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# Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology—A Mellon Working-Group Reflection

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American sociology has not taken and does not take religion as seriously as it needs to in order to do the best sociology possible. Despite religion being an important and distinctive kind of practice in human social life, both historically and in the world today, American sociologists often neglect religion or treat it reductionistically. We explore several reasons for this negligence, focusing on key historical, conceptual, methodological, and institutional factors. We then turn to offer a number of proposals to help remedy American sociology's negligence of religion, advance the study of religion in particular, and enhance sociology's

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broader disciplinary capacity to improve our understanding and explanation of human social life. Our purpose in this analysis is to stimulate critical and constructive discussion about the significance of religion in human life and scholarly research on it.

DOES AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY take religion seriously? Does sociology understand all that it should about religion, if only in order to do its descriptive and explanatory job well? And how does the specific field of sociology of religion fit within or relate to the larger discipline of sociology? We believe that the answers to these questions are that American sociology too often neglects religion or treats religion reductionistically, and ought to improve itself by taking a more robust understanding of religion more seriously in research and teaching. We addresses questions about religion as a social object, sociological knowledge about religion, religious claims about social life, and the character and future of the larger discipline of sociology itself.

At the initiative of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in partnership with the University of Notre Dame, we—a group of mostly American sociologists interested in the study of religion—take up these questions and reflect critically and constructively about the relationship between religious knowledge and the discipline of sociology.<sup>1</sup> We offer this article to stimulate greater disciplinary self-reflection and more constructive discussions about religion in sociology. We offer our thoughts as a small contribution to much larger conversations that have unfolded around the world in recent decades about the meaning, social role, and future of religion and secularity. We speak mostly as Americans about American sociology, yet hope that our particular perspective might make some useful contribution to these larger global conversations.

This article proceeds in three parts. We first describe problems and challenges facing the study of religion within sociology. We then describe positive signs. Finally, we offer constructive proposals for future directions.

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<sup>1</sup>The term “religious knowledge,” provided by the Mellon Foundation, means what academic studies have come to understand about the nature of religion and its role in human life, as well as knowledge that religions claim to have about different aspects of reality. Our appreciation goes to the Mellon Foundation and to the University of Notre Dame for their funding and support of this project. The views contained within do not necessarily represent theirs. Many thanks, too, go to Atalia Omer and Katherine Sorrell for extremely helpful suggestions for revisions of this article—although they share no responsibility for any possible errors or problems in the article. Not every author necessarily agrees with every specific point advanced here, although this article reflects the general thinking of the authors as a group.

## WHY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY TAKING RELIGION SERIOUSLY HAD TO FAIL (OR NEARLY SO)

In this section, we examine the reasons—historical, conceptual, methodological, and institutional—why American sociology has had difficulty taking religion seriously. To approach this issue, and the questions that opened the article, it is necessary to first set them in their larger historical context and then place them in the contemporary landscape of American sociology.

### Historical Problems

First, *since its inception, American sociology has had a complicated, shifting relationship with “religion.”*<sup>2</sup> In its earliest years, American sociology germinated in the soil of a socially activist American Protestantism. Many first-generation sociologists came from Christian backgrounds, hoped to use sociology to promote religiously inspired and informed social reforms, and even spoke confidently about visions for “Christian sociology.” The Social Gospel leader, Shailer Mathews, for instance, published an eight-part series of essays titled “Christian Sociology” in the first two volumes of the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895–96. Mainline and progressive evangelical Protestantism was the traditional institutional authority exercising control over socially legitimate cultural knowledge (Smith 2003b). Beginning in the twentieth century, however, American sociology began to marginalize “religious sociology” as a misguided attempt to make claims to knowledge. University-based sociologists, seeking to turn their nascent field into a legitimately viewed profession, began intentionally drawing a sharp distinction between scientific sociology (said to be good and authoritative) and religious “dogoodism” (said to be bad and illegitimate). As such, American sociology was established discursively and institutionally as a structural rival of religion, in some sense, a secularized version of American Protestant Christianity (as the discipline of anthropology was, similarly, a secular complement to the Christian missionary movement abroad). From the start, then, American sociology got off on the wrong foot in its ability to take religion seriously.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The twenty-three “theses” of our working group are given in italics.

<sup>3</sup>To keep this story realistically complicated, however, we do note the contributions to studying religion made by the early-twentieth-century Community Studies tradition (e.g., “Middletown”); by Talcott Parsons, for whom religion played a central (if abstract) role in social theory; and by the occasional serious scholars like Gerhard Lenski (1963).

Second, *in the particular history of American thinking about religion and society, certain dimensions of religion and the “spiritual” were unjustifiably removed from the roster of serious academic topics that merit scholarly description, understanding, and explanation.* An evolutionary theoretical heritage that posited religion, particularly the dominant form of Christianity, as the most highly evolved form of the “natural spiritual quest of man” dominated the latter half of the nineteenth-century. In retrospect, scholars now see that heritage as not only self-aggrandizing, but also false. In turn, *other* forms of practices concerning transcendent, spiritual, supernatural, and mystical matters—such as magic, cultic practices, mysticism, and nonobvious forms of spiritual searching—were largely removed from sociological consideration. Given the evolutionary assumptions about religion common in the nineteenth century, it was easy to discard these as primitive and inferior superstitions and residues destined for extinction. These all remain important religious or quasi-religious realities in the contemporary world, however, and deserve more and better study than they typically receive by sociologists.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the larger academy’s current renewed attention to religion is driven not by a native academic interest in things sacred and transcendent but, rather, by the external *imposition of undeniably important religious movements and events building over the past forty years.* The founding thinkers of sociology understood religion to be important, but also believed that it would wither away in relevance and strength with the development of modernity. In fact, to the contrary, a host of social, political, and theological movements, revolutions, events, and trends in recent decades have *forced* mainstream American academics, whether they like it or not, to take religion seriously. These developments include the rise of the Moral Majority and religious right in the United States; the Iranian revolution; Catholic Solidarity in Poland; the role of Pope John Paul II in challenging communism; liberation theology in Latin America; the religious energy in the antiapartheid movement in South Africa; ongoing conflict between Hindus and Muslims in and around India and Pakistan; a resurgent evangelicalism in American culture and politics; the massive growth of Pentecostalism and charismatic evangelicalism in the Global South; and the surging growth of multiple religions in China, South Korea, and other Asian countries. September 11, 2001, put a massive exclamation point at the end of these profound phenomena to open up the twenty-first century.

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<sup>4</sup>For an anthropological example that takes “primitive” religion seriously, see Ashforth (2005), in addition, obviously, to much anthropological work in this area.

The recent renewal of scholarly interest in religion has thus resulted not from any internally driven enlightenment about the subject of religion among faculty in universities. It has rather been forced upon the academy by the reality of religion's continued presence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These facts have forced American academics to reconsider problems in the secularization-theory model, to learn more about the empirical realities of religion in the contemporary world, and to adjust their interests, understandings, and analyses to better account for the religious realities and religious facts of the real world. But the deeper effect on the discipline of sociology itself has been arguably limited. That is, something big has happened in the world in last forty years that has thrown the standard, received views of religion into flux, provoked renewed interest in things religious or spiritual, and underscored the limits of the old paradigm. But many American academics, often ill-prepared intellectually, seem to have met these changes and challenges with surprise and perhaps with some begrudging resistance.

Fourth, *the apparent "resurgence" of public religion around the world transpired when American social scientists were focused primarily on theories and explanations that could not properly account for that resurgence.* During the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, American sociology was preoccupied with rejecting the Parsonian structural functionalism that had dominated the discipline during the mid-twentieth century and replacing it with theoretical alternatives. Some of that reaction took the form of various micro-sociologies—symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, dramaturgy, and so on—which were relatively neutral in their ability to accommodate a renewed interest in religion. But the more influential movements in American sociology during these decades were expressed in "rational choice" theory and various "structural" approaches to social analysis, including versions of neo-Marxism and state-centered theories. Central to these latter approaches are the commitment, rooted deeply in Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and others, to rational egoism, materialism, and a focus on resource or utility gain. Consequently, much of the discourse of the "structural" outlook of those years concerned interests, resources, domination, and the determinative power of social structure. Other matters, such as culture, belief, ideology, nonrational behavior, ritual, and "superstition," were considered marginal. So when religion began in the 1970s to show that it was not going away, many social scientists of the era were unprepared intellectually to make sense of it. That influence continues to this day. To the extent that the theoretical worldviews of sociologists today still revolve primarily around matters of material interests, economic forces, political interests, social dominance, relational power, and so on, religion remains

largely reducible and ignorable. By theoretical presupposition, the former are taken to be “real” while religion is believed to be peripheral or epiphenomenal. But, we believe, religious commitments in the end cannot be completely reduced to interests, power, and material resources, so an interest- and resource-based general sociological model cannot account for religion well.

Even today, Western nations largely frame processes such as global socioeconomic development in ways that do not involve religion in any serious way. Worse yet, leaders of liberal democracies cling to an old faith in the positivist account of modernization, presuming that the processes of development are solvent enough to neutralize or subdue the antimodernizing impulses of religious belief. This has perpetuated patterns of Orientalism and colonialist relations between “developed” and “developing” countries. Instead of understanding religion as it operates on its own terms within the developing world—not to mention in “advanced” countries—Western leaders react with dismay, ignorance, and despair over the “staying power” of religion across the globe. As a result of this ignorance about the roles that religion plays in various national contexts, development projects, state-building, peace building, the promotion of democracy, and even trade agreements have often failed. Thus, as global religion becomes increasingly difficult to ignore, we believe an appropriate sense of urgency for taking religion seriously is still lacking in important power centers of the West, let alone amongst scholars. Yet, as the waves of “world problems” inevitably crash onto local shores in a globalizing world, we can no longer afford to ignore the important matter of religion as it exists in human life around the globe.

Fifth, *the resurgent American cultural sociology since the 1980s has proven only marginally interested in religion and, in fact, tends to treat religion as indistinguishable from other social realities.* Hitting the real limits of the rational choice and structural sociologies that dominated the discipline in the United States during the 1970s helped to give rise to a resurgent cultural sociology in the 1980s and beyond. We view that as a good movement overall, although much of the work in the new cultural sociology turned out to ignore religion. With few exceptions, little was done on the theoretical front of the new cultural sociology to take on religion as a particular social object and to significantly improve our sociological understanding of it. If anything, religion became viewed as simply another “ideology”—ontologically and conceptually indistinct from any other belief system. Indeed, dominant sociological views of culture secularize religion, treating it as a subcomponent of culture, when, we think, a plausible historical and sociological argument can be made that culture is actually a subcomponent of religion.

As a result, many cultural sociologists saw little reason to theorize religion as a particular kind of social entity—even though cultural sociology should be well-equipped theoretically to study religion as a distinctive kind of social object. Within this larger intellectual and analytical movement that might have served to revive a robust understanding of religion, the latter was instead melted into the larger mix of all things ideological, symbolic, and meaningful. Arguably, too, the ability of cultural sociology to adequately understand religion was weakened by the neo-positivism and empiricism advocated by some in the subfield. Recent developments in the field have increasingly called into question the link between discourse and practice, leading to focused studies of either discursive structures or popular material culture. Consequently, cultural sociology has constrained its own ability to make adequate sense of the subjective aspect of human existence, which we think is important (though not exclusive) in religion.

### Conceptual and Methodological Problems

Sixth, *many of our standard methodological tools reflect assumptions about and treatments of religion that are so thin, skewed, and misleading that they constitute a serious obstacle to understanding and explaining the complexity of real religious phenomena.* Methodologically, sociology has generally not thought of religion as an important variable. Mainstream surveys simply do not ask enough in-depth questions about religion, nor are our concepts about religion deep or interesting enough to generate many really good survey questions. Several sociological studies of religion presuppose, for example, that religion can be adequately captured for most analyses by a limited set of standard survey-measure variables entered into multiple regression equations—“church attendance,” “affiliation,” “Bible views,” and the like. In certain circumstances, that may work. But the common tendency is to proceed with little reflection on or conceptualization of the subject of study, slapping standard measures and methods on a variety of matters “religious,” and concluding that what is to be learned will either come out in the findings or, if nothing comes out, that there is nothing important to learn. Attempting to “pay more attention to religion” while relying on such flawed assumptions and measures may actually make matters worse and inhibit future investigation. As a simple example, for a long time, sociological surveys of religion asked one religion question about affiliation: “Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other.” Those categories proved grossly simplistic for capturing real distinctions of consequence that existed in American religion. Often, dummy variables for these gross religious types produced no significant results, and so analysts concluded that “religion does not matter.”

Subsequent improvements in religion survey measures (e.g., Steensland et al. 2000) have improved our ability even with statistical analyses of religion to find significant and sometimes powerful religion effects. But we think the conceptual and theoretical work that needs doing is much more extensive than the incremental improvements in measurement we have seen in recent years. Knowing something about the complexities of religion in most cases, we suspect that far more rethinking of the tools we use for capturing different aspects of religious practices, rituals, affiliations, attitudes, habits, beliefs, and so on—inductively driven by significant qualitative field research—would have a big payoff in revealing the intricate and subtle ways that religion actually influences people's lives and the social world. We also think sociology of religion needs to consider the ways in which too many of its assumptions, concepts, and measures are governed by a normative evangelical Protestant view of religion. In short, religion is much "thicker" than what many of our standard measures and methods capture, and most of our (neo-positivist) methodologies cannot adequately test our theories about religion. If we hope to adequately grasp the social significance of religion in social life, we need to improve our measures and methods.

Seventh, *disciplinary preoccupations and trends often include conceptual inadequacies and biases that impede the serious study of religion*. In general, mainstream American sociology has a strong antimentalist outlook. Because the discipline commonly discounts "beliefs," attitudes, and mental life in motivating and guiding social action and behavior (Campbell 1996), sociology has difficulty taking religion seriously. Underlying this trend are many basic theoretical misunderstandings, including, for example, the failure to recognize that "social structures" are always culturally constituted, including by sets of cultural beliefs such as religion. More broadly, we detect here an inadequate familiarity with important issues in the philosophy of science that affect our work, including questions about causation, empiricism, emergence, and the ontology of unobservable entities. At a much more simple level, for decades, secularization theory dominated social science's view of the fate of religion in modern society. As this theory has proven untenable, scholars since the 1980s have found themselves without an adequate conceptual apparatus at hand to respond to the very-real religious world that imposed itself upon their crumbling academic verities.

For another example, some scholars, especially postmodern and post-colonial critics in religious studies, have challenged the very idea of "religion" as a universal, basically human, and coherent concept. We think such critiques are partly insightful and correct (see below), but also

misleading on the particular question of *defining* religion. It is true that the use of the idea of “religion” as a singular category can be misleading in various ways, including wrongly suggesting that all “religions” in the world are natural kinds that share identifiable sets of properties, tendencies, teachings, and practices. At the same time, we believe that, by shifting our focus from largely exclusive concerns with discourse and concepts to a more expansive view that takes seriously practices and actions, we can identify a particular type of human activity and orientation that shares features that can be rightly described under the rubric of “religion.”<sup>5</sup> However, we think it best (as much as possible) to refer to “religions” in the plural, to remind ourselves of the multiplicity and diversity of the subjects of study. And we think it important to intentionally distinguish different aspects of religious phenomena, such as religious practices, rituals, beliefs, organizations, dispositions, material artifacts, and so on. To improve the definitional adequacy of our concepts in a way that will enhance our ability to understand religion well will require much more theoretical work (Edgell 2012).

In this larger context, however, sociologists have also paid insufficient attention to how the study of religion has itself participated in and authorized the discourses of colonialism and “Orientalism.” On this point, we think many of the postcolonial critics are correct. Too often, we have overlooked the complicity of academic concepts such as “religion” in authorizing historical power restructuring, domination, and direct and cultural violence, both domestically and globally. Interrogating this legacy entails ramifications for the global and comparative academic study of religion, calling religion scholars to overcome our too-common national and Christocentric parochialisms. Further, the modern project itself has involved “migrating the holy” to the political construct of the nation state (see Cavanaugh 2011). The nation has become not merely a replacement of religion but, at times, instrumental to the fulfillment of religious objectives. This is not only the case with Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories, for example, but also motifs located in the mythologies of Sinhala Buddhism, Hindutva, Hamas, and a host of other explicitly religious nationalisms. None of these, however, can be explained outside intersecting discursive formations, from colonialism to Orientalism and to the very logic of nationalism. Nor can they be reduced to these formations either. To make sense of the reality of religion around the world, we need to become more self-reflexive about these kinds of processes and dynamics.

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<sup>5</sup>See Riesebrodt (2010), which most, though not all, of us find highly persuasive.

## Contemporary Institutional Problems

Eighth, *the sociology of religion in the United States continues to remain somewhat institutionally isolated*. For much of the twentieth century, sociology of religion in the United States was organized into largely autonomous professional associations. These, most notably, include the Association for the Sociology of Religion, the Religious Research Association, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. It was not until 1995 that a religion section even began in the American Sociological Association, ninety years after the ASA's founding. These independent associations have helped the field's development in some ways. They all enjoy significant material resources to carry on their work, publish their own field-specific journals (e.g., the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*), and organize their own conferences. But, in doing so, they have also segregated sociologists studying religion from their sociological colleagues in other, often more central fields of study in the discipline (e.g., social inequality, organizations, gender, and race and ethnicity). An *unintended* consequence of this particular organizational structuring has been to culturally define "religion" among sociologists as a distinct, isolated field of study. This has a silo effect, isolating scholars who think a lot about religion from colleagues who do not, and sending a message that "religion is being taken care of" by specialists, so those who are not sociologists of religion can largely ignore it. (This dynamic is not unique to the sociology of religion—many fields of sociology encounter it too—but it is still a fact that we think helps to explain the difficulty of sociology taking religion adequately seriously.)

Ninth, *the isolation of religion has been reinforced organizationally at the university-level through the creation and expansion of religious studies departments*. Historically, universities concentrated the study of religion into distinct departments, most of which emerged out of religious seminaries, divinity schools, and other semi- and quasi-confessional programs in academia. Departments of religious studies worked hard to define and protect the specific subject matter over which they presided. They also developed distinct methodologies believed to be uniquely suited to research on the sacred. For example, phenomenological approaches provided a means for taking seriously people's reports about religious experiences and beliefs in a way that potentially protected the latter from reductionistic, subject-dissolving analyses (like those that neuroscience might provide). While religious studies departments rightly gave "religion" a real place at the academic table, this often had the negative consequence of excusing scholars in other disciplines from also taking religion seriously. In effect, other scholars, including those in sociology, were able

to overlook or ignore religion as a relevant social reality in their research because of religious studies' specialization in and dominance of the topic. This fact becomes clear when we compare how much attention major European sociologists, such as Ulrich Beck, pay to religion relative to their counterparts in the United States. As a result of this academic division of labor, many scholars in many disciplines, including sociology, are not particularly well prepared to understand and explain religion well.

Tenth, *the sociology of religion is at the lower end of the disciplinary status hierarchy in the academy*. Within sociology generally, the subfield of religion occupies a low status; moreover, within the social sciences, sociology has become somewhat marginal especially compared with the rise of positivistic economics in shaping policy and public discourse in recent years. These status hierarchies have become even more heightened with the growing prominence of a new scientific discourse shaped by neuroscience and neo-Darwinian approaches, which are arguably marginalizing *all* of the social sciences. Further, dominant trends in science suggest a growing *scientism* that reduces numerous phenomena, including religion, to the neurological, genetic, and biological levels—privileging magnetic resonance images (MRIs), for instance, as the method by which we can arrive at our best knowledge of complicated social realities. Certainly, there is a diversity of voices among scientists in their views of and attitudes toward religion, but often the loudest voices are those that assume reductionist accounts of religion.

Eleventh, *understanding religion is hampered by a larger inability in the discipline to think broadly, which is reinforced by current institutional structures and standard practices*. The institutional reward structures in sociology do not incentivize studying religion, let alone big-picture social-theoretic questions that are relevant to religion. Yet such big-picture questions are foundational to sociology and ignoring them undermines the quality and significance of our sociological work. These forces are especially evident during graduate training and for junior professors. Graduate training in sociology across most American universities increasingly pressures students to generate publishable articles as quickly as possible, to make students more competitive on the job market, and to improve the rankings of their departments. Junior scholars face similar pressures as they navigate the tenure process; success and security depend on establishing an early and steady production of publications. What junior scholars often develop as a result, whether intentionally or as an unintended by-product, is a mentality that privileges the use of available survey data sets to run quick quantitative analyses to address some minor lacuna in a particular body of literature. Such training generally does not encourage in-depth and broad reading on difficult problems. It rather

fosters a careerist mentality that sees the pursuit of big and difficult questions as grit thrown into the machinery of scholarship. Engaging big questions slows down the prolific manufacturing of published articles and is a risk to short-term achievement and, hence, a threat to professional survival. The requirements of major, sought-after funding sources (such as the National Science Foundation) to couch research in scientific frameworks that privilege “hypothesis testing” also arguably inhibit the pursuit of serious, in-depth research on religion exploring territory beyond well-worn paths and formulas. The institutional reward structures in the academy may thus obstruct the pursuit of big theoretical questions as well as moral visions of sociology’s possible contributions to society which might shape the discipline. We may rely on training in sociological theory to address such questions, yet even this as normally taught in graduate programs can be quite narrow, even perfunctory, and is often skewed by a common, underlying picture of human persons as essentially interested in political, status, and material ends.

Twelfth, *the relative lack of personal religious commitment, identity, and knowledge among mainstream American sociologists arguably provides an obstacle to taking religion seriously in scholarship.* We assume that, in general, the more personal, substantive knowledge a scholar has about an object of study, the more comfortable and competent the scholar can be in studying it (Polanyi 1962). We also assume that academics, who value competence and nuanced understanding in the topics they study, are less likely to turn their focus to subjects that would require significant investment in basic and professional knowledge. It is problematic, then, for the study of religion that American social scientists, and sociologists specifically, are disproportionately less religious than the U.S. population overall (Ecklund 2010). One consequence, we think, is that many social scientists may consider religion to be unfamiliar, unknown, and perhaps alien. This unfamiliarity may not necessarily make sociologists hostile to religion—although anecdotal evidence suggests that hostility toward religion is by no means absent in the discipline—but it may still have other consequences for taking religion seriously in scholarship. Without first making a substantial investment to learn more about religion, religiously unfamiliar scholars who address religion in their work risk getting their analyses and interpretations wrong. The majority of academics who are not personally familiar with religion, therefore, have incentives to simply steer clear of religion as “not something they study.”

In addition, some social scientists are suspicious of bias among religion scholars, whose knowledge of religion may stem from personal experience as believers and practitioners. Indeed, many American sociologists of religion in the 1950s and 1960s were often pastorally oriented—that is,

they were practitioners interested in using sociological research to improve their religious institutions. However, there is no reason to think that a scholar with experience in a religion and commitment to a religious identity is any more likely to be biased than a scholar committed to any other identity (such as gender, class, or race) or political stance (such as feminism or Marxism). In fact, we question whether lack of personal experience with religion is a justifiable reason for ignoring the presence and effects of religion in sociological work. Sociologists often lack personal experience with the things we study: privileged scholars often study underprivileged peoples and communities, male scholars often study women, scholars of different racial and ethnic backgrounds often study people and communities of different backgrounds, and so on. In some cases, personal unfamiliarity or distance is analytically advantageous. That same principle ought to function similarly when it comes to religion, one of the fundamental fields and sources of solidarity and social cleavages in social life. In the particular case of religion, the obstacle may not simply be unfamiliarity, but also what we believe is widespread and growing misinformation about religion in recent years, driven by the fear in various communities of “fundamentalism” and some New Atheism discourse. When personal unfamiliarity is coupled with readily available public discourse characterizing religion as essentially evil and irrational, it may not be surprising that scholars are reluctant to undertake the serious study of religion.

## POSITIVE SIGNS

Despite the problems and weaknesses we have presented above, we do not think the future of the field is bleak. American sociology has seen a growing openness to the importance of studying and understanding religion since the 1990s. Many sociologists have realized that the traditional critique of religion, in the form of secularization theory, is misguided, empirically flawed, and uninteresting. As a result, the discipline has seen a growing interest in the study of religion at many levels. Evidence suggests, for example, a growing demand from undergraduate students for courses that can help them to better understand religion and its role in the contemporary world—a demand that many sociology departments do not yet seem to be meeting. The quantity and quality of sociology graduate students interested in studying religion also seems to have increased in recent years. So, too, has interest in religion among established sociology faculty, journal editors, and book publishers in the last two decades.

In addition, sociology of religion as a field in the United States has produced a lot of theory and empirical work seeking to account for the

persistence of religion in the modern world. Most scholars (though not all) in American sociology of religion have overcome the traditional presupposition—found in Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and other classical thinkers—that religion is inherently irrational and is a negative force in personal and social life. Indeed, some contemporary observers claim that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, suggesting that American sociology of religion has developed too much of a “pro” view of religion and of the human goods that it promotes; they call instead for a more balanced view of religion’s ambivalent capacity for causing both positive and negative outcomes (Levitt et al. 2010). Recent analysis has also identified a significant shift in sociological treatments of religion over time: religion is analyzed less often as a “dependent variable” (the outcome or effect of other causal influences) and more often as an “independent variable” (the influence or cause operating on other outcomes) (Smilde and May 2010). These shifts indicate that scholars are at least interested in trying to understand the phenomenon of religion more adequately.

We can consider a further example here. Above, we noted that the designated “study of religion” as it evolved in the modern university consequently defined “religion” as a self-contained entity separable from other aspects of life; its study was cordoned off (by a theory of political liberalism) as having to do mainly with a particular dimension of people’s private lives. This tended to set up scholars to miss the many ways that religion was in fact part of everyday life in all spheres of society, but recent work on “everyday religion” has helped to correct this myopia regarding empirical reality (for example, Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008). This suggests that some in the discipline are committed to more adequately grasp religion as an object of study. It also suggests that, in the course of rethinking the role of knowledge about religion in the discipline of sociology, we need to pay close attention to the very conceptual boundaries and categories of religion that we presuppose and sustain in our scholarship.

Many sociologists still do not know what religion is and how and why it may have such consequences. But, more and more, sociologists seem in principle to be open to the fact that people are religious and that religion may have consequences in those people’s lives. In fact, compared to the disciplines of economics and political science, for example, where religion is nearly excluded from serious consideration by the presupposed axioms and focuses of the mainstream of those disciplines, sociology is positively enlightened and dynamic on matters religious. Some evidence also suggests that many good sociologists who study religion avoid parochialism, purposely framing their scholarship, which by any account is essentially

about religion, in terms of interests in different fields, such as political sociology, marriage and family, economic sociology, and so on. While this may suggest something amiss about the community of sociologists who study religion, it may also broaden the intellectual and network reach of the study of religion in the discipline.

More generally, most of the old disciplinary boundaries and categories are being reconsidered or challenged. Western “Enlightenment” when it comes to religion appears to be intellectually and academically stunting. People around the globe are transcending the standard Western story about “modernization” and its attendant doctrines about the “warfare of science and religion,” the obvious good of the liberal individual subject, and the teleological evolutionary destiny of religion to become privatized and subjectivized. This kind of fundamental intellectual churning and rethinking is happening not only (or even mostly) in the United States, but also in Europe, China, south Asia, and elsewhere. For instance, in Germany today, about one-third of the academic “clusters of excellence” are about religion. Thinkers outside of the cultures most influenced by Western Enlightenment skepticism appear to be more creative and open in their reflection on these matters than most scholars within those cultures. This appears to be a moment of flux provoking a foundational rethinking around the globe of terms and issues that have until recently been largely stable and taken for granted (in the West) since the seventeenth century.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Sociologists interested in improving the way that religion is understood and treated in sociology more broadly should recurrently ask and answer questions like these: What specifically would success look like? What do we need to understand about the nature of society in the twenty-first century that requires us to understand religious groups, practices, identities, rituals, beliefs, sensibilities, affiliations, and movements? How specifically would better debates about religion and social life sound? With whom should sociologists, both those who specialize in religion and those who do not, be talking? How could understanding religion better and taking religion more seriously improve the quality and fruitfulness of our disciplinary discourse? The task of reimagining the future is a crucial to moving forward the state of the relationship between sociology and religion. In what follows, we advance a set of proposals that we believe could help move sociology in the right direction.

## Overcoming Parochialism: Transcending National and Disciplinary Boundaries

Our thirteenth thesis is that *sociology must expand its conceptual and theoretical focus to address a wider variety of disciplines, nations, and religions*. Debates about the proper role of religion are churning all over the world, in academia and beyond. All of the social sciences today are struggling to come to terms with the fact that religion has not disappeared as a result of modernization but continues to exert significant influences in a host of ways in many institutions and nations around the world. The issues addressed here, in short, are very big and must be understood in such global, foundational terms. To the extent that we fail to expand the focus of our research, not only will religion remain regrettably marginal in sociology, but sociology will also increasingly marginalize itself in the broader world of practical and theoretical knowledge about human social reality.

Commensurate with the real globalization of social life today, the sociology of religion in America needs to globalize its vision—to address broader histories, cultures, and religious experiences. The discipline needs to focus on big issues, questions, and debates, and show how religion must be taken into account to address and answer them well. American sociology of religion has a strong bias toward studying the United States, particularly American Christianity (Smilde and May 2010; Cadge et al. 2011). In and of itself, this is perfectly legitimate and valuable. But changes in the world around us require a more international, multireligious, comparative perspective in order to acquire a more adequate understanding of religion—even for scholars just studying the United States. One positive example is the creation of programs in religion and politics at major universities like Berkeley, Columbia, Notre Dame, Georgetown, Harvard, and Princeton. Until sociology expands its focus to incorporate a greater variety of religions from all regions of the world, it will not only remain parochial in its substantive focus, but will be hindered in its ability to imagine new theories and paradigms for making sense of religion in the world as it is unfolding.

In addition to globalizing in meaningful ways, for the study of religion in sociology to flourish, it must shift into a more extradisciplinary or interdisciplinary mode. Sociology has developed a particular perspective on understanding the world that we think is valid and useful, but much of the best work on religion in recent years has been produced by scholars outside of sociology. All sociologists trying to better understand religion must make efforts to learn outside of the discipline from the best in anthropology, religious studies, psychology, history, philosophy, and

theology, as appropriate. No one discipline can adequately address and make sense of the new realities of religion in the world today. However, we do not think that sociology's role in such global and disciplinary exchanges should be exclusively passive and receptive. Sociology has much to bring to the table in terms of its theoretical and methodological resources, as well as its history of debates. Enriching sociology with the knowledge and perspectives of scholars in other disciplines will both elevate the quality of our own sociological work and generate interest and visibility outside of our own silo. We need both new ideas and new organizational forms, such as multidisciplinary centers for the study of religion, which are more adequate to the real world in which we now live. Connecting with other disciplines and scholars from different cultures around the world will not only promote cultural diversity but also move us past the constraints of the dominant epistemologies that govern and constrain American sociology.

### The Need to Historicize Sociology and Religion

Fourteenth, *it is essential to take a longer-term view and recognize the deep cultural assumptions and categories that have set up all of modern social science to think and behave in certain ways toward religion.*<sup>6</sup> By self-reflexively historicizing the study of religion and sociological theory itself, we can see the discipline's real points of connection to moral, historical, philosophical, and ontological questions. Most pressing for our purposes is why religion is an "other" in sociology. That is, why does religion seem to occupy a separate category among all human phenomena that scholars past and (often) present think can be ignored or explained away?

To answer these questions, we point to the impact of the Enlightenment, a transformation of fundamental cultural categories in Europe between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, a shift which changed what was taken for granted about religion. During this time, the "otherness" of Christianity's God was redefined to be brought within the known world of "creation," through a theological shift from analogical knowledge of God to nominalism's univocal knowledge of God. Transcendence was "domesticated" in ways that had huge cultural, social, religious, and political implications (Placher 1996). (That decisive shift was itself set up by the nominalist movement of William of Ockham, among others, in the late medieval period [Gregory 2012].) Christian apologetics also

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<sup>6</sup>We do not promote historicizing as a means to dissolve the subject of "religion," or to suggest that all of these matters are "relative" in the sense that any one position is as good as another; we historicize to foster a historical awareness that enables us to take stock of our situation and of the means we have for dealing with it.

abandoned claims to theology as a rational enterprise, operating with the sharp divide between “nature” and “the supernatural.” With Immanuel Kant, religion became subjectivized, as simultaneously humanly unknowable and personally experienced in a subjective way. The basis for future arguments about religion and its legitimacy were then grounded in inner, subjective experience (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher and much of liberal Protestantism). Religion also was redefined to be about ethics and morals, often construed as rule-following. In the end, theology became cast as a nonrational enterprise and ethics as a discipline that did not reference empirical reality (as ethics does, say, in the Aristotelian approach of virtue ethics [*eudemonian*]). These lines of thought passed through Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, and others. Hence, the very foundations of sociology are rooted in an “othering” of religion and everything else “pre-Enlightenment” while keeping liberal Protestantism’s outlook and progressivism.

The formative role of a variety of historical developments in the West is also critical for understanding religion and how intellectuals now define its “proper place” in social scientific research and higher education. One such important development was the outcome of the Western so-called wars of religion in early modern Europe (see [Cavanaugh 2009](#)). Another is the emergence of the secular state and forms of nationalism. Yet another was the rise of the modern research university and philosophies of science that informed its work in different ways along the path. For instance, the expansive German notion of *Wissenschaft*, in which philosophy and theology are inclusively considered particular forms of science, is remarkably different from the early twentieth-century approach of positivist *scientism*, which excluded theological claims, among others, as literally meaningless. Even further back in time, one can examine the impact of the “Axial Age,” a period between 800 and 200 BCE in which key philosophical and religious developments took place across civilizations, including the emergence of perspectives such as individualism and universalism, as well as new social forms such as a religious elite and traveling scholars (see [Jaspers 1953](#); [Eisenstadt 1986](#)). New theoretical perspectives such as Multiple Modernities and Comparative Civilizational Analysis encourage a comparative cultural and historical approach ([Eisenstadt 2003](#)). Such work has been done by people like Robert Bellah, David Martin, and Peter Berger ([1967](#)), and we encourage other scholars to undertake answering these questions.

## Conceptual and Methodological Reconfigurations

Questions about the role of religion in sociology also highlight the need for much better theorizing about religion broadly. In other words,

simply giving more attention to religion, if religion is conceptualized in its current, problematic terms, could make matters worse. Improving religion's treatment in the structure and practices of the discipline of sociology will be fruitful only if it provokes scholars to rethink many of the assumptions, categories, and expectations that define the current approaches to religion in sociology. To begin, fifteenth: *among the numerous conceptual issues needing to be addressed is the very distinction between "religious" and "secular."* In most of social science, the received presupposition is that the secular or secularity is a kind of space created with the disappearance or exclusion of religion. For most who operate under categories inherited from the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century social-evolutionism, the "secular" suggests a kind of natural resting place—that is, a neutral territory or condition achieved when the superstitions and irrationalities of religion are dispelled, or perhaps a final destiny for ever-evolving humanity. In this sense, secularity itself is naturalized, made neutral or objective, and de-problematized as a particular historical and social formation needing explanation itself. Scholars are now challenging that Eurocentric and totalizing notion (Asad 2003). In fact, some scholars have recently asserted that secularity is not some kind of natural, neutral, and ultimately universal space or condition toward which humanity moves as it discards the irrationalities and oppressions of religion. Rather, it is a particular social condition created at a specific time in mostly post-Christian circumstances (Buckley 1987; Taylor 2007; Warner et al. 2010). Scholars must therefore view "the secular" as a construction that comes after and out of particular religious traditions (i.e., there is a distinctly Catholic secular, a Turkish secular, and so on). This process of relativizing secularity opens important questions about how such constructions happen, historically and culturally, both religious and not. It also raises larger questions about the nature of humanity, personhood, and history as they relate to matters of transcendence, the sacred, and the like. We need, in short, a sociology of secularism, even a sociology of comparative secularisms.<sup>7</sup>

In reflecting on these matters, we realize how easy it is to confuse terms in ways that trip up our thinking. For example, sociologists can easily forget that Emile Durkheim actually wrote about the sacred versus the *profane*, not the sacred versus the *secular*. The difference matters significantly for how we conceptualize things religious and their place in the larger order of cognition, culture, and society. For instance, we can

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<sup>7</sup>Some of this work is being done, especially outside the United States, but it remains an open question as to whether that work will influence mainstream American sociology. See, for example, Warner et al. (2010).

certainly distinguish the “sacred secular” from the “secular profane,” including in the former category things such as the U.S. Constitution, human rights, and so on. Thus, we need to seriously consider distinctions between concepts such as “religious,” “sacred,” and “transcendent,” and, as we argue below, do more to define and conceptualize religion. We need to re-read and re-think the classics and examine—perhaps dissolve or reframe—intellectual problems that may be inherent to our original foundations.

The task of historicization described above can also aid the task of re-conceptualization. We can ask why, for instance, such a thin definition of religion has persisted for so long. In American sociology, we can easily recognize the legacy of certain kinds of Protestant theology, whose heavily creedal and voluntaristic natures, along with their relatively narrow, privatized accounts of divine involvement in history and life, have defined the way most Americans understand religion. This theology also belies an intellectualist error that treats practices as propositions. Recognizing this legacy should strengthen the imperative to eschew reductionistic accounts of religion and to turn instead to a more practice-theoretic understanding of what religion is, focusing not so much on ideas in the minds of individuals as their participation in communities of discourse (but without making the error of dismissing the role of beliefs altogether).

We must also attend to the fact that debates over and renegotiations of the “secular” take place within the nexus of the nation-state, which is always a contested construct. The colonial legacy’s definitional hold on religion has led to what we call “methodological nationalism”—the presupposition that “the social” and “the national” are interchangeable, settled categories and realities. Moving forward, sociology needs to overcome this analytic parochialism. This would involve, for example, thinking more critically about Islam and the Orient as “The Other” and acknowledging the modern, liberal West as a normatively guided geopolitical project. Denaturalizing what may seem to be axiomatic (e.g., who or what is the nation? Religion?) does not require giving up the analytic distinctness and efficacy of religion. In fact, it may actually attune analysts to a nonreductionistic account of religion, in part because such approaches would necessarily depart from modernist biases and paradoxes. So, while imagining modern nationalism as a first instance where religion intersects with sociological realities to generate cultural and political boundaries coincides with the complementary invention of religion as a transcultural and ahistorical essence to be domesticated and interiorized, a more critical view provides us greater and much-needed self-reflexivity.

Sixteenth, *sociology would do well to pay closer attention to its motivations for studying religion, as well as our assumptions about religion*

reflected in these motivations. Our motivations affect our perceptions, interpretations, and theorizations. Human interests always shape human thinking, even scientific thinking. All human knowledge, including scientific knowledge, has always been, always is, and always will be *personal* knowledge—always historically, culturally, and morally situated in ways that affect it, for better or worse (Polanyi 1962). We know that the distinction in scholarship between value-driven motivations and (compulsory) value-free objectivity is hard—and probably impossible—to maintain in practice, regardless of Weber’s injunctions. This need not mean the automatic loss of balance, fairness, and the search for truth in scholarship. And this need not mean that truth statements are impossible to make. But it complicates matters and certainly disrupts our foundations in epistemological foundationalism and positivism. Increasing our self-reflexivity about our motivations for studying religion may provide clues about how we approach, perceive, and interpret religion in our work. And this may enable us to study religion in a way that improves sociology and, in turn, broadens our knowledge about human social life.

### What Is Religion? (And Why Does the Question Matter?)

Seventeenth, *we need more clarity on what “religion” even is*. When we discuss what religion is and how it works, we are often addressing different issues. One concerns differentiating the “thing” religion as an *object in reality* from things not religious.<sup>8</sup> For another, there is the phenomenological question or approach, which deals with how people *experience* religious phenomena. While this captures something important about religion for people, it is inadequate to treat a phenomenological account as a definition of religion’s ontology. This raises the issue of whether there are ontic facts behind “religion.” That is, is religion something more than human construction? While sociology is not suited as a discipline to answer this question, we need to recognize that our work carries presuppositions about the nature of the world, reality, and religion’s place in it. These discussions often also address whether a *general theory* of religion is even possible, compared to a more strictly historicist approach. Another set of distinctions has to do with levels of analysis at which we could examine the phenomenon of religion. One could talk about individual-level religious beliefs, practices, and experiences of the sacred or spiritual or transcendent. Then there are practices and shared beliefs at

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<sup>8</sup>From certain perspectives, “religion” is only or mainly a modern phenomenon or category, but such perspectives make the mistake of reducing religion (only) to institutionalized religions or belief systems. See Asad (1993).

the level of groups, communities, and congregations. At another level, there exist global “imagined communities,” for instance, in Hinduism, Islam, or Roman Catholicism. One could even talk about the emergence of a “global sacred” with the sacralization and global diffusion of human rights.

Then there is the question of why the study of religion is worthwhile at all. One rationale for the study of religion is that it is “out there” as a matter of institutional fact that seems to matter in the world. A second rationale is phenomenological: many people, by all their accounts, actually experience “religion” as something transcendent, sacred, and important. They experience it as making a difference in their lives. For at least those kinds of reasons, religion deserves its own field of study. We simply cannot understand the nature of the world well, we think, without understanding religion and its role in human life. More broadly, it would be difficult to understand the historical emergence of the human species itself without religion. Religion, language, narratives, and rituals are crucial in the formation of the human species. Myths and sagas are crucially important to humans, who are mimetic animals. Contrary to the assumptions of some in modern science, whether humans can even live as purely rational animals without religion, narratives, rituals, and myths is questionable in our view.

In addressing these issues, the fundamental question that sociologists of religion need to answer is: Exactly what about religion warrants identifying it as a distinct human activity, formation, or cultural or organizational expression deserving its own specialized focus and field of study? It is clear that religions operate in social life through many of the same causal mechanisms that other, nonreligious phenomena do. In other words, religious and nonreligious phenomena alike shape beliefs and desires, organize communities of discourse that exert social influence on members, provide content for socialization, transfer information and resources through social networks, and so on. Indeed, many in sociology tend to treat religion as mere “ideology,” which, while not totally reductionistic, does not recognize any *distinctively religious* aspect of religion. (The assumption here is that the same mechanisms involved in religious phenomena, such as beliefs, are also at work in other, nonreligious beliefs that cause action. If this is the case, the thinking goes, why not dissolve “religion” into organizations, resources, ideologies, or other categories?)

But what, if anything, makes religion distinctive among other ideologies, cultural formations, and social organizations that warrants particular attention? Answering this question requires developing a theory that treats the *religious* dimensions of human experience as real in their own right—a theory we believe is still lacking. Some thinkers focus on transcendence—the engagement with superhuman powers. Others object

that people pursue transcendence in all sorts of ways, including nonreligious ones. Still others argue that religion involves a particularly *powerful* version of transcendence that is both qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from other experiences or ideologies. Martin Riesebrodt's recent work (2010) is an important step in explicating a *practice*-based conceptualization centered on people seeking help from superhuman entities.<sup>9</sup> Even so, transcendence itself can be seen as a historically emergent category arising in the Axial Age, as religious community became differentiated from society based on kinship and city-gods and critiques of cultic sacrifice took hold. Prior to this period, religious experience was arguably characterized more by modes of immanent sacreds, similar to what Durkheim describes. Definitions of religion focused exclusively on the concept of salvation arguably neglect such earlier modes of religion.

Further work to define religion must resist the prevailing attempts to subsume religion into culture, ideology, psychological coping, or other categories. We do not anticipate a quick and easy resolution, especially the roots of our very discipline contain the seemingly incommensurable definitions of religion by Durkheim and Weber. But we need to promote fruitful discussion on this question, if only because real-world groups have beliefs and practices that they themselves consider religious and which we as scholars need to do a better job of understanding.

This all requires yet another shift: from ideas in the minds of individuals to participation in communities of discourse. Eighteenth, *methodologically, this entails adopting more thickly historical, ethnographic, and comparative approaches when these are better suited to answer our questions about religion.* Although we are wary of the presumptions built into survey methods, we do not advocate the rejection of these research methodologies altogether. They do have important advantages in that, when done well, they are able to make claims about populations, map the prominence of various phenomena, and spot trends whose importance could be assessed over time. At the same time, we do need to be careful of the problems and limits with these approaches—for instance, despite the advantages of longitudinal surveys, a serious problem with them is that the meaning of a survey question can—and often does—change over time. Further, many of our standard methodologies do not have the capacity to grasp deeper and more complex aspects of religion. But this does not mean we should simply stick to what we already know how to do with our existing methods or let them serve as perennial constraints

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<sup>9</sup>Riesebrodt also provides a strong argument for the continued relevance of religion as a universal concept.

on what we are able to see. We certainly need to acknowledge that “religion” is harder to measure than concepts such as “income,” but at the same time, it is comparable to other elusive and less tractable concepts, such as “power” or “capitalism.”

As noted above, better work to conceptualize and measure religion, even in standard instruments such as surveys, requires breaking with the biased standards of American conservative Protestantism, such as frequency of Bible-reading. One tangible improvement would be the development of survey questions designed to capture aspects of everyday “lived religion” (e.g., how people are involved in practices of informal prayer such as asking God or a higher power for help) or to gauge the importance of place and materiality (e.g., ways in which particular places might be “set apart,” either physically or metaphorically, from routine life; or ways in which religion has to do with objects that people own, wear, or contact in certain situations). Importantly, improved measures of religion need to find their way into general surveys—not just religion-focused ones. Religion should be as common a variable as race, class, and gender in quantitative analyses. That this is not yet the case is, we believe, largely due to the inadequacy of our standard measures.

### Is a Two-way Dialogue Possible, and What Would It Look Like?

Nineteenth, *we propose the idea of a two-way stream between religion and sociology.* But what would that possibly look like? Why and how might each benefit from the other? We observe that the social sciences have much to offer other disciplines in driving empirical inquiry on religion. In theology, for example, interest has grown in how scientific and social scientific knowledge can inform reflections and understandings in that discipline (for example, [Placher 1989](#); [Martin 1997](#); [Flanagan 2007](#); [Mathewes 2007](#); [Ward 2012](#)). The field of religious studies also benefits by importing tools of systematic data collection and analysis first developed in the social sciences. However, much less is said, among social scientists in any case, on what theology (very broadly conceived) might be able to offer our conversations and debates. Indeed, it is not clear that social scientists can even imagine the possibility or be willing to consider the discussion. Still, we might ask, what theological or more broadly religious research could shed light on work in the social and behavioral sciences? What are the philosophical anthropologies of different forms of religion, and how might they shape the way social scientists think about their objects of study and explanations?

One starting point might be to examine how religious traditions influence conceptualizations of agency and personhood, which would then influence our use of those concepts in the social sciences

(Smith 2003a, 2010). More generally, engaging in greater reflexivity concerning basic sociological ideas of explanation, causation, and motivation could reveal the extent to which these are still deeply rooted in Protestantism. Comparing religious traditions—for instance, by examining Buddhist conceptions of the person—may likewise alter our understandings of causality as involving co-dependent co-arising phenomena. Such investigations might help us work on a thicker understanding of religions specifically and human personal and social life more broadly.

Another rationale for intentionally integrating both knowledge about religion and religious knowledge into the discipline of sociology follows from the observation that at least some schools of thought in our discipline unapologetically begin with particular intellectual and moral locations, commitments, presuppositions, and interests; some even argue that these particular positions privilege their sociological understandings. Examples include feminist theory, Marxism, queer theory, some forms of critical theory, and projects of “real utopias.” One might ask why or how such value-committed scholarly approaches that start with particularistic intellectual and moral presuppositions are legitimate in sociology, while religious perspectives on human person and social life are a priori excluded. The uneven privileging of certain intellectual and moral positions deserves ongoing questioning and consideration. At the very least, examining such issues seriously will force sociologists to be more self-aware and self-reflexive.

All of this obligates sociologists to invest more into learning about religion, just as they invest in learning about race and ethnicity, class, gender, and other important aspects of social life. We do not mean that sociologists of religion should be personally convinced about the truth-claims of any religion. Rather, we refer to the sort of seriousness about religion and religious phenomena that is evident in scholars as professedly “religiously unmusical” as Max Weber. This would entail being open to the possibility that disciplines such as theology or traditions of spiritual disciplines may contain valuable insights for sociologists of religion. This would also entail a greater basic literacy about religion, in the sense of what religious beliefs and practices mean to the people who adopt them and the communities that sustain them. Rather than imposing secularist assumptions about how people operate and about the proper role of religion in society, it would obligate sociologists to consider religious beliefs, practices, and experiences as reflecting modes of knowledge about the world worth engaging to better understand human history, culture, and social life—even when we disagree with their claims.

We therefore urge scholars today to not prematurely limit ourselves to what may feel like “safe” and “obvious” categories and lines of thought.

The construction and policing of strong traditional boundaries will only stunt the intellectual vibrancy of the contemporary university. Our discipline and its comfortable tendencies and practices—including the dominant secularist assumptions that tend to reduce religion to other categories such as ideology, power, insecurity, and so on—are a product of a particular, path-dependent, noninevitable historical process. Questioning some of these basic presuppositions and categories will not hurt sociology or sociologists (Milbank 2006).

In fact, most social theory is about the intellectual push and pull of life in a post-Kantian dispensation. And most of the theoretical issues we wrestle with today have roots that go all the way back to the ancients. Might it help us to begin to question the very reasons for believing in the modern fact–value divorce? How might we benefit from questioning the widespread assumption that human action is always based on interests and rules? Might we have something to learn from reconsidering the possibility that there is something like a natural law? Might ancient knowledge accumulated through millennia of religious experience—including teleological and *eudaimonian* views—have something to tell modern inquirers into human social life (insights that Enlightenment skepticism and rationalism have ignored)? Raising such questions underscores the need for further reflection on what the dominant epistemology or epistemologies in the field are and should be, since this has bearing on how sociologists approach the study of religion.

### What Are (or Should Be) the Big Questions in Sociology of Religion?

Twentieth, *we need to better identify and focus on big questions*. There are numerous important, broad questions that contemporary research in the sociology of religion should be addressing. Some of these are long-standing problems, others have only received recent attention, and still others have hardly been considered. Some of these questions are more empirically tractable, whereas others deal with deep cultural forces that are not observable on the surface.

A first category of questions asks what is the role of religion in generating or sustaining or challenging different cultural structures in the modern world. Several examples merit consideration here. One is the relationship of religion to certain types of individualism.<sup>10</sup> Another pressing question is the role of religion in creating and rectifying social inequalities. We need a better understanding of the relationships between

<sup>10</sup>This was addressed in Bellah et al. (1985).

religion and race, class, and gender stratification (see, for example, [Emerson and Smith 2000](#); [Keister 2011](#)). Analyses focused on race, class, and gender may help us to better understand religion in the first place. Turning to the political arena, open questions concern the relationship between religion and sources of power such as states and governments, especially the role of religion in state formation and peace-building. For example, what are the various institutional and juridical mechanisms by which democratic polities manage and accommodate pluralism? Under what conditions do religious cleavages lead to intractable forms of conflict, including violence? In economics, what is the role of religion in sustaining and challenging economic systems? How did American Protestantism make peace with neoliberal capitalism? Relatedly, one avenue for examination is the historical imprint of religion on present-day processes such as globalization. The Jesuits, for example, were a globalizing force long before neoliberal capitalism. An even more macrohistorical exploration would consider the cultural innovations generated during the Axial Age such as the emergence of transcendence as a preoccupation of religions, or the ways in which religion began to challenge violence.<sup>11</sup> Such historical questions are critical to challenging the pervasive (and we think erroneous) assumption that everything begins with modernity and that we can conveniently ignore what came before.

A second set of questions concerns factors that foster the emergence and sustenance of secularism—including the ways in which religion is a contributing factor in this regard. One dimension of this question is to study people and societies who are irreligious or indifferent to religion. Phil Zuckerman, for instance, claims that in Scandinavian societies such as Denmark, which have the lowest rates of religious belief and participation, people are more content and society is more effective in resolving issues such as poverty. His recent edited collection sets an agenda for the social-scientific study of atheism and secularity ([Zuckerman 2008, 2010](#)). But much more scientific work remains to be done along those lines. More historical questions merit investigation as well. One such issue is the now-pervasive notions of “freedom” or “liberty.” How did these concepts emerge historically? What role did religion play in shaping whether they were considered natural or cultivated capacities or rights? Comparing our dominant Western views to other conceptions of freedom, autonomy, and agency would be instructive in this regard (as Saba Mahmood does with Islam, for example) ([Mahmood 2005](#)). Agency is typically framed from a Western liberal viewpoint, but in order to better understand how it

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<sup>11</sup>Good examples are recent works by Hans Joas and William Cavanaugh that demolish the idea that it is only through modern secularism that violence is challenged, and Jurgen Habermas’ work on the emergence of prophets as a critique of state power.

is differently conceived in non-Western and nonliberal societies, we need to consider the role of religion in sustaining our own liberal presuppositions. Along these lines, it is worth examining the role of religion in the emergence of political liberalism in general. Scholars such as Michael Gillespie, Pierre Manent, and Charles Taylor have examined the role of religion in the intellectual history of modernity, although more sociological treatments of this question are needed (Manent 1994, 1998; Taylor 2001; Gillespie 2008). This could help us understand, for instance, why, in spite of the seeming collapse of Christianity in Europe, religion—and Christianity in particular—is arguably still fundamental in structuring politics and economics in Europe.

A further question regards the role of religion in shaping the current belief in (a certain form of) science as a way to explain the world. Understanding this would entail examining, for instance, the relationship between scientism and creationism in the contemporary United States. All such questions would require historical, cultural, and comparative methods of research. A still further set of questions, also entailing comparative cultural inquiry, concerns the forms and meanings of “spirituality” worldwide. As Peter van der Veer suggests, “spirituality” in its meanings and manifestations in modern societies shows significant cross-cultural diversity (van der Veer 2009). A related issue worth addressing is the emergence of the historically recent category of “spiritual but not religious.” For instance, when, where, and to what extent do we find spirituality that is meaningfully disconnected from religion? To what extent is this discourse a boundary-maintenance mechanism having to do with, perhaps, embeddedness in social networks in which being “religious” is perceived as a bad thing? Also relevant here is the importance of understanding and explaining variation in how people engage with the supernatural and with superhuman powers. For instance, examining the role of “spiritual insecurity” and the continued prominence of witches in the lives of many modern Africans can illuminate the relationship between religion and uncertainty and how this shapes people’s behavior and decisions (Ashforth 2005; Trinitapoli and Yeatman 2011). This allows for a more adequate understanding of the role of risk and insecurity in modernity than, for instance, its treatment by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). In addition, we need to better understand the emergence, sustenance, and diffusion of new religious movements in the world today, such as Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. We do not sufficiently understand how new religious movements are generated. For example, how is it possible for a movement to be cobbled together from disparate traditions yet “stick” and gain traction among followers around the world? What binds people to these beliefs and practices, and how do

global and local processes interact? And how are these processes similar to or different from other globally diffusing phenomena, such as multinational corporations?

### Institutional Reconfigurations

Twenty-first, *we need some tangible changes in the broader institutional setup and reward structures of the discipline.* We note a contradiction between the agenda we are setting forth here, which calls for more in-depth intellectual work on big questions, and the nature of graduate training, which increasingly emphasizes quick publications and tries to push students through programs ever faster. With few exceptions, graduate programs in sociology are designed to produce technicians and not intellectuals. The limited financial resources of departments play an important role here; in many cases, departments are unable to support students beyond the third, fourth, or fifth years of their graduate programs. The sort of training and research we are proposing would take longer than most departments can—or are willing to—support. And in addition to in-depth reading to address big questions (rather than simply a topic-focused approach that characterizes most students' interests), our call for more interdisciplinary and international research calls for institutional interventions that would support good graduate students studying religion as they pursue such ends.

Part of the difficulty in rewarding big thinking is the increasing corporatization and commodification of education. The past decade has seen an increasing shift toward the quantification of academic goals and achievements that resemble the dynamics of a for-profit corporation, driven by boards of trustees and corporate CEOs looking for achievement metrics that might be comparable to those of a corporate sales division. Add to this the sacralization of the college degree in our culture, and we can better understand the dwindling support for the kind of research that we are calling for. One solution to this problem would be the establishment of generous dissertation fellowships, postdoctoral fellowships, grants for international research, and sabbatical grants for early- and mid-career scholars pursuing bigger questions. Another possibility is the development of think-tanks and institutes for the study of religion that can bring scholars together and support them in the focused pursuit of their research for a period of time. But given that some foundations have been reducing their investments in scholarship on religion, this might prove a formidable challenge. Given the globalized perspective required in the study of religion today, the additional investments in travel, languages, fieldwork, education in new literatures, and so on will need significant institutional financial support.

In addition to reward structures, a crucial institutional issue is the supply of courses. For graduate students, this is a serious issue because it affects the availability of jobs and thus what scholars-in-training choose to study. The dearth of courses in the sociology of religion adversely affects the availability of the next generation of scholars. But university departments across the country need not provide more course offerings in this area in order to generate employment for our specific subfield. Rather, universities ought to measure student interest and demand in sociology of religion and adjust their supply of courses. Deans should then act accordingly to create new positions and courses. This is an issue that institutional gatekeepers need to take more seriously.

### Publishing Outside Specialty Sociology-of-Religion Journals

The community of sociologists interested in religion have four different associations, three religion-specialty journals, and three annual conferences.<sup>12</sup> While a unique strength of our subfield, the drawbacks of this structural arrangement are worth considering, too. We suspect that having three sociology-of-religion journals, for example, fosters scholarly isolation by enabling scholars to limit their contributions to specialty journals, where their work will remain invisible to readers who do not already follow these. “Religion” as a topic is thus concentrated: strong but also cordoned off from the rest of the discipline. Having three of its own journals does not push scholarship on religion to “spread out” and speak more broadly to a wider constituency of colleagues. But if that were to happen, religion might be better integrated in the discipline as a whole—even if this made it harder (at least initially) to publish peer-reviewed articles on religion. We think at the very least that, twenty-second, *sociologists of religion should make efforts to overcome their insularity by being more vocal in journals and conferences outside the subfield*. Established scholars who publish articles in other journals, making in those contexts the points about the study of religion we have discussed here, will both add legitimacy to the subfield and do a service to the discipline as a whole. More generally, we think we need to seriously ask what purposes our many religion associations and specialty journals do and should serve. Should some of our associations and journals merge?

<sup>12</sup>These include the American Sociological Association religion section, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR), and the Religious Research Association (RRA), the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research* (in addition to *Social Compass* and other non-US-based specialty associations, journals, and meetings).

## Rethinking Teaching

Finally, twenty-third, *we need to reconsider our teaching of sociology, sociology of religion, and social theory*. How should we introduce undergraduates to the study of religion? What are the most important things we want to communicate to students? What do they most need to learn to be good citizens of the world today? What should be in a syllabus, how should we engage students, what projects ought to be assigned? Such questions raise larger questions about the boundaries of the sociological canon. How, for instance, do Weber and Durkheim fit into a longer tradition of history and philosophy? Are there other thinkers in theology, philosophy, and religious ethics that students in the sociology of religion ought to read early on, perhaps people like Reinhold Niebuhr or Michael Polanyi? What do we assume and teach about the philosophies and meta-theories that underwrite our sociology? Then there is the issue of mentoring: what sorts of research are we encouraging graduate students to conduct? Should we be encouraging something different instead? What problems and questions are worth investigating?

Certainly, there are many important topics to address in the sociology of religion courses we teach. Notable among these are religion and immigration; religion in global cities; religion and youth; global Pentecostalism; the globalization of Islam; religious individualism in the West and other places; religion and conflict, violence, and peace-building; the “resurgence” of religion; and addressing and demystifying “fundamentalism.” These courses can help students understand, for example, the uniqueness of religion in America, the role of race in American exceptionalism, and the complexity of religion in the contemporary global context, such as global Islam or religion in China. Our discipline offers analytical categories and techniques that are useful for making sense of these phenomena. Moreover, the work that some of us assign students as part of these courses, such as observing a religious congregation that is different from their own tradition and writing religious autobiographies from a sociological perspective, can have significant and even transformative impacts on them. Such projects guide students (most of whom consider themselves to be religious to some degree) in the experience of looking at a religious tradition or institution—even their own—from the “outside,” without having to either discard their own beliefs and traditions or to attack (or embrace) those of another. Our courses provide a structure within which such difficult experiences can be navigated.

In addition, sociological tools can allow students to critically engage with religion based on a hermeneutic of not only suspicion but one of

generosity and genuine understanding. More than simply “critical thinking,” our courses can cultivate a way of constructively engaging in meaningful discourse about religion, across all sorts of boundaries. To have such an engaged civil discourse first requires students to develop more accurate understandings of what people actually believe and what religion means to its adherents and practitioners. Simply correcting misperceptions and simplistic ideas about religion can be a great service. For instance, it comes as surprising news to many evangelical Protestant college students that they belong to a broader tradition that was once part of Roman Catholicism. Similarly, it is worth debunking the myth that “all religions are the same” (see [Prothero 2010](#)).

Classes in sociology of religion can cultivate the habit of civilly disagreeing with others. The pedagogical aim of this endeavor should therefore be to generate practices of civil relations and discourse that enables students, regardless of whether they are personally supportive, hostile, or indifferent to religious claims, to engage in conflictual or agnostic but constructive thinking over differences that really matter. It would show that, despite the toxic conflicts of our broader culture, it is still possible to generate “civic friendship”—to have discussions across difference, not in a simplistic “politically correct” way that merely maintains decorum, but to engage productively in discussions that take seemingly intractable differences seriously. This requires the cultivation of humility; it entails openness to learning from people students disagree with, rather than rendering such differences irrelevant by a relativistic approach.

Our position on teaching the sociology of religion represents a deeper moral vision for the field and a commitment to a kind of “public sociology.” Teaching religion at this moment inescapably entails taking on such a responsibility. Sociologists will do a bad job in helping students become good citizens of the world if we do not understand religion, provide adequate knowledge about religious phenomena, and model how such constructive conversations can take place around contentious and divisive issues related to religion. The sociology of religion and individual sociologists who take religion seriously can provide a much-needed challenge to certain contemporary views, which—encouraged by vocal proponents of the New Atheism—foster reductive views of religion and outright dismissal of if not hostility toward religion. Further, we can challenge the idea that civility requires leaving religion at the door, and we can support a more robust understanding of pluralistic, democratic engagement and citizenship. Our discipline can also serve as an endeavor in peace-building if we move beyond our current semi-parochialism toward conversations with peace studies and political science.

## CONCLUSION

In our twenty-three points, we have tried to lay out what we see as the main causes of sociology's difficult dealings with religion and offer some suggestions for improving the situation into the future. We hope that by publicly advancing these views, we might foster more critical and constructive conversations among a variety of sociologists coming from different approaches—all toward the larger goal of improving sociology's engagement with and understanding of religion. Finally, it is our hope that such improvements within the sociology of religion will improve more generally the quality and contribution of sociology, social science, and higher education broadly.

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