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Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion: A Response to Jean-Pierre Reed

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Abstract

This piece is a response to Jean-Pierre Reed's review of *Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion* published in *Critical Research on Religion*. Aside from his appreciation for the contributions of this volume, Jean-Pierre Reed's critique concentrates on three fundamental issues in relation to the agenda for a critical sociology of religion we advance: scientificism, interdisciplinarity, and politics. This response focuses on scientificism and politics in particular, since they are intimately related and at the core of this book's evaluation of the subfield.

Keywords

sociology, epistemology, religion, methodology, objectivity

Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion is a book based on the premises that critical debates—and disagreements—are healthy if not necessary for sociology (Wood 2014, 753). I am therefore grateful for Jean-Pierre Reed's discussion of our assessment of the sociology of religion's current and future state in his review of our volume that appeared in *Critical Research on Religion* (Reed 2021).

Aside from his appreciation for the contributions of this volume, Jean-Pierre Reed's critique concentrates on three fundamental issues in relation to the agenda for a critical sociology of religion we advance (Altglas and Wood 2018): scientificism, interdisciplinarity, and politics. Jean-Pierre Reed is right to emphasize interdisciplinarity's fruitfulness (our book itself gathers contributions from sociology, history, anthropology, and political science), but *provided* that we are fully aware of epistemological differences and, in some cases, incompatibilities. In fact, such acknowledgment might be the necessary condition for an effective articulation of different methods and approaches. But in my response to Reed, I would like to focus on the two other issues, scientificism and politics, which are intimately related and at the core of our evaluation of the subfield.

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If Reed (2021, 109), in his review of our volume, believes we suggest academics should leave politics out of the sociology of religion, we have certainly misunderstood each other. The authors of this collective book could not—and probably would not—make such a claim because, as Jean-Pierre Reed indeed notices, their contributions are full of politics. Academic politics, to begin with: we are fully aware that, with this volume, we position ourselves in specific areas of studies and, as such, we participate in a struggle for symbolic power. Besides, such intellectual positioning has not occurred in a vacuum; it was prompted by existing, significant academic trends—in particular, the return of religious sociologies, which the book’s introduction responds to, and which we understand as part of academia’s inner ideological struggles. This is highlighted, for example, by the intention of a number of scholars to restore theology as the master discourse on religion or to assert the importance of religious experience and faith for academics to fully grasp religion as an object of study. How precisely these approaches contribute to the sociological understanding of religion has to be discussed, rather than being interpreted as “symbolic violence” (109) on our part—not least because, strictly speaking, one would need to be in a position of domination to exert symbolic violence. Ultimately, if we see in debates a form of “symbolic violence,” I believe sociology, so fundamentally based on critical thinking, will be in deep trouble.

None of the authors of this book shy away from a reflection on sociology’s political implications, quite the contrary. Their contributions share an emphasis on the ways in which the academic’s social position permeate their analysis of religion, leading in some cases to authenticate certain social experiences (usually those reflecting their own) and disqualifying others. While addressing diverse themes and areas of interest, the contributions to this volume display a common interest for power relations and the ways in which they are reproduced, both within academic discourses and in the social world at large. In fact, if one wanted to challenge the authors of *Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion*, they could try to evaluate how the politics of our contributions might have affected the sociological knowledge we elaborated and this in relation to our stance regarding objectivity. Such challenges are genuinely wanted.

This logically leads me to address what Jean-Pierre Reed (107) calls our “scientificism,” by which we would be making of scientific objectivity a moral principle. Perhaps we do, to a certain extent: after all, is the primary ethical responsibility placed upon us not to pursue our occupational task effectively, in other words, to advance knowledge about the social world? I believe however that our approach is actually more pragmatic than moral or ethical. Indeed, our issue with religious sociologies is that they tend to amount to ideological assertions about the legitimacy of religious (often Christian) beliefs, but fail to demonstrate the methodological, theoretical, or epistemological benefits of incorporating religious values in social research. In fact, this volume’s chapters show, through a variety of topics and areas of interest, that taking for granted social norms and beliefs irreflexively has consistently undermined the understanding of religion.

Jean-Pierre Reed is right on this point: this book does emphasize the importance of scientificity. Scientificity demands that the research results are independent from the researcher’s social position—a point also made by Bruce (2018, 9) in a book published the same year as ours and which also addresses the methodological and epistemological issues within the study of religion. The problem with our emphasis on objectivity, Jean-Pierre Reed argues, is that we underestimate the unescapable influence of meanings and values, both in scientific objects and academics’ intellectual endeavors. Needless to say, absolute objectivity is unattainable; but does it justify abandoning it altogether? Bruce (29) responds to this question with an excellent line: “that it is impossible to achieve a completely aseptic environment does not mean that I would have been as well having my gall bladder removed in a sewer as in a hospital operating theatre.” Besides, I am afraid that, in some cases, the impossibility of a perfect objectivity and the absence of a simple process to attain *a degree*

of objectivity are simply used to justify the pursuit of ideological goals through academic research. The celebration of “Christian sociologies” is a case in point in my view.

Referring to Max Weber, Jean-Pierre Reed (108) reminds us that science cannot be value free—Weber himself noted that our values affect *what we choose* to research. Yet, Weber certainly did not claim personal values should also shape our methodology or analysis. He also insisted on the principle that academic discourses should clearly differentiate between scientific explanations of *how* the social world works on the one hand, and the political views about how the social world *should* work on the other, the latter which cannot be established on the basis of purely scientific criteria. The confusion between those two different types of concerns were, for Weber (1949, 60), “one of the most widespread and also one of the most damaging traits of work in our field.” Thus, while the authors of this book are influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s approach to reflexivity, striving for objectivity is not an exclusively Bourdieuan stance. Breaking with “pre-notions” is the condition for sociological knowledge (Durkheim 1982). We do not claim this is the only way to approach the human world but, so far, the benefits for sociology to depart from its foundations have not been demonstrated compellingly by those who express the wish to do so.

Finally, insisting on pursuing scientific objectivity should not be seen as a moral weapon academics use against each other. On the contrary, we would like to argue that revealing the conditions of the production of knowledge, and the political implications of this knowledge, is a powerful means to protect academic freedom and autonomy. Social research is increasingly affected by political agendas and the governance of populations, with “social impact” becoming an essential criterion to access research funding in the United Kingdom for instance. The investment in research on “radicalization” across Europe, the French government’s accusation of “Islamism” toward academics working in the fields of Islam, and post-colonial and race studies, resonate with Jean-Pierre Reed’s (109) concerns about the political influence of the religious right in the American context. In those current political landscapes, it is imperative to reflect on the politics of social research and reassert the sheer importance of independent academic knowledge.

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Author biography

Véronique Altglas is a lecturer at Queen’s University Belfast and Secretary General of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion. Comparing the diffusion of Kabbalah with that

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