Matthew Wood and Véronique Altglas

REFLEXIVITY, SCIENTIFICITY AND THE
SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: PIERRE BOURDIEU
IN DEBATE

Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘epistemic reflexivity’ for the sociology of religion, in particular by examining his neglected address to the French Association for the Sociology of Religion in 1982. Whilst sociologists of religion have addressed some issues of reflexivity in their practice, less attention has been paid to the crucial scientific requirement, highlighted by Bourdieu, to break from the ‘illusio’ of that field and thus avoid alignments with positions taken by religious actors themselves. As a result, many sociologists inevitably participate in religious contestations and stakes, whether or not they affirm or deny their own religious identification with those they study. Although Bourdieu’s address was a response to a particular national and historical form of the sociology of religion, we argue that it retains much significance today and may lead to fruitful debate within the discipline.

Key words: Bourdieu, epistemology, insider-outsider, laïcité, reflexivity, science

Introduction

In an address given to the French Association for the Sociology of Religion in 1982, Pierre Bourdieu (2010:2) asks a crucial question: «can the sociology of religion as it is practised today, that is to say by producers who participate to various degrees in the religious field, be a genuine scientific sociology?» It is striking that this address and the question it poses have remained relatively neglected, despite their relevance for the sociology of religion as well as for wider sociology. In this article, we contextualise Bourdieu’s address within his broader comments on reflexivity in order to explore its utility for addressing certain common but problematic positions often adopted by sociologists of religion today. Whilst sociologists of religion have paid some attention to issues of reflexivity, particularly in the form of the insider-outsider debate, there has been less recognition of the crucial scientific issue, highlighted by Bourdieu, that sociological analysis must avoid aligning itself with positions taken by religious actors themselves. Such avoidance is part of the epistemological break that Bourdieu (and
others) understand as lying at the heart and origins of sociological method; without it, sociologists inevitably participate in religious contestations and stakes, whether or not they affirm or deny their own religious identification with those they study. Whilst Bourdieu’s address was a response to a particular national and historical form of the sociology of religion, the fact that it retains significance today shows that the past quarter century may not have seen as much scientific advancement as we might like to believe.

Bourdieu’s epistemic reflexivity

The answer Bourdieu (2010) provides to his question is tautological, but no less true because of that: «with difficulty; that is to say, only on condition that it brings a scientific sociology of the religious field» (2010:2). As we will explain, Bourdieu sees reflexivity as central to scientificity; thus his question concerns whether sociologists of religion can be reflexive, an endeavour that he believes poses particular problems. In that it addresses the scientific nature of sociology, Bourdieu’s address is therefore also illuminating for the study of other fields of action and should not only interest sociologists of religion. Before proceeding to discuss Bourdieu’s 1982 address in more detail, it is therefore useful to examine what Bourdieu means by reflexivity and why he sees it as so central to sociology.

From his earliest work, Bourdieu addressed the epistemological basis of sociology (Bourdieu et al. 1991/1972). From this he developed a notion of reflexivity that according to Loïc Wacquant (1992) differs from that of other social scientists in three ways: «First, its primary target is not the individual analyst but the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations; second, it must be a collective enterprise rather than the burden of the lone academic; and, third, it seeks not to assault but to buttress the epistemological security of sociology» (1992:36). Simply put, for Bourdieu, reflexivity is a necessary precondition for the scientific nature of sociology.

In adopting this stance, Bourdieu contributed in a highly significant way to debates that reflected epistemological crises about claims to knowledge and which gained widespread currency from the 1980s. Discussions of the role of reflexivity in social research were especially influenced by the ‘writing culture’ debate that grew around the perspective represented by the collection of essays edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986). Addressing anthropologists, this asserted that ethnographic writing should be seen as a form of poetic representation of the social world rather than as scientifically authoritative. In other words, it was held that ethnographers’ interpretations were only of equal epistemic value to those of the people they studied, or to other writers such as novelists and poets. One consequence of this view was expressed in a related volume published the same year, in which Marcus and Fischer (1986:xix-x) allege that the real aim of anthropology should be ‘self-reflection and self-growth’.

Bourdieu is not alone in emphasising the scientific importance of reflexivity against this explicitly postmodernist version. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:18) also argue that rather than seeking to eliminate the effect of the researcher on what is studied,
which is in any case an impossible task, social scientists must seek to understand that effect and then exploit it. The aim of reflexivity is therefore to produce *more secure* knowledge; reflexivity does not undermine a commitment to realism but only to «naive realism», the view that knowledge must be *absolutely* secure (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:17). From this perspective, the aim of personal examination is to better the research process itself rather than to affect or transform the individual researcher. For example, Bourdieu (2003:288–290) discusses how his experiences of the Béarn society of his childhood helped his sociological practice. His childhood knowledge that certain social units (such as neighbourhoods) in Béarn were talked about as if they had a strong reality but were in fact merely occasional entities, suggested to him during his fieldwork in Algeria that certain Kabylia concepts were also not as ‘real’ as everyday speech suggested. In emphasising the aim of such reflexive concerns as gaining a better understanding of the object of study rather than of the subject that studies, Bourdieu explicitly rejects postmodern anthropologists’ critiques of ethnography, claiming that their narcissism stands «as the polar opposite to a truly reflexive social science» (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:72).

However, Bourdieu sees researchers’ reflections upon their social origins and status as *less* scientifically valuable than reflections upon their positions and trajectories as *social scientists*, including the theory, concepts, methodology and research methods which they employ. As Wacquant (1992:41) explains, «It is not the individual unconscious of the researcher but the epistemological unconscious of his discipline that must be unearthed». This «epistemic reflexivity» (Wacquant 1992:47) therefore requires the «objectivation of the subject of objectivation**, of the analysing subject» (Bourdieu 2003:282). Whilst Kenway and McLeod (2004:530) claim that Bourdieu neglected the development of a similar view within «poststructural methodologies», especially amongst feminists, in fact Bourdieu’s techniques for the destabilisation of scientific authority differ from these by acting as a *stage* through which research must pass in order to establish greater stability. Bourdieu names this «participant objectivation», explaining that it aims... to grasp everything that the thinking anthropologist (or sociologist) may owe to the fact that she (or he) is inserted in a national scientific field, with its traditions, habits of thought, problematics, shared commonplaces, and so on, and to the fact that she occupies in it a particular position (newcomer who has to prove herself versus consecrated master, etc.), with «interests» of a particular kind which unconsciously orientate her scientific choices (of discipline, method, object, etc.) (Bourdieu 2003:284).

In other words, the aim of participant objectivation is to break with one’s investments and attachments within the «academic field» that are represented by presuppositions associated with scholarly education, perception and position (Bourdieu 1992:254).

Participant objectivation can only be properly understood when it is compared to another form of objectivation necessary in the practice of sociology, namely that which involves breaking with the unconscious «preconstructed» notions about the social world held by actors within it – as is achieved in structuralist or objectivist analysis (Bourdieu 1992:241). Although there is insufficient room here to discuss Bourdieu’s
claim that preconstructions are held pre-reflectively by social actors, it may be noted
that some scholars have consequently seen Bourdieu’s view of the possibility of scientific reflexivity as contradictory (for example, Jenkins 2002). Bourdieu’s position, however, may be defended by referring to the way in which the distancing and detachment necessary for an epistemological break are facilitated by specific practices that, if not unique to, are arguably most fully developed in the scientific field – as we discuss in a later section. For Bourdieu, this form of objectivation involves the rejection of the phenomenological stance through active distancing and detachment from the presuppositions associated with the subjective experiences of those being researched, thereby opening up the social world to scientific study. He shows that this is a core feature of the disciplinary development of sociology – in this, he is influenced by the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard, who states that «There is no science but of the hidden» (quoted in Bourdieu 1993:10). In this regard, it is relevant to note that whilst this feature is prominent in Durkheim’s (1895/1982) methodological principles that advocate the rejection of «prenotions», its presence in Weber’s work is too often overlooked because of his emphasis upon the method of Verstehen. However, whilst Weber’s specific use of this method involves paying attention to people’s subjective meanings (more precisely, their Weltanschauung or worldview), it by no means treats these as providing a sociological description or explanation in themselves, but rather as requiring an interpretation that can only be carried out through scientific objectivity (Weber 1978:4–22). The value of Bourdieu’s contribution to this debate is that it emphasises how preconstructions are associated with social actors’ different positions, which relate to one another within fields of power.

Like Weber, Bourdieu (1977) aimed to move beyond both subjectivist and objectivist analyses, claiming that whilst the sociologist’s objectivist perception must, analytically speaking, come first, it should be followed by a re-introduction into scientific analysis of the subjective experiences of those being studied. Bourdieu (1992:250–251) explains how this re-introduction relies upon participant objectivation itself, since this «negates the very experience against which they [the instruments of breakage] have been constructed». In other words, participant objectivation involves a break from those objectivist concepts and methods that were necessary to gain a preliminary scientific understanding of subjective experiences, free from preconstructed notions, in the first place. Only through this double break is the social world truly understood in terms of its practical logic, whereby social actors live their lives according to a «feel for the game» based upon their subjective experiences of their objective positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:129).

It is important to bear these epistemological issues in mind when reading Bourdieu’s 1982 address. His dissatisfaction with the sociology of religion arises from his insistence that sociological practice must achieve scientificity. As explained, this only comes about through conscious rupture both with the subjective presuppositions taken for granted by those being studied and with the researcher’s scholarly presuppositions. For Bourdieu, such rupturing requires reflexivity. As the next section explores, the real issue raised in his address is therefore why Bourdieu believes it so difficult for sociologists of religion to practise their sociology reflexively.
The sociology of religion

Bourdieu’s attention to reflexivity in the sociology of religion is framed by his views about the state of French scholarship, gained through his own studies of religion and through his knowledge about the role played by the theme of religion in the historical development of sociology. While religion was a central theme integrated within the general sociological theories of the founders of sociology, over the course of the twentieth century it became an increasingly specialised field. Luckmann (1967) was one of the first to condemn the «regressive» nature of this sociology of religion, arguing that it neglected analysis of social change whilst focusing on trivial and narrow descriptions: «the apparent flourishing of the sociology of religion in recent decades was paralleled by a decline of its theoretical significance» (1967:18). Luckmann’s comments were particularly directed towards the post-war development of a «religious sociology», in which religion was identified merely with its Christian denominational forms. At the same time as Christian churches distrusted sociology’s supposedly reductionist approach, theologians and church administrators were increasingly interested in the use of sociology as an «ancillary science» for descriptive and managerial purposes (Dobbelare 2000). As Beckford (1989:15) notes, it was not by chance that many sociology of religion societies were founded by churches, thereby limiting the interests of the former to those which concerned church administration.

In France, for example, there emerged a sociology of Catholicism, led by Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970), a professor of history of canonical law at the University of Paris who established a sociology of religion research group in 1954 (the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions, which later became the Groupes Societes Religions Laicites) and who stimulated large, quantitative studies of participation rates amongst the French population. It was well known that many in this first generation of French sociologists of religion were former Catholic clergy, which explains the sorts of issues they focused upon. More significant, however, were the limitations that could result in terms of methodology; for example, Le Bras argued that, «There are sectors that the Catholic forbids himself to explore: those of Revelation. While the myths of archaic peoples are an invention […] of the tribe or of the clan, Christian mysteries are dictated by God to Man, who limits himself only to translating it into his language» (quoted in Willaime 1995:43).

Bourdieu’s response to the sociology of religion can only be properly comprehended given the context just described. Of course, it is undeniable that more recent generations of sociologists of religion are comprised primarily of professional sociologists and that the sociology of religion has greatly extended its domains of exploration. However, this does not mean that Bourdieu’s response has lost its relevance. As Beckford (1989:1–17) and Turner (1991:3–4) argue, the sociology of religion remains relatively isolated from wider sociological debates: its continued privileging of detailed descriptions of religious experiences and beliefs has often been to the detriment of proper consideration of core sociological issues such as social class, family organisation, power and authority. It is a central contention of this article that these problems
within the sociology of religion arise from its ambiguous relationship to its object, which is precisely the issue Bourdieu addressed in 1982.

Early in his address, Bourdieu demands that the sociologist makes a choice between «whether he [sic.] wants to understand the struggles in which religious things are at stake, or to take part in these struggles» (2010:2; first emphasis added). This choice is demanded because those who take part in a social struggle (including over meaning and language) are tied to a certain unquestioned stance, involving the preconstructions inherent in a field of social action. This is what Bourdieu calls «illusio»: «the belief associated with belonging to the religious field [...] in other words, the investment in this game, associated with specific interests and profits characteristic to this field and the particular stakes it offers» (2010:3). Bourdieu (2010:6) insists that sociologists of religion become aware of their investment in the religious field since only by doing so can that investment be controlled, in the sense of achieving the «epistemological break» that (as discussed in the previous section) he posits as necessary in the scientific stance.

What Bourdieu perceives as the refusal by some French sociologists of religion, regarding the choice either to understand the religious field or to participate in its struggles, leads him to state bluntly that «there are people who use sociology to conduct struggles internal to that field», such that «the boundary of the religious field has become blurred ([for example] we have bishops who are sociologists))» (2010:3). The result is duplicity in which such sociologists, whether they consciously intend to do so or not, deceive others (and perhaps themselves) that they are conducting a scientific study whilst they are really engaged in struggles within their field of study. Accordingly, the refusal of the epistemological break «condemns oneself to play the socially and psychologically [but not sociologically] profitable double play that allows one to accumulate the profits of (apparent) scientificity and of religiosity», this «double play and double profit» being especially noticeable amongst «Catholics who study Catholicism, Protestants who study Protestantism, Jews who study Judaism» (Bourdieu 2010:6). A good example of such duplicity is discussed in the research that Bourdieu and Monique de Saint Martin (1982) conducted into the French Catholic Episcopate, an institution within which they outlined actors’ contrasting social trajectories, competition and power. As Bourdieu and Saint Martin recognise, their analysis contrasts sharply with the picture of the Catholic Church as a unified body that is presented not only by the Church itself to its members, but also by the French sociologist Émile Poulat who portrays the diversity of social origins and political ideas inside the Church as insignificant and who is therefore «totally in accordance with the representation the body of clerics has and wants to give of itself», such that his analysis functions as an academic version of the Church’s official discourse (Bourdieu and Saint Martin 1982:40).

At this point, it is worth noting that in his address Bourdieu also refers to another reason, in addition to the danger of duplicity, why a genuinely scientific sociology of religion is so difficult: namely, because the religious field is distinguished from other social fields in that the unconscious investment in its game (the illusio) is disguised by conscious investment in articulated beliefs. As he writes, «the religious field is, like all
fields, a universe of belief, *but in which it is a question of belief*. The belief that the institution organises (belief in God, in dogma, etc.) tends to mask the belief in the institution, the *obsequium*, and all the interests associated with the reproduction of the institution* (Bourdieu 2010:3; first emphasis added). Although Bourdieu does not develop this argument, such that its significance for scientific reflexivity is not drawn out in his address, it is possible to bring his discussion to bear upon this peculiarity of the religious field. From this perspective, the conscious beliefs (rather than unconscious *illusio*) of the religious field may be seen as a distinct set of knowledge that is not only institutionalised, trans-local and historically-enduring, but which demands public adherence or rejection. In other words, alongside the existence of local but public goings on, the «anecdotal information» (Bourdieu 2010:4) that is itself the object of investment and contestation by participants in a field (most notable in the form of gossip), there exists institutionally-codified, widespread and longstanding public knowledge in the form of religious beliefs (or creeds) that are also the target of investment and contestation. This is the reason schism is such a notable feature of the religious field, regardless of its underlying social or cultural conditions. Whilst beliefs of this sort may exist to a certain extent in some other social fields – most notably in the political field, hence the oft-noted similarities with religion – they are much more pronounced in the religious field, supporting Bourdieu’s view of its peculiarity. The important point for the purposes of this article is that recognition of this peculiarity enables us to understand better the specific *difficulties* of a sociological study of religion: whilst all sociologies founder if they do not recognise *illusio*, sociologists of religion are more prone not to recognise this fundamental aspect of social life because their attention risks being diverted towards conscious, articulated beliefs instead.

To return to Bourdieu’s discussion of duplicity in his address, it should be clearly noted that he does not demand that sociologists of religion renounce their religion – only that *when they act as sociologists* they renounce their participation in the struggles of the religious field. However, it may be argued that it is unfeasible for people to attempt an epistemological break in one part of their lives whilst not doing so in another, especially as Bourdieu (2010:6) claims that it constitutes a «painful amputation». A further difficulty arises from Bourdieu’s (2010:5) view that the religious field has the peculiarity that even those who are not religious tend to exhibit a stance towards it, and in this way participate in its struggles: «who can say that they do not belong to it, at least negatively through indifference?» Bourdieu, however, clearly maintains that the sociology of religion is feasible because he believes in the possibility of scientific reflexivity, which if prioritised has the capacity to *trump* a sociologist’s participation in other social fields. It is only by over-looking this that Hervieu-Léger is able to argue that, «[following Bourdieu’s line of thought], sociologists of religion cannot study their own religion: «The sociologist who belongs to the institution is clearly disqualified; the sociologist who once belonged, who is «unfrocked», even more so» (2000:13).

That Bourdieu does not demand that sociologists of religion renounce their religion is shown by his view that participation in the religious field can actually *contribute* to a scientific study by providing an appreciation of what it means to belong to that field.
This refers to the second rupture discussed in the previous section, namely the break from objectivist perception that enables the re-introduction into analysis of the subjective experiences of those being researched. Crucially, however, this re-introduction does not involve a reversal of the original rupture from actors’ preconstructions – rather, the second rupture (like the first) requires controlled scientific reflexivity. Bourdieu (2010:3–4) argues that a full sociological understanding of the social world must take account of the claim by participants in the religious field that their subjective experiences are a «necessary and sufficient condition of adequate knowledge». In partial agreement with such participants’ criticism of «objective analysis», Bourdieu points out that the sociologist «is likely to omit taking into account in his analysis the belief that he had to ignore in order to construct his object as such, and to have little inclination and ability to recreate in the description the enchanted experience, the illusio, which is associated with belonging» (2010:4). In other words, objective analysis is impoverished by leaving out all the «little details [...] that we only have if we are interested in them at first hand», thereby masking the «nearly infinite number of pathways [... that] are achieved in practice only through apparently contingent events, seemingly singular actions, thousands of infinitesimal adventures» (Bourdieu 2010:4; emphasis added). Bourdieu’s consequent evaluation of participation in the religious field is worth quoting at length:

From being an obstacle to objectivation, belonging can become an aid to the objectivation of the limits of objectivation, on condition that it is itself objectified and controlled. It is on condition that we know we belong to the religious field, with its related interests (and who can say they do not belong to it, at least negatively through non-indifference?), that we can control the effects of this belonging and draw out the necessary experience and information to produce a non-reductive objectivation that is capable of moving beyond the alternative of the inside and the outside, of blind attachment and partial lucidity (2010:5; emphases added).

What matters, then, is not whether sociologists of religion renounce any religious attachments in their wider lives but whether they attempt an epistemological break in their sociological practice. This is why Bourdieu (2010:1, 6–7) insists in his 1982 address that the former is a private affair – he refuses the opportunity to accuse individuals of not carrying out this act, stating that accusations about «the interest of others» usually mask resentment or sublimate «everyday [non-sociological] disputes». However, whether an epistemological break is made in sociologists’ sociological practice clearly is an appropriate subject for debate. Significantly, Bourdieu furnishes his readers with one important means of testing whether such a break has been made, by stating that duplicity «betrays itself in its language, and notably by introducing into the heart of erudite discourse words borrowed from religious language, through which slip in [...] the tacit presuppositions of the native relationship to the object» (2010:6). In order to explore the contemporary relevance of Bourdieu’s remarks, the following section examines some positions found in Anglophone and Francophone sociology of religion today. It will be shown that the moves that characterise sociology as a science are often ignored or paid little regard, with the result that sociology’s power to uncover and explain the social world may be much diminished.
Contemporary debates

Insider-outsider

In English-speaking sociology of religion, the issue of reflexivity has been generally circumvented in favour of the ‘insider-outsider’ debate, which focuses upon the advantages and disadvantages associated with understanding a religious organisation depending upon whether one participates in it or not. Consequently, this debate involves issues concerning what it means to believe in, to belong to, or to have knowledge about religion – and concerning how ‘religion’ should be conceptualised in the first place. The enduring nature of this debate, and the way in which it is linked primarily with the discipline of religious studies, is demonstrated in McCutcheon’s (1999) edited reader. However, Bourdieu’s address suggests that the insider-outsider debate may be misleading – the relevant issue is whether or not knowledge is being produced scientifically, which involves epistemic reflexivity. Notably, scholars in religious studies are not primarily concerned with their scientificity - although some, such as Byrne (1999), have reacted against this stance - since they tend to equate science with reductionism and determinism, and hold that the primary aim of a scholarly understanding of religion is merely to uncover the meaning of religion for the religious themselves. But as Bourdieu shows, such elision of an objectivist interpretation has the consequence that people’s subjective meanings cannot be properly understood, since these are associated with particular structural positions.

From this perspective, it may therefore be problematic when sociologists of religion become concerned with the insider-outsider issue rather than that of scientificity as Bourdieu defined it, as in the volume edited by Arweck and Stringer (2002). Both Collins (2002) and Guest (2002), for example, seek to address the insider-outsider issue by arguing that what constitutes an insider or an outsider is highly complex and context-dependent, and by emphasising that what they are doing as sociologists (or anthropologists) is not fundamentally different from what many in the groups they study do. Whilst Collins (2002) makes known his personal position as resident warden and member of the Society of Friends (Quakers), a group he also studies as an anthropologist, he asserts that being an anthropologist does not necessarily make him an outsider since «Quakers reflect, too. One need not have a degree in anthropology in order to ruminate on Quaker faith and practice – indeed the mode of worship clearly encourages Friends to do just that, as shown occasionally in the content of spoken ministry» (2002:89). Indeed, Collins reports that having arranged a meeting, as warden, for «a Quaker well known for running interesting courses, to speak on the subject of ‘community’, he found that by the end of the talk he «was hoping he would soon stop in that I would have little else to say in my thesis!» (2002:89–90)

Guest (2002:37, 42–43), by contrast, declares his lack of religious identity and belief in the alternative Christian worship groups that studies; but in discussing the «reflexivity» of participants he adopts an analysis that explicitly coincides with that of Dave Tomlinson, a Christian author and formative influence upon such worship in the UK, who interprets «post-evangelicals» in terms of «the distrust of person-based, «parental» authority». According to Guest (2002), since participants tend to be «versed
in post-modern literature and thought», «the general form of services undermines clear-cut or definitive presentations of Christianity, thus demanding some reflexive engagement from the participant» such that «the picture is one of perpetual innovation and ritual change — reflexivity without closure» (2002:49–50). The perspective of Tomlinson, and similar Christian authors, is therefore reproduced in Guest’s analysis, which emphasises subjective experiences over social authorities. This is clear, for example, in Guest’s discussion of the ritual of walking around a labyrinth commonly found in these worship groups, which for him «suggest[s] ritual and spiritual direction as person-centred, guided primarily by the experience and perception of the individual participant» (2002:46–47).

Although it is by no means irrelevant for social researchers to compare their similarities and differences to those they study, the prioritisation of the insider-outsider issue within debates about the production of knowledge is potentially misleading because it may divert attention from the scientific practice of the researcher. As the preceding section explains, crucial to this practice is the requirement to achieve an epistemological break from the presuppositions inherent in social life — something that is not required of social actors in a field, regardless how reflective or learned they may be. Thus, what is significant is not whether researchers are insiders or outsiders but whether they are acting scientifically. In contrast to scientists, Quakers who give talks to Quaker groups and evangelicals who write books for Christians are acting religiously - that is, explicitly participating within the religious field - irrespective of whether they are attempting an analysis of their position or are drawing upon non-religious forms of knowledge (such as scholarly debates about community or postmodernity). Given that an epistemological break enables much that is hidden about social life (due to the illusio) to be revealed, it is highly troubling when sociologists resign themselves to offering little beyond the pronouncements of those they study.

It is important to note that an epistemological break is not only achieved through a decision to reflect upon preconstructions, but also involves scientific practices which, through their systematic enactment, are necessary for attaining such a break. Indeed, Collins’ reflections upon his own scientific practices are useful for drawing a distinction between him and other Quakers in his group. As he explains, «I check my pocket for notebook and pencil», «I reflect continually on the building, its artifacts, the events that take place here and those who participate in such events [...] and make mental notes about interactions I will later write down as fieldnotes», «[a]fter lunch I sit down and reconstruct the morning’s events in my notebook [… t]his task takes two or three hours and has become a significant part of my «after-meeting» ritual» (Collins 2002:82–85; emphases added). Nor are sociologists’ scientific practices limited to periods of data collection. Even if some self-reflective religious participants reflect and write on their experiences in a similar way to that described by Collins, the fact remains that sociologists are also distinguished through their wider scientific work, which includes discussing their research with other scientists, carrying out research on other social topics, and teaching, marking and examining within their discipline. To repeat, these scientific practices are necessary (but insufficient) for achieving an epistemological break and clearly distinguish scientific researchers from those they study. Against
any objection that such a view of the sociologist is an elitist one, it must be asserted that the ability to channel one’s working life – with all the material, social and cultural resources that higher education provides – towards the study of a social group does of course privilege the researcher in that endeavour.

The lack of scientific reflexivity regarding the illusio of the religious field has serious consequences. Collins (2002) argues that «it is pointless to try and «trump» adepts’ accounts; the anthropologist can only record them, understand how and why they compare, and set his/her own account alongside them» (2002:90). But this may lead to participants’ accounts being adopted as sociological descriptions and explanations in themselves, rather than being subjected to scientific study in terms of how they express a particular position and stake in a wider context of social constructions and contestations. This is precisely the issue raised by Bourdieu regarding the contribution of sociologists of religion in the reproduction of the Catholic Church’s own representation of itself to its public. Guest’s (2002:52–53) reliance on Tomlinson’s discourse of self-authority leads him to relegate such sociological concerns, as for example may be pursued in terms of how those who run alternative worship groups interpret such a discourse in their local context and attempt to reproduce it through operating rituals like that of the labyrinth. Such sociological considerations are confined to Guest’s (2002:52–53) concluding remarks about the need to examine sources of authority and legitimacy. Here may be recalled Bourdieu’s (2010:6) point that duplicity displays itself in the unquestioned use of language taken from the religious field - one form of such duplicity clearly includes researchers who ally their analysis with those produced by people occupying a particular position within the religious field.

That this is by no means an uncommon stance in the sociology of religion is made clear by Wood’s (2009) critique of sociological studies of spirituality which today command an increasing amount of attention in the sub-discipline. Wood demonstrates that rather than exploring how actors’ discourses are constructed and contested by paying attention to their structural positions in this field, sociologists studying ‘spirituality’ have assumed that these discourses in themselves offer a sociologically sufficient description and explanation of actors’ lives. The prevalence of affirmations of self-authority within these discourses has led sociologists to argue that ‘spirituality’ (as, for example, in Guest 2002:48) represents a shift in the nature of religion in contemporary Euro-American societies, away from the authority of traditions and leaders and towards the individual’s own innate authority – with the result that there is little sociological awareness of the social contexts in which these discourses have been produced and function. It is therefore not surprising to discover that studies of spirituality have been strongly shaped by those working in religious studies, a discipline that does not necessarily share sociology’s insistence upon an epistemological break (Wood 2010).

Most typically, as in the case of Collins and Guest, social researchers forge alliances with educated participants who are well-read in certain intellectual debates – in other words, those with whom an intellectual (and probably a social) background is shared. Revealingly, in the same volume, Waterhouse (2002) explains that her analysis of Soka Gakkai involved «the input of two long-term ‘academically literate’ practitioners» who she resembled in terms of gender, age and education – to the extent that she considers...
her analysis vindicated by the fact that «they have both affirmed my analysis to be acceptable from the perspective of an insider» (2002:58–59). Like Collins, Waterhouse intends her account merely «to be complementary to official insider accounts» and denies «claiming that as an outsider I can make observations on Soka Gakkai ritual which no insider could make» (2002:67–68). In addition to the problems already discussed regarding social researchers’ adoption of participants’ accounts, it may be noted that even if Bourdieu’s view that social actors are unreflective is rejected, such that it is admitted that they may hold sociological knowledge about their field of action, it remains the case that participants cannot be presumed to convey such knowledge to social researchers or to acknowledge its existence in social researchers’ accounts. This is because (unlike the genuinely scientific sociologist) they retain stakes in the field of action which affect their interactions with social researchers, such as in claiming legitimacy for their own position in the field. Thus, a position such as Waterhouse’s could only be maintained upon the unrealistic premise that no power-relationship pertains between researchers and their field subjects. In short, by focusing upon how insider and outsider positions are ambiguous, Collins, Guest and Waterhouse pass over what makes social scientists distinctive from those they study, which is prone to lead to the conscious or unconscious adoption of the discourses of (some of) the latter.

Positive laïcité

In his workshop on reflexive sociology, Bourdieu (1992:235–237) notes that sociologists must be careful to break from preconstructed notions that are found in official representations, often as legitimised and guaranteed by the State. As an example, he refers to the problematic position of research into «poverty» conducted by American sociologists that, by being encouraged and funded by political programmes, reproduced an official discourse rather than pursuing a genuinely scientific sociological analysis (Bourdieu 1992:236, n.27). Within contemporary French sociology of religion, a similar situation pertains in some studies of laïcité and responses to religious diversity.

Since the turn of the new millennium, laïcité has become one of France’s most passionate debates. Discussions about the role of religion in the French public sphere were sparked by various events including the centennial commemoration of the 1905 law separating Church and State and its modifications suggested by the Machelon commission in 2006, the banning of conspicuous religious symbols in State schools, the creation of a council representing Islam with the support of the Interior Ministry, and the controversy about so-called cults. Laïcité is also a concept used by sociologists to analyse France’s responses to religious diversity. Altglas (2010) examines how the notion of laïcité has been used in sociologists’ analysis of the French cult controversy. Sociologists such as Hervieu-Léger (2001, 2004a) have noted that whilst neutral in principle, laïcité in fact operates normatively in regulating religious diversity and in providing recognition of some forms of religion but not others (the latter including, for example, Islam and new religious movements). Similarly, Baubérot (1997:319) draws attention to the contradictions of laïcité, which paradoxically combine the principle of religious freedom with a perception of religion as incompatible with reason and pro-
And Willaime (2008) argues that, «an ideological laïcité whose antireligious dimensions are poorly disguised contrasts with an empirical laïcité that respects religious freedom and is capable of recognising the positive contributions of religions to civilisation» (2008a:49). Elsewhere, Willaime (2005) distinguishes between a «laïcité de combat» as opposed to a «liberal laïcité».

However, these sociological analyses tend to be strongly intertwined with a moral evaluation of responses to religious diversity. Hervieu-Léger (2001:208), for example, proposes a «mediating laïcité», which would act as «a tool for thought and action for the achievement of the fundamental values claimed by the Republic». Likewise, Baubérot (1990) advocates a «new pacte laïque» enabling citizens to live in peace within a context of religious diversity. And Willaime (2008b) argues for a «laïcité de dialogue» in which religions would receive recognition for their contribution to social life, thereby encouraging engagement with them. French sociologists have further argued how such «positive» forms of laïcité could be ensured, such as through a High Council of Laïcité (Hervieu-Léger 2001:205–209) or a «Universal Declaration on Laïcité for the Twenty First Century» (launched by Jean Baubérot, Micheline Milot and Roberto Blancarte, this was signed in 2005 by more than 200 academics from 30 countries). These sociologists’ analyses of laïcité are therefore to be understood as statements of what laïcité should be.

This particular relationship of these sociologists of religion with their object is explained and justified by Baubérot and Milot (2002) in their review of Hervieu-Léger’s (2001) essay on the «cult» issue. Approving the way the author combines sociological analysis and common sense statements on «cults» to please the reader, Baubérot and Milot state that

Sociologists of religion have refused to engage in [...] applied research] for too long because – in a conjuncture with the privatisation of religion – their legitimacy in global society depended on their ability to distinguish themselves from theological discourse and pastoral matters. The emphasis on objectivation has been very strong, even unilateral. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is necessary, whilst conducting the most rigorous analysis, to endorse – by making explicit – the risks of tension between «scientific openness» and the «limits of action» (2002:31).

This proximity of academic and political discourses is underlined by Nicolas Sarkozy’s introduction of the term «positive laïcité» into the public debate, first in his capacity as Interior Minister and subsequently as President of the Republic. Claiming the superiority of religion and espérance above other forms of human needs, Sarkozy (2004:170) advocates a «positive laïcité’» that would allow religions to play a «constructive role in society» in educating citizens by teaching them values and morality. Sarkozy’s approach towards religion-State relations triggered a debate amongst scholars about the validity of his political agenda. Whilst Baubérot (2009:197) accuses Sarkozy of neo-clericalism, Willaime defends him by alleging that «Sarkozy understood that we could openly practice a laïcité de dialogue with religion» and that because the separation of Church and State is no longer threatened «it becomes possible, without repudiating laïcité, to explicitly acknowledge the spiritual, educative, cultural and social contributions of religions» (2009:212). Although Baubérot’s and Wil-
lajime’s responses represent theoretical differences, ironically each criticises the partiality and political nature of the other’s analysis whilst claiming for himself the right to contribute to the public debate. Indeed, the core of their disagreement involves their normative views about what role religion should play in the public sphere. This example raises a more general point about the achievement of, in Bourdieu’s terms, a genuinely scientific sociology, namely that scholars’ keenness to contribute to public debates may have the effect of leading them not to question the preconstructions upon which these debates are founded.

Framed by political and ideological debates about laïcité, these sociological analyses may be criticised for their normative character. However, from a scientific point of view a more important problem is that, in defending or criticising certain arrangements between religion and the State, they refrain from empirically studying these arrangements as they exist in social life. In other words, sociological analysis of controversies over «cults» (and the same may be said about some studies of Islam in France) has led merely to a denunciation of laïcité’s consubstantial problems with religious diversity, rather than to a questioning of what laïcité is in terms of the social discourses and practices of relevant actors (including institutional ones); what meanings are granted to the term by these actors; and what sorts of strategies and mobilisations are involved in these discourses and practices. In fact, study of the social construction of laïcité shows that this notion is frequently invoked and strongly contested by divergent political and administrative approaches towards the «cult» phenomenon, and more broadly towards religion (Altglas 2010). By tending to avoid research into these sorts of issues, there is a clear methodological parallel between Francophone sociologists’ debates about laïcité and Anglophone sociologists’ of religion debates about the insider-outsider issue.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relevance of Bourdieu’s epistemic reflexivity for the sociological study of religion, particularly by focusing upon the remarks in his 1982 address to the French Association for the Sociology of Religion. That address examines the difficulties of sociologists of religion to achieve the epistemological break necessary for scientific study, and the consequent duplicity in attempting to participate in scholarly and religious fields at the same time. By focusing upon Anglo-Saxon sociologists’ contributions to the insider-outsider debate and to French sociologists’ contributions to debates about laïcité, we have shown that these criticisms remain pertinent throughout the sociology of religion today. Whilst our primary aim has not been to defend Bourdieu’s views about the nature of social life or scientific method but to demonstrate their continued relevance, in this conclusion it is pertinent to raise two problems with his version of epistemic reflexivity.

Firstly, Bourdieu does not clearly discuss whether participant objectivation should be publicly represented - in fact he is ambivalent on this point, at times arguing that it is the responsibility of individual sociologists and at other times stating that it must be
carried out collectively. In relation to this, it is unclear whether this process of reflexivity should be made public in the writing-up of research. Usually, reflection on research only appears in writing as a defence of the researcher’s chosen methods and as a criticism of other theories or concepts. But if the reflexive process of doing research is to be incorporated into the public, written presentation of that research, then much more is demanded: for example, how survey questions were decided upon, the influence of the researcher’s position and trajectory in the scholarly field, and so on. In fact, Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:219) does criticise scholars for deleting from their writing the way in which the research was carried out, like painters who make sure that brush strokes cannot be seen in their completed work - as he writes, «Homo academicus relishes the finished».

A second problem is how sociologists should decide whether their methods and theories are appropriate or useful, simply on the basis of understanding their academic position and trajectory; in other words, how objectifying ourselves as scholars in the academic field actually helps us in deciding how to do research. For example, the increasing use of Bourdieu’s concepts by sociologists may be associated with certain positions in the academic field - such as, in Anglophone sociology, newly qualified scholars reacting against their elders’ (and superiors’) use of more established theorists. But does the revealing of this mean that such scholars should refrain from referring to Bourdieu?

It is not our intention to address these problems here; rather, they are raised in order to indicate that much more debate is required into the nature and consequences of Bourdieu’s comments on sociological method. This is particularly true within the sociology of religion, which for too long has neglected discussion about the scientific status of its endeavour. That the time is ripe for such debate is highlighted by the recent comment by Paul Chambers (2008:25), as an officer of the British Sociological Association’s Sociology of Religion Study Group, that the difference between «religious sociology» and «sociology of religion» is «a distinction that most sociologists of religion would reject». Bourdieu’s views explain clearly why any such rejection would lead to the study of religion that was sociological in name only.

Notes

1 The address was published in its original form in Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions (Bourdieu 1987a) and in a shorter form in Bourdieu’s (1987b) Choses Dites, but omitted in the English translation of the latter. Quotations in the current article are taken from the English translation by Matthew Wood and Véronique Altglas published in this volume of Nordic Journal of Religion and Society, under the title ‘Sociologists of belief and beliefs of sociologists’ (Bourdieu 2010).

2 All translations into English of extracts from French texts are those of the authors.


4 A word meaning ‘hope’ but which resonates strongly with Catholic theology, being commonly used by Pope John Paul II.
References


Matthew Wood and Véronique Altglas: Reflexivity, scientificity and the sociology of religion


