

Doing the Sociology of Religion: Engaging Interest and Transforming Understanding

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Abstract

This article discusses pedagogical strategy in the context of teaching the Sociology of Religion. The article takes the position that an ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically sophisticated approach to teaching the Sociology of Religion is better able to capture student interest, encourage student participation, expand student numbers, and advance critical dialogue. Strategies are offered in order to help instructors create a welcoming space whereby open and critical dialogue may be fostered.

Keywords: Religion, Spirituality, Pedagogy, critical education, Sociology.

Religion in the world is an ongoing, even growing, concern. The Sociology of Religion section at the A.S.A. expands as more researchers turn their attention towards the subject matter. It is a curious and, perhaps for some, confusing development, especially considering the spoken assertion amongst many scholars that religion would be, indeed was, a dying concern. As Stark points out:

For several centuries, Western intellectuals have been predicting the death of religion. Writing in about 1710, the English freethinker Thomas Woolston (1670 – 1731) expressed his confidence that religion would be gone by 1900. Voltaire (1694 – 1778) thought Woolston was being far too pessimistic and suggested that the end of religion would come within the, then, next fifty years.” (Stark, 2008, p. 115).

The fashion for predicting the demise of religion was picked up by others (Berger, 1969; Comte, 1852; Marx, 1970; Wallace, 1966; Wilson, 1966). While ruminating on the future of religion, Wallace noted that “...the evolutionary future of religion is extinction. Belief in supernatural beings and in supernatural forces that affect nature without obey nature’s laws will erode and become only an interesting historical memory” (Wallace, 1966, p. 265). Others concur. From Freud (Freud, 1964) who saw religion as little more than infantile delusion, to Marx who saw it as soother used by the ruling classes to succor the masses into silent acceptance, to Weber who saw the death of religion in the inevitable march of a disenchanting rationality, religion was going to be dead and gone before the turn of the 21st century.

In fact, and perhaps unfortunately for a few people (Dawkins, 2006a), quite the opposite has occurred. The scientist, writing on the chalkboard of modernity has not erased people’s belief in the supernatural, or in something behind and beyond the material world. No matter how scientists and others have tried, people’s belief in “something more” remains as strong as ever. In fact, in sixty years of polling in the United States, the number of people *who do not believe in God* (i.e. the atheists) has remained remarkably stable, never getting above six percent (Stark, 2008). Globally, the atheists haven’t fared much better. In most countries avowed atheists never make up more than 7% of the population, and in only France and China to do the numbers break double digits and reach an unimpressive fourteen percent. Interestingly, this unimpressive number hasn’t gone unnoticed as atheists themselves, sensing they are being backed into the wall, and perhaps chagrined that no matter how hard they try they just can’t convince the stupid people of the world of their childish “god delusion”(Dawkins, 2006a), become strident and arrogant (some might even say ignorant) in their polemic attack on this global delusion (Eagleton, 2006) .

That religion has not disappeared in a magical poof of secularization means something. The fact that these days there are more people are involved in religion, more people are discussing religion, and more scholars wanting to know what is happening means that more students are going to be wanting to learn about religion. Unfortunately this can be a problem because doing the Sociology of Religion can be very difficult. People have a hard time looking at the issues in anything like an unbiased fashion. There is hostility and anger, defensiveness and justification, and general avoidance of the issues. The defensive reaction is not totally unjustified. Scholars in general have dismissed religion as everything from infantile delusion (Freud, 1961, 1964), to infantile boob experiences (Prince & Savage, 2012), to elite machination (Berger, 1969; Marx, 1978), never really taking seriously the notion that there might be something

within the deep core of religion worth looking at. In fact, scholars have almost unilaterally argued that religion would simply just go away because it was stupid and irrational (Berger, 1968, 1969; Bruce, 2002; Karel Dobbelaere, 1981; K Dobbelaere, 2002). And it is not just subtle but derisive dismissal that is the issue. When illustrious Cambridge scientists engage in violent and abusive polemics against the faithful (Dawkins, 2006a), defensiveness can be expected. The bottom line is, the antagonism of some scientists towards religion alienates people (Zigerell, 2012). Calling religion Violent (Ellens, 2001), calling religious people illiterate and dangerous (Mooney & Kirshenbaum, 2009), stating overtly that God is unnecessary (Watt, 2010), and equating religion with child abuse (Dawkins, 2006a, 2006b) does nothing to create a forum for critical and reasoned inquiry. The well is poisoned before the student even gets in the door. If you question spirituality, if you say that modern new age varieties of religion are colonized arms of corporate profit making enterprises, (Carrette & King, 2008), if you point out the political machinations of the right (Butler, 2006), people get defensive. They seem to think, not without reason, that if you make a criticism of their religion then you must be undermining their beliefs in toto, and they react.

As expected as the defensiveness might be, however, it doesn't help. It doesn't help the critical Sociologist who has something to say about religion, and it doesn't help the faithful either. How can we teach anything to anybody when all we see is defensive reaction. The answer is, we cannot. We cannot argue with someone when their hackles are up and we cannot reason when we've backed them into the wall. Ergo, we shouldn't do it. This is especially true if we want to engage a wider audience. If we're not satisfied with preaching to the choir then we have to come up with pedagogical strategies that do not violate our scholarly sensibility, and do not turn people away.

But how do we take religion seriously, and critically, without offending the many, many, many faithful out there? There are a few things that the committed instructor can do. **The first thing one can do** is take the religious core seriously. This religious core is mystical experience. Mystical experience was identified by the eminent American Psychologist William James over a century ago as the fundamental motive force and foundation of religion. In his psychological classic, James points to the "pattern-setters" whose mystical experiences form the foundation of tradition, ritual, and observance in all institutionalized faiths (James, 1982, p. 6)! Other scholars have picked up on the significance as well. Abraham Maslow writes:

The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion (unless Confucianism is also called a religion) has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer. The high religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of this original mystic experience or revelation from the lonely prophet to the mass of human beings in general. (A. H. Maslow, 2012, p. 339)

Bucke (2009/1929, p. 11), Canadian doctor and graduate of the McGill Medical School, speaks of "men" whose "spiritual eyes have been opened," i.e. who have had mystical experiences, a "new birth" have risen to a higher spiritual place, and who have "seen". "The better known members of this group who,

were they collected together...have created all the great modern religions, beginning with Taoism and Buddhism, and speaking generally, have created, through religion and literature, modern civilization.”

It is something to take seriously, not only because a lot of people (between 30% and 50% of the population) claim to have mystical experiences (Yamane & Polzer, 1994), but because there is work out there that can be invoked in discussions (Forman, 1999; Harmless, 2008; Versluis, 2007; White, 2012). Of course, people may get a little uncomfortable here with the idea of taking the mystical root of religion seriously. It is important to remember however that taking the phenomenon seriously is not the same as accepting a certain explanation concerning the nature of the experience. (Hood Jr, 1976, p. 181), and taking a good look at the depth and breadth of research, such as it is, we do not want to put aside critical sensibility. As Hood (1976: p. 181) says, “While we are certainly free to dispute the mystics' interpretations of their experience, we are not free to reject the virtual unanimity of the mystical experience itself.” Nor, I think, would we have to. In my own experience teaching the Sociology of Religion the simple act of admitting that religion goes beyond the surface Sociology of people like Marx, Durkheim (1965 (1912)), Weber (1904 (1995)), and Berger is sufficient to break down resistance and get people listening.

The second thing we can do to break down resistance and get dialog flowing is take seriously the reality of individual experience. Many scholars have no belief in the spiritual side of things and this shows in their subtly derisive attitude and general lack of interest in authentic mystical/religious experience. Nevertheless, and despite the disbelief of some, a lot of people claim to have religious experiences and the reality of this can be exploited in classrooms to break down defenses and get dialog going. Particularly relevant here is the experience of (Harmless, 2008) who found, quite by accident one day, that opening a dialog on the student's own suppressed mysticism was a great way of moving his course on mysticism forward. Harmless (2008, pp. ix-x) relates a profound moment where one his students in class, after spending several weeks studying mystics, raised her hand and said:

I don't want to sound arrogant or anything. But you know-when I read these people, I think that I've experienced something like that. I am beginning to think that I'm a mystic—maybe, not the same way these people are, maybe not as intensely. But I know what they're talking about.” Harmless goes on... “There was a pause, then hand after hand began to rise. Each who spoke repeated something similar. These mystics were talking about things that they themselves had tasted, that they too had felt.

Harmless calls this a remarkable moment and it certainly is. For our purposes here this demonstrates an important pedagogical principle for teaching the Sociology of Religion which is that we have to take experience seriously. Using mystical experiences as a jumping off point not only reduces defensive reactions but also invokes immediate class participation. The truth is, a lot of people have “mystical” experiences and acknowledging this opens a dialog and grabs people's interest. Of course, opening the dialog requires the instructor to put considerable effort into ensuring the dialog remains respectful, something that is by no means a certain outcome. A lot people, academics and students included, have a lot of very negative feelings towards the topic and these feelings need to be addressed so that they don't bowl over the discussion. This author, for example, had some very bad emotional and physical

experiences while growing up, and these experiences can be traced directly to the indoctrination and ideology of the Western Catholic church. For a long time this anger and hurt expressed itself in opinions towards religion and religious people. Justifiable hurt and anger expressed itself in alienating acts of dismissal. I would like to think that reminding instructors to keep their own hurt and anger out of the class forum is unnecessary, but the truth it is isn't. Instructors are humans like everyone else and reminders to keep it safe and open by keeping one's own anger and resentment out of the equation serve a useful professional and epistemological purpose.

It should be noted that taking mystical experience seriously, and doing emotional work to ensure discussions remain open and respectful, does not mean putting aside critical sensibility. As Hood suggests, you can accept the experience while still being free to dispute the interpretation (Hood Jr, 1976, p. 181). Whether you conceive of these as pure conscious events (Forman, 1999), contact with the divine (Underhill, 2002 (1911)), solutions to the existential crises of "man" (Fromm, 1950), peak experiences (A. Maslow, 1971, 1994), or psycho-neurotic regressions (Prince & Savage, 2012), limbic activity (Michael A. Persinger, 1983; M.A. Persinger, 1987; M.A. Persinger, 2002), or some "God" gene (Hamer, 2005) is a point of discussion. How far you want to let discussion go into theology, the psychology of religious mysticism, neurobiology, neurotheology, etc, is a question for the instructor and the class.

Speaking for myself, in my own Sociology of Religion course I take the core of mystical experience seriously while at the same time tracing that core through the pernicious reconstruction of religion that occurs as a result of the imposition of social, political, and economic interests. There may be a core mystical experience to talk about, especially for those working in the psychology of religion, but there is also a fantastic corpus of sociological work that demonstrates just what happens to that mystical revelation once it is passed into the world, and I extensively with what happens as mystical revelation is passed into the world (Sosteric, 2013b). This discussion invariably takes us through the sociological classics. So for example Marx (1970) demonstrated that religion becomes ideology in the hands of the elite, Durkheim showed how religion evolves into a social resource (Durkheim, 1965 (1912)), Weber (1904 (1995)) spoke about the contribution of religion to the growth of the Capitalist social system, and so on (Berger, 1969). Lundskow (2008) is my choice of text, and my own work in this area is representative. In *The Sociology of Tarot* (Sosteric) I examine the cultural and political history of the tarot, showing how a simple deck of cards becomes imprinted with elite spiritual ideology in the service of an emerging capitalist system. The point is simply this, you can take the critical high road with a lot less grief if you simply accept the reality of mystical experience and use that as a jumping off point.

The third thing we can do to create an open and welcoming forum is be honest about science. In the popular mind scientists are like the proverbial knight in shining armor, fighting of Satan's demons of the epistemological and methodological darkness (Petkova & Boyadjieva, 1994). Unfortunately, this is ideology pure and simple and even though the high priests of scientists perpetuate it in their less-than-honest glosses of the scientific method (see for example (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010)), the image is not accurate. There is, arguably, a lot of ideology in science (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1985; Mulkay, 1976; Sosteric, 2012, 2013a). Mulkay (1976) in particular provides a strong exposure of the ideology of science and just how it operates to support **not** the high epistemological ideals of truth and honesty, but the

self-interest of the scientists themselves. This sentiment is echoed by Halton Arp who suggests that science goes about “widely promulgat[ing] theories that are contradicted by observation and experiment,” mandating its explanations with authority, and defending them with “educational, economic, and sociopolitical agencies.” (Arp, 2000, p. 447). The point is, science is not without epistemological or ontological “sin.” Science ignores contradictory evidence (Collins & Pinch, 1998), practices its black experiments on hapless human subjects (Morena, 2000; Washington, 2008; Welsome, 1999) and even jettisons the holy grail of scientific theory, parsimony, in favour of outrageously complex formulations with little extra explanatory value (Arp, 2000: 447). As Arp (2000) says, science has become a lot like a religion. Certainly true. Misrepresentation, even mythologization of science. Hawking and Mlodinow (2010) lot of effort into elevating science and scientific method, but erroneous. Erroneous because approaches fetishism.

We have to be careful to take our own medicine here. Just as we expect the faithful to not get defensive when the critical microscope is put on religion and spirituality, so should we not get defensive when we the critical microscope on science. Indeed, we have no excuse. The norms and values of science suggest that scientists should strive to be above petty egoic, self-interested, bias. We should strive for objectivity and this certainly involves being open and critical of our own work. It is a good practice in general, but it is also worthwhile when considering teaching a sociology of religion course. A little sprinkle of honest self-reflection goes a long way to opening up dialogues and capturing interests. Not only that but being open and self-reflective about our own belief system *models* a certain behavior to our students that is very difficult to ignore. If we are open and honest about our science our students can, and must, be open and honest about their belief systems as well. The bottom line is this. Modelling healthy and critical self-inquiry to student helps break down the barriers.

The fourth thing that we can do to open up our course is think about, analyze, and be courageously honest about own beliefs, experiences and so on. This is important no matter where we may sit along the continuum that lies between atheism and utter and certain knowledge. Being open about our own believes is important for a couple of reasons. One, it models open self-inquiry. This is important in an area of study (i.e. Sociology) where self-inquiry and reflection is a basic requirement of student participation. Two, it presents the case study as an important scholarly tool for exploration. My own particular path in this area is noteworthy. As a child I was born into a rigid Catholic family. I rejected the belief system at an early age (approximately the age of eight) primarily because of the violence and hypocrisy that I saw around me. In fact, a particular even stands out as the catalyst for my rejection. This event occurred when I, as a young child helping my mother in the kitchen, reached into a hot oven and pulled out a hot pan. I burned myself badly and my mom, instead of offering empathy and consolation, said that the pain I was experiencing was only small sampling of what I could expected in HELL. Even at the young age of eight I couldn't square the words about a loving god with the anger, hatred, and emotional violence I saw in my mom that day. At that point I finally had enough of the violence and hypocrisy and I simply stopped going to Church and gradually rejected spirituality. The rejection became total when I was finally introduced to Karl Marx's thoughts on the subject in my undergraduate years. Interesting enough, it wasn't a particular objection to spirituality, or even God, that caused me to bolt from the Catholic fold, it was the emotional violence of my mother. In my classroom experience,

opening up this personal revelation has eased students into a reflection and subsequent discussion of their own reasons for being faithful, or not. We often find in these discussion that the reality of our religious/spiritual choices are far more complex, rationale, and interesting than propagandists like Dawkins (Dawkins, 2006a) would have people believe. It should also be noted that opening up the floor in this fashion also generates a lot less defensive reaction.

The Fifth thing that we can do to open the floor is to not assume simplicity of the question, nor the veracity of your particular position. A polemicist like Richard Dawkins assumes, with an irrational degree of certainty, that there are no super-natural aspects to nature. Indeed, in general scholars don't believe in the supernatural. Nowhere is this more clear than in the scholarly treatment of mysticism, revelation, and consciousness. Scholars, even sympathetic ones, work hard to distance themselves from any intimation that there might be something there other than dishonestly, delusion, or simple error. Even in an era where research into mystical experience is becoming more accepted, arm's length denials and dogmatic rejections still prevail (Kluger, 2004). Rodney Stark summarizes the disbelief of scholars well:

The reason for this... has been that the "causes" of revelations have seemed obvious to most social scientists: those who claim to have received revelations – to have communicated with the supernatural – are either crazy or crooked, and sometimes both....even many social scientists who will assume the rationality of more mundane religious phenomenon, find it quite impossible to accept that *normal* people can *sincerely believe* they have communicated with the divine.....even the most unbiased social scientists typically have been unwilling to go further than to grant that the recipients of revelations have made honest *mistakes*, that they have *misinterpreted* an experience as having involved contact with the divine. This is taken as self-evident on the grounds that any real scientists 'knows' that real revelations are quite impossible."¹

Whether or not "normal people" believe they talk to divine, whether mystical revelation is crookery or error, whether people's experience of liminal realms is nothing more than neural cross talk (Kluger, 2004) is an open question worthy of discussion in a course. However keep in mind that the issues are more complex than a simple statement of belief. On one hand people's definitions of God vary greatly. Conceptions range from the personal and patriarchal God of orthodox Christianity and Judaism to the more scientifically palatable versions of "something more" presented by people like Sheldrake (2009) and Radin (2006) to the outrageous new age influenced varieties of folks like Laszlo (2007). There is also legitimate research in "boundary" phenomenon. (Russell Targ & Puthoff, 1974; Russell Targ & Puthoff, 2005). The point here is simple. Overly zealous discharge of the issues does not an open classroom make.

In case the reader may be feeling the pain intellectual indigestion here, let me remind them that the point here isn't to prove or disprove the phenomenon, take a side, or otherwise struggle with ontological issues. The point is to create conditions whereby sociologists can seize the opportunity to attract students for more critical inquiry. I am not suggesting you spend an entire course on exploring

¹ Stark (1999, p. 288). *A Theory of Revelations*.

mysticism, personal beliefs, boundary phenomenon, or the religious aspects of science. I am suggesting a nod in the general direction of these phenomenon as way of getting dialog to flow. This is a jumping off point for a more sociologically informed sociology of religion and nothing more.

The sixth and final thing you can do to open the pedagogical space and draw students in to no assume the answer to question. In periods of modest self-appraisal scientists must admit they can neither prove or disprove God in any form (Watt, 2010). Scientists can marshal all sorts of logic for or against, they can engage in all sorts of polemic, and they can collect all sorts of secondary evidence (like personal experiences, or survey data), but belief necessarily hinges on a person's choice. Ultimately all notions of God point to non-material realities. Since we, as scientists, live in a material world, since our eyes and instruments only measure material realities, and since we insist on material evidence, we cannot prove or disprove non-material phenomenon. In the words of Karl Popper (Popper, 2005), you need to be able to falsify and you can't falsify a non-material entity. Science only can go back as far as the creation of the physical universe, and not before. Science cannot see the spiritual realms that some people, based on their spiritual experiences, purport exists. All science can do is accept or reject personal experience, and theorize upon that. Because of the basic ontological disjuncture, the most scientifically reasonable position to take is an ontologically agnostic one. This is also, as I have attempted to show in this paper, the most pedagogically sound position to take. If we accept this fact, if we accept student experience, if we accept the limitations of science, we can capture student interest and move on from there directly into open, satisfactory, and sociologically informed discussions of spirituality.

Conclusions

This article has been an attempt to demonstrate the importance of a sensitive and open approach to sociology of religion. The goal here isn't to take a side, or to push a philosophical or spiritual position, but to simply clear the field and open the realm to sympathetic, but critical, discussion. The goal, in a word, is to overcome resistance. As Zigerell (2012, p. 319) argues, courses that cover challenging material benefit from pedagogical design that "attenuates possible perceived conflict." This is supported in literature as pedagogically sound principle retain attention and encourage critical engagement (Verhey, 2005), This is an important consideration since people with antagonistic belief systems avoid certain courses that challenge. People who reject evolution don't register in, drop, or don't pay attention to college biology courses (McKeachie, Lin, & Strayer, 2002). Epistemological and ontological sophistication (Lombrozo, Thanukos, & Weisberg, 2008; Sinatra, Southerland, McConaughy, & Demastes, 2003) equals greater possibility of engaging students and getting them to accept. The issue is equally about science and truth as it is about pedagogical strategy and simple respect for others. As scholars we have a tendency to write off beliefs that don't fit our paradigmatic understanding of the world as ignorance. However, as Darnell and Sherkat (1997, p. 314) note this confuses "a systematic construction of value with an inability to understand opportunities." What they are trying to say here is, if I may be so bold, simply that if we let our own value judgments interfere with sound pedagogical strategy we miss the opportunity to engage student interest, and transform student understanding.

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