DISCIPLINARY CONFLICT IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION: ANTHROPOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, AND "LINES IN THE SAND"

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This article explores the differences between the anthropological and the sociological approaches to religion as they have developed in the last decades of the twentieth century. Both disciplines are divided between generalizing and particularizing schools—"ethnology" vs "ethnography" to use the anthropologists' preferred terms. Where once the disciplinary affiliation of particularizers / ethnographers determined the content of their studies—anthropologists studying "culture" and sociologists studying "structure"—this division no longer holds. It has been replaced by a division that is simultaneously ethical and epistemological: anthropological ethnography has become post-colonial, while sociological ethnography remains in a largely colonial mode. The article distinguishes these modes and traces their implicit epistemologies to different sets of regulative ideals. Recent anthropology's twin regulative ideals, "truth" and "equality", have led it away from the myth of the anonymous observer to a focus on intercultural dialogue.

Students of religion have often turned to social science for help in understanding religious life. Not uncritically, they have sought to apply anthropological and sociological insights to the religious sphere. These disciplines have discovered much about social life in general, and religion is, among other things, a social phenomenon, so the effort has been generally useful. Yet, as is the case with much cross-disciplinary dialogue, many key distinctions have been missed.

Most important among these are the differences between anthropology and sociology themselves. Although the two disciplines have separate intellectual traditions, they have long been confused in the public mind. Among other things, both study "society" and both use similar research methods. Each began in the late nineteenth century, as part of an optimistic European scientism that addressed key social issues. Sociology began as an attempt to understand the social impact of the Industrial Revolution. Anthropology took shape as an adjunct to European nationalism, for which its four constituent fields (linguistics, physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology) corresponded to the four pillars of the nationalist enterprise: lan-

guage, race, culture, and shared history (Borofsky 2000). Thus, at the beginning, sociologists studied the modern world and anthropologists studied "the primitive"; sociologists of religion studied church life while anthropologists of religion studied supposedly more "archaic" religious forms.

Yet, this distinction no longer holds. Anthropologists now study Protestant mega-churches (Coleman 2000), while sociologists study rituals at the Easlen Institute (Goldman 2000). Anthropologists now work in Brooklyn (Brown 1991), while sociologists work in rural Brazil (Adriance 1995). Their common institutional marriage in university sociology *and* anthropology departments easily leads outsiders to think that their distinctiveness is a thing of the past.

Yet, this would be a mistake, one that I seek to correct in the present article. Students of religion have recently begun to understand the importance of their own field's history, particularly the role of the Enlightenment and colonialism in constituting discourses about "religion" and "religious studies" (Preuss 1987; Chidester 1996). Those seeking to use anthropological and sociological insights into religion must similarly understand the changing constitution of the discourses in these fields. Despite popular perceptions, they differ considerably, and in crucial ways.

I write as a scholar trained in both sociology and anthropology, as a student of religions, and as the former head of one of those joint departments. From my vantage point, anthropology and sociology complement one another, but serve different purposes. In the pages that follow, I shall describe these purposes by means of three interlocking conceptual distinctions, each of which encapsulates an historical moment in these disciplines' development. The first two are known but oft forgotten. The third is new and responds to recent developments on the anthropological side of the ledger. There are, as always, other ways to cut the conceptual pie, but this tripartite division has the merit of illuminating each field's implicit ethical commitments. Students of religion, far more than social scientists, know how important such commitments can be.

1. *Three key distinctions*

1.1. *Generalizing vs particularizing inquiries*

Our first distinction applies to both anthropology and sociology, as well as to the other social sciences. It draws lines not between but within them, separating scholars according to the purposes toward which they devote their work. Some such division is standard among philosophers of social science, though the details fill too many books to cite here.[1] Each of its many names captures one of its aspects: generalizing vs particularizing, ethnological vs ethnographic, nomothetic vs ideographic, etic vs emic, comparative vs descriptive. Recognizing that these pairs are not identical, I shall take the "generalizing vs particularizing" pair as metonymic (though the "ethnological vs ethnographic" pair covers much the same territory). The first term implies a dual wish: to generalize beyond particular cases and to uncover law-like regularities in human behavior. The second implies a wish to understand social actors in a particular locale from the inside.

Generalizing inquiry seeks the rules of social life, the laws of social motion, to paraphrase Marx, by which we can better understand human life in general. Its prime question is "how?": How do religions form? How do they change over time? How do they attract members? How do they lose them? Such questions are best answered comparatively, so scholars using this approach look for the regularities that underlie disparate cases. Specific social locales are interesting only as examples of wider trends, not in themselves. Athens and Jerusalem may do things differently, but their particular ways of doing them are not very important. Generalizing social science believes that truth is found in patterns, not details.

The major theoretical fights in the sociology of religion are over these patterns. A recent example is the tiff between secularization theories and market theories of religious growth and decline (Young 1997; Bruce 1999; Stark and Finke 2000). Both sides seek to explain changes in religious influence, and they use law-like generalizations to do so. Though they disagree about almost everything else, they are doing the same kind of science. Anthropologists of religion brawl at

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[1] One could do worse than begin with Jürgen Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), which traces this sort of distinction through much of late nineteenth and early twentieth century social philosophy.

this level less often, largely because there are fewer generalizers among them today than there were in decades past. Stewart Guthrie's (1993) recent book in which he traces religion to systematic anthropomorphism is a welcome revival, despite its flaws.[2]

Particularizing scholars do not look for general social laws, but seek to understand specific communities of people. Their prime question is "what?": What motivates these people? What are they doing when they pray? What do they mean when they say they are serving "God" or "the gods"? Answers to such questions typically help us understand individuals or interacting communities rather than explaining institutional systems, whole societies, or humanity at large. They may have wider significance; indeed, many contemporary particularizers connect the patterns they find in their research site to wider social trends (e.g., Warner 1988; Davidman 1991). But they do not try to develop universal generalizations. Their conclusions apply to a specific time and place; they are set in history rather than transcending it. Particularizers do not tell us what people-in-general do, but tell us what people do in the specific community that they have observed. This is a different intellectual product—one which some generalizers have called "slow journalism", a term of abuse that contains just enough truth to make my distinction clear.

So, we have a two-by-two table to fill in:

	generalizing (ethnology)	particularizing (ethnography)
anthropology		
sociology		

Let us start with the "generalizing" column. The main difference between generalizing anthropologists and generalizing sociologists is the content of their generalizations. Take two influential books that apply social science to religion: Guthrie's (1993) *Faces in the Clouds* and

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[2] Generalizing studies were more common two and more generations ago (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1965; Turner 1969; La Barre 1970) but have lately fallen out of favor, largely as a result of the discipline's reaction to its former colonial involvement (see below).

Stark and Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion* (1985). Each presents a comprehensive theory of religion. Each attributes people's religiosity to extraneous factors: in the first case, a biological tendency to anthropomorphism; in the second, the ability of social organizations to offer both concrete and abstract rewards. Each explains religion non-religiously—in keeping with the scientific faith in naturalistic causes. Yet Guthrie's account is biological while Stark and Bainbridge's is social.

This stems from disciplinary history as much as from anything else. Anthropology has long seen itself as "the science of man", while sociology sees itself as "the science of society". Anthropology is open to the biological; indeed, its dominant "four-field" paradigm promotes physical anthropology alongside linguistics, and archaeology and the social/cultural anthropology that most of us know. Sociologists, on the other hand, usually follow Durkheim in ruling biology out of court. A *sui generis* social reality resists biological or psychological explanation.

Look, for example, at the ways in which the two disciplines treat religious experience. On the anthropological side, Felicitas Goodman posits a single "religious altered state of consciousness", which generates similar experiences in widely differing social contexts (1986, 1990). In a series of experiments, she had subjects from various cultural backgrounds crouch like a Nupe diviner or lie prone like the shaman figure in the Lascaux cave paintings. Each of these (and other) body postures produced its own distinct experience, she says. Nupe imitators, for example, saw blue or white lights, felt themselves spun around, and thought themselves all-knowing—matching Nupe reports of their trance states. Goodman thus infers that religious experience is biologically grounded.

Sociologists, on the other hand, typically focus on the social context. Mary Jo Neitz shows how the members of a Catholic charismatic prayer group were taught how to have the "appropriate" kind of religious experiences.[3] They learned to attribute some sensations, emotions, and thoughts to the Holy Spirit, while simultaneously learning that other, unauthorized experiences were irrelevant or were the product of evil forces. Neitz highlights the social processes

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[3] Though Neitz is actually a skilled particularist, her work on charismatics (1987) is the clearest recent example of the application of sociological generalizations to religious experience. See Spickard (1992).

through which such supposedly personal experiences are constructed. From her point of view, religious experiences are always filtered socially; a supporter of Goodman's views might respond that so much emphasis on the filter avoids dealing with experience at all.

This difference makes for great interdisciplinary conflicts, as anthropologists assail sociologists' social fundamentalism while sociologists decry anthropologists' naive epistemology. Yet, this feud is more a matter of lineage than of distinct kinds of science. All generalizers seek law-like regularities. Disciplinary histories, not philosophies, divide anthropological and sociological generalizers from one another.

Now let us turn to the other column, where perhaps more divides anthropological from sociological particularizers. Here, too, history once mattered: the disciplines used to specialize geographically, anthropologists studying other societies while sociologists studied our own. But location ceased to matter some time ago, and sociologists as well as anthropologists now claim to be doing "ethnography" (see Becker and Eiesland 1997). Yet differences remained, as our second conceptual distinction will make clear.

1.2. *Culture vs structure*

Though Talcott Parsons' grand synthesis of the social sciences has long since crumbled, its after-effects lived on until recently in a rough division of labor between anthropological and sociological ethnographers: the former studied "culture", the latter "structure". Parsons (1950) divided society into several "systems", of which each encouraged a different topic of investigation. The "cultural system" included people's mental worlds: their attitudes, values, philosophies, worldviews—in short everything that lived inside people's heads. Probing that system involved understanding people from the inside: how they saw, how they responded, what they meant by what they said. It involved getting inside their skin—as much as this is ever possible, given the limits of human subjectivity. Particularizing anthropologists have long tried to do so and have famously reflected on their trying, as a glance at the last two decades of anthropological writing shows (e.g., Geertz 1983; Marcus and Fischer 1986; R. Rosaldo 1989; Harris 1968).

The sociologists' "institutional system" lay alongside the anthropologists' "cultural system" in Parsons' schema, highlighting the various patterns found in people's everyday behavior. Where the idea of

"culture" stressed what people think, the ideas of "institution" and "structure" emphasized what people do. Institutions channel people's behavior into well-worn grooves, providing a veneer of inevitability that belies such behavior's adventitiousness. Particularizing sociologists study the institutional structures of the communities they visit and explore the ways that these structures influence people's lives.

One can see this difference by contrasting two excellent ethnographies: Michelle Rosaldo's *Knowledge and Passion* (1980) and R. Stephen Warner's *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (1988). Both paint rich pictures of the communities they study: Philippine headhunters and small-town Californians, respectively. Both show us how people make sense of their lives in a time of major social change. But their emphases are different. Rosaldo—the anthropologist—focuses on meaning systems: how the Ilongot see the world and why their actions make sense in light of their philosophy. She shows how their conversion from headhunting to fundamentalist Christianity involved no basic change of views (see also R. Rosaldo 1980, 1989). Warner, the sociologist, also shows us people's mental worlds, but he connects them to institutions, arguing that various kinds of institution channel different ways of seeing. Established churches, for example, tend to encourage (and attract) those seeking more religious authority, while more "nascent" religious forms tend to emphasize the free-flowing religious spirit. Warner does not argue that church structure determines theology; he sees both as independent variables on the American religious scene. Yet, the interplay between established and nascent structures is for him the neglected key to much recent religious history—and is thus a major focus of his book.

Of course, anthropologists do not just look at culture and sociologists do not just look at structure; skilled ethnographers usually consider both. But it is next to unthinkable for an anthropologist to neglect the way people see the world, just as it is unthinkable for a sociologist to neglect their institutions. In the same way that a Catholic cannot ignore the Vatican, no scholar can ignore the center of her or his discipline. One can sort ethnographies by what they cannot leave out more easily than by what they include.

We can now tentatively fill in the two-by-two table as follows:

	generalizing (ethnology)	particularizing (ethnography)
anthropology	laws of human life	specific cultures
sociology	laws of social life	specific institutional structures

At first blush, nothing could be clearer. Anthropologists concern themselves with the whole of human life, while sociologists focus on its social component. Anthropologists study people's cultures, while sociologists study the institutional structures that guide people's behavior. Cutting through these disciplines is a fundamental distinction between generalizers and particularizers. Generalizers from both disciplines seek universal laws, while particularizers report the lives of specific communities. Our first two concepts help us see the differences between the disciplines as well as within them.

Or do they? Though there are good philosophic reasons for keeping the vertical division, the horizontal one is less telling. We saw that only disciplinary history divides the generalizers from one another; the same is increasingly true of the particularizers as well. The Parsonian theoretical synthesis is gone and its institutional counterpart is fast fading. Though anthropological observers of Star Trek or rock music may still focus on cultural symbolism (Arens and Montague 1976) while sociological observers focus on fan groups, industry consolidation, and the like (Banks 1996), these divisions are by no means hard and fast. Prominent anthropologists are questioning the very concept of culture (Ulin 1984; Clifford 1988; R. Rosaldo 1989; Gupta and Ferguson 1997b), while "cultural sociologists"—sociologists of religion among them—are claiming a place at the center of their discipline (Bellah et al. 1985; Wuthnow 1987, 1991). The horizontal line in our table is increasingly like the proverbial line in the sand: a clearly drawn boundary made to challenge opponents, which vanishes in the next day's wind.

There is, however, still a third distinction to explore—one toward which much recent literature in anthropology and religious studies has pointed, though it has not appeared on most sociologists' radar

screens.[4] Explaining it requires a short review of the role that ethnography as a type of research has played in each of these two disciplines.

1.3. *Colonial and post-colonial sciences*

Although there have been traveler's accounts of far-off lands at least since Herodotus, ethnographic anthropology traces its institutional rise to the end of the nineteenth century. After decades of colonial expansion, imperial bureaucrats needed to understand the peoples they now ruled. The problem was one of control: Western armies had conquered the world but had not been able to pacify its populace. The British Foreign Office hoped to get natives to stop fighting and pay taxes. The American Bureau of Indian Affairs hoped to turn tribes into family farmers.[5] Doing so required understanding their folkways, which anthropologists were drafted to learn.

This is not the whole picture, but it is central. Anthropology was part of the process by which Western authorities created what Foucault (1980) called "power/knowledge"—the knowledge that helped Europeans dominate the rest of the world. Understanding native politics and motives made such domination easier. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1969 [1940]; 1956), on everyone's short list of great ethnographers, studied the Nuer in part to figure out how authority works in a society with no apparent political structure.[6] This helped Britain rule the south Sudan. On the other hand, nearly every introductory anthropology text excoriates Frank Cushing (1896, 1901, 1990) as an "ethnographer gone native", in part because he refused to report his full findings to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Both were excellent field workers, and both had the best interests of their informants at heart, as they understood them. One can make sense of their respective reputations only in the context of colonial rule.

True, not all anthropologists served their governments, and not all approved of the uses to which their work was put (Horowitz 1974). But as Edward Said (1978) has shown, the idea that Westerners had to record and catalog vanishing native customs was in itself imperial-

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[4] Feminists are a notable exception, for reasons I discuss below.

[5] The equivalent French and Russian bureaucrats also sponsored field anthropology, but I cannot consider their peculiar twists here.

[6] Geertz (1988) notes that he gained some of his knowledge while organizing Nuer raids against the Italians during World War II.

istic. It implied that only the West had "history" and "progress" while everyone else was stuck in "tradition". Only Westerners could understand the historical forces to which everyone was subject— which justified their position at the top of the global hierarchy. The West became the world's intellectual arbiter, meriting its "white man's burden". Anthropology was a key part of that imperial process.

Sociological ethnography, refined at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, on the other hand, grew out of a concern for social problems. Unlike colonial anthropology, it was not entangled in rule but in assimilation: How could the "socially disadvantaged" be integrated into middle-class American society? William F. Whyte's *Street-Corner Society* (1943) was an excellent example of such ethnography, sponsored by institutions that wished to help poor immigrants and that were guided by the sense that the first step in helping them was to know them. Later descriptions of poor Blacks, homeless families, and other social outsiders humanized such folk to mainstream readers and helped support social programs to improve their lot (Liebow 1967; Lewis 1966; Kozol 1988; Kotlowitz 1991). The discourse of such ethnographies—some sociological, some journalistic—contained the semi-conscious implication that given the right environment and support, the "disadvantaged" would become "just like us".

Fewer sociologists have portrayed the rich and well positioned, except in so far as they appear in cities and towns studied as wholes (e.g., Dollard 1937; Warner et al. 1963). Those that have—William Domhoff's (1974) depiction of San Francisco's Bohemian Club comes to mind—seem often driven by a wish to expose this group's excessive power or make us see the unusualness of their lives. Like the desire to aid the unfortunate, this too appeals to an American middle-class belief that everyone should be alike. But for the most part, sociological ethnographies have made the lives of the poor seem familiar more than they have made the lives of the rich seem strange.

In a sense, anthropological and sociological ethnographies are just two different ways of presenting "the Other". Anthropological "Others" have traditionally lived in far-off places and have appeared either as restless natives or as exotic relics that need preserving. So we control them or protect them, keeping them at arm's length because they are not "Us". Sociological "Others", on the contrary, are potential friends and neighbors. We get to know them in order to change them—to make them copies of ourselves. Is it too much to see a

connection between sociological ethnography and social work—both born at the University of Chicago? A little wealth and education, a better accent, a little soap behind the ears, perhaps a few more middle-class values; what sociological ethnography of poor folk does not recommend, at least implicitly, such cures for social ills?

And what anthropological ethnography would dare to do so? Every introductory textbook begins by denouncing ethnocentrism, and it is nothing if not ethnocentric to claim that others would be better off with our way of life.[7] True, few texts advocate letting people kill each other; that, after all, is the altruistic part of the colonial enterprise. But beyond ensuring a stable social order, anthropology often presumes that outside interference only brings loss. Here is a traditional difference between the fields, as remarkable as it is unremarked in the literature: the subconscious rhetoric of sociological ethnography helps others become like us, while the rhetoric of anthropological ethnography helps them to stay the way they are. Why else the latter's nostalgia for "the passing of the primitive" with its focus on dying customs that highlight the exotic?[8] The best anthropological field researchers are honest about their love of tradition while reporting their informants' changing lives (e.g., Read 1965; Spindler and Spindler 1971; M. Rosaldo 1980). The worst—those caricatured by literate natives (see Fire and Erdoes 1973; Deloria 1973)—simply refuse to see the real people before them.

Put perhaps too rudely, this is a choice between social uplift and intellectual zoology—not conscious, mind you, yet firmly imbedded in the disciplinary discourses. This is not a matter of individual ethics or the work of any individual ethnographer. The institutional connections between anthropology and the Colonial Office, on the one hand, and between sociology and the institutions that create public social policy, on the other, framed the discourse to which individual scholars conformed.

Over the last two decades, many social scientists have come to acknowledge these institutional forces, as well as the role of disciplinary discourse in intellectual life. Feminism and ethnic consciousness movements, anti-colonialism, the theoretical works of Foucault and Said—all these have had their influence, particularly in anthropol-

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[7] For an analysis of the role of textbooks in sedimenting scholarly disciplines, see Spickard (1994).

[8] Among numerous examples, see Lévi-Strauss (1955); Read (1965); Diamond (1974); Clastres (1998).

ogy. The past fifteen years have seen the growth of a new, reflexive anthropology, one that has rejected its colonialist, museum-oriented roots. Where there was once a single model of anthropological encounter—visit some exotic peoples, live with them for two years, record their lives, write up the results for the people at home—now there are many.

Rather than presenting "the facts", the new ethnography[9] speaks of "texts", "discourses", and "narratives". Rather than taking the role of omniscient narrator, it touts "reflexivity", "pluralism", "dialogue". It broods over the impossibility of its knowledge and the inadequacy of its key ideas. Though many sociological ethnographies retain the air of the settlement house, anthropologists now write experimental works in which the they appear as prominently—sometimes more prominently—than do the natives. The novel *Krippendorf's Tribe* (Parkin 1988), in which an anthropologist masquerades his teenage children as his research subjects, works in part because much current ethnography seems more about "Us" than about "Them".

Just what is going on here? Various authors have explored this change; many have grasped a part of it.[10] At times literary, at times philosophical, anthropology's recent reflexive turn is, I believe, at root political. Like many of their radical and counter-cultural 1960s age-mates, the new ethnographers "see poking into the lives of people who are not in a position to poke into yours as something of a colonial relic" (Geertz 1998: 72). Their crisis of conscience has spawned a crisis of both method and substance. Those rejecting anthropology's closet imperialism have had to figure out a new way to ply their trade. Fortunately, their reflections have profound implications for social science as a whole. To see how, let us take a close look at a particular case—one directly relevant to the anthropological study of religion.

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[9] For a range of examples, see Abu-Lughod (1988); Brady (1990); Clifford (1997); Crapanzano (1980); di Leonardo (1998); Dwyer (1982); Good (1996); Herzfeld (1998); Lavie (1990); Sarris (1993); Visweswaran (1994); Yu (1997). For a short but sympathetic critique, see Geertz (1998).

[10] See, among others, Clifford (1988); Fox (1991); Geertz (1998); Gupta and Ferguson (1997a); Marcus and Fischer (1986); R. Rosaldo (1989); Rose (1990).

2. *"They shall take up serpents"*

Both anthropologists and popular culture have long been fascinated with Appalachian snake-handling sects. Popular research on groups that use serpents, poison, and other risky goods in church often presents them as rustic psychopaths, as uneducated indigents, as relicts of pre-modernity (Holliday 1966; Pelton and Carden 1974). Despite its disciplinary strictures against ethnocentrism, anthropologists, too, have focused on serpent handlers' cognitive distance from "normal" citizens (La Barre 1970; Kane 1979), most notably by treating snakes as symbolic phalli.[11] Both have portrayed them as "Others", to be ridiculed, healed, or studied as one might study a mutation—for a sense of the limits of human life that have possibly been crossed. In any case, they are "not Us"—not just "not middle class" but "not sensible" bordering on the "not sane". Even sympathetic portrayals, such as the 1968 film Holy Ghost People, cannot make their strangeness familiar.

   In a recent reflective essay, Jim Birckhead (1997)[12] uses snake-handling to illustrate a key post-colonial dilemma: What do we encounter when we interact with the people whom we study? He begins by noting the vacuity of the traditional supposition that one's research subjects are "out there"—as people with a clearly identifiable culture, different from ours, that separates them from us and from others around them. The serpent handlers of his acquaintance are not so isolated. They are just like their neighbors: semi-rural, often poor, victims of an economy that has bled their region of capital and concentrated it in outsiders' hands. They drive pickup trucks, listen to country music, eat Southern foods, travel, and talk just like their neighbors. Yes, they take up serpents and drink poison in church, but not as regularly as popular images would have us believe. Many groups use serpents "as infrequently as once a month, once a year, or even once in five years (and then only by one or two preachers or elders)" (Birckhead 1997: 31). In fact, says Birckhead, "remove the serpents, poison, and fire, and serpent handling is indistinguishable

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[11] "'Hi, Brother Homer. How's your copperhead?' 'Just fine,' replied Homer, 'Do you want to take it out and play with it?'" (Kane 1979: 272)

[12] Though the following comments are based on Birckhead's essay, they extend a good deal beyond it. I have tried to make more explicit some of the implications that I see in his work, and I thus run the risk of making points with which he may disagree. Any flaws in the logic or presentation of what follows are mine, not his.

from the plethora of small, independent, Pentecostal and charismatic groups throughout the South, other parts of the United States, and around the world" (Birckhead 1997: 32).

Other Southerners—circus men, animal collectors, zoologists—handle snakes more often, yet they are not seen as "bizarre" or "degenerate". Why, then, do we let "snake-handling" define these people and why do we let it define them in such negative terms?

Birckhead suggests that snake-handling is perhaps more significant for mainstream culture than it is for its practitioners. It resonates with our "dark and abiding cultural obsessions with cults, inbred and degenerate hill people, fanaticism, danger, sex, and death" (Birckhead 1997: 33). It taps into non-Southerners images of Appalachian "otherness", in fact becoming an icon of that otherness in outsiders' minds (Birckhead 1997: 21). To let snake-handling define this religion is to separate oneself from its practitioners, to exoticize them and define them in outsiders' terms. It is to focus on our image of them rather than their image of themselves.

Yet, Birckhead notes that this is too simple. Not only do outsiders treat serpent handling as an icon; insiders do too. Like all humans who must construct a cultural identity—and that means everyone—people from these churches define themselves, at least in part, by the one practice that distinguishes them: their willingness to court death in pursuit of their faith. They construct an identity around snakes, strychnine, and other practices that put their lives on the line.

More complexly, part of this identity is performed. Serpent handlers do not work in private, nor are they and their fellow congregants the only ones to attend their church services. One also finds observers: curious tourists, reporters and camera crews, even the occasional anthropologist. All are drawn by the exotic, to which the participants play. These are not hidden observers, though they may portray themselves as such; like all observers, they influence the scenes they view. Those who take up serpents thus become actors in a dual sense: they take their lives in their hands in a way closed to ordinary people, and they do so before an audience that has come for a show. They thus collude in the identity that the world has given them: they become exotic as part of their process of cultural self-definition.[13]

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[13] "The media coverage, for example, is not an epiphenomenon in serpent handling communities but is integral to how people dialectically construct themselves within and against the reflections of popular commodified representation" (Birckhead 1997: 68).

Serpent handlers are, however, not the only ones constructing identities; so must the other participants in this cultural scene. Film crews, tabloid reporters, and tourists all define themselves by their pursuit of the unusual. The professionals stalk the strange, package it, and sell it—communicating a sense of mystery to the masses. Their stories about snake handlers and strychnine drinkers feed a hungry market, for which these reporters have become cultural midwives, serving and reproducing mainstream culture's "dark and abiding obsession" with the bizarre. The tourists consume such experiences, living their personal obsessions. For both, snake-handling sects are better than "show biz" because they are "real".

These players do not usually see themselves as creating the events they view, however. Instead, they are "witnesses", reporters", "transmitters", even "public educators". They "experience things firsthand" and "get the real view". Or they "bring things to people's attention" and "open up the world" for those at home. Any suggestion that they are just seeing a show challenges this identity and thus debases their experience. Hence they detest fakery and see virtue in its exposure. This sets up an interesting dynamic, in which the outsiders' identity as observers depends both on the performance-value of the events they witness and on those events' absolute veracity. The first encourages serpent handlers to play to their audience, courting death a bit more closely than they otherwise might. The second discounts such courting as worthless "show business". Reportage quickly becomes destructive voyeurism, forcing the natives to conform to outsiders' expectations and (mis)understandings. To the degree that the "natives" do so, they deny their own sense of identity—part of which, however, involves playing to their audience's expectations in the first place. For neither party is identity a given, nor is it a stable accomplishment.

Serpent handling is by no means the only activity fraught with such dissonance. The Pacific Cultural Center in Hawaii, for example, attracts many American and Japanese tourists who come to see Pacific Islanders perform their native dances, show their crafts, and display their "traditional" ways of life.[14] Many of the performers, however, are Mormon students at the nearby Hawaiian campus of Brigham Young University, who—though Islanders—often learned "their" crafts and dances only after coming to that White-run school.

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[14] I am indebted to Paul Spickard for these insights.

As Mormons, they had not participated in such things at home. Though students are proud of their skills and of the financial support that their performances give their school, their situation is inherently ambiguous. They support a White institution by presenting newly learned and popularized versions of their "traditional" culture to tourists, many of whom have distinctly racist attitudes about such "happy dancing natives". Which identity is really theirs?

3. *The anthropological self*

And what of anthropologists? Whence comes their identity in such situations? In the colonial era, anthropologists were much like the journalists and tourists of today, though with deeper intellectual pretensions. They were "Civilization's" eyes and ears. They came, they saw, they reported, arm in arm with the conquerors, whose deeds they may have deplored but whose underlying missions they bolstered. Despite their intentions, they fed the popular demand for the exotic, whether as noble savages or as heathen darkness (Douglas 1970). Apostles of the extraordinary, chroniclers of the remarkable, they told us about people in far-off places—and did so with purported scientific accuracy. Anthropologists saw themselves as "scientists of social life", whose reports alone were the only credible records of other peoples' ways.

Yet—and this is the import of post-colonial anthropology—ethnographers can no longer claim such an identity. Those who reject imperialism find that they must rethink their role and their relationship with "their" natives. No longer is anthropological investigation a matter of "Us" studying "Them"—and then passing on the results of our study to those in command. No longer can anthropologists pretend to be invisible recorders of an objective social world. Instead, they must discover who they are in the ethnographic encounter.

Birckhead notes that only fluid boundaries separate anthropologists from other players in the religious scenes that they investigate. In his own case, a reporter gave him his first entry into the field and he has often been pumped to return the favor. His "natives" (now his friends) sometimes expect that he will report on them journalistically—the only kind of reportage they understand. But he has qualms about telling tales that might bring them ridicule or harm. Outsiders, on the other hand, often think anthropologists *are* natives: research

on the socially marginal notoriously leads folks to suspect one's loyalty to the "normal" world (Wagner 1997: 94-96). This is especially true if the "natives" are not easily distinguishable from everyone else. Such apparent disloyalty can have consequences: snake-handling is illegal in West Virginia, and Birckhead could have been jailed for "encouraging" his informants' unlawful acts.

Formerly, anthropologists avoided such worries by representing the authorities. Having decided that this role made them glorified spies, many have given up that privilege. They may not have gone as far as to *become* natives, as did Frank Cushing, but their loyalties have changed. Anthropologists no longer automatically reject Cushing's path while affirming Evans-Pritchard's. They find their identity is not as easy to specify as the textbooks claim.

How does this affect the anthropological study of religion? In several ways. Old-style ethnographies were written in "the ethnographic present"—a tense which portrayed their subjects living changeless lives. This highlighted peoples' cultural rules at the expense of ignoring their histories. Take two examples, one recent, one classic. Pierre Clastres (1998) portrayed the Guayaki Indians as timeless forest-dwellers, ignoring the fact that they were refugees who had been displaced by the Paraguayan government two years before his visit (Geertz 1998). Margaret Mead (1953) recorded the cultural changes between her two visits to Manus Island without seeing how the islanders' experiences in World War II stimulated their latent political discontent and focused it into religious channels (Worsley 1968). In both cases, the presumption that non-Europeans lack history got in the way of a full understanding (Wolf 1982).

As Renato Rosaldo (1989) notes, this also changes anthropologists' approach to "culture"—the root idea that used to define their discipline. Few current ethnographers expect to find enduring traditions waiting to be recorded. Instead, they find people wresting with an adventitious present, who call on various traditions to aid their wrestling; such traditions are reshaped in the act of being used. Rather than static, enduring entities—the "superorganic" toward which Alfred Kroeber (1952) theorized—cultures are constantly being revised and recreated. Ethnographers have gradually learned to be true to their data, rather than reifying it into something supposedly eternal.

Most importantly, anthropologists now focus more closely on their encounters. Rather than ethnography being a matter of a superior "observer" watching a subordinate "observed", it is now clearly a

meeting that expands both sides. To use a distinction that Birckhead borrows from Wilma Dykeman, ethnography is not a matter of "looking at" others but of "allowing us to live with" them (1997: 24). For what happens when we truly encounter another way of life? As novelists and travelers have long claimed (and as many anthropologists have admitted in their private moments) an encounter with others always changes us. We compare our way of seeing with theirs, as they compare theirs with ours; the normal human result of such conversations is that both sides grow.

As we watch our informants impose meanings on their experiences, we come to see how we do the same. As we see them work to justify their worldviews, we realize that we, too, work to justify ours. Our encounters show us that neither they nor we are privileged, for our own ideas are as poorly or as strongly grounded as theirs.[15] For all our pretensions to science, nothing much separates us from those we study. This point of view places particularizing anthropology squarely among the humanities—as a path of knowledge that seeks to understand people rather than to explain them (Dilthey 1988).

4. *Science, truth, and regulative ideals*

We are but one step away from usefully distinguishing sociological from anthropological approaches to religion in a post-colonial age. First, we must consider the changed status of anthropology as a science. The discipline has long seen itself as scientific, yet one of science's chief *raisons d'être* is that it is more objective than the humanities. Can anthropology sustain this claim any longer—especially after so many ethnographers have put objectivity in question?[16]

Yet, post-colonial anthropological ethnography is not *just* a humanity, and it is certainly not mere self-absorption. For it enters its encounters with some useful baggage—some ideas that, while no more certain than anyone else's, help shape its meetings with its

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[15] Mary Douglas (1975: xi-xviii) provides a particularly powerful critique of the notion that modern Western ideas are better grounded than others.

[16] James Clifford (1997) remarks that contemporary ethnography must opt for "deep hanging-out" and "lucid uncertainty" over any pretense of really knowing the people that it supposedly studies. Clifford Geertz (1998) provides a trenchant critique of this view—ironically, for Geertz himself (1977) long ago questioned ethnography's ability to understand other people.

informants. These ideas are what Kant called "regulative ideals": concepts that, though epistemologically insecure, make other activities possible. Kant argued that the idea of "God" so regulates morality: one cannot demonstrate God's existence, but some faith in a supreme power is needed for a moral life. In Kant's vision, all practical thought requires regulation, much as a motor needs a governor to do useful work. Though one cannot deduce the aptness of a regulator *a priori*, one can know that aptness by the results obtained.

Two such ideals stand out in current anthropological practice: the ideals of "truth" and of "equality". There may be others, but these are all that I have space to describe here. The first is shared by many scientific disciplines and, indeed, makes them possible. It distinguishes anthropological ethnography from the "slow journalism" for which might be mistaken. The second, however, is not so widely shared and sets current ethnography apart both from old-style anthropology and from most current sociological work.

First, "truth". What does it mean to say that "truth" regulates intellectual inquiry? Notoriously, it does *not* mean that the results of a given inquiry are true in any final sense or that the truth of an inquiry's results justifies its methods. In order to make either of these claims, we would need some independent means of assessing truth, which we—as humans—do not have. We are simply not omniscient, so our knowledge is insecure.

Yet, this is not really a problem. Since Peirce (1955), most philosophers have been clear that truth is available only eschatologically. That is, truth is unobtainable by mere mortals, who can at best work towards it. A scientific community accumulates wisdom by collecting the experiences of its members, thus moving toward an account of the-way-things-are. But it can never claim to have arrived at such an account, because such a claim would require exactly the omniscience we lack. Unlike communities that anchor truth in the past or in some *a priori* revelation, the scientific community corrects its mistakes by systematically revising its beliefs in the light of experience—a process that in the mortal world never ends.

Just as in the calculus one can speak of a curve approaching a limit, so in science one can speak of the limit of a line of inquiry. For Peirce, "Truth is that concordance of abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief" (quoted in Feibelman 1969: 212). We can never reach that limit—at least we can never know that we have done so—

but its existence as a goal guides our efforts to achieve it. Trying, directing our work as if truth were within reach, moves the scientific community forward.

"Truth" stands here as a regulative ideal, unattainable but necessary. It is a statement of faith that—eschatologically, through rigorous analysis, doubt, and careful listening to experience—humans will be able to understand the world. Without some such belief, inquiry would proceed aimlessly and without rudder. With it, the scientific community has steerage. Not that it can ever prove its theories right: Peirce and Popper (1932) agree on the epistemological impossibility of that! But it can at least prove some theories wrong by their failure to match experience. That constitutes scientific progress.

It is not hard to fit post-colonial anthropological ethnography to this picture. Its practitioners do not merely think that colonial anthropology is outmoded, but that it is wrong. Societies are not timeless, so ignoring their history distorts them fundamentally. Culture does not consist of a set of impersonal rules directing human action; instead it consists of resources for action, subject to human choice and will. Colonial power relations are not external to so-called primitive societies; they construct those societies and so must be central to ethnography rather than peripheral to it. These and other issues separate post-colonial ethnographers from their predecessors, and lead the former to claim to portray more truly the people about whom they write.[17] "Truth" here continues to regulate inquiry.

Were it to cease doing so—were "beauty", "the market", or "careerism" (to mention just three alternate ideals) to replace "truth" as the ideal guiding the anthropological community—then anthropology would cease being a science. Though individual anthropologists may have chosen such ideals, the community of anthropologists has not done so. Anthropological ethnography's standing as a science is thus secure.

Let us turn to the second regulative ideal, "equality". Like "truth", this is a somewhat arbitrary value. It is, in itself, no "better" than positing "social efficiency" as an ideal. (Following Kant, all ideals are arbitrary; none are universally compelling—at least we cannot *know* that they are universally compelling, which amounts to the same thing.) Nonetheless, ideals have consequences for action. Like

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[17] See R. Rosaldo (1989); Douglas (1979); Wolf (1982).

"truth", a belief in "equality" changes scholarship. What happens when ethnographers assume equality with their informants?

To begin, such ethnographers can no longer take the role of educated outsiders, come to help natives sort out their conceptual affairs. No more can they speak with the imperial voice: "You think you are testing your faith with snakes, but actually you are displaying your manhood"; "You think you are honoring your ancestors, but actually you are reaffirming your kin ties". These statements may work for certain disciplines, but not for those that embrace "equality" as an ideal. Post-colonial ethnography bans the missionary position and its presumption of native ignorance. More precisely, equality demands that native interpretations of *our* beliefs be given as much weight as our interpretations of theirs.

This changes ethnographic practice. If we are no longer imposing interpretations, but trading them, we begin to converse with our informants. In fact, ethnographers have always done so, but they have traditionally seen these conversations as means to an end. Presuming equality means that we can no longer present just our side of the conversation; we must present both. Our dialogues become the topic of ethnography, not its means, and ethnography becomes personal: a matter of cross-cultural encounter rather than a one-way view.

In consequence, ethnographic reports have changed. Their old rhetorical form—"here are the people and this is their way of life"—hid both the natives' and the ethnographer's subjectivity, and so that form has shifted. Post-colonial ethnographic writing has become personal, not because it has ceased trying to understand others but because ethnographers have discovered that only personal writing can fully portray such encounters.[18] What appears to be a retreat from science is actually a sign of increased commitment to it. Post-colonial ethnographers are no longer satisfied with their predecessors' shortcuts. They seek a truer picture of their informants' lives.

Granted that such ethnographers value equality and that this has changed the way they practice their craft. What makes "equality" a regulative ideal? Simply two facts. First, equality is not demonstrable. One cannot prove that people are equal any more than one can prove the existence of God. Second, treating people as if they were one's equals lets one portray them more truthfully than would other-

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[18] See the references in n. 10 above.

wise be the case. Holding this ideal thus helps ethnographers do better scientific work.

I shall not say much about the first point, other than to note that any such proof would depend for its legitimacy on a universal standard of measurement. As no such standard is itself demonstrable, equality can at best be valued, not proved. The second point is a matter of some controversy, however, and requires attention.

The issue, at bottom, is the fear of bias. Anthropologists have long discouraged "going native", not just because doing so betrayed the discipline's imperial support (as I implied above) but also because they believed that only outsiders had the perspective to see things clearly. One should learn the natives' worldview, but not accept its values if one wants to get things right. Similarly, anthropologists (and others) sought to bar extraneous values from their investigations, believing that only "value-freedom" guarantees truth. (The old *MAD Magazine* cartoon in which the Marxist surgeon decides to "liberate" an infected appendix from its "oppression" by the intestine—by removing the intestine(!)—illustrates the supposed dangers that value-laden science poses.)

Yet, the alternative to the long view is not the close view, and the alternative to "value-freedom" is not bias. Midway between long and close views is the dialogue—the core of the post-colonial encounter. That dialogue depends on values, among them a commitment to equality with former colonial subjects. Dialogue is hard enough anyway; if one does not enter it with the right attitude, it will not take place. Even to have a dialogue, one must be willing to encounter the other, to listen and be listened to. One must bring oneself to that dialogue, values and all—for that is what one is asking of the other. Above all, one must be willing to change: one's values, one's mind, one's life.

Not every discipline needs this engagement. Generalizing anthropology does not, because it does not treat individual lives. It is thus comfortably regulated by "truth" but not by "equality", at no loss. But particularizing anthropology—ethnography—needs this engagement because its prime task involves those lives' representation. Dialogue makes such representation possible; it, in turn, depends on "equality" as a regulative ideal. Post-colonial ethnography claims that its colonial predecessors inability to embrace equality closed them to real dialogue; thus they missed much of what they could have learned.

5. *Framing the social-scientific study of religion*

At last, we have the tools to distinguish anthropological from socio-
logical ethnography. Post-colonial particularizing anthropology has
embraced equality, while much particularizing sociology has not.
Anthropological ethnographers once wrote as if they served the Em-
pire, but many do so no longer. Sociological ethnographers, for the
most part, still participate in a discourse that honors the middle class.

Here, then, is our table, suitably altered for the end of the millen-
nium. The horizontal line distinguishes between our two disciplines;
the vertical line distinguishes between each discipline's generalizing
and particularizing tendencies:

	generalizing (ethnology)	**particularizing (ethnography)**	
anthropology	laws of human life	mainly "culture"; now also "structure"	post-colonial commitment to "truth and "equality"
sociology	laws of social life	formerly "structure", now also "culture"	commitment to "truth"

Like all lines in the sand, these are not timeless—though, as I noted
above, the vertical line is more philosophical than historical and thus
likely to last. If sociological ethnographers ever join anthropologists
in their commitment to equality as a regulative ideal, the cells on the
right will merge. Until then, or until the next historical change, their
differences will endure.

What impact does this have on the study of religion? Most impor-
tantly, it makes clear some of the choices that scholars must make, if
they wish to use social science in their work.

First: one can generalize or one can particularize: one can seek the
general laws that explain religious phenomena, or one can seek to
understand religious people in a particular time and place. These are
separate activities, arising out of separate human interests (Habermas
1968). Particularizing social science does not just collect data for later
generalizations; it is an independent activity, seeking its own ends.

From the post-colonial vantage point, there is something inherently oppressive about the generalizing project. Attempts like Guthrie's (1993) and Stark's (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) to explain religion implicitly grant precedence to scholarly over native interpretations. Are religions "really" about anthropomorphism or "compensators"? Or are they about the gods that people think they are worshiping? Despite overt denials (Stark 1999) generalizing social science produces a clash of worldviews that implicitly belittles religious understandings. And because it does not recognize these understandings' epistemological equality, it furthers the colonial project.

Post-colonialism's recognition of its own particularity prevents it from suppressing this the colonial voice, but it can point out the domination inherent in the generalizing view. It argues that generalizing social science produces its own self-fulfilling world view, which has no better epistemological claim on our allegiance than do the religions that it supposedly explains.

Second, one can choose between anthropological and sociological approaches to religion—or at least between the value stances that these disciplines presently espouse.[19] On the generalizing side, this amounts to choosing which explanatory factors one will consider. On the particularizing side, this is no longer a choice of research locations or methods, but of the values that regulate one's inquiry. Largely, anthropological ethnography has embraced the post-colonial option for equality with those it studies; sociological ethnography does not (yet) use equality for a regulative ideal.

In the religious sphere, the quest for equality turns social science into something like an ecumenical dialogue. Post-colonial ethnographers no longer just portray others' religious lives, though they still do that. They further portray their conversations with them, which become locations for what amounts to theological encounter. As with ecumenism, such encounter changes both sides. Post-colonial ethnographers place themselves in the scene, showing how they and the natives have changed each other. This may amount to a reaffirmation of each side's original stance, to mutual conversion, or to partial conversion in either direction. Rather than being hidden, however,

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[19] I recognize that some sociologists embrace post-colonialism. Yet, far fewer sociologists than anthropologists have thought through the epistemological ramifications of this position, and far fewer manifest it in their work.

such inner changes become a main topic of ethnographers' accounts.[20] The result is more truthful as well as more illuminating.

My choice, obviously, is for the post-colonial: with Birckhead (1997), I study religions not so much to look at others, but to live with them.

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[20] One can only imagine what Black Elk's *The Sacred Pipe* (1953) would have looked like, had its ethnographer recognized the impact of his years of conversations with Catholic anthropologists (Deloria 1973; Holler 1995). Similarly, one suspects that E. E. Evans-Pritchard's religious conversion had something to do with his research on Nuer religion (1956), but the dominant colonial paradigm kept him from telling us. See Geertz (1988); Douglas (1980).

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