We take a semiotic approach to studying religion in order to assess how basic English conveys the structure of the institution of religion and provides the lay public with knowledge about religious identities. Our data consist of definitions of religious identities provided by two dictionaries. The identities we consider are from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions. From the dictionary definitions, we created a semantic network showing how the meaning of one identity is elucidated by references to other identities. The network can be interpreted as roughly mapping the institutional layout of religion. Identities in the network partition into clusters corresponding to the major faiths, and status hierarchies of some institutional structures like abbeys are evident within faiths. A few bridging identities link different faiths, so the overall structure is loosely connected apart from a few semantic isolates. Our results suggest that basic English biases its speakers’ awareness overwhelmingly toward Christian identities, provides meager knowledge regarding Judaism, and offers limited and sometimes eccentric views of other major faiths.

Our goal in this article is to demonstrate that the structure of the institution of religion is implicit in the meanings of religious identities, and can be revealed by a novel form of qualitative analysis—analyzing dictionary definitions of the identities. In particular, we propose that dictionary definitions of religious identities establish a
semantic network that reflects the structure of identities within the institution. The semantic structure enables “pursuing various structured, cross-cutting patterns of meaning and attempting to make sense of how the world must appear to someone using such categories” (Lucy 1997, p. 296).

These ideas develop out of general propositions set forth by MacKinnon and Heise (2007). However, whereas MacKinnon and Heise (2007) analyzed all substantive words (e.g., religion, god, church) in dictionary definitions in order to find “confluences of meaning” that delineated institutions and differentiated them from one another, we focus on how definitions link identities one to another and create a network that reveals the institutional structure. Also, whereas MacKinnon and Heise (2007) dealt with a multiplicity of institutions, we focus exclusively on religion.

Our view of the religious institution as embedded in identity meanings helps explain how lay individuals acquire knowledge about the structure of the religious institution, which they confront as clients, as potential recruits to institutional roles, and through chance encounters. Though their institutional functions are limited, lay individuals must have some inkling about institutional structure in order to navigate within institutional structures and to behave sensibly in the roles that they have. We propose that lay individuals acquire knowledge about the structure of the religious institution from the language that they speak.

Sociologists have analyzed religion extensively, but much of that analysis focuses on the theological ideologies and services that religious practitioners offer to the public, rather than on the structure of the institution and the lay public’s knowledge about that structure. Thus our work contributes to a less cultivated area in the sociology of religion.

Sherkat (1998, p. 1090) suggested that “religious structures consist of both religious schemata and religious resources,” pointing to a duality of structure within the institution of religion. The fact that religious awareness drives one’s actions and preferences suggests a dialectic between religious schemata and membership in religious organizations. Someone identifying as a Biblical inerranist would have worldviews reflecting “some general set of understandings typically employed by communities embracing contemporary constructions of Biblical edicts. Individuals adopting this precommitment use inerrancy as a resource to inform other beliefs” (Sherkat and Ellison 1997, p. 960). We argue that religious cognitive structures are anchored at least partly in language, particularly religious language, and the semantic structure of the religious institution is both a schema and a resource. As a resource, the schema allows an individual to navigate within the
institution of religion, and also is a basis for interpretive extensions, such as supposing that one knows what a monk is in Islam because one knows what a monk is in Christianity.

Sherkat (1998, p. 1091) suggested that religious awareness can be “transposed across social realms,” suggesting that one’s religious schema will have important implications across multiple institutions. Related to this, in our studies we found that the secular identity of “authority” appears in definitions of some religious identities and also appears in definitions of identities in other institutions such as politics. Such a linkage might well serve as a fulcrum for transposing the religious schema to the schemata of other institutions.

By way of definition, we take social institution1 to be the largest unit of social structure—“a higher order unit of social structure than the role, . . . made up of a plurality of interdependent role-patterns” and “of strategic structural significance in the social system in question” (Parsons et al. 1951, p. 39). We view “interdependent role-patterns” from the standpoint of identity theory (Stryker and Burke 2000; Thoits and Virshup 1997), positing that an institutional structure consists of a set of identities connected to one another by various kinds of organizational and social psychological processes.

Following MacKinnon and Heise (2007), we study institutional structure by analyzing semantic relations among the meanings of institutional identities, as given in dictionary definitions. Balzer’s (1990) view of institutions provides a rationale for this approach. Balzer (1990) argued that an institution consists of groups that engage in various types of actions, individuals with various intentions, power relations, and a superstructure shared by individuals involved in the institution. Regarding the superstructure: “groups, action types, and the characteristic function [that relates groups and actions], after a while get represented in the mental frames built up in the individuals, they get internalized and often even explicitly represented by terms in the language spoken by these individuals” (Balzer 1990, p. 9). Thus a superstructure consists of language and meanings which verbally reflect the composition and structure of the institution. The object of focusing on language in institutional studies, as in cultural studies, generally, is to analyze “the complex interplay . . . between language as a resource and language as a historical product and process” (Brown 2006, p. 113).

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1Social science employs the concept of “social institution” in several other ways than the one we employ here. Habitualized actions like hand-shakes can be called social institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). So, too, can organizations grounded in cognitive or rational systems (Hechter et al. 1990; Jepperson 2002).
Our semiotic approach to social institutions presumes that institutions are “semantic fields or zones of meaning” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 41), and “conceptually organized meaning-systems” associated with “fields of identity” (Perinbanayagam 2000, p. 133, note 11). From this perspective, dictionary definitions of institutional identities can serve as an empirical base for studying an institution’s constitution and—to the extent that the definitions link identities to one another—the institution’s structure as well. Arguably, dictionary definitions offer a more practical empirical basis for delineating institutions than surveying the institution’s material instantiations since an institution’s embodied identities, actions, settings, and instruments are so geographically and temporally dispersed as to be inaccessible in practice.

MacKinnon and Heise (2007) proposed that dictionary definitions of identities relate identities taxonomically and syntactically. For example, the Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary defines an archbishop as “a bishop of the highest rank who is in charge of churches and other bishops in a particular large area.” This definition tells us that an archbishop taxonomically is a kind of bishop, and indicates that syntactically an archbishop manages bishops. Taxonomic relations correspond to structures as displayed in organization charts, and define chains of recruitment and achievement (Heise 1987), while the syntactic relationships define the identity’s quintessential role and role-set (Merton 1968).

Authoritative texts presenting a language constitute the language as real: “The English language presents itself to the individual as an objective reality, which he must recognize as such” (Berger 1967, p. 12). Because dictionary definitions are authoritative statements about a language, they may be judged to have only a faux reality, devoid of true empiricism. However, lexicographers produce dictionary definitions by abstracting meaning from actual usages in a corpus of written and spoken language. For example, one of the dictionaries that we use in this study was compiled on the basis of a corpus of 600 million words. “Actual usage . . . provides documentation for the definition, which is really only an interpretive claim made by the lexicographer” (Landau 2001, p. 210). Thus dictionary definitions are empirically grounded generalizations, exactly like results in other kinds of qualitative research, and it is in this frame that we use them as an empirical base.

Social theorists have implied in some of their writings that lexicons might be a good basis for social analysis. Vygotsky (1986, pp. 5–6, 10–11) identified word meanings as the elemental unit of verbal thought, and semantic analysis as an appropriate means for exploring verbal thought. Bourdieu (1991) considered operations of naming as
fundamental in social sciences because words structure the social perceptions that individuals have and thereby are instrumental in generating social reality, including social structure (1991). Bourdieu (1991, p. 48) emphasized that dictionaries create a standard language to stitch together society, and words with definitions normalized in dictionaries provide a privileged universal construction of reality, “functioning outside the constraints and without the assistance of the situation.”

Nonetheless, dictionary definitions are social constructions that implement symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991). For example, one of the dictionaries that we use does not consider Jew as a kind of religious person, while the other defines Jew as “a member of a race of people whose traditional religion is Judaism” (Walter 2005), setting a biological frame for the Jewish identity. Dictionary definitions implement symbolic power as they become authoritative texts, employed in cultural discourse. “[A]uthoritative discourse is based on the assumption that utterances and their meanings are fixed, not modifiable as they come into contact with new voices” (Wertsch 1991, p. 78). Because dictionary definitions exercise symbolic power, they must be employed judiciously in social research—no less so than statements that are acquired in interviews from individuals.

PROCEDURES

Our work builds on MacKinnon and Heise’s (2007) procedures for analyzing social institutions on the basis of dictionary definitions of social identities. MacKinnon and Heise demonstrated that role compositions of institutions can be delineated by attending to convergences in identity definitions. Their analyses of concepts referenced in the definitions of a broad range of identities allowed them to partition different institutions from one another.

In this article we also approach the topic of social institution by considering dictionary definitions of identities. Because our interest here is solely in the religious institution, we consider religious identities exclusively. Additionally, in this article we are especially interested in the structure of the religious institution—that is, in relations among identities, so from each dictionary definition of an identity we extract references to other identities only.

DICTIONARIES

A lexical database called WordNet (Fellbaum 1998; WordNet 2005) assembles nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs into synonym sets,
and the synonym sets are linked by various kinds of relations posited in psycholinguistic theory (Miller 1991). We use WordNet for two purposes in this article—assembling a set of religious identities, and acquiring a dictionary definition of each identity.

Our interest is in nouns because we focus on religious identities, and according to Miller (1998, p. 24): “The semantic relation that is most important in organizing nouns is... the relation of subordination (or class inclusion or subsumption), which in this context we will call hyponymy. For example, the noun robin is a hyponym (subordinate) of the noun bird, or, conversely, bird is a hypernym (superordinate) of robin. It is this semantic relation that organizes nouns into a lexical hierarchy.” We use WordNet’s feature of listing hyponyms in order to obtain a list of religion-related identities.

WordNet provides a definition of each of its synonym sets, and we use these definitions as one source of dictionary definitions. Additionally we use the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Walter 2005)—CALD for short—for this purpose. CALD is a dictionary designed for individuals learning English as a second language and thereby operationalizes our notion of basic English.

**SELECTING CONCEPTS**

We used WordNet to assemble all the hyponyms of two concepts: religious person and spiritual leader. The two lists provide the corpus of identities that we consider in this article (plus the identity of Jew as noted in the next section).

We considered including hyponyms of “God, Supreme Being,” “deity, divinity, god, immortal,” and “spiritual being, supernatural being,” in order to include the interaction partners of religious people and spiritual leaders during their devotions. However, the hyponyms of these categories added numerous gods, angels, demons, and spirits, many of which arguably are obsolete (e.g., Baal) or nonreligious (e.g., Vampire). Inclusion of such terms would deviate from our goal of examining the contemporary institution of religion as framed in ordinary English, so we leave semantic analysis of such entities to another study.

The hyponym lists of religious persons and spiritual leaders contained archaic terms (e.g., Druid) and names for specific individuals (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi). We purged the lists of such terms, maintaining that any identity included in our final list should have a recruitment program: prospective parents in the contemporary world must be able to hope (or worry) that a child of theirs could acquire the identity.
We reduced our list of religious identities further by requiring that every identity in our final list have a definition in CALD as well as in WordNet. CALD focuses on developing a working vocabulary in English, so this requirement eliminated words and linkages that are esoteric (e.g., Ultramontane—an adherent of ultimate papal authority). At the same time, CALD contains 72,500 sense entries, so the requirement does not reduce the list to juvenile dimensions. CALD did eliminate a few identities that would be included if we used a less restricted dictionary. For example, Apostle was eliminated because it refers to specific individuals in CALD—one of the twelve original followers of Jesus Christ, and WordNet also makes historic references, whereas other dictionaries indicate that Apostle can refer to a leader of the first Christian mission to a country or region, or to any of the twelve members of the administrative council of the Mormon Church.

**CODING**

For each concept in our list of religious persons and spiritual leaders, we combined the texts of the WordNet and CALD definitions, and extracted all religious identities that were cited in the definitions. For example, “Canon” is defined by WordNet as “a priest who is a member of a cathedral chapter” and by CALD as “a Christian priest with special duties in a cathedral.” Together, these two definitions link Canon to Priest and to Christian. We dropped references to identities outside of our final list of religious identities (e.g., Saint) and to secular identities like Authority and Dignitary.

As noted by MacKinnon and Heise (2007), many identities are collectivity identities with a unique linguistic property: the same word serves as either a noun or adjective. For example, one can say “a priest, who is a Christian” or “a Christian priest.” Thus we treated the adjective form of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Roman Catholic as equivalent to the noun form, and included occurrences of the adjectives as references to the corresponding identity. However, this strategy did not work for Jew. As noted in the American Heritage Dictionary (1995), “It is widely recognized that the attributive use of the noun Jew, in phrases such as Jew lawyer or Jew ethics, is both offensive and vulgar. In such contexts Jewish is the only acceptable possibility.” Moreover, Jew is not listed among WordNet’s kinds of religious persons, even though WordNet does refer to Jew in religious contexts, as in defining Pagan: “not a Christian or Muslim or Jew.” To deal with these problems we ourselves added the identity of Jew to kinds of religious persons, and
we converted occurrences of the adjective Jewish to the noun form Jew in order to maintain consistency with our procedures regarding Christian, Hindu, etc.

We coded the faith—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Multiple-faith, or Other—predominantly associated with each identity in our final list. We performed this coding subjectively, as this is a relatively easy task for any native speaker of English. These codes, partitioning the identities into seven faith groups, are used to illuminate the semantic network that we derive.

**NETWORK ANALYSES**

We used Pajek 1.2 (de Nooy et al. 2005) to analyze links and to draw the semantic network. The classifications of concepts’ related faith were entered as a Pajek partition. Religious identities serve as nodes in the semantic network and references to other identities serve as arcs.

**RESULTS**

Our final list of religious persons and spiritual leaders named in basic English consisted of 107 identities. Eighteen were network isolates, having no links to other identities included in our list. These isolates were: Agnostic, Anchorite, Celibate, Churchgoer, Flagellant, Missionary, Monotheist, Moonie, Mormon, Mystic, Pantheist, Parsi, Pilgrim, Polytheist, Prophet, Quietist, Shaman, and Worshiper. The other eighty-nine religious identities had one or more semantic links to other religious identities, as displayed in Figure 1.

The isolates include all but one of the identities that are not a component of any of the five major faiths, as coded in our Other category (Agnostic, Mystic, Pantheist, Parsi, Polytheist, and Shaman). Among nonisolated identities, only Pagan is in the Other category. Thus the few religious identities not related to any of the major faiths typically take their meanings from references to concepts other than religious identities.

The major faiths are not represented equally among the religious identities that we are considering. Of the religious identities in our full list, sixty-three are uniquely associated with Christianity, four with Judaism, eleven with Islam, five with Hinduism, and three with Buddhism. Testing an hypothesis of equal representation for each of the five faiths yields a Chi Square of 151.63, and the probability of such a large Chi Square with four degrees of freedom is less than one in a quadrillion.
Identities of the major faiths form noticeable clusters in Figure 1. Additional clustering also is evident within the Christian identities. Protestant identities tend to surround Christian. Catholic identities tend to surround Roman Catholic. The Catholic identities further form a cluster associated with abbeys, and another cluster around Priest containing identities associated with the Church hierarchy. Anglican identities are a small cluster near the Catholic hierarchy.
cluster. A small evangelism cluster (televangelist, evangelist, Jehovah’s Witness, preacher) shows up.

References to faiths are key ways of defining the religious identities. Of the arrows shown in Figure 1, twenty-eight point to Christian, eight to Muslim, six to Hindu, four to Jew, and three to Buddhist. References to denominations within faiths are common, too, with twenty arrows pointing to Roman Catholic, three each to Anglican and Protestant, two to Shiite, and one to Episcopalian. The remaining arrows show that religious identities often are defined in terms of role-identities within the religious sector, especially Priest with 18 instances, Monk with seven instances, Clergyman with six instances, Bishop and nun with five instances each, and Superior with four instances. Abbot, Caliph, Cleric, Evangelist, Friar, Mendicant, and Pope each were used in defining two identities; and Cardinal, Confessor, Lama, Preacher, Prior, and Swami each were used in defining one identity.

The network shown in Figure 1 is weakly connected. That is, disregarding arrow directionalities, it is possible to follow arrows and get from any identity to any other identity. Thus the different faiths all are bridged by connecting identities. Monk interconnects Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Priest connects Christianity with Buddhism. Guru connects Hinduism and Buddhism. Pagan—someone who is not a Christian, Muslim, or Jew—interconnects Christianity, Judaism, and Islam by a negation.

**DISCUSSION**

Dictionary definitions of religious identities establish a semantic network that constitutes a rudimentary mapping, or cognitive schema, of the institution of religion as it is understood by laypersons speaking English. Sherkat and Wilson (1995) theorize that such schemata are employed as a resource in several religious phenomena, including religious mobility. We conjecture that movement between denominations might relate in part to the network closeness of the denominations’ standard identities, as measured by the number and shortness of links between the identities, because network closeness corresponds to similar perspectives.

As shown in Figure 1, the unique religious identities relating to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism group together in separate clusters. Within each grouping the identity encompassing all members of the faith is most central (i.e., referenced most)—Christian and Roman Catholic for Christianity, Jew for Judaism, Muslim for Islam, Hindu for Hinduism, and Buddhist for
Buddhism. The Christian identities further separate into Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Anglican clusters, plus an evangelism group. The Roman Catholic identities display internal structuring related to hierarchy and the subinstitutions of the Vatican and abbeys, and the confessor-penitent dyad provides an instance of interdependent role-patterns.

This degree of resolution in mapping the institution of religion was obtained with definitions limited to those in basic English—that is, the level of English taught to students who learn English as a second language. A larger and more intricately structured map of the religious institution undoubtedly could be obtained by using unabridged dictionaries of English. Indeed the entire institution of religion presumably could be mapped by creating a semantic network of the hundreds of religious identities in English from definitions in unabridged dictionaries and glossaries of religious terms.

We found that a few bridging identities loosely connect the five faiths, and these may provide a minimal basis for interreligious understanding as well as possibly providing the basis for misunderstanding. For example, monk bridges Islam and Christianity. However, monk in the Islamic sense is associated with Sufism. Dervishes in this tradition are a type of monk and are known for their prayer styles involving bodily movements. On the other hand, monk in the Christian sense connotes a religious person devoted to contemplation, prayer, and work. Similarly, mendicant bridges Hinduism and Islam. A mendicant in Hinduism connotes a religious person with an ascetic lifestyle, while Islamic mendicants are associated with dervishes and Sufism. Guru bridges Hinduism and Buddhism, considered in both religions as a religious leader or spiritual teacher. Priest bridges Christianity and Buddhism, considered in both religions as an authority that performs religious rites. (Priestess probably would be a bridging identity if Paganism had a larger presence in basic English.)

Christian Smith (1998, pp. 118–119) proposes a subcultural identity theory of religion, positing that: “Religion can survive and thrive in a pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging…. In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural” (italics removed). Our findings suggest that distinctions among faiths are represented within the cultural schema of religion by clustering of
each faith’s identities. While bridge identities connect the faiths, these perhaps are more a basis for metaphoric understanding (and misunderstanding) across faiths than a resource for either engagement or tension.

Interestingly, the bridging identities that connect Christianity and Judaism involve negations rather than shared features. The WordNet definition of Pagan says that a pagan is “not a Christian or Muslim or Jew” and thereby interconnects these three faiths. Gentile connects Christian and Jew because CALD defines the concept as “a person who is not Jewish.”

The religious institution presented in basic English is overwhelmingly Christian. Most of the connected identities in our sample—seventy-one percent—are associated with Christianity, as compared to four percent related to Judaism, twelve percent associated with Islam, six percent related to Hinduism, and three percent related to Buddhism. While basic English does provide speakers with an awareness of religious diversity, the religious concepts are so overwhelmingly Christian that the diversity might be viewed as token diversity more than anything else. This corresponds to the reality that Wuthnow (2005, p. 153) sees: “The idea of diversity, therefore, is often just that—an idea, rather than a feature of life that has been honed by living firsthand in diverse contexts. . . . [Many Christians] rarely have significant or extensive contact with people from other religions unless they happen to work in religiously diverse settings; their churches are usually more of an enclave that protects them from exposure than an opportunity to gain greater exposure.”

As immigrant populations of all major faiths are increasing in the United States, many Christians find it difficult to reconcile their faith with accepting these others (e.g., Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims), often viewing such demographic shifts as a threat to democracy and American values in general. Focusing on the United States, Wuthnow (2005, p. 90) notes that: “Americans generally pride themselves on being tolerant of racial, ethnic, and religious differences, and yet the history of bigotry and exclusion along racial, ethnic, and religious lines should give us pause. As a society, we are at best ambivalent about how welcoming we should be to new immigrants and to new ethnic or religious minorities.” As Davie (2007, p. 178) notes, “in Western societies, the religious playing field is not level.”

Our results raise the question of whether some of this intolerance is anchored in the English language itself. The Christian bias in the English language may mean that people do not have the language tools necessary to understand and empathize with the religious
processes of non-Christians. As progressive immigration policies reflect an increasing presence of non-Christians, many foreigners experience discrimination due to this lack of understanding.

We speculate that the relatively high semantic representation of Islam in our corpus of religious identities may reflect an increase in attention given to the Muslim world in recent years. As the first Gulf War, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, the war in Afghanistan, the current Gulf War, violent protests in the aftermath of Salman Rushdie’s publication of *The Satanic Verses*, the violent response to *Behzti* (a play in which a Sikh playwright portrays sex and violence in a temple), the 2005 terrorist bombings of London’s public transportation system, and other political events shift attention to the Middle East, lexicographers continue to create dictionaries from contemporary texts—especially by the more than seventy-five percent of native English speakers in the world who are located in the United States—and those texts reflect an increasing emphasis on Islam. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that twenty-six percent of Muslim words given in WordNet relate to fundamentalist practitioners of Islam.

The prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism as opposed to other kinds of Buddhism is another of our outcomes that suggests that dictionary definitions are sensitive to historical change. We suspect that an analysis of dictionaries would find little concern with the Tibetan variation of Buddhism prior to the 1959 takeover of Tibet by China and expulsion of the Dalai Lama, but instead might find an emphasis on the Japanese variant, corresponding to the craze regarding Zen Buddhism in the 1960s. Future research in lexicographic sociology might compare current dictionaries with older ones to see if historical events do indeed alter the image of the institution of religion that is embedded in dictionaries.

Perhaps the most perplexing of our findings relate to the Jewish identity. In the first place, dictionaries offer a surprising emphasis on the biological aspect of Jewishness, with the *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary* defining Jew in part as a race, and WordNet defining Jew in part as someone claiming descent from Jacob. Secondly, Judaism seems underrepresented in the dictionary image of institutional religion. Only four percent of the religious identities in our sample were Jewish, those identities being Jew, Rabbi, Cantor, and Gentile (which substantively refers to a non-Jew). Though we often call ourselves a Judeo-Christian society, our data indicate that the “Judeo” is quite subordinate to the “Christian.” Indeed, our data include about three times more Islamic identities than
Jewish ones, suggesting the irony that our religious consciousness is more Islamic-Christian than Judeo-Christian. A third peculiarity evident in the original dictionary definitions is that Jew links to a high proportion of derogatory words and biblical words—a much higher proportion than other common religious identities. Twenty-four percent of types of Jews given in WordNet are derogatory. These facts intimate that a measure of anti-Semitism might be embedded in the English language.

Our results indicate that in semantic networks based on dictionary definitions, in-degree centrality (i.e., being referenced frequently in definitions of other concepts) is more important than out-degree centrality (i.e., a definition that references numerous other concepts). Identities referenced most by other identities essentially partition the network by faith, and such identities help bridge identities of various faiths. The referenced identities apply to more people, and they are taxonomically more general identities. In contrast, out-degree centrality actually indicates peripherality when a semantic network is viewed as a reflection of social structure. For example, Benedictine references three identities, but no identities reference Benedictine.

This article—following MacKinnon and Heise (2007)—breaks new ground in an area that might be called lexicographic sociology. Lexicographic sociology, like some contemporary variants of linguistic anthropology, uses language “as an instrument for gaining access to complex social processes” (Duranti 2003, p. 332). One potential strength of a lexicographic approach to studying institutions is that research can incorporate dictionaries from various eras and societies into analyses, thereby getting a handle on historical and cultural variations. Although systematic language taxonomies are directly available only in WordNet, WordNet is available in more than a score of languages, with more on the way, and the methodology could be extended to historical instances of language.

The foregoing analysis provides a rudimentary map of the institutional structure of religion as it is deposited in the English language. English clearly provides an idiosyncratic reflection of roles and status hierarchies that can make up the institution of religion. We suppose that that fact permits understanding of some of the unique psychology of English speakers, in line with the classic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity—namely “that languages provide their native speakers with a set of hard-to-question dispositions (e.g., to hear only certain sound distinctions, to favor certain classifications, to make certain metaphorical extensions) that have an
impact on their interpretation of reality and, consequently, on their behavior” (Duranti 2003, p. 326). Over the years, the hypothesis of linguistic relativity has garnered substantial support: “Results on a range of non-linguistic tasks carried out in over ten unrelated languages and cultures show that people think, remember, and reason in the system they use most for speaking” (Brown 2006, p. 109). Our particular application is: “A domain-centered approach [that] begins with a certain domain of experienced reality and asks how various languages encode or construe it. . . . This approach ‘asks’ of each language how it would handle a given referential problem so as to reveal the distinctiveness of its functioning; ideally it makes clear the various elaborations and gaps characteristic of each language’s coding of a common reality” (Lucy 1997, p. 298).

Future research in lexicographic sociology can deepen our understanding of language and religion by varying languages and publics. For example, with Islam and the Middle East receiving increased attention in recent years, analyzing the taxonomic structure of religious identities in Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Hebrew might shed light on how people from the region understand their religious identities, and on the contrasting ways that they relate to the institution of religion.

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