

"Academic review of Mark Chaves's 2010 article in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion."

Academic review written for the European University at St. Petersburg, 2025.

Chaves, M. (2010). Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 49(1), 1–14.

Summary of Argument

Dr. Mark Chaves argues that researchers in the sociology of religion routinely make a mistake he calls the "religious congruence fallacy": they assume that people's religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour form a consistent and logically connected system. In reality, Dr. Chaves says, this is rarely true. Religious ideas are activated in specific contexts and situations, not across all areas of life. The main thesis of the article can be summarised as follows: religious congruence — when beliefs and behaviour genuinely match — exists, but it is the exception rather than the rule, and it requires special conditions to appear.

About the Author

Dr. Mark Chaves is a sociologist at Duke University, where he directs the National Congregations Study. He is best known for his quantitative work on American religion, including his book *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (2011). The article reviewed here sits at the intersection of his empirical work and his broader concern with how scholars conceptualise the relationship between religion and behaviour. Dr. Chaves is not a theorist by training, which makes his theoretical intervention in this article particularly notable.

Summary of Contents

The article opens with three short stories: a rainmaker who refuses to perform rain dances during the dry season because they would not work, a rabbi who privately admits he does not believe his own prayers reach God, and a theology student who becomes a priest despite having lost his faith. Dr. Chaves uses these cases to illustrate that people can participate in religious practices without holding the beliefs those practices are supposed to express.

From this starting point, Dr. Chaves identifies three specific versions of the fallacy. First, the assumption that a person's religious ideas form one coherent system. Second, the assumption that religious practices directly follow from beliefs. Third, the assumption that beliefs operate consistently across all areas of life.

He then reviews evidence from sociology, cognitive science, anthropology, and social psychology. A particularly striking example: theological conservatism predicts political conservatism among white Americans, but political liberalism among African Americans. This shows that the same belief can produce different behaviour depending on context.

The article also addresses research methodology. In quantitative studies, the fallacy appears when scholars treat religion as a simple, stable predictor of behaviour. In qualitative studies, it appears when researchers take people's self-reported beliefs at face value and assume those beliefs explain what people do.

Dr. Chaves ends with practical suggestions: researchers should study specific situations rather than general attitudes, look at short- and medium-term effects rather than assuming lifelong religious influence, and pay attention to emotions and unconscious reactions alongside explicit beliefs.

Strength

The greatest strength of the article is the way Dr. Chaves connects insights from cognitive science and social psychology to the mainstream sociology of religion. The idea that religious knowledge is stored and activated differently from other kinds of knowledge — what cognitive scientists call the distinction between "theological correctness" and intuitive religious thinking — helps explain why sermons and rituals often fail to change behaviour outside the religious context. This theoretical move gives the fallacy concept a solid empirical foundation, not just a conceptual one, and opens up a concrete research agenda for understanding when and why religious congruence actually occurs.

Weakness

The main limitation of the article is that Dr. Chaves does not engage in sufficient depth with the conditions under which religious congruence does appear. He mentions social pressure, conscious effort, and long-term learning as possible factors, but leaves these ideas undeveloped. As a result, the article is considerably stronger at identifying the problem than at explaining when and how religious beliefs actually do shape behaviour. A reader who finishes the article knows what researchers should stop assuming, but has limited guidance on what to look for instead. Given how much evidence Dr. Chaves marshals against the fallacy, a more developed positive account of religious influence would have made the argument significantly more useful for empirical research.

Conclusion

"Rain Dances in the Dry Season" is a concise and well-argued contribution to the sociology of religion. It does not present new empirical data, but it synthesises a wide range of existing research to make a theoretical point that has real consequences for how scholars design their studies and interpret their results. The article is most useful for researchers working on the relationship between religion and behaviour — whether in survey research, ethnography, or experimental designs. It is also accessible enough to work well in graduate seminars on the sociology of religion or the methodology of religious studies more broadly.

A Note on Relevance to Network-Based Research

Dr. Chaves's argument has a particular resonance for researchers who study religious change through social network analysis and agent-based modelling. If religious beliefs and practices are not

internally consistent but are instead context-dependent and situationally activated, this has direct implications for how we model religious transmission.

In standard models of religious socialisation, beliefs are often treated as stable individual attributes that are passed from one agent to another through social contact. But if Dr. Chaves is right, what actually travels through social networks may be something more specific: not "religiosity" as a unified trait, but particular practices, emotional responses, or situational cues that activate religious behaviour in certain contexts and not others.

This connects directly to the PIB sequence proposed by Stolz and colleagues (2025): participation in public rituals declines before the personal importance of religion declines, which in turn declines before religious belonging. This ordering makes much more sense in light of Dr. Chaves's argument. Public ritual participation is the most context-dependent dimension of religiosity — it requires a specific social situation to occur. Personal importance is more internal and less situationally constrained. Belonging is the most persistent, because it requires the least activation. In other words, the PIB sequence may reflect not just the cost of each behaviour, but its degree of context-dependence.

For agent-based models of secularisation, this suggests that the `p_cross` parameter — the probability of contact between religious and non-religious agents — may work differently across the three dimensions. Cross-community contact may erode ritual participation relatively quickly, while having a much slower effect on declared importance or identity. Modelling these as separate transmission channels, rather than a single religiosity variable, could make simulation-based accounts of secularisation substantially more realistic.