

Editorial

The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity

[The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology and Christianity](#) was published this fall. Its compilation was a three-year process intent on being as topically comprehensive as possible in a single volume, and more than Euro-American sociologists talking to each other. More specifically, as the Introduction to the compendium concluded, “The aim of this volume is to set a research agenda on selected topics for the immediate future of scholarship globally, to redefine existing areas within the context of international multi-disciplinary research within these two fields, to highlight emerging areas within them, and to provide upper undergraduate and graduate students with ideas and encouragement for future research activity” (13). What follows are excerpts from the Introduction to the *Handbook*, albeit not in the order in which they appear in the *Handbook*. The Table of Contents of the *Handbook* appears as an appendix at the end of this editorial.

Overview

This Handbook is a collection of analyses from scholars around the world of selected aspects of the intersection of the relatively young, modern social science of sociology understood by a tiny minority of global citizens, and the old, metamodern world religion of Christianity understood at least cursorily by a vast majority of global citizens. As two respective social imaginaries (Taylor 2003) or standpoints, this collection includes both sociological perspectives of Christianity—an application of the more general, classical sub-discipline of the sociology of religion to the world’s largest religion—as well as Christian perspectives of sociology, or at least of social issues/problems of mutual concern. The former are the etic perspectives of the “objective,” universal, “non-native,” social scientific outsider, whereas the latter are the emic perspectives of the “subjective,” local, “native,” religious insider (Harris 1976). At times a third standpoint is taken to observe the similarities, differences, and relationship between the two standpoints of sociology and Christianity. The intent is to avoid excessively favoring any one perspective over the others.

This volume is divided into five distinct parts, each part opening with its own short Introduction to its theme and the seven respective chapters included. *Part 1: The History of Christianity and Sociology* provides a sociological perspective of early Christianity, comparative world religions, as well as the main branches of Christianity. It then elucidates Christian

influences on early sociology, before examining current Christian influences on public religion and nationalism. *Part 2: Contemporary Sociological Theory and Christianity* explicates Burawoy's (2021) professional and critical sociologies intended for academic audiences. Going beyond the standard theoretical perspectives of sociology, it offers more philosophical perspectives of both sociological topics and sociology itself. *Part 3: Social Institutions and Christianity* expounds on what Auguste Comte, in his early formulation of sociology as "social physics," termed the "social statics" of social institutions that form part of social structure. The character and role of selected micro, meso, and macro social institutions are examined. *Part 4: Social Change and Christianity* expounds on what Comte termed the "social dynamics" of social change. It details selected Christian responses intended to mitigate social inequalities and injustices of social class and race, to mollify war and disease, and to respond to cultural change from religiosity to spirituality. Finally, *Part 5: Applied Sociology and Christianity* explicates Burawoy's public and policy sociologies intended for extra-academic audiences. After introducing professional applied sociology, it relates applied sociology to law and community, socialisms, and modern slavery, all in the context of the ethics of care, human rights, and social justice...

The intersection of sociology and Christianity is unsurprising for those invested in both, and indeed, more organic than commonly intuited. As social imaginaries, their similarities brought them together in the Christian sociologies of the nineteenth century, their differences drove them apart during the secularization of the sociology of religion in the twentieth century, before their likenesses reunited them toward the end of the century. Despite the persisting challenges of being for or against the world, utilizing different methods of knowing, and vying for epistemological authority, true dialogue between sociology and theology has now been achieved at the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. This interchange has been facilitated by the current cultural ethos of post-secularity which welcomes both religious and secular viewpoints into the public sphere (Beaumont and Eder 2019), while acknowledging the pluralities of multiple secularities, modernities, Christianities, and sociologies. This compendium assumes this cultural context and pursues this disciplinary engagement.

History

Presumably, humans have always theorized, scrutinized, and moralized about the character of their existence in general, and their relationships with each other in particular. Long before Christianity took form two millennia ago and sociology took form two centuries ago, social theories about reality, social observations about actuality, and social ethics about morality, however informal and unrefined, guided human life. Ironically, as many scholars have documented, the rise of modern Western science was impelled by the Christian social imaginary. The Book of Nature, a religious and philosophical concept originating in the Latin Middle Ages, viewed the earth as a tome to be read for advancing knowledge and

understanding. Thus, Francis Bacon famously wrote in the early seventeenth century of the two books of God's Word (scripture – special revelation – God's workings in the world) and God's Works (creation – general revelation – the workings of God's world), the latter to be read via scientific research to better comprehend and admire not just the world, but its divine author. Robert Merton (1938) argued that it was English Puritanism and German pietism in particular that drove the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via the significant synergy between ascetic Protestant values and those of modern science.

When science turned its scrutiny onto humans themselves, the Christian social imaginary, if not always the specific doctrinal beliefs of Christianity, remained formative of the new social sciences. Western science had already from its beginnings been birthed by the rationality of the Scholastics of the twelfth century and nursed by the Enlightenment "science of man," but also by Christian moral philosophy (Scimecca 2019). That the new empirical science of sociology was soon and severely weaned from Christian moral philosophy neither negates sociology's genealogy nor its future potential to "reclaim its promise" in postmodernity (Scimecca 2019) by being re-imagined (Chiareli 2019).

Nevertheless, as the young social science grew throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, there were attempts in England and the United States to deliver "Christian Sociologies," each with their own social carriers, philosophical bases, and social and intellectual climates, and each confronting what would become perennial issues of philosophical anthropology, ethics, and epistemology (Lyon 1983a). In Britain, a tension emerged "between religious sociology, in which sociology is put to serve faith, and the secular sociology of religion, where religion is studied scientifically, [though] the secular sociology of religion eventually replaced early religious sociology" (Brewer 2007:7). In the United States, "between 1865 and 1915 ... religious and secular spheres were not clearly segregated within American social thought or American higher education. Social gospel, social reform, and social science burgeoned; all went by the name sociology" (Henking 1993:49). In Canada, the history of English language sociology bore "the substantial institutional footprint of so-called 'social gospel' sociology in Canada's Protestant universities and religious colleges, 1889-1921" (Helmes-Hayes 2016:1).

After sociology more firmly secularized in the second quarter of the twentieth century, both Catholic and Protestant Christian sociology separated and organized more overtly in the second half of the century, though an identifiable Catholic sociology did not survive the century. In the United States, the American Catholic Sociological Society was founded in 1938, but was renamed the Association for the Sociology of Religion in 1970, just as the quarterly *American Catholic Sociological Review* was renamed *Sociological Analysis* in 1973, and then the *Sociology of Religion* in 1993 (Kivisto 1989). Similarly in Europe, the International Conference of Religious Sociology established in 1948 in Belgium was Catholic in ethos, but by

1989 it had transformed into the secular International Society for the Sociology of Religion due to the ambivalent response of the churches in Western Europe to sociological analysis of religion, and continuing distrust by Orthodox Christianity of reductionist positivist or Marxist analyses of religion. Faced with mounting tensions and strained relationship with Rome because of the attempt by the Catholic Church to control its outputs, the ISSR abandoned Catholicism and linked up with mainstream sociology instead (Dobbelaere 2000).

Meanwhile, within Protestantism, both the Ilkley Group in Britain and the Christian Sociological Society (CSS) in the United States were conceived in the 1970s and still active into the 2020s, providing a personal network and supportive forum for Christian sociologists. In 1976, the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology (ACTS) emerged out of the CSS, because “CSS and ACTS originated out of overlapping yet distinctly different needs ... ACTS is similar to an academic or scholarly wing of CSS” (Moberg 2015:60). In 2015, ACTS was renamed the Christian Sociological Association (CSA) to mirror the American Sociological Association (ASA), and it became the organizational co-sponsor of the newly-named biannual *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* (Hiebert 2016a, 2016b). Though the secular sociology of religion in which religion was approached scientifically had come to dominate the academic discipline, Christian sociology was very much alive.

Beginning in the 1980s, the explosion of publications exploring the interface of sociology and Christianity was further evidence of its resurgent vitality. Multiple definitive analyses of the Christian-sociology nexus emerged (e.g., Lyon 1983b; Gaede 1985; Perkins 1987; Fraser and Campolo 1992), and multiple collections of readings exemplifying the same were collated (e.g., De Santo, Redekop, and Smith-Hinds 1980; Grunlan and Reimer 1982; Swatos 1987; Leming, DeVries, and Furnish 1989). By the twenty-first century, Nancy Ammerman opined that “Christian scholars have important opportunities to participate in the re-framing [of sociology] that is now underway” (2000:694). Textbooks for introduction to sociology courses were published from a Christian perspective (e.g., Tweedell 2003; Kim 2022), and some popular Christian writers such as Brian McLaren (2007; 2021; McLaren, Padilla, and Seeber 2009) unabashedly exercised a vigorous sociological imagination.

In sum, throughout the two centuries they have shared, sociology and Christianity have fluctuated from combining to colliding to colluding and back to combining again (Brewer 2007). From when John Henry W. Stuckenberg penned *Christian Sociology* in 1881 during the origins of the social gospel movement, to sociology’s fixations on secularizing itself and on its secularization thesis of society for most of the twentieth century, to when “the sociological imagination proved a revelation in theology and biblical studies” (Brewer 2007:21) toward the end of the century, the relationship of sociology and Christianity has continually evolved. One manifestation of the latter was the significant extent to which socio-critical approaches to exegetical studies of the Bible, and especially to the beginnings of Christianity, had become an

avant-garde tool of hermeneutics relative to the historical-critical approaches inherited from the nineteenth century (Turcotte 1992)...

Dialogue

Only when theology and social science are viewed as equally collective, human, interpretive enterprises (Postman 1988) can not mere conversation, but true dialogue occur. For a conversation to be a dialogue, each party must fully recognize the other as equal, place self at stake, be open to truth, and seek fusion (Gadamer 2000). Refusal to do so is simply will to mastery. Dialogues must remain in the present and ongoing, neither totalizing nor capitulating, each holding the other accountable, and thereby providing a system of epistemic checks and balances. For truly, the social sciences are at bottom “no more than *narrated interpretations of reality* which possess no privileged status permitting them to judge or police others” (McGrath 2001:119). So too is theology (Hiebert 2008)...

Overall, there are many “hidden threads” of Christian principles woven into sociological theories and the fabric of society (Heddendorf and Vos 2010), and countless examples of dialogue between sociology and Christianity, even expressions of theology as sociology and sociology as theology (Wheeldon 2016). Nevertheless, Evans and Evans conclude that “the influence of Christian theology on mainstream sociology has been almost nothing compared to the influence of mainstream sociology on theology” (2012:351). Meanwhile, as Robin Gill asserted in his three-volume *Sociological Theology* (2012a, 2012b, 2013), “the proper work of a sociologist is to sniff cautiously at *everything*, sociology included” (2013:3). So too, the proper work of a theologian is to sniff cautiously at everything, theology included...

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