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## Editorial: “On Change”

From the first faint formations of what would become a new social science, sociology has scrutinized both religion and social change. Indeed, without the political, economic, and intellectual upheavals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including the Enlightenment’s rejection of traditional religious authority, it is unlikely that the ascendant method of science would have been applied to the analysis of society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Auguste Comte (1789-1857), the putative and presumptuous father of sociology, conceived of his new religion of science as “social physics,” consisting of both the “social statics” of social structure and the “social dynamics” of social change. Ironically, sociology arose with religious fervour as the product and the analysis and the supposed salvation of the revolutionary social forces that generated modernity. Truth be told, the Italian Catholic Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), writing a century before Comte, was a more credible and reputable founder of the new science. But foreshadowing how sociology hastily and vigorously distanced itself from religion, just as Durkheim distinguished it from philosophy and psychology, Vico is not much credited or even remembered, because his thinking was simply too Christian.

Fast forward to today, and sociology continues to offer incisive analysis of religion and social change. But now the change is from modernity to post-modernity, along with the myriad other “posts” that characterize contemporary Western society, including post-Christian. Indeed, Karl Marx’s famous phrase from the opening chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* (1948) – “all that is solid melts into air” – may well describe the metamorphosis from modernity to postmodernity more aptly than it described the earlier transformation from pre-modernity to modernity. The current “incredulity toward metanarrative” (Lyotard) of postmodernity is no more or less challenging to traditional religion than the autonomous rationality of modernity had been. And traditional religion could not afford to accommodate completely to either era, because as William Inge observed, “Whoever marries the spirit of the age, will be a widow in the next.” Sure enough, by now it is evident that postmodernism in turn “carries the seeds of its own obsolescence,” just as Marx said of capitalism.

What remains essentially unchanged regarding the intersection of sociology and religion is what Christian Smith has termed the sacred project of contemporary American sociology. Far from standing aloof from religion, sociology has itself become a functional religion, with its own sacred project of human emancipation. According to Smith, it is noteworthy “how closely sociology’s sacred, spiritual project parallels that of (especially Protestant) Christianity in its structure of beliefs, interests, and expectations” (2014, p.18). At the broadest level, philosopher Charles Taylor has even argued that all of secular modernity is at heart a championing of Christian social ethics in secular terms. Perhaps Comte was not so mistaken after all, nor was

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the subsequent, intervening social gospel movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so misguided, if sociology and religion are in fact so alike. Yet the character of religion, even Christianity in particular, has changed remarkably since the founding of sociology, though it is near meaningless to speak of religion or even Christianity in the singular. Has sociology changed as much, or has it too always been religious at heart?

This *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* is obviously, by its title, mission, vision, and purposes, focused on bringing sociology and Christianity together at least in conversation, even when the conventional notion of integration is not always possible. Founded only five years ago by bold and fruitful scholars associated with the Oxford Graduate School in Tennessee, it has filled a significant void in Christian scholarship. Until its inception, sociology was one of few academic disciplines lacking such an integrative journal, and Christian sociologists could publish their scholarship only in secular journals, Christian interdisciplinary journals, or Christian journals devoted primarily to other disciplines. Along with organizations such as the Christian Sociological Association (CSA – formerly the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology), and the publication of books on the integration of sociology and Christianity, nothing is more critical to a Christian presence in sociology than a journal that gives voice to Christians in sociology.

But this voice of Christian sociology is now also changing.

The first change is that I am assuming the editorship of JSIRS with a deep sense of responsibility, and unwarranted honor and privilege. I do so having contributed several articles and book reviews to this journal in its formative years, as well as having published in enough other academic journals to have sufficient experience with the process. I see great potential for JSIRS to mature and grow into its significant potential. And I invite all interested scholars to join us by contributing to this collective effort. The editorial board has already expanded with the addition of two scholars, with more to come. Both Brad Breems, PhD, Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Trinity Christian College, and Scott Monsma, PhD, Professor of Sociology, Northwestern College, have already contributed to this issue.

Another change that is already evident in this issue is not entirely new. It includes a type of scholarship that has appeared in JSIRS twice previously, and that will become formalized and routinized in the future, as sociologists might say. This issue includes not only two standard research articles and three book reviews, but a third category that is increasingly common in scholarship. Commentary essays are similar to long-form journalism in that they are thought pieces that ponder contemporary social and cultural issues while referring to scholarship, but without necessarily citing or documenting it, and without necessarily contributing original research. As JSIRS aligns more with the practices of the American Sociological Association, ASA's general interest magazine *Contexts* is an exemplar of this type of writing. By avoiding sociological jargon and theoretical or statistical density, it appeals to educated lay readers,

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makes social research accessible to them, and thereby strives to be the public face of sociology. JSIRS commentary essays will likewise strive to be the public face of Christian sociology.

The change JSIRS is undergoing will not be a revolutionary transformation that abandons its past, a change without continuity. It will be a reformational re-visioning that better positions the journal for the future, a seeing further by standing on the shoulders of giants, as outgoing editor Kenneth Schmidt invoked Newton's metaphor in his final editorial in the previous issue (Vol 5, No 2, 2015). I am most grateful that Dr. Schmidt will continue to contribute his hard-earned experience by serving on the editorial board. Matthew Vos will continue to serve as book review editor and "liaison officer at large." Steven Mittweide will continue to offer his expertise on matters of publication, such as formatting and indexing. Joshua Reichard, whose original vision brought the journal into existence, will continue to serve as the primary point person with Oxford Graduate School, which remains the institutional sponsor of this journal, making possible what otherwise would not be. The journal thus rests to a significant degree in the hands of its four founders.

This issue of JSIRS is therefore transitional, somewhere between what it has been and what it will become. It is not the liminal space of, for example, partial wakefulness from a dream world, where one is unsure of who they are, where they are, and what they are doing. We know well enough who we are, where we are, and what we are doing. But we are also changing. The entire journal will be reviewed, its purposes, policies, and practices reassessed, and by the next issue of 2016, it will very likely have a new name, a new look, a new co-sponsor, and more. So anticipate the future. Look for change. Share the vision.

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### Works Cited

Smith, C. (2014). *The sacred project of American sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.