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Sociological and Theological Imagination in a Post-secular Society

Abstract: In Comte's vision, humanity progressed from a theological to a metaphysical to a positive phase. This transition was to be mirrored by the replacement of theology and metaphysics by a new science of society—sociology. Comte's prophecy was quickly fulfilled—within a century the new discipline had successfully undermined the legitimacy of other systems of knowledge in the social realm—like philosophy, theology, and literature. Even theologians learned to adopt the findings of their rival and incorporate them into their framework. At the same time, the emerging social sciences borrowed heavily from theology, while trying to mask the debt. The recent constructivist turn has challenged social scholars to rethink that positivist paradigm. This article tries to take up the challenge and see whether theology and sociology can possibly learn from one another.

Keywords: theology, sociology, secularity, post-secularity, sociological and theological imagination.

Throughout the 19. century the emerging social sciences waged a war with religious authorities similar to the war in which natural sciences won their autonomy and legitimacy some two centuries earlier.¹ Although this conflict resulted in their victory, the social sciences were not able to fully break apart with concepts, language, and methods that theology had applied previously to analyze the same area of study.

While I will be speaking of 'sociology' and 'theology', both of these terms are construed very broadly. In fact, theologians today are generally willing to adopt a broader definition of their discipline than they used to, and some will go as far as to understand it as any attempt to interpret society in terms of a comprehensive cognitive framework (see [Crockett 2011: 15](#)). At the same time, it is also increasingly difficult to speak of 'sociology' as a unified discipline, and sociological theories and research as distinct from social theories and research. Patrick Baert and Felipe da Silva argue that today 'it makes more sense to talk about social theory rather than sociological theory. Sociological theory suggests a discipline-bound form of theorizing—theory for sociological research. Sociological theory never existed in this pure form anyway' ([2010: 287](#)). Sociology is a very diverse intellectual field, and some of the criticism presented below will be less valid in regard to more interpretative approaches within sociology. Yet, many—perhaps most—sociologists will agree there exists something

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what C. W. Mills famously called ‘sociological imagination’: a distinct sensibility, a set of questions and basic principles of addressing them. Therefore, rather than speaking of theology and sociology as two distinct disciplines, I prefer to speak of theological and sociological imaginations (or, as J. Orme Mills does, of the sociological and the theological ‘mind’; Mills 2004: 3).

The first part of this article analyzes symptoms of an emerging consciousness of the ways in which the implicit rivalry between sociological and theological imagination influenced both disciplines. First, I will look into the frontal attack on sociology by John Milbank, Anglican theologian and representative of the so-called Radical Orthodoxy. In his *Theology and Social Theory* (1990) he claimed that all that sociology has to say about society is already present within theology. Theology also—from its own perspective—deals with the social; its pretense to the status of science is no less substantiated than this of the social sciences. Therefore, says Milbank, theology should reclaim the lost ground, and reject the baggage of sociological and psychological theories that it had adopted to its own harm. I will also analyze less radical ways, in which other theologians would like to reshape the relations between their discipline and the social sciences.

Second, I will focus on the increasing appreciation of the theological perspective among some social scientists. Several of them propose a post-secular sociology, suggesting that both disciplines open towards each other. This shift should be understood in the context of a post-modern turn in sociology and humanities in general, which questions the positivist paradigm, prevalent until recently, and blurs the disciplinary boundaries. Here, the recent post-secular turn of Jürgen Habermas, and recent writings of Zygmunt Bauman, seem to propose new, and radically different patterns of relations between sociological and theological or religious interpretations. While Bauman ignores the boundaries between the two perspectives, both in terms of language and the selection of research problems, Habermas suggests ‘translating’ religious content/message into a secular language in search of precious/worthy truths that only religious communities managed to preserve. In this article, however, I explore a third way, which maintains disciplinary boundaries and the specific perspective of each discipline, while advocating a new conceptualization of the relation between the sociological and theological imagination.

Sources of the Secularist Paradigm within Sociology

As sociologist of religion José Casanova (2005) observed, all of classic sociologists: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim or—to a lesser degree and with certain reservations—Max Weber implicitly accepted the idea that modern process of rationalization was accompanied not merely by a ‘disenchantment’ of the world—that is emancipation of various spheres of human life from the area of the sacred, but by something more—an irreversible decline of religion in general. Casanova rightly pointed to the fact that none of these classical sociologists laid out a ‘theory’ of secularization in a systematic way, and that it was never

tested empirically. As a matter of fact, then, it was never a theory. Attempts to verify certain hypotheses were made after the World War II, partly (but not only) by scholars from the so-called Catholic or religious sociology. It turned out that to reasonably discuss the secularization thesis it has to be narrowed down to a set of falsifiable hypotheses. Casanova identified three basic meanings of the word 'secularization'. First, it can mean an inevitable decline of religious belief and the replacement of religious explanations by scientific ones. Second, the term also denotes the process of differentiation of the religious sphere from other spheres of life, which liberate themselves from the shadow of the 'sacred canopy' of religion. Third, it describes the privatization of religious life, which means that religious belief and practice disappear from the public sphere and become invisible to traditional research methods.

In sociology of religion the secularization theory in its first, most ideologically laden version was repudiated quite long ago (Bell 1977; Berger 1999; Stark 1999). In its second, most neutral meaning, it is widely accepted today and provokes little controversy. Secularization thesis in the third meaning was reconstructed to denote privatization as a historical process, present in certain particular periods or national settings, and not a universal or a one-way phenomenon. Casanova himself argues that since the beginning of the 1980s religion in many places have again become public. In this article I concentrate on the first of the three meanings of secularization. While its first and most vulgar version in its explicit form disappeared, the question remains how deep are the ideological roots of the secularization paradigm within the sociological theory. To put it differently: to what extent the 'sociological imagination' remains a continuation and, at the same time, a contestation of the 'theological imagination'? For C. W. Mills (2000) the former's task was to help one to understand broader, social processes in which an individual biography is involved. His basic premise was that ordinary men 'cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them' (Mills 2000: 4). Job loss, divorce, experience of war, and other existential problems are to be seen against the backdrop of global processes in the labor market, the transformation of the functions of family and marriage, or long-term trends in international relations. Only taking into account the importance of this social context will the people be able to 'provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations' (Mills 2000: 8). The main goal of sociology, as Mills envisioned, was 'to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference' (2000: 13). It is easy to see, that it is religion which has traditionally performed—and for many performs until today—exactly this function. While religion places an individual within a larger, cosmic and sacred plan, interpreting individual failures and successes through the categories of sin and grace, the sociological imagination tries to explain individual biographies through their social conditioning, and structural changes within society. The stake is similar in both perspectives: the religious imagination seeks to protect the integrity of the otherwise chaotic, at times helplessly brutal world through its reference to a good God; the sociological imagination tries to sustain a belief that the social world is a coherent whole, which can be described and explained. While the

former rests on a theodicy (an attempt to reconcile the idea of a good God with the reality of evil world), the latter—on a ‘sociodicy’—an attempt to rationally explain the roots of the social ‘evil’ (as structural problems, tensions etc.) (see [Morgan and Wilkinson 2001](#)).

Two distinguished sociologists of religion, Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge ([\[1987\]1996](#)), the founders of the economic theory of religion, clearly saw the inevitable tension between their theories and religious explanations. In their introduction to the seminal *Theory of Religion* they wrote:

[...] it is hypocritical to imply that work such as we present is without implications for religious faith. [...] by attempting to explain religious phenomena without reference to actions taken by the supernatural, we assume that religion is a purely human phenomenon, the causes of which are to be found entirely in the natural world. [...] Furthermore, when we contrast many faiths and seek human causes for variations among them, we at least imply that none possesses the revealed truth. Orthodox clergy have no difficulty seeing at a glance that work such as ours is potentially inimical to faith. On this question we believe the orthodox clergy show better judgment than do many liberal clergy who seem so eager to embrace social science. ([Stark and Bainbridge 1996: 22–23](#))

Unfortunately, few other sociologists have been that frank.

Janusz Mucha, while paraphrasing Lewis A. Coser’s *Letter to a Young Sociologist* wrote: ‘Although it is hard today to believe that ‘truth will set us free’ one has to hope that our research effort will contribute to the development of humanity’s self-consciousness, to a self-conscious social planning, to the blossoming of human dignity’ ([2009: XXVI](#)). Hardly could one find a more telling example of a situation, in which research problems become moral imperatives. This passage is by no means a unique feature of radical sociologists—to a certain degree it characterizes the whole of sociological enterprise. Already towards the end of the 19. century Albion Small and George E. Vincent ([1894: 77](#)) confessed in their handbook to the emerging new academic discipline that ‘Sociology was born of the modern ardor to improve society’. This ardor has not gone until today, although most of social scientists try hard to mitigate it. Not always are they successful. Let me provide just one example, although countless others could be found. In his *Transformation of Intimacy* ([1993](#)) Anthony Giddens describes the birth of modern sexuality. In his view, what is today widely practiced becomes ‘normal’, but ‘normality’ here is understood in a normative, not only statistical sense. He falls into the trap of what Roberto Cialdini ([2001](#)) called the principle of social proof. Giddens ([1993](#)) frequently crosses the border between description and value-judgment, as when he writes that the decline of perversion was an important achievement of the freedom of expression in liberal democracies: ‘Victories have been won, but the confrontations continue, and freedoms that have been achieved could still plausibly be swept away on a reactionary tide’ ([1993: 33](#)) A bit further we read: ‘heterosexuality is no longer a standard by which everything else is judged’ ([Giddens 1993: 34](#)). It probably is not, but we cannot be sure what Giddens is trying to say here: whether that there is an objectively observable increase in social acceptance for homosexual behavior, or if it his desire to see such a transformation. One fears Giddens himself does not differentiate these two separate dimensions clearly enough.

Secular Biographies

Individual biographies of early sociologists may prove to be the key factor in tracing the origins of the secularist paradigm in sociology. Comte's (1974 [1896]) ambition to establish a religion of Humanity, with sociologists as priests, was responsible for much of suspicion towards the nascent discipline. Comte himself could be described as a 'secular Catholic': he viewed religion as a necessary source of social order and in a particularly explicit way tried to incorporate the Catholic doctrine, which he generally highly valued, into his system of positive philosophy. Later sociologists could be better characterized, according to the famous—although often misinterpreted (see Swatos and Kivisto 1991)—self-description of Max Weber (in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies on February 19, 1909) as 'religiously unmusical'. Durkheim came from a rabbinic family, but abandoned Judaism and became atheist. Nevertheless, in the later period of his activity he developed an idea of a global civil religion, which he called 'the cult of man', 'religion of humanity' or the 'religion of law'. The main function of this 'secular religion' was civic education through the public school system (Wallace 1977). He was probably most explicit about the normative tasks of the discipline he helped establish: 'We must discover the rational substitutes for these religious notions that for a long time have served as the vehicle for the most essential moral ideas' (quoted in: Coser 1977: 137). In other words, sociology was to be a moral science, although not by choice—as a self-proclaimed competitor of religion—but out of necessity, in the face of decline of traditional, i.e. religious foundations of the social order.

Unlike in France, where most sociologists were declared atheists, early sociologists in Great Britain, Germany and the United States were often associated with Protestant social movements. In America, many among the first-generation sociologists had theological education. Eight well known scholars, including William G. Sumner and William I. Thomas, started their career as ministers. John Brewer (2007) claims that great religious diversity meant no single minister could come to national prominence unless he crossed the borders of his denomination. Therefore, inspired by optimistic postmillennialism, many pastors became engaged in reform movements, which opened a path to social recognition and wider audience. Gradually, postmillennial eschatology, which hoped to establish God's Kingdom on Earth even before the Second Coming, was secularized and opened up possibilities for a 'Christian sociology', understood as a rational and scientific method to eliminate social evil. Much of this enthusiasm is evident in books such as J. H. W. Stuckenberg's (1880) *Christian Sociology*. Institutes and summer schools of Christian sociology were affiliated with many theological seminars (see Henking 1993).

Austin Harrington, analyzing the work of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (2008: 21) suggests, that social sciences needed this mediation of religious reform movements to establish themselves within the academia. Sociological conversion, however, was often accompanied by the scholar's personal departure from institutionalized religion. Albion Small, who remained deeply religious until the end of his life, is one of the few exceptions here. This individual reorientation was accompanied by institutional secularization of sociology (Brewer 2007). This process is well

illustrated by a 1909 memorandum of the American Sociological Association, which included the following advice to the organizers: ‘all those who should be invited [...] should be instructed that all reference to the Divine Authority of any particular religion is to be avoided’ (quoted in Swatos 1989: 370). Successive changes of the title of a sociological journal published since 1940 by the American Catholic Sociological Society provide another telling example of this process. Initially, the title was: *American Catholic Sociological Review*; starting in 1963 it was changed to *Sociological Analysis*, and in 1993—to *Sociology of Religion*; also the name of the society was changed in 1970 to the Association for the Sociology of Religion (see Brewer 2007: 13).

This process suggests a more universal process: for the social sciences to gain independence and recognition, it was necessary to sever the ties to other forms of knowledge and forget about their past. Nevertheless, the process was never completed. As Stanislaw Andreski (1972: 237) observed with his usual irony, after being a sociologist ‘has become an established occupation, the social sciences have begun to attract the type of mind which in the olden days would have taken up dogmatic theology or preaching’. Such a development could possibly help explain the relative decline of sociology after 1960s., a decline which a number of sociologists themselves (see Berger 1992; 2005; Postman 1984) ascribe to the excessive moralizing and ideologization. Ideologization was not a new temptation; indeed, already over one hundred years ago Max Weber (1989: 27) observed (in his famous 1919 essay on *Science as a Vocation*) that the space abandoned by religion would not remain empty: there would be ‘thousands of professors seeking to take over his [prophet’s or savior’s] role in their lecture-rooms in the guise of state-salaried or privileged petty prophets’. Weber viewed this penchant of intellectuals for secular ‘prophecies’ as one of the negative consequences of the ‘disenchantment’ of the world but—unlike Durkheim—remained deeply skeptical about the possibility of substituting for religion as the source of social order: ‘as yet, a new prophecy has never emerged (and I deliberately use an image here which has been offensive to some) through the need of some modern intellectuals to furnish their souls with, so to speak, guaranteed genuine antiques’ (1989: 29). Despite these efforts, academic prophets are doomed to fail, Weber believed: ‘If one wishes to propound new religions without new, genuine prophecies, then something profoundly similar occurs with even worse effects. And academic prophecy will create only fanatical sects, never a true community’ (1989: 30). Decades to come, however, were to prove that alongside with the rise of social science in status and prestige, that prophetic temptation became harder to resist.

Theological Critique of Sociology

Within the last decade or two, a number of both sociologists and theologians focused on the interrelations between their respective disciplines. The main work written from the theological perspective is *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990) by John Milbank, Anglican theologian and the leader of so-called Radical Orthodoxy movement.

Milbank's starting point is a peculiar post-modernism, which stresses the need to overcome the modernist paradigm in social sciences. In this paradigm, only 'scientific'—but in practice completely ideological—thinking is to lead to the objective knowledge about social reality. In Milbank's view, sociology's pretense to intellectual rigor and the formulation of scientific laws are no more substantiated than similar claims of religious interpretations. As a consequence, both perspectives must conflict with each other (Bullock 2000). Milbank's chief aim is to overcome intellectual marginalization of theology, which in his view has recently tried to gain credibility by referring to and drawing from sociological theories. He writes: "*all* theology has to reconceive itself as a kind of 'Christian sociology'" (Milbank 1990: 381). For sociology, he foresees no place; it should therefore be discarded.

Milbank starts his opus magnum with a strong thesis: "Once there was no 'secular'" (1990: 9). The category of the 'secular' was constructed simultaneously with the deconstruction of the 'sacred'. Similarly, there is no such thing as 'society'—there are only communities (such as the church), and each of them needs to and tries to come up with its own 'social theory'. Therefore, the adequate alternative to sociology is to be found in ecclesiology. Milbank argues that theology embraced secular narratives, which emerged to replace religious interpretations in public discourse. He rejects all theoretical orientations in sociology, and is especially critical of both functionalism and conflict theory. The former relies, in his view, on hidden metaphysics, clothed in a quasi-scientific jargon, that adds nothing to what theology had proposed earlier. Conflict theory, on its part, stresses—and indirectly legitimizes—the role of violence in social relations. This Hobbesian premise is constitutive of all of sociological enterprise, as well as of all modern political thought.

Out of the twelve chapters of the book three are a direct critique of sociology. For Milbank, sociology is synonymous with the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', and Marxism in particular. Sociological explanations usually refer to the notion of power. Even social cohesion and harmony, which functionalists view as the normal state of society, result from the balancing of the divergent social forces. To illustrate this point, Milbank points to the inability of sociology to understand the institution of the church as a community of faith rather than as a complex organization which does not differ substantially from a party or a corporation in its internal power struggles and hierarchy. For sociologists, church is usually analyzed as an emanation of material interests, to which religious belief is just a cover-up.

Milbank neglects the fact that sociology is a multi-paradigm discipline. While it is true that a number of theoretical orientations are by-products of Marxism based on secularist premises, other perspectives (e.g. interpretivism, phenomenology) cannot be easily labeled as such. Nevertheless, his main thesis is correct: sociology as such tends to interpret the social reality in terms of power relations, therefore imposing a conflictual worldview, while theology fosters a more harmonious vision.

Apart from Milbank, other, less radical scholars tried to rethink the proper role and status of the social sciences from the theological perspective (Gill 1975, 1978). Neil Ormerod (2005) argued, for example, that it is theologians' right and duty to draw social scientists' attention to two issues. First, that they are neglecting the key

problem of evil. Second, that social sciences do not offer a complete vision of social reality, whose indelible feature is divine grace. This last statement goes too far, forcing scholars to adopt methodological theism instead of methodological atheism. Ormerod's proposal will therefore not be met enthusiastically among sociologists. It could prove interesting to them, however, if we put it differently: theology can help social sciences in establishing the limits of their cognitive competence. It does not mean sociology should give up certain reductionism, but only that scholars need to realize sociological imagination is just one of many equally legitimate perspectives in interpretation of the social.

Milbank's main thesis could be redefined as a conflict of two perspectives, where one side—modern social sciences, strives for a nomothetic status and enjoys monopolistic position in interpreting social life, and the other is religion, understood as a pool of knowledge about individual and collective human life. The latter does not aspire to scientific status, but certainly does offer a comprehensive perspective for description and interpretation of social life. What is most troubling is the belief—born during Enlightenment and later reinforced by the positivist fascination with science—that human existence can be fully explained scientifically and other explanations are not necessary, to say the least. In this respect, the secularist paradigm remains virtually intact at the very foundations of social sciences. Ironically, however, recent postmodern turn in the social sciences may open up new perspectives for understanding.

Post-Secular Sociology?

Although secularism is deeply imbued within the very fabric of sociology, there were periods of relative rapprochement between the two disciplines. One attempt to bridge them was the so-called religious sociology (*sociologie religieuse*), or explicitly Christian or Catholic sociology. As John Brewer (2007) observed, scholars representing this tradition often found themselves in a very difficult position. On the one hand, they were outside of the mainstream sociological research, and on the other, they were rejected or treated with suspicion by church authorities, which viewed social sciences as inherently antireligious. This tradition finished more quickly in the United States: Christian sociology assimilated with the mainstream already in the 1950s. In Great Britain it survived until 1960s.

The next wave of mutual interest started in the 1970s, although this time these were predominantly theologians that drew from social sciences, especially in Biblical studies. Sociological categories were applied to the study of the Bible as a whole, as well as to analyze particular phenomena, such as various cultural practices, issues of family life, war and peace, or social characteristic of the early Christian communities. Sociologists, on the other hand, tried to identify social factors that contributed to the rapid growth of Christianity in the ancient world (Stark 1999).

The most recent renewal of interest is explained by the postmodern turn in both disciplines. Deconstruction of both Biblical hermeneutics and sociological theory seem to blur the boundaries between all disciplines. In the last decade a number of

leading sociological journals, mainly those focusing on social theory, published articles discussing relations between sociology and theology (see Beckford 2006; Brewer 2007; Harrington 2007, 2008; Flanagan and Jupp 1996, 2007; Fuller 1998; Keenan 2002, 2003; Lyon 2008; Martin 1997; McLennan 2007). Several books were also published on the topic. While it is difficult to determine, whether these publications indicate a broader reorientation within sociological theory, it is worth to have a closer look at their main premises. Here, I will treat William Keenan's article from *Theory, Culture & Society* (2003) as symptomatic of a larger trend.

Keenan (2003: 19) claims that 'sociological mentality and imagination are deeply imbued (if not synonymous) with secular humanism'. Meanwhile, all major world religions have a lot to say about the social life. Sociology, entrapped in 'a secular humanist conceptual net' (Keenan 2003: 33), loses the ability to grasp the depth of social phenomena. A 'theological ear' would be enormously helpful to sociologists (Keenan 2003: 20), and the rejection of limits set by the positivist ideal of science could restore 'the sacrality of the social bond' (Keenan 2003: 21). Author stresses the necessity of restoring the 'religious' dimension of theoretical conceptualizations of social life, while differentiating it from the purely confessional dimension, which is exclusive to a given religious community (Keenan 2003: 22). This reorientation could result in a socio-theological perspective, that is, a perspective open for the theological, sacramental, or eschatological dimension of culture and social life that Keenan calls 'theological sociology' and 'sociological theology' (2003: 33). In his view, this would mean reconstructing sociology on different premises, as a *post-secular sociology*.

To sum up, Keenan calls for (1) exposing the secular, ideologically founded premises of sociological theory and research; and (2) greater appreciation for the religious perspective in sociological research, while avoiding identification with a particular religious denomination. A close encounter with sociology could lead to the latter's transformation into a discipline conscious that the sacred dimension is irreducibly present in the human world, and not a transient and redundant variable, impossible to take seriously into account by researchers, a variable that can—and should—be dismissed in sociological research.

Scottish sociologist Gregor McLennan (2007) wrote about this proposition with suspicion. In his view, such post-secular sociology undermines the very project of social sciences as an attempt to obtain knowledge independent from individual (subjective, e.g. religious) beliefs of each scholar. McLennan un.masks such a proposal as postmodern deconstruction. In fact, Keenan's position is acceptable only when one agrees to the radical statement by Paul Tillich (which Keenan quotes in his paper): 'Everything secular is implicitly related to the holy. It can become the bearer of the holy. Nothing is essentially and inescapably secular. Everything secular is potentially sacred, open to consecration' (Tillich 1951: 218 quoted in Keenan 2003: 35). Sociologists will find it hard or even impossible to agree with such a radical pronouncement, since it abolishes what even the Second Vatican Council recognized as the 'proper autonomy of the secular' (*Gaudium et spes*). Another perspective for the coexistence of sociological and religious imagination was offered by two of the most prominent con-

temporary sociologists—Jürgen Habermas and Zygmunt Bauman. I will now analyze their views more closely.

Sociology and the Constructivist Turn

As Barbara Strassberg (2005; 2001) observed, diverse forms of knowledge—magic, religion, science, technology, and ethics—‘coexist at every stage of the evolution of societies and cultures and are interconnected and intertwined with each other’. At present, science and technology hold the dominant position, but their prevalence no longer goes unquestioned. In the second half of 20. century, the idea of science was gradually ‘disenchanted’ and deconstructed. Naturally, these developments had a number of sources. In social sciences, the main one was sociology of knowledge. Scholars like Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) understood that the objectivist model not only does not describe the social sciences, but it neither applies to natural sciences. The position of a disengaged observer is impossible to achieve even in a laboratory. Knowledge comes in different forms, and one must not apply validity standards of natural sciences to other types of knowledge. These scientific standards are ‘local’, too. All knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is constructed in social processes, rather than ‘discovered’. These new understandings brought the collapse of the positivist idea of science and led to the rethinking of the role of sociology, and its relation to other forms of knowledge. Recent works of Habermas and Bauman illustrate how this post-modern, constructivist turn may translate into a ‘postsecular turn’ (McLennan 2010).

While accepting the annual Peace Prize of the German book industry in 2001, Habermas (2003: 109), the ‘pope of secularism’, unexpectedly warned his audience against ‘an unfair exclusion of religion from the public sphere,’ or cutting off ‘secular society from important resources of meaning’, still to be found in religious communities. To the surprise of his audience he admitted that communicative reason alone was insufficient to provide social solidarity: religious reflection is equally necessary. It is true, he said: religion, needs to go through the same process of critical self-reflection, which the social sciences already went through. Science should maintain a healthy distance towards religion while remaining open to its perspective. In particular, religion remains an effective check against the excesses of the market expansion, especially in the area of bioengineering.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski, paraphrasing the aforementioned Weber’s self-identification as ‘religiously unmusical’, wrote in a commentary to Habermas’ speech that in his understanding of the religious sphere his musical ear seems to get better as he grows older: ‘Demonstrating that post-metaphysical thinking has to be radically limited, [Habermas] proved the necessity of religion, emerging—unexpectedly to himself and others—as the philosopher of a ‘post-secular society’ (2002: 12; cf. Habermas 2008).

In a 2002 essay Habermas (2002), in turn, stressed the key role of Christianity in sustaining the core values of the Western civilization:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective

life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk. (Habermas 2002: 148–149)

In 2004, finally, a famous encounter between himself and card. Joseph Ratzinger, later pope Benedict XVI, devoted to the ‘pre-political foundations of the democratic constitutional state’, took place. Interestingly, both agreed on most issues. Habermas claimed that secularized public space should open up for the religious voices, because religious communities have preserved ‘intact something which has elsewhere been lost’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2007: 43). Card. Ratzinger, on his part, admitted that the ‘divine light of reason’ has a major role to play in checking the pathologies of religion (2007: 77).

Interestingly, Austin Harrington (2007), analyzing Habermas’ turn criticizes him for insufficient openness towards the religious perspective. German philosopher, claims Harrington, still presumes that this perspective is generally unclear for a modern man and therefore needs translation into a secular language. To be sure, Habermas’ turn is not a radical conversion: he is mainly concerned with the ways the presence of religious perspective can contribute to the maintenance of the Enlightenment ideals in our contemporary postmodern conditions, and not with reframing the relationship between social sciences and other disciplines, such as theology. Nevertheless, this evolution can indicate a broader reorientation of social sciences and a new appreciation of the ‘sociological’ potential inherent in every major religious faith. Excluding this perspective would inevitably lead to the impoverishment of our perception of social reality.

Zygmunt Bauman (1988) observed that the dominant current in sociological theory is postmodernism, which, in his view, refuses to deal with social ‘problems’, rejecting all reformatory ambitions so characteristic of early sociologists. To avoid subordination by the state, always eager to use sociological tools and knowledge in managing society, postmodern sociology escapes into quasi-philosophical speculation. In fact, Bauman himself represents such an attitude. In his works he focuses on existential issues such as love, death, sense of life, intimate relations, and so forth. Postmodern sociology is characterized, then, by the blurring of lines between various disciplines, deliberate eclecticism of methods, terminology, areas of study, and theoretical positions. Sometimes, this eclecticism leads to a strange marriage between sociology and theology.

A recent article by Bauman (2009) entitled *Seeking in Modern Athens an Answer to the Ancient Jerusalem Question* illustrates this point well. The author compares Carl Schmitt’s decisionism with the concept of a sovereign God contained in the Book of Job. We need not focus here on the details of his argument—from our point of view, what is more important is Bauman’s dialogue between Biblical text and modern political thought. Borrowing from French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman grounds his sociology in sensitivity to Others, claiming that the postmodern

condition necessitates internally motivated moral individuals, rather than what he perceives as ‘rigid’ ethical codes, characteristic of modernity and seemingly unable to catch up with the changing circumstances. In claiming so, he systematically and deliberately neglects distinguishing his sociological statements from his value judgments. His sociology escapes the traditional empirical scrutiny and evolves into a set of arbitrarily chosen—albeit noble—normative statements and value judgments, an ‘implicit theology’ which one can profess, as you profess a religious creed (Flanagan 2010).

Social Sciences in Pursuit of Meaning

Bauman’s sociology undoubtedly offers a way to bridge the theological and the sociological imagination. His strategy, however, results in the blurring of the lines between the language and focus of both systems of knowledge. His recent work, especially, clearly demonstrates that his variety of sociology is not after statistical correlations or even Weberian *Verstehen*; it is an attempt to make sense of human individual and social existence. With this goal in mind, Bauman—and a host of others (see e.g. Postman 1985; Sennett 1977; 1998)—bring strong value commitments into their scholarship; they no longer claim to discover truths about our social lives, but rather offer interpretations which are difficult to validate through empirical research. These interpretations are, as philosopher Agata Bielik-Robson suggests, ‘crypto-theologies’ (2008), since any systematic intellectual effort will in a sense be inescapably religious, i.e. will constitute an attempt to impose meaning upon an otherwise chaotic reality, an attempt as arbitrary as that offered by any religion. ‘Religion’, she asserts, ‘understood traditionally, is a thought that ‘organizes’ a previously unorganized impulse of negativity, or spontaneous incompatibility of man and the world, thus deepening negativity and forging it into a new principle of existence’ (p. 8). According to Bielik-Robson, even most militantly secular philosophy at a certain point makes an arbitrary choice, which is subsequently faithfully observed and surrounded with a specific form of worship.

While this is also true of much of the social sciences, within philosophy there is today a more widespread awareness of those various crypto-theologies. Social scientists need yet to more fully appreciate what theologian Timothy Radcliffe put bluntly: that “sociological theories are not value-free. The explanations proposed always derive from and express some prior implicit or explicit interpretation of the meaning of man’s existence and destiny” (2004: 168). If we accept this conclusion, two consequences follow. First, it is a matter of intellectual honesty to clearly state those underlying meanings and assumptions (or ‘crypto-theologies’). Second, the question emerges how are the social scientific interpretations of meaning different from other interpretations offered by religions, philosophies, literature, the arts and so forth. It could well be that social scholars (and to an extent—their publics), by setting out to find meaning, tend to expect too much of the social science. Meaning has to be found somewhere, but they do not believe it can be found elsewhere, so social scientists enter the ‘meaning business’ themselves. However, their task may be self-defeating, as the meaning people yearn for can only be experienced as given:

No one can pull himself up out of the bog of uncertainty, of not being able to live, by his own exertions; nor can we pull ourselves up, as Descartes still thought he could, by a *cogito ergo sum*, by a series of intellectual deductions. Meaning that is self-made is in the last analysis no meaning. Meaning that is the ground on which our existence as a totality can stand and live, cannot be made but only received. (Ratzinger 2004: 73)

In the wake of the constructivist turn on social sciences, social scholars are now much more ready to openly admit they are guided by a moral philosophy, or that their work is interpretation. Sociology of knowledge, especially, revealed the socially constructed character of the sociological project and undermined its claim to scientific objectivism and neutrality. Yet much of sociological research is still done as if this turn never happened. What is problematic then is not the inherent qualities of the sociological imagination, but the extent to which it has permeated our contemporary societies. Western societies—with their technocratic policies, instrumentality in social relations, social authority of science and their tolerant ignorance of the metaphysical and the religious—have in a number of ways institutionalized this sociological imagination. If sociology wants to remain faithful to its original critical vocation, it is perhaps time that it seriously looks into various ‘crypto-theologies’ underlying much of sociological thinking.

Conclusion

In the market of interpretations, sociology has driven out theology, and more broadly, the religious worldview as a legitimate point of view in matters social. Increasing reflexivity of the social sciences, however, gradually led them to discover certain ideological premises deeply rooted in their foundations. Secularization theory is one of these premises. When critical ‘sociology of sociology’ laid bare these assumptions, a number of scholars set to rethink the relationship between the theological and the sociological imagination.

What could such a post-secular approach in sociology mean? Keenan (2002: 282) writes that liberation from the secularist straightjacket will bring about new research directions and insights. More and more scholars come to understand that sociology and theology (or, more broadly, religion) offer perspectives that differ significantly, but may meet in certain points. Nevertheless, I claim that the postmodern rapprochement between sociology and theology through the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, which Keenan seems to suggest and Bauman’s work to illustrate, is not a step in the right direction.

What I am not suggesting, either, is that sociology should give up certain reductionism, which is a necessary precondition of any methodological purity. Should sociology stop talking about anomy, dysfunction, deviation, social control, and replace these terms and concepts with original sin, sin, guilt, punishment, salvation, weakness of human nature? By no means. Sociology remains a legitimate way of perceiving (i.e. describing and interpreting) social reality, but it has to realize that it is a project rivaling—and to a degree based on—earlier, particularly religious, interpretations. What is needed is a more modest sociology, conscious of its ideological origins, ready

to recognize its limits, and—what is equally important—allow place for other perspectives in the analysis of social reality. Religion is just one of them, albeit perhaps the most important, but there are others: literature, philosophy, art—all these are ways to describe and interpret social life that have valuable insights to offer.

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