Article

The Sociology of Religion in a Post-Colonial Era: Towards Theoretical Reflexivity

James V. Spickard

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Redlands, 1200 Colton Avenue, Redlands, CA 92373, USA; Jim_spickard@redlands.edu

Abstract: This article makes two points. First, it argues that sociology, like all knowledge, is shaped, though not determined, by its historical-cultural origins. Early sociology arose in 19th-century Europe and its core concepts were shaped by that era—both in what they reveal about society and what they hide. We now realize this, so we sociologists of religion need to examine our inherited concepts to understand those concepts' limitations. We also need to include an analysis of the way the current historical-cultural situation shapes sociology today. This is the theoretical reflexivity called for in the title. Second, the article argues that expanding sociology's conceptual canon to include insights from other historical-cultural locations is more than just an ethical matter. It is also epistemological. Sociology does not make progress unless it includes insights from as many standpoints as possible. This does not mean that all insights are equal. It does mean that all have the potential to improve sociological understanding. Whether or not they actually do so is a matter for the scientific process to decide.

Keywords: sociology of religion; post-colonial; reflexivity; epistemology

1. Introduction

Let me explain my title. Sociology as an intellectual discipline was born in late 19th and early 20th century Europe as an attempt to explain the rapid social changes of that era (Giddens 1976; Al-Hardan 2018). Comte, Marx, Spencer, Tönnies, Durkheim, Weber, and the rest had different theories about why and how that change was occurring, but they all thought that something new was afoot in the world. Europe was for them the leading edge of this process. They saw science in general and social science in particular as ways of understanding this new world and of bringing it more fully under human control. They sought to understand the ways that societies shape people: their lives, their actions, and their ideas. Theirs was an Enlightenment project: they believed that scientific knowledge would improve human lives. Weber, more than others, had doubts about this outcome, but all of them thought that the effort was worthwhile.

There was one epistemological problem. Excepting Marx, these early sociologists forgot to locate themselves in the landscape they were describing, and even Marx did not do so consistently. They forgot that they, too, were historical beings, whose social surroundings shape their thinking. Douglas (1975, p. xii) comment that, for Durkheim, the social shaping of knowledge "applied fully to them, the primitives, and only partially to us" was true for all of sociology's founders. Theirs was a colonial world and they stood on top of it, imagining that their superior perspective gave them special responsibility for the well-being of the people they were studying. Their concepts and theories were shaped by their colonial situation. They ignored earlier sociologies, such as that of the great Arab scholar Ibn Khaldūn, because they mistakenly thought that he did not speak to the world's current condition (Spickard 2017a, pp. 135–79). And they suppressed the work of non-White sociologists, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, because that work threatened White Euro-American intellectual hegemony (Morris 2017).

We no longer tolerate living in that world. Colonialism is dead (though its aftereffects live on), neither Europe nor America is the sole source of intellectual vision, and the Enlightenment project is in tatters. Sociologists who were raised in my White, male, Euro-American, post-Christian, professional-class intellectual milieu have no special insights just because we have mastered sociology's inherited intellectual discourse. We do have insights, but we cannot assume that they are better or more useful than the insights gained from people shaped by other social locations: countries, races, ethnicities, classes, genders, sexualities, religions, and so on. Sociologists raised in these other locales can often see things that people raised like me cannot. Their ideas, however, have also been shaped by their social settings. Some of their concepts and theories, though not all, will improve sociology's ability to understand the complex social world in which we now live. So, I hope, will some of mine.

That is the first point of this article: all knowledge—including sociology—is shaped, though not determined, by the history and culture within which it arose. I explore the consequences of this for the sociology of religion, drawing a parallel with the revolution that has reshaped anthropological ethnography over the last three decades. Ethnographers have learned that they need to include themselves in the social landscape, if they are to represent it accurately. I argue that such descriptive reflexivity needs to be supplemented by a theoretical reflexivity. Sociologists must acknowledge that our standard concepts and theories were produced in a particular historical-cultural milieu. Only by understanding the limitations that the milieu built into those concepts can we improve them and make social-scientific progress.

The second point is related to this, but on an epistemological level. There is a good deal of effort among sociologists to expand the sociological canon on ethical grounds (Al-Hardan 2018). International Sociological Association President Margaret Abraham (2018) address at the latest World Congress of Sociology is a fine example of this, as were many other speeches and commentaries at the event. I shall make a different argument: that the demand for expansion is epistemological just as much as it is ethical. Sociology needs to include diverse voices in order create better knowledge. To remain scientific, we sociologists must transcend our discipline's Euro-American origins. We must embrace theoretical resources from many other standpoints, if we are to improve our understanding of our now-shared world.

2. Religion and Sociology's Origins

Let us start with the situation in which the early sociologists created our discipline. They were trying to explain processes that centered on their own societies and they were trying to establish a discipline that saw the world in a new, scientific way. Like all intellectual revolutionaries, they had to distinguish their explanations from competing ideas. Especially in 19th-century France, but also elsewhere, this meant opposing religious understandings of the situation with sociological ones. This involved more than just Comte (1853) postulated progression from theology to metaphysics to science. Reactionary Catholicism worked hard to undermine the French secular state and especially the Third Republic. In response, progressive sociologists treated religion as sociology's conceptual 'Other' (Vásquez 2013). Sociology saw itself as the voice of the future: clear, rational, enlightened, and scientific. This cast religion as a holdover from the past. In the founder's minds, science would ascend while irrational, authoritarian, credulous religion would fade away. The result, Vásquez argued—as did Martin (2005, p. 17) before him—was that secularization theory was built into sociology from the very beginning. The notion that religion is vanishing is a myth, but a powerful one, even now.

I have elsewhere described this myth as part of sociology's "default view" (Spickard 2017a, pp. 21–34). This is a set of taken-for-granted presumptions about religion that shape our scholarship without fully entering our awareness. It includes such notions as religions being primarily matters of belief, embodied in formal organizations, headed by people analogous to clergy, having sacred texts, and so on (Beyer 2006). Sociologists of religion no longer adhere to this as strictly as they did even ten years ago, though the view remains strong, particularly (but not exclusively) in the United States and among quantitative researchers (Smilde and May 2010). Textbooks still uphold the default

view (Spickard 1994; 2017a, pp. 22–25). Mainstream theory has not significantly departed from the old pattern (Bender et al. 2013), though it is being chewed around the edges by feminists (Neitz 2000; Goldman 2012), scholars of "lived religion" (Hall 1997; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008), those investigating religion in 'non-religious' places (Bender 2003; Cadge 2013; Gauthier 2013), and Latin American advocates of "popular religion" as the road to understanding religion's future (Parker 1996, 2018; de la Torre and Martín 2016).

That is why I wrote *Alternative Sociologies of Religion (2017a)*. In it, I discussed the limitations of this default view, but I also presented three non-Western alternatives. If sociology had started in Confucian China, for example, it would have seen the sacred as a relational rather than as an organizational matter. Confucian sociologists of religion would ask a question seldom previously considered in the subdiscipline: Who maintains the sacred relationships in a given instance of religious life? In my book, I show that, for American religious congregations, this is done by the women cooking the church suppers and tending to members' needs (Spickard 2017a, pp. 111–34). This realization puts women at the center of congregational life and men on the periphery—a conclusion that empirical evidence supports as well (Marler 2008; O'Brien 2012; Day 2017). This is the reverse of the Euro-American default view.

I did something similar for sociologies built on the work of Ibn Khaldūn and on insights drawn from Navajo ceremonialism. Ibn Khaldūn explored the ways in which religion and ethnicity both generate "group-feeling", while traditional Navajo religion emphasizes the importance of ritual experiences unfolding in time. These approaches are not special; they just happened to be the ones that I know something about. But the point *is* special: other historical-cultural situations generate other default views of religion. Each of these default views highlights something different about our subject matter. We learn something important by learning to see religion from other historical-cultural vantage points. It is only by recognizing the limitations of the standard way of thinking and learning to see from other standpoints that we make scientific progress.

The point, again, is that all knowledge, including ours, is shaped by its historical-cultural location. As theorists, we need to become aware of this, to avoid the errors of the past. I spent some time in the book showing how sociology's 19th-century origins primed it to embrace secularization theory. I also showed a connection between market-oriented rational choice theory and the 1980s and 1990s intellectual *zeitgeist* that saw markets as good explanations for almost everything and saw individual choice as constituent of all aspects of life. I won't go into these here.

Instead, I want to explore a deeper issue. I want to explore the necessity of and the implications of sociologists of religion taking our own historical-cultural locations into account in our theorizing—from non-dominant locations as much as from dominant ones. Why do we need to remember where we stand when we survey the social world? Why should we focus on how that standpoint shapes our thinking? What can we gain from building that realization into our theories?

I am speaking, here, of a theoretical parallel to the revolution that has reshaped anthropological ethnography over the last three decades (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Behar and Gordon 1995; Dawson et al. 1997; Spickard et al. 2002). Ethnographers used to present themselves as having a God's-eye view of the social scenes they were describing, but they no longer do so. They have long acknowledged that their data come from their ability to embed themselves in scenes that are not their own, but they now acknowledge the need to make explicit what their own backgrounds prevent them from seeing. They need to show their readers how the ideas they bring with them into the field often prevent them from understanding aspects of the scenes they are trying to portray.

The young Isaac Newton wrote in his notebooks about sticking a large needle in his eye, to learn how that eye systematically distorted his vision (Breen 2014). I am not asking us to do anything so painful. Yet learning to see the limits of our own seeing is crucial for making progress as a field.

3. The Ethnographic Revolution

What was this ethnographic revolution? How is what anthropological ethnographers do today different from what they did when I was trained a couple of generations ago?

My teachers and my teachers' teachers were trained to visit far-away peoples, learn their languages, find out how they saw the world, how they acted in it, and how they maintained a sense of meaning. Then they were supposed to report back to their readers or superiors about what they learned. The results are fascinating. Books like *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922), *We, the Tikopia* (Firth 1936), *Nuer Religion* (Evans-Pritchard 1956), *Divinity and Experience* (Lienhardt 1961), *Navaho Witchcraft* (Kluckholn 1944) and others carry us to unaccustomed worlds. These were good books, but they were embedded in a colonial power structure that remained hidden from their readers' view (Wolf 1982). Evans-Pritchard, for example, was sent to the Sudan by the British Colonial Office to find out about Nuer politics. He so mastered their segmentary political system that he organized Nuer raids against Italians troops in neighboring Ethiopia in early World War II (Geertz 1988). Yet he did not write about that success. Instead, he wrote about the Nuer as if he were invisible, a fly on the wall, not really there.

A few decades prior, the American ethnographer Frank Cushing installed himself without permission in the Governor's living-room at Zuni Pueblo and wandered into secret ceremonies uninvited (McFeely 2001). The Zuni did not want to risk annoying his employers at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, so they did not throw him out. They turned the tables, however, by sending their own ethnographer to Washington DC to figure out how to keep the Americans at bay. We'wha, a cross-dressing *berdache*, was fêted for a year as a "Zuni princess". We don't know what secrets she took back to New Mexico with her, but they surely helped the Zuni maintain some independence.

Most, though not all, of these early ethnographers retained a colonial outlook on the people they were observing. They thought that "We", the advanced people, study "Them", the backward people, either to control them or to save their knowledge for posterity as their cultures fade away. Sociological ethnography began slightly differently. In the U.S., the Chicago School and the Settlement House movement were projects of an educated elite who used ethnography to study immigrants and lower class people whom the elite wanted to teach middle-class American behavior (Thomas and Znaniecki 1996; Whyte 1943).

Contemporary sociology of religion has inherited this approach. Our typical ethnographies try to show what role religion plays in lower-status people's lives. Think about the way that our discipline frames theories: if the tables were turned, would we be claiming that the elite's religions are mere "compensators" for the things they can't have in life (Stark and Bainbridge 1980)? Yet we entertain this about poor and working-class people's religions, and ethnic minorities', too. Too many of our studies still explain such religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature" (Marx 1844). Few of us would accept this conclusion, were lower-status people to investigate us.

Such dynamics operate across all the lines dividing our increasingly globalized society: class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, level of development, education, place in the world colonial and neo-colonial system, and so on. Scholars of all stripes need to understand our own position in these systems at least as much as Newton had to understand how his eye bent light. If we don't know the distortions, we cannot correct for them. We cannot really see the world we are investigating.

Such thinking brought forth "the reflexive turn" in contemporary ethnography. A host of new ethnographers wrote themselves into their stories, so we could better understand their fieldwork and grasp the dynamics of the social scenes they were recording (Hamabata 1990; Behar 1996). Brown (1991, 2002), for example, wrote herself into her ethnographic biography of Alourdes, a Vodou priestess living in Brooklyn, New York. Brown used her presence to highlight her own cultural missteps and to remind readers that Alourdes was the expert on Vodou, not she. Tweed (1997, 2002) wrote of his ambivalent experiences investigating a Cuban-American Marian shrine in Miami. His natal (but abandoned) Catholicism gave him access to the shrine keepers, but it also led them to try to reconvert him. This

challenged him as a scholar. It made him realize that the people we study have agendas, too. He told us about this, so we, his readers, would know the limits of his seeing.

We need to know such things, and not just because they remind us that ethnography is a very personal data-gathering method. They also remind us that we, as readers, bring our historical-cultural prejudices to the texts. We can misread those texts, destructively. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Albrow (1997) have each written about American culture's fascination with Pentecostal snake-handling, which many observers see as dark, mysterious, benighted, and cruel. Both these scholars show how this image of Pentecostal mountain people says more about educated people's voyeuristic fantasies than it does about the 'snake-handlers' themselves.

That's the point. Each of us brings our own historical and cultural assumptions to our investigations. If we are unaware of them, they will color our findings. We will, as do so many sociologists of religion, look for religion in churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, and other formal places and ignore it everywhere else. We will ask people about their religious beliefs but not about their relationships. We will ask them how religions shape their moral lives. These are all good questions, but they retain a partial vision of religious life.

We can no longer treat Euro-American Christianity as the model by which we understand all religions. We live in a different world than did our sociological forebears. We need to explore it—and theorize about it—differently than we have before.

4. Our Present Situation

What is our historical-cultural situation? It is not that of late 19th-century France, nor that of mid-20th-century America, though both still heavily influence our thinking. What does our contemporary situation prime us to see about religion that we might not have seen before? Three factors stand out to me, though there may well be others.

The first of these is globalization. Where once our lives revolved around our local communities and most of us produced goods and services for the local market, now we have ties to people around the world. These ties involve much more than the ubiquity of telephones and of the Internet. They involve more than the complex network of trade relations that bring bananas, coffee, and tea to our breakfast tables. They even involve more than the interconnected financial markets that, on the one hand, let us use our credit cards in Timbuktu but, on the other hand, produce worldwide financial panics that threaten to bring whole economies to their knees.[1] All these are important, but they do not exhaust the connections we now have with one another.

The fact is, our current global system is shaped by great inequality, specifically by the aftermath of centuries of Euro-American colonialism. Europe and North America, plus Japan, China, Australia, and a few others, have much more influence than do most places. This makes every intellectual act different than would be the case if these power relations did not exist. Those of us who live in the metropole can theorize as if the world were "flat", to use Friedman (2006) rather ideological metaphor. Those theorizing from other places cannot ignore the metaphoric hills and mountains that perpetuate social inequality (de Blij 2009). Opportunity is decidedly not available to everyone. Power divides us wherever we turn.

For scholars, some of those hills and mountains come from differential access to research funding. May and Smilde (2018) recently sampled forty years of articles on religion in top U.S. sociology journals and found that an increasing percentage depended on funding, especially from non-public sources. This makes it difficult for scholars from outside the metropole to publish in such journals, as they lack the right financial connections. As a result, scholars from the Global North dominate sociological research and those from the Global South are ignored. To take one small example, sociologists around

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[1] Think of the worldwide market-quakes radiating from Mexico (1994), East Asia (1997), Russia (1998), the U.S. (tech stocks in 2001; hedge funds in 2005; sub-prime mortgages in 2007–2008), and Europe (PIIGS debt crisis 2009–2013).

the world are familiar with North American scholars who have written on Latin American popular religion, such as Smith (1996) and Ammerman (2007), but are far less familiar with the many Latin American scholars who have done so too (Antoniazzi et al. 1994; Mariz and das Dores Campos Machado 1998; López 2000; de Carlos 2004; Orellana 2008; Mansilla 2009).

People today are thus both linked and divided. Our different historical-cultural locations make us see these links and divisions differently. We cannot understand religion's place in the world without reaching beyond our own standpoints.

A second crucial factor is identity. Identities come in different varieties than they used to. I wrote in my book that

> Only men have the privilege of imagining that they lack gender. Only Whites have the privilege of imagining that they lack race. [And] only heterosexuals have the privilege of ignoring peoples' varied and complex sexualities. (Spickard 2017a, p. 247)

Let me add that only people who live in relative wealth can imagine that poverty does not matter. Only people who live in stable nations can imagine that there are still fixed and safe nationalities. Only people who have the freedom to choose their religions can imagine that religion is a matter of private choice.

These identities are not mutually exclusive. The term 'intersectionality' underlines the fact that the various forms of social stratification I have just listed do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven in real people's lives (McCall 2005). This makes the investigation of conceptual blinders an empirical matter. For example, I have a colleague who looks a lot like me, but you cannot understand the way he thinks unless you know that he went to school in an African American neighborhood and attended an Asian evangelical church for over 30 years. His historical-cultural background is different than his attributed identity would seem.

Today, however, any of these attributed identities can become a master identity, even against a person's will. The Croatian writer Drakulić (1993) described how she had always defined herself by her education, profession, gender, and personality—until the Croatian-Serbian war stripped her of everything but being a Croat. Religion can do the same thing; think of the 1975–1990 civil war in Lebanon, the recent rise of ISIS in the Middle East, and anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar and Germany today. Identity is a key factor in our current world, but it is imposed as often as it is freely chosen.

If our theories cannot see this, then we are standing in the wrong place.

If our theories forget to think about the complexities of genders, races, sexualities, class standings, nationalisms, and different peoples' abilities to choose—along with their intersections—then we are forgetting the real world that we live in. Theories about a fanciful world are just that: fantasies. This is not good enough.

Yet there is a third factor, as well. I had originally subtitled my book "Towards a World-Conscious Sociology of Religion" because I think we are on the cusp of an era in which consciousness of the world as a single place is possible. This is not some Pollyannaish moment, filled with sparkly My Little Ponies and everyone singing Kumbaya. (I apologize for the Americanisms, but they express this very well). Nor is it because we have that famous picture of a blue planet hanging in the starry firmament (Apollo 1968) and French President Macron reminding the U.S. Congress that "We have no Planet B" (CNN 2018).

Globalization is not just a matter of material connections; it is also a matter of consciousness (Albrow 1997). Once we understand that (for example) the American and European appetite for palm oil leads to clear-cutting rainforests in Borneo, which in turn increases the carbon load on the atmosphere (Rosenthal 2007), we think differently than we did before. The same happens when we learn that donating used clothing to charities in the U.K. harms the local textile industry in Kenya, where 75% of such donations end up (Kubania 2015). In such instances, we see that our local standpoint misleads us. We learn that we need to see from other standpoints, if we want to see how our global system works.

This brings us back to the sociology of religion. Our discipline's currently dominant theories were created in Europe and America to understand developments in Euro-American religion. We need to recognize their standpoint-based partiality. In our interconnected world, it seems quaint to think that life will improve as 'bad old authoritarian religion' fades away or at least retreats to the private sphere (Vásquez 2013). Equally quaint is the notion that progress comes when we free up religious markets, as the rational-choice theorists wanted us to believe (Stark and Finke 2000). Nor is the promise of increased religious individualism (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) a panacea, at least because such religion erases the possibility of social critique (Spickard 2017b)—something that an interconnected, risk-filled world sorely needs.

Each of these theories was plausible when the world was less connected and those of us living in the Global North could imagine that others' experiences of the world were much like our own. That is no longer the case. Others' experiences are not just like our own, and people in other social locations see things that we cannot. Yet we all share the same complex world. If we are to understand that world—the point of our science—all of us need to recognize that our visions are partial. No matter where we stand, we are confronted with the conceptual limitations that our own social locations create for us. Transcending those limitations is the intellectual task of our time.

Reflexive theorizing calls for us to grip this tightly. It asks us to remember our own location when we theorize. It asks us to recognize the limits of our own vision. It asks us to remember that different people have different amounts of power, including the financial power noted above. Yet it requires us to reach across our divisions, so that we can learn what people with different powers, with other identities, and from other historical-cultural locations see about our common world.

This could not have happened in a fully colonial era. Said (1978), Fanon (1963), Memmi (1967), Geertz (1988), Trinh (1989), and others have ably shown us how colonialism made social-scientific knowledge a tool of empire. Their post-colonial theorizing was a slap against that empire and the social scientists whose work supported it. In effect, they said it was time for Western intellectuals to obey the title of American Indian activist Deloria (1970) book: *We Talk, You Listen*. Euro-American intellectuals have a lot of listening to do, before we understand what the world looks like from other historical-cultural locations than our own.

Listening, however, is not the end of the road. Every location has its blind spots—including the post-colonialists' (Spickard 2017a, pp. 225–41). Every location lets us see some things but hides others. There is no God's eye view of the global world that we share. If we want to understand that world, then we have to lean across our differences and share our insights. Sprague (2005), who understands social-scientific epistemology as well as anyone I have encountered, writes about the strength of standpoint theories. She tells us that all humans have standpoints, but we also have the ability to imagine the world from other people's standpoints. We can use these to correct our own.

5. The Ethics and Epistemologies of Reflexive Theorizing

At this point, a perfectly wise sociologist of religion would describe for you a perfectly reflexive theory about religion's place in the contemporary world. She would tell you what is happening to religion and why that happening looks different, depending on where we stand.

For example: where a statistical sociologist might tie membership declines in American and European churches to a loss of religious belief (Bruce 2002), a feminist sociologist might trace this to changing women's roles: increased women's employment lowers how much they can volunteer to sustain local congregations (Marler 2008; Day 2017), leading those congregations to decline. A Confucian sociologist might elaborate this, noting that women's socially assigned role in maintaining interpersonal relationships is central to American and British religious life. Their action is the *li* that generates the *de* that makes congregations possible (Spickard 2017a, pp. 111–34) A Khaldūnian sociologist might take a different tack by asking where and when religion becomes a locus of group identity, as opposed to ethnicity, class, nation, or other markers (Spickard 2017a, pp. 159–80). A sociologist sensitive to poor people might trace the ways that their religious engagements helps

them cope with life in a world stacked against them (Smilde 2007). Each of these would illuminate part of the picture. Other standpoints would make other contributions.

The problem is, I am not a perfectly wise sociologist of religion. I cannot give you such a sum-it-up picture of religion in the contemporary world.

I can, however, make some comments on the epistemological and ethical implication of the picture I have been painting. To remind you: that picture contains three elements.

- First, we all see the world through lenses shaped by our historical-cultural situations.
- Second, each of those lenses has a partial but perspectively accurate view.
- Third, we live in a hilly, unequal, but globalizing world, where we can, if we will, communicate across our partial viewpoints and see our own partiality.

There are a lot of barriers to that communication, but it is at least possible. The question is, how can we encourage that communication to improve our discipline's understanding of the world we share?

I need to introduce a concept here, one well-known in Kantian metaphysics and in certain varieties of the philosophy of science. This is the notion of a "regulative ideal". Put simply, a regulative ideal is an abstract idea that makes practical activity possible. It does not, itself, constitute knowledge, but it regulates thought so that a particular action ensues (Kant 1965, A180/B222)

Let's imagine a social scientist who studies religions. Social scientists share an ideal that regulates all their scientific activity: it is the ideal that a scientist is supposed to get things right. As scientists, we come up with hypotheses, then we find data to test them. What are we supposed to do if the data tell us that our hypothesis is wrong? We throw away the hypothesis and seek a better one. This is so simple that it is in our beginning textbooks. Yet it puts us in rather deep epistemological waters.

The problem is, what count as data and proof shift from time to time and place to place, depending on what our scientific community will accept. When I entered this profession, most sociologists of religion would only accept numbers as data: demographics, survey research, and so on. I was told in no uncertain terms that my ethnographic work was not sociology, no matter how rigorous my fieldwork had been. That has changed. Sociologists of religion now see the worth of qualitative data because it, together with numeric data, gives us a 'better' picture of religion than numeric data alone. This is progress.

Yet notice the intellectual structure of this statement. 'Progress' means that we have absorbed another way of seeing the world because we now agree that it produces a picture that is 'more right' than the picture we held before. *If we did not have that ideal of 'getting things right', we would not be able to speak of progress at all*. Scientific progress depends on the abstract notion that we can improve our understanding. This regulative ideal lets us improve our accounts of the world—not just individually, but as a scientific community.

Charles Sanders Peirce put this abstractly, using the term 'truth' in place of the term I have used here: 'getting things right'. He pointed out that 'scientific truth' is the result of an eschatological process. He wrote that: "Truth is that concordance of abstract statement with the ideal limit toward which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief."[2] He saw the scientific enterprise as a communal activity, in which scientists read and critiqued each other's work, repeat each other's experiments, and gradually—collectively—come to understand the world better than they had before. Self-critical striving for an ever-better picture of the world lets scientists say with certainty that current views improve on the past. They can be just as certain, however, that their continued effort to get things right will overthrow current understandings.

As sociologists, we are engaged in the same endeavor. What is required of us, if we are to improve our understanding of religion in the contemporary world?

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[2] Quoted by Feibelman (1969, p. 212).

6. What Is to Be Done?

There are, I think, three things that we must do. These are not moral judgments, or at least not only moral judgments; they are also scientific and epistemological ones. We must do these things or else we will be unable to improve sociology's knowledge of our subject matter.

My first proposition is that people who are privileged must listen to the insights of those who are not.

We are long past the day when we could listen only to White, male, Euro-American, professional class voices to tell us what is happening to religion. These voices have insights, but they do not see the whole picture. They—and I include myself—are privileged enough to be able to forget that their vision is partial. In our present, hilly, unequal world, they are, relatively speaking, at the center. If we want our discipline to progress, sociologists must listen to the voices from the margins, so as to correct our current misunderstandings. Our discipline will not make theoretical progress unless we all communicate and combine our respective insights. Those at the center already dominate our discipline's communications; they do not need to work to make their voices heard. Thus, they need to make explicit room for marginal voices. Those voices have something to contribute as well.

My second proposition is that we must analyze the socio-political situation in which both marginal voices and central voices live.

Intellectual life does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by larger world events. Secularization theory absorbed the prejudices of its day, just as rational-choice theory absorbed the politics of neoliberalism. The same could easily happen today. Keeping a weather-eye on the dynamics of our own era is the only way that we can track the forces shaping us. Again, this is a scientific/epistemological issue rather than just a moral one. Ignoring such factors practically guarantees that we will get the picture wrong.

The third proposition is a bit different. If what I have been arguing is correct, our effort to create a scientific sociology of religion depends on free communication between people across cultural, national, racial, ethnic, class, gender, and other divides. We need everyone's insights if we to progress. That requires us to defend each other's participation in the world conversation.

My third proposition flows from this: We must protect each other's independent intellectual inquiry.

We must do so, not just in the name of humanity, though that ought to be enough; we must do it in the name of science. If we do not, if oppression, violence, denial of resources, or silencing makes us lose our colleagues' contributions, then our science suffers. Protecting free intellectual inquiry is an epistemological matter, not just an ethical one; without it, scientific progress is impossible. This point is at the heart of my contribution today.

Our globalized world ties us together in webs of social and economic interdependence. Our work as scientists does so intellectually as well. World inequities threaten our conversation partners—politically, economically, socially, and militarily. People without power are, as our late colleague Maduro (2004, p. 232) reminded us, "consistently threatened, busted, bombed, or trampled by the this-worldly powers and principalities".

Maduro (2014, p. 45) also reminded us that "As intellectuals, we brandish a special kind of power." It matters how we use that power: "with whom, for whom, for what?" He saw this primarily as an ethical issue, but I submit it is also a scientific and epistemological one. Only the privileged can ignore the inequality and violence in our world. Ignoring inequality, violence, and the world's other ills means that we fail to see religion (and everything else) clearly from standpoints other than our own. It makes us forget that our own views are partial ones, and we mistake the part for the whole. We then do bad science.

Reflexive theorizing in the sociology of religion requires us to see the world as it is, and to seek the insights of those who encounter the world through multiple historical-cultural lenses. It calls us to be one world community.

Fortunately, there are now international scholarly organizations—the International Sociological Association among them—dedicated to all three of these tasks. Our Research Committee for the Sociology of Religion has fostered and will continue to foster the voices from the margins from which

we have so much to learn. It has analyzed and will continue to analyze the socio-political situation in which we all live. And it has defended and will continue to defend the right of sociologists everywhere to describe our world, free from suppression, violence, and fear.

We have not done enough. There is more to do, but at least we are walking the right road. Our science depends on our continuing to do so.

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