



10 Years of Flourishing for the Sake of Sociology and Christianity

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It is with particular joy that I write this essay for the *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* (JSC). Ten years ago, I founded the *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* (JSIRS), now JSC, as an expression of the mission of Oxford (now Omega) Graduate School, the American Centre for Religion/Society Studies (ACRSS). I applied for the ISSN number and launched the first website in early 2010. Drs. Curtis McClane and Ken Schmidt, both OGS alumni, served as the first editors and, to get the journal off the ground, I wrote the inaugural article in 2011. Dr. Steve Mittwede, and others, also helped advance the journal in its earliest days.

OGS had a few aborted attempts at scholarly journals over its 30-year history, but none had achieved staying power or a scholarly reputation beyond its own constituency. My goal was to launch a journal which could connect the work of OGS to the broader academic community, especially Christians teaching and practicing sociology. OGS's mission, simply, is to "change the world through social research" through our master's and doctoral programs in the "sociological integration of religion and society": hence, the original title of the journal.

Dr. Russ Heddendorf taught for OGS near the end of his life, and the mission of OGS resonated with him as a pioneering Christian sociologist. His protégé, Dr. Matt Vos, became actively involved with OGS after Dr. Heddendorf's passing, and introduced the team advancing the nascent journal to members of the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology (ACTS, now the Christian Sociological Association—CSA), which propelled the journal forward. Dr. Vos and Dr. Dennis Hiebert forged the journal's partnerships with ACTS/CSA, which led to the journal's name change in 2016. The journal has continued to professionalize and prosper since that time, and the fruitful partnership between OGS and CSA continues to flourish.

With all that said, I'd like to share some reflections regarding intersections of sociology and Christianity in my personal and professional life. I happen to live in one of the most

impoverished cities in the United States, with one of the highest concentrations of children living in poverty per capita. Youngstown, Ohio, is a rustbelt city which has struggled to redefine itself and recover, not only from the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s, but the downsizing and closing of a large General Motors factory. Living and working in the city limits has given me a unique opportunity to conduct daily ethnography as I go about my business – always observing and interpreting life through a sociological lens. The sociological imagination cannot be muted.

I spent 10 years as an assistant superintendent in an urban Christian school system in Youngstown, the largest publicly funded private school system in the state. Youngstown City Schools happened to be the bottom-ranked public school district in the state, which allowed our school system to meet a desperate public need through the state’s voucher system. While leading change and transformation of the school’s mission, I was able to employ sociological theory and method to redefine the “definition of the situation,” per W. I. Thomas, and in turn, my work has had an influence on the broader Christian schooling movement, nudging it in the direction of social justice.

Although I’ve published quite a bit of my sociological work in scholarly journals, my interests led me toward sociological practice: clinical sociology, specifically, which involves interventions to advance social change. For several years, I studied clinical sociology, especially regarding organizational and social justice interventions, and presented my portfolio of work before a dais at the Association of Clinical and Applied Sociology (AACCS) meeting in 2018, where I achieved Certified Clinical Sociologist status with AACCS.

In terms of theory, I presented my work as “clinical religious sociology,” employing social situationism (Thomas’ “definition of the situation”) as theoretical groundwork for applying sociology to religious contexts. “A situational approach to religion overcomes all the reductionist tendencies . . . while at the same time being squarely centered in well-founded and tested sociological theory” (Swatos, 1987, p. 157). Proposed in an otherwise obscure chapter by Bill Swatos (1987), *Clinical Religious Sociology* is a “method that takes the internal logics of religion seriously” (p. 160). It calls sociologists to understand religion “not in terms of abstract principles, but of interactions and situations” (Swatos, 1987, p. 161). Put simply, if we apply the Thomas Dictum to religious situations – and religious organizations – we come to see God as a social actor in a situation defined theologically: when we “define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas, 1928). If God is part of the definition of the situation (for example, God calling Christians to provide education to children in poverty as a matter of social justice), then the situation is ultimately real in its consequences. The dais at AACCS affirmed my approach to conducting clinical sociology in a religious context. I intend to submit an article to *JSC* about this theoretical approach to Clinical Religious Sociology in the not too distant future.

I cannot express enough how thankful I am to see how JSC has matured over the years. I am deeply thankful for the stewards who have cared for and nurtured it in its infancy and adolescence. I am sure it is now entering adulthood. As such, it will continue to be a voice of serious sociologists who approach our discipline from a Christian perspective and make unique contributions to society through our scholarly work. I am now serving as the President of Omega Graduate School (The American Centre for Religion/Society Studies) and am thereby positioned to advance the partnership between OGS and JSC in creative and mutually beneficial ways. I look forward to OGS continuing to sponsor and promote the journal as we advance its purposes together. Here's to another 10 years!

References

Swatos, W. 1987. *Religious Sociology: Interfaces and Boundaries*. New York: Praeger.

Thomas, W. I., and Swaine Thomas, D. 1928. *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. New York: Knopf.