

Editorial: “A Re-visioned Journal”

Welcome to the *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* (JSC), which is actually the *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* (JSIRS) “born again.” As anticipated in the editorials of the final two issues of JSIRS, this journal has undergone a significant transformation during the last year, one that is not so much a revolutionary re-making as it is a reformational re-visioning of itself. After appointing a new editor prior to the previous issue, the journal has now also adopted a new name, articulated new purposes, policies, and practices, and welcomed a new co-sponsor. Taken together, one could press the metaphor further by claiming “a new creation, where everything old has passed away, and see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). But analogies always eventually break down when differences overtake similarities, and hyperbole always misrepresents, in this case, the important and valued continuities of this journal.

Both the new name and new co-sponsor ground the journal further in the disciplinary purposes, perspectives, and praxis of sociology. The original name, the *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society*, reflected the broader academic programming of its founding institutional sponsor, Oxford Graduate School (OGS). The new name, the *Journal of Sociology and Christianity*, foregrounds more clearly a specific academic discipline and a particular religion. The new title also paradoxically both broadens and narrows the interest of the journal, broadening suitable content beyond questions of integration, while narrowing focus onto Christianity instead of all religions equally. In its simple, brief, and direct pairing of two world views and methods of knowing, the new title also better aligns with other journal titles in other academic disciplines. It pursues at once both “Christian sociology,” as problematic as the phrase may be, and the sociology of Christianity.

The new organizational co-sponsor, the Christian Sociological Association (CSA), grafts in the foremost professional association of Christians in sociology. Most recently known as the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology (ACTS), its members have already contributed more articles and reviews to this journal than any other identifiable group. The purpose of the CSA is “to be a forum where Christian sociologists can explore the implications of the Christian faith for the thinking and doing of sociology, and a place to engage in personal and professional development through concentrated discussion on the integration of the sociological vocation with the Christian calling.” As such, this journal is a fitting additional forum in which to further that purpose and publish their research, while inviting all others of similar interests to join in as well. Like two neighbouring evergreen trees whose roots have interwoven, the base of this journal has doubled in size and strength with the equal co-sponsorship of Oxford Graduate School and the Christian Sociological Association.

To readers who have already skipped over the re-worked purposes of this journal the way most of us skip reading the verbiage to which “I Agree” refers before clicking on it, not so

fast. Purposes, much more than legalities, are essences, and the purposes of this journal define its core reasons for being. They warrant careful reading and a little elaboration as follows:

1. to publish original research and commentary that addresses the difficult social and cultural issues of our time;

Like all academic journals, the primary purpose of JSC is to publish original research articles supplemented by book reviews. But following a trend in scholarship, such as the American Sociological Association's general interest magazine *Contexts*, JSC will also include commentary essays that are similar to long-form journalism which appeals not just to other scholars, but to the educated public as well.

2. to publish all types of sociological research, including scientific, interpretive, and critical articles, as well as their applications to public and policy debates;

Jurgen Habermas delineated three different knowledge systems applicable to sociology: an analytic sociology built on a Durkheimian commitment to systematic observation, an interpretive sociology built on a Weberian focus on the meanings people attach to their social world, and a critical sociology built on a Marxian dedication to social change. All will be included in JSC for the purpose of informing social understanding and action at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

3. to publish the full range of theoretical perspectives and research methodologies employed by sociologists to analyse human social life;

The American Sociological Association is currently comprised of fifty-two special interest sections, ranging alphabetically from aging to theory. What holds them all together under one umbrella is the theoretical perspectives and research methodologies they have in common, though sociological theories and methods are themselves as diverse, or more so, than any other academic discipline. The more of them included in JSC, the more representative and enriching the journal will be.

4. to weave Christian faith and practice into its many different social and cultural settings without imposing itself;

For at least the last generation, Christian scholars and practitioners have recognized the need to contextualize Christian faith for any and every social and cultural setting, in order to make it comprehensible, relevant, and redemptive. A "one size fits all" Christianity, or perhaps more accurately a "one kind fits all" Christianity, is none of the above, and is likely a negative presence, not merely a neutral presence. In James Davison Hunter's fecund phrase, Christian faith is best a "faithful presence," not a forceful presence.

5. *to enrich understanding of the diversity of Christian faith and practice;*

It follows that Christian faith and practice itself is different in dissimilar social and cultural settings. While theologians search for the universal essence of Christian faith, who better than sociologists to unpack its contextualized expressions? Indeed, the primary mission of a Christian sociologist vis-a-vis Christian faith may well be to differentiate between the truly spiritual and the merely cultural.

6. *to utilize sociology as a tool for Christian ethical reflection and social engagement;*

As noble as Weber's notion of value-free social science may be, and as committed as the sociologist may be to the description of what is rather than the prescription of what ought to be, such ideals prove naïve and untenable when confronted with what sociology reveals about human life. The student of sociology soon senses a powerful moral imperative underneath the analytic detachment, as the discipline exposes systemic social injustice and structural evil that otherwise remains hidden. Sociology then becomes what Christian Smith deemed a sacred project or calling to do something in and for the social world.

7. *to expand the resources and research available to Christian leaders and practitioners as agents of service and change in their respective endeavors;*

If research in any discipline never eventually reaches at least the leaders of society, and therefore never has any effect on individuals or society, it is in every sense of the word, useless. If Christian leaders or simply persons of Christian faith are to serve others effectively, or bring about positive social change effectually, sociological knowledge is vital. JSC is committed to delivering such knowledge to such people.

8. *to stimulate ongoing dialogue among Christians who desire to integrate their faith with their scholarship about the ways and processes of doing so;*

The challenge of integrating the perspectives of a particular academic discipline with Christian faith is a long-standing and on-going pre-occupation in most Christian higher education. The literature is vast. Yet how fruitfully it can be done remains an open question, depending in part on the discipline. Some view it least likely to be positively effective in sociology because of the kinds of questions sociology asks about religious faith. Some have in fact abandoned the term integration in favor of notions of conversation or intersection. Regardless of the concept employed, JSC is an active participant in the process.

9. to provide a window for persons not of Christian faith to observe how Christians study and engage society through sociology;

JSC seeks to model an integrous sociology, so that persons not of Christian faith can see that it is entirely possible for Christians to take the discipline seriously, and to practice the methodological atheism of the scientific method professionally, while remaining committed theists personally. It is not a forced choice of either/or. Indeed, JSC maintains that the best sociology practiced and produced by Christians is that which is convincing and compelling regardless of Christian faith, and without necessarily appealing to the perspectives and assumptions of Christian faith.

10. to invite scholars not of Christian faith into dialogue by reporting on their research into the intersection of Christianity and society;

Much of the sociology of religion, perhaps most of it, and maybe even the best of it has been generated by persons of no religious faith, from the famous founders of the discipline onward. Christians have much to learn from non-Christians about Christianity. Sometimes seeing Christianity from the outside is as instructive and enlightening as seeing it from the inside, sometimes more. One need not be a person of Christian faith to contribute material to JSC that is welcome, provided the topic is relevant to the journal's interests.

11. to inform scholars in other academic disciplines of the contributions that sociology can make to interdisciplinary scholarship and the intersection of Christian faith and learning;

The status of sociology among academic disciplines is a matter of some debate. But there is no doubt or debate that individualistic Western societies were thoroughly psychologized by the twentieth century; that is not just sociological envy talking. There is also little debate that the putatively post-modern society of the twenty-first century has a greater social consciousness than the previous. And as sociology, perhaps more than any other discipline, continues to overlap with other disciplines in both the humanities and social sciences, its potential contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship holds great promise.

12. to serve as both a priestly voice for and a prophetic voice to the Christian community.

The theoretical distinction between priests and prophets, between conservative ideologues who speak for the religious establishment from its center, compared to radical utopians who speak to the religious establishment from its margins, identifies two complementary roles for religious elites and two functions for religious organizations. In many ways, Christian sociology has evolved from the former to the latter, from a “church sociology” in the service of the social institution to a critical sociology calling the church to renewal, and to return to the original essence and purity of an institutionally compromised and complacent faith. The purposes of JSC include both.

In sum, “the *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* is a peer-reviewed, academic publication designed to provide a forum for the latest research and commentary relative to the intersection of Christianity and society.” That is our stated mission and vision. Suggestions for ways to enhance this journal further are always welcome, as are suggestions for how to promote it. We need each reader to tell a professional associate about JSC, to forward the link to some colleague(s), and to post information about it somewhere online. Go to it. Godspeed!

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