Sociology for People of Faith . . . and Anyone

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Beginnings

I came to sociology out of a commitment to help solve the problems in the world I saw around me, from my vantage point in the Northeastern United States. It was the 1960s and the civil rights movement, often encountering violent pushback in parts of the country, was morphing into the more radical black power movement. Our nation's first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, a symbol of change, was shot dead during a public parade in Dallas, Texas, a sign of the divisive climate of the times. And the Vietnam War was becoming a tragic conflict stirring domestic divisions that would inflame the nation.

Entering Harvard College on scholarship in 1964, I decided to major in Government, an area of study I thought might help prepare me to make a difference in the world. My commitments, looking back on it, were carried by an ethic of love and service to others rooted in faith in God, and God's love in Christ, instilled in me by my parents. My father was a Methodist minister, loved into the faith, he would say, by his Sunday school teachers in the Pennsylvania railroad town where he grew and met my mother, his lifelong partner in ministry. My own faith as a praying youth was nurtured both in our household and in the various loving congregations my parents served throughout my childhood and youth.

How amazing it was, then, looking back on it, that soon into my first year or two at Harvard I found myself an atheist, if I thought about it at all. And what is so remarkable about this profound transformation in my outlook is how seamlessly and unnoticeably it took place, without any soul-searching or intellectual battles. I just slipped into believing that God didn't exist, but, instead, was simply a creation of human imagination. How such a profound transformation could take place without notice, I came to realize, cries out for explanation which I hope to shed some light on through some sociological reflections below.

Sociology, or knowledge of the “social”—that is, human beings’ relations with one another—overlaps with other social science disciplines, like political science, social psychology, economics and social anthropology. They all, in different ways, and with different focii, study social relationships among human beings—how they work, their structures, effects, etc. Yet despite their substantial overlaps, these disciplines can exist on college campuses as tightly bordered communities of academics who pay little attention to one another. In addition, all these social science disciplines, including sociology, have been wracked historically by at times bitterly contested internal divisions based on differences in outlook, method and ideology. One prominent division in contemporary sociology, for example, is that between the growing number of those who favor quantitative research methods, using standardized questionnaires, on the one hand, and those preferring participant-observation ethnographic research, or historical research, on the other, differences we will touch on below. How such boundaries and divisions affect academic life and learning varies across institutions at different points of time.

Academic Journey

In my own journey, I initially became interested in Karl Marx’s emphasis on class and class conflict in political life and the importance of the ways in which an economic surplus is appropriated from workers by a ruling class, whether it be capitalists from wage workers, aristocrats from peasants, chiefs from tribes people, or party chiefs from citizens.[1] This approach to understanding politics was embodied in exemplary ways by my great teacher at Harvard, Barrington Moore, Jr. His magnum opus, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, sought to understand, through comparative historical analysis of class relations, why democracy emerged in some nations--like England, France, the United States and India --and why dictatorship in others—like Russia, Germany, Japan and China. [2]

The Vietnam War itself gave direction to my studies, as it clearly demonstrated that we Americans did not adequately understand the social bases of politics in what we then called the “underdeveloped” or “developing world.” (Our extended military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan show we still have not come far enough in that area.) I turned, then, to better understanding the “developing world” and ended up applying Moore’s methods to understanding different paths of political development in the then new nations of postcolonial

Africa. I chose Africa because I had ended up in London, studying as an occasional student at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and wanted to spend time that year seeing and experiencing life on the ground in some part of the developing world. I thought Africa would be the easiest part to travel to from London, mainly overland, hitchhiking and taking local buses. Looking back, it is amazing to see how life-changing such a seemingly arbitrary decision can be, forming us and taking us in directions we never could have imagined.

After spending a half-year traveling through East Africa to stay in Zambia, the country I had chosen to focus on, I returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and began doctoral studies in the Sociology Department at Brandeis University. After coursework I would return to Zambia for a year of dissertation research, where I learned more important sociological lessons by living there than I did in my archival research. Among other things, my time in Africa transformed my relationship with African-American life, showing me some of its distinct and valuable cultural roots. And, in hindsight, it opened up my eyes to the realities of kinship and family networks that helped me see such realities around me in the United States colleagues often could not, realities I came to see were at the root of the "culture wars" paralyzing American politics. They were also a source, I would see, of conflicts over issues like homosexuality in the world church.

I chose Brandeis' Sociology Department partly because of the freedom it afforded its graduate students, allowing me to get credit for ongoing studies with Barrington Moore at Harvard, for example, and because one of Moore's prime graduate students, a tutor of mine at Harvard, George Ross, had joined the faculty there. There I met some great fellow travellers, so important in one's education, including Karen Fields, a brilliant student of religion who would retranslate and reinterpret Emile Durkheim's classic, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Nancy Jay, also a student of religion, as well as feminist and Christian, and Fatima Mernissi, a pioneering feminist thinker and activist in the Arab world.

Some of us came together under the tutelage of a brilliant and profound social thinker relatively new to the faculty at the time, Egon Bittner, who taught us new and fruitful ways to understand culture and society. Egon, as we came to call him, was born into a Jewish family in Czechoslovakia in 1921. As a teenager during the holocaust he lost his entire family and suffered brutal imprisonment in Auschwitz. After the war he made his way to the United States, finding work with the telephone company before resuming studies at UCLA. There he

became part of an innovative movement in sociology called "ethnomethodology," guided by the school of philosophical thought called phenomenology.[3]

"What is a phenomenon?" I still remember Egon asking us one day in class, in order to help us understand *phenomenology*, or the knowledge of phenomena. "A phenomenon," he went on to explain simply, is "an event in the consciousness." And, since certain routine events in the consciousness, we came to understand, are shaped by assumptions we humans carry and share with those we live and interact with--our family, neighbors, our society—phenomena are a place to witness and explore the workings of "culture." And it is the taken-for-grantedness of social norms and values we assume others hold as they assume it of us, that give culture its greatest power. This is evident in the fact that often it is only when we leave our familiar world of shared assumptions, to a different country, for example, or even to a different neighborhood or family from a different ethnic background, that we notice and discover that we, indeed, have something called "culture." Though we hadn't been aware of it, it was something shaping our very being, our routine interactions with all those around us, our very identity.

Deeper Understandings of Society and Culture

Egon Bittner's teachings brought me to a deeper understanding of the nature of culture, its concrete pervasiveness, yet invisibility at times, and the ways it is present and rooted in our everyday lives. Other conceptions of culture prevalent in sociology at the time, like that of Talcott Parsons, then at Harvard, characterized it as a set of abstract social norms (or social rules) shaped by common values, all of which seemed to have a life of their own, functioning systematically together. They were often seen as things unto themselves. They were reified, made "things," rather than seen as an integral part of the agency of ordinary people in their daily lives, where culture is continually reproduced, and, in the process, continually changed in both conscious and, more often, unconscious ways. And in Parsons' more abstract conception, the depth of culture's taken-for-grantedness and its concrete presence seem to have faded away.

The deeper understandings of culture Bittner's teachings revealed also helped clarify critical differences between the natural and social sciences, particularly the inherent limits on objectivity in the latter, a point made by Max Weber, a classical founder of modern sociology, in his concept of *Verstehen*, or understanding.[4] For example, to see a young woman seated in

a group listening to a speaker suddenly raise her arm might well prompt us to think that she wants to ask a question—that that is her intention and the meaning of her action. But, if the speaker has just asked the audience about their loyalty to the Nazi party, the young woman's raised arm might take on an altogether different meaning, as a pledge to that cause. On the other hand, in a village meeting in a tribal society, the young woman's raised arm in the midst of a speech by a chief might be unthinkable as a request to ask a question, given the social norms of gender, eldership and respect in such contexts. It might, then, be more accurately seen as an expression of hearty agreement or praise. And in a Pentecostal church her raised arm might well be seen, instead, as an enthusiastic response to the Holy Spirit.

The point here is that for any observer, or social scientist, to correctly identify simply that action of a raised arm, or any action, for what it really or "objectively" is, he or she must understand what raising an arm in any of these contexts might mean and actually does mean to the young woman herself and those around her. They must build on—that is, partake of—the meanings of the young woman and those around her—their individual and collective assumptions and subjectivities—in order to see, or understand, the action for what it really is. That is, as Max Weber put it, all knowledge of social reality is inescapably subjective, and value-related, because it is based on the observer's understanding of the meant sense, the intention, of the actor, and, therefore, part and parcel of his or her culture. "The thought objects constructed by the social scientist in order to grasp this social reality," wrote the Austrian phenomenologist and follower of Weber, Alfred Schutz, whose work Bittner drew on and taught us, "have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [yes, "men" he writes in 1953], living their daily life within their social world." [5]

After reading and hearing lectures from many theorists in sociology referring to Max Weber's concept of *Verstehen* as central to their discipline, I had never heard any of them show an understanding of it in these deeper terms I learned from Egon Bittner and Alfred Schutz. To my mind, this is an example of how many practitioners of the discipline operate at superficial levels of understanding, not only of the classic thinkers they tout, but also the concrete realities they deal with in their research and teaching.

The Example of Police Work

Such a deeper understanding of culture embedded in the day-to-day actions of people turns out to be helpful in gaining fresh and important insights into often quite challenging, practical problems in any age. Take police work, for example, and police-community relations, currently a focus of critical concern in American life, and an area of empirical study that Bittner turned to early in his career. Egon undoubtedly read what had been written about police work, but he didn't proceed with a set of standardized questions to field quantifiable answers. Instead, he went out into the field with police officers quietly observing the *phenomena* of their daily work.[6]

As he watched what they did he realized that the collective taken-for-granted assumptions defining the nature of their work did not correspond to how it was generally described at the time as "law enforcement." For example, when someone turns a lost child in to the custody of a police officer in a public park and the child simply wants to run off, or, instead, a man, unknown to the child, comes up to the officer and says *he'll* take the child to look for the parents, what law is the officer enforcing when he forbids either action and uses force if they don't comply? Similarly, when an officer is called to a home where a domestic dispute threatens violence—involving, say, a mother, grown son, grandmother and stepfather—and the officer tells the son to sit there and the stepfather to sit over there, what law is she enforcing? And what do all those present expect she and her partner might do if they don't comply?

What defines the role of police, Bittner realized, was not law-enforcement but, instead, the assumption that they are authorized to use force in "situationally justified" ways. But, that work is done best when force is not used and remains in the background, for example in the domestic dispute above. There the police officer might want to take one of the disputants aside, out onto the porch, for example, to help cool the situation down, part of his or her peace-keeping work. But which one? What is the nature of the dispute and the relations of those involved, say, in a fiery Italian-American family, for instance, versus a stolid WASP one, or in an African-American one where the grandmother is head of household? Here one realizes that effective police work requires less knowledge of any laws to enforce than, say, local customs and, in this case, family culture, the collective taken-for-granted assumptions of those present. And, even as officers seek to determine the relationships of those present by questioning them, it makes a difference whom they question and how, with what forms of etiquette, in order to persuade them to obey rather than resist their commands. And it is here that the importance of the practical knowledge of local customs and culture, and residents'

trust in an officer's recognition of them, comes into focus as a key element in effective police work.

It is telling that in his fieldwork Egon observed that police officers were reluctant to go out on patrol with fellow officers whose repeated missteps were known to raise rather than calm tensions in the myriad situations of potential violence they encountered day-to-day. And, regardless of what these specific officers do, it makes a difference how those present in this trying situation see the police, what they assume about them in their community. In the context of present-day discussions of troubled relationships between police and communities of color, one can see how Bittner's insights might be helpful in thinking through how best to address problems involved.[7]

"Family-Value" Conflicts in American Life

In my own work, this deeper understanding of the nature of culture came into play when I realized that a classic anthropological study of family and marriage I was teaching in urban sociology, *Family and Social Network* by Elizabeth Bott, held perspectives that helped answer a longstanding question that plagued us sixties radicals: why are we white and middle-class?[8] Why, for example, did our sixties feminism, focusing on transforming gender relations in family and personal life rather than issues like "equal pay for equal work," arise among white professionals like us and have little appeal to working-class women or women of color?

In an African-American or white working-class or small-business family living within a close-knit network of extended-family ties, for instance, women as housewives and mothers are more apt to rely on women relatives for help or counsel rather than their husbands, who might spend their weekends out fishing with their cousins, or "the guys." These women would not see a need to join a "consciousness-raising" or "support group," the organizational bedrock of sixties feminism designed to relieve the social isolation the role of housewife/mother could create. Furthermore, their bonds of cooperation as women kin, a source of their collective power, were grounded in traditional definitions of gender rather than in the feminist call to overturn them.[9]

As I shifted my doctoral dissertation research from Zambian and African politics to this subject in American politics, I soon realized that understanding why sixties feminism didn't appeal to some women was just a step removed from understanding why some women would militantly defend tradition in the family like those forming the popular base of socially

conservative movements then fueling the growth of the New Right. I got a postdoctoral fellowship from a new women's studies center at Brown University to do ethnographic participant-observation research among New Right groups near my home in Northampton, Massachusetts, where I had come to teach sociology at Smith College. They included right-to-lifers, parents campaigning against sex education in a rustbelt mill town, conservative Catholics running a home school, and, eventually, a Jerry Falwell-inspired fundamentalist Baptist church in Worcester, Massachusetts, founded by a pastor who was then vice president of the Massachusetts chapter of Falwell's Moral Majority, the leading, most hard-line New Right organization at the time. [10]

The fact that the New Right activists I met were from diverse religious backgrounds—Catholic, Jewish, as well as Protestant—and in each tradition one could find their liberal opponents, suggested that something besides religion was at work in shaping their conservatism. All the social conservatives I met in the course of my research were formed, and most still lived within, a context of strong extended-family ties. The founding pastor of Shawmut River Baptist Church, for example, Frank Valenti, was from a family of Italian immigrants who ran a construction business involving various family members. The church grew largely through recruiting members through extended-family ties. The largest family in the congregation, the Strongs, also with a successful construction business, brought fourteen adults into the church, quite like Falwell's own congregation in its early days, as Falwell recalls, that when "Pop" and Bertha Johnson's family arrived, adding to his own, "we had a fairly good-sized congregation."[11]

This pattern of maintaining close family ties across generations was so taken-for-granted among church members, that, even though I had told Pastor Valenti on several occasions that my parents lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, while I lived an hour's drive from him in Northampton, Massachusetts, he once turned to me and asked in puzzlement: "Where do you live out there in Northampton anyway? You're still at home, aren't you?" meaning, since I wasn't yet married, with my parents. All the single men in church, I noticed, even into their thirties, if not married, still lived "at home." How different from the culture of white professionals like me where you are prepared to leave home for independent living in college and beyond, wherever professional job opportunities might take you.

Sociological Practice in Documentary Filmmaking

As soon as I walked through the doors of Pastor Valenti's Shawmut River Baptist Church for worship that first Sunday, I felt that here you could see the social world in which new right enthusiasms made sense to its supporters. For that reason I thought it would be an important subject for a documentary film, given the escalating conflicts in American life the Moral Majority represented at the time. Though I had always been interested in film, I never thought of making one. However, one of my close friends from Brandeis, Nancy Jay, happened to know the family of John Marshall, one of the pioneers in the United States of *cinéma vérité* documentary filmmaking, where the story is told more intimately, not by narration, but, instead, by scenes of real life and stories characters tell to camera. Marshall embraced the project, in part, because his grandmother was a Bible-quoting Calvinist from Nova Scotia, and the film was on its way.[12] Also, since I had little interest in religion at the time, I turned to close colleagues from Brandeis who were award-winning students of religion, Karen Fields and Nancy Jay, for advice about how to portray peoples' faith [13]

"Show people facing challenges in life anyone can relate to," Karen and Nancy both simply and wisely advised, "and then show them wrestling those problems in terms of their faith." That is what we set out to do and it proved, in addition, to be a beautiful formula for the kind of character-driven storytelling that makes for engaging cinema.[14]

But, would the leaders of a Moral Majority church trust a sociologist educated at Harvard and Brandeis—"the churches and synagogues of secular humanism" as Pastor Valenti called such institutions—to make an intimate film about them for national broadcast on PBS? How that happened, and how these experiences ended up impacting my own faith journey, are too much for this article and can be found in my book on that project, *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*.[15] Suffice it to say that sociologically based understandings were key to making the project work.

Sociological reflections helped me understand, for example, things that continue to perplex liberals and progressives, like why conservatives embrace both right-to-life and an enthusiasm for military service, an illogical pairing, to the liberally minded, of pro-life with pro-war. Some felt this contradiction simply confirmed their view of conservatives' patent hypocrisy and bad faith. However, in a world where people depend on family helping out even when it is inconvenient or their own resources are wearing thin, opposition to abortion and support for military service can be seen to go hand in hand since both represent meeting

family obligations of an ultimate kind. For women this involves risking and sacrificing their lives to bear children and care for them and other dependents, even when it isn't convenient; and for men, as a requirement of male honor, to risk their lives for family and country—and, most immediately, for their "brothers" in their own unit.

Deeper insights came later in my research, like understanding how fundamentalist churches can champion the kind of black and white moral absolutes liberals dismiss as rigid and unrealistic, yet attract adherents who find such church teachings eminently practical. Understandings came when I noticed that, even though Pastor Valenti vehemently preached "God hates divorce," I would see him and other church members openly helping this or that woman leave or divorce her husband. Puzzled by these unspoken contradictions, I finally asked one member why they were helping one woman divorce her husband. He looked at me nonsensically as if I were crazy to ask, and then, in exasperation, spit out the, to him, obvious explanation: "Everybody knows he's been pissing away the family income with his drugs and snowmobiles!" [16]

I soon realized that "Everybody knows…" was key here. In a family-based church community made up of extended families accustomed to sharing beyond the walls of nuclear family privacy, and a community rife with gossip, rumor and talk, moral judgments about any specific situation took place against the background of a firm bed of shared knowledge about the concrete circumstances involved—what "everybody knows." For that reason, general rules, in this case against divorce, did not matter that much. And there was no need to clarify the rule that "God hates divorce," by adding "except under x, y, or z conditions." It was less a hard-and-fast rule than a moral exhortation, a watchword, a saying. That is generally true for how Bible verses came into use at Shawmut River. It never troubled members that one verse might contradict another, since everybody would know when "turn the other cheek" was called for and when "an eye for an eye." [17] (Perhaps this observation might help us understand why many of Donald Trump's supporters do not find so troublesome many of the inconsistencies and contradictions the media continue digging up from what he has said or tweeted in various contexts.)

Yet, how different moral culture is in the worlds of most educated professionals raised and living within loose-knit social networks, ,where friends and colleagues generally don't know one another's families, and none may know different sets of friends we may have. In such lives a moral culture—that is, social norms, or rules, governing society, and common values present in them--cannot rest on of a firm bed of knowledge of specific people and

events known in common. Therefore, general rules loom larger in building our moral compass for life, and, hence, their viability, appositeness and realism matter. We need rules that tell us explicitly, for example, that divorce is generally wrong except under x, y or z conditions.

Furthermore, to shape such realistic rules for life one naturally draws on general knowledge of relevant social realities to help build them. Raised with such habits of thought in our day-to-day practices of figuring out how to live rightly, many are primed to absorb the general, abstract world of academic learning about society, culture, etc., unlike those raised in the village-like contexts members of Shawmut Valley experienced, or villagers in any part of the world, for that matter. They, on the other hand, are usually more practiced and skilled in forms of moral culture that involve concrete storytelling about specific persons and contexts known in common—like, for example, simply saying, "Remember how Auntie Joan left that job!"—that is, in order to care for her ailing mother-in-law, all present understand as a lesson being given about the duty to care for family members in need. They are more at home in the personal and concrete, rather than the abstract and impersonal, in metaphor rather than concept--like Jesus, perhaps, in parables rather than propositions. Therefore, they don't take as easily to forms of learning dependent on abstract generalizations prevalent in "higher learning." (This is one obstacle formal education has yet to recognize and tackle in trying to educate many of the underserved in American life whose worlds and cultures are generally more shaped by such close-knit extended-family ties.)

Reflections on Atheism and the Post-Enlightenment Outlook of the West

But, these reflections also shed light on the question I raised at the outset: how a faithful young person like myself could slip unnoticeably into atheism during his first year or so in college. Building a framework of sensible, realistic rules for life by drawing on knowledge accumulated in higher learning comes with certain foundational assumptions built into it. The empirical sciences in the West were created by focusing solely on what one could see, feel or touch, setting any and all spiritual realities aside for the purposes of their development. However, even though such a methodological assumption remains simply an assumption, and something not proved—or even provable—by empirical science, when its findings become built into a framework for living, into a broader outlook or worldview, it naturally becomes a worldview that has no place for the workings of spirit or of God. In fact, any consideration of the work of God, or of any spiritual entities, may be felt to hurt the

integrity of a person's reasoned outlook. As the outspoken British atheist, the physicist Stephen Hawking, once put it from his own natural science perspective, "A physicist can't allow his calculations to be muddled by belief in a supernatural creator."[18] I believe this is a major reason how I, as a believing young person, in the process of building an outlook for life with resources from the empirical sciences of higher learning around me, unnoticeably slipped into atheism during my college years. And it represents, perhaps, an inexorable force drawing geographically mobile intellectuals toward an atheistic worldview.

What can be called this broader post-Enlightenment outlook of the West was embodied in how Christianity was delivered by western educated missionaries to much of the developing world. This became clear to me in an extensive documentary film project I undertook to explore the sources and directions of Christian growth in Africa. According to Andrew Walls, a key consultant in this project and the world's leading student of Christianity's spread across cultures, while the post-Enlightenment outlook of the West allowed some room for God—like the virgin birth of Jesus and a few other miracles—it tended to rule out any other effects of spirit on the material world, whether the healing work of the Holy Spirit, the crippling effects of demonic possession, the protection of God's angels, or the presence of the "heavenly host" most Protestant Christians routinely still sing about in their doxology.[19]

"Why didn't the missionaries from Europe tell us that Jesus heals?" asked groups of early Ghanaian converts to Christianity reading a newsletter sent out to them by a faith-healing ministry in the United States after World War I. Their conversations led to their creating new independent congregations which would eventually grow into what is now Ghana's largest church, the Church of Pentecost Ghana.[20] In general and across denominations, healing and deliverance ministry, including exorcism shaped to address the spiritual forces Africans see afflicting them, were critical in unleashing Christianity's explosive growth in Africa.[21]

The Issue of Homosexuality in the Church and Beyond

In the process of this documentary film project on Christian growth in Africa I also became increasingly aware of how social realities shared by Africans and social conservatives in the United States—mainly the prominence of extended-family ties—were helping give rise to difficult conflicts over the issue of homosexuality in the world church and beyond. Where

extended families are the building blocks of life, marriage itself generally involves less sharing and less intimacy than in the "companionate marriages" associated with isolated nuclear family life. Instead, family life is typically divided into women's and men's worlds. At Shawmut River Baptist Church, for example, at men's gatherings, like Saturday morning prayer breakfast, one would typically hear men say things like "Women! Go figure!" about this or that puzzling thing "the other" gender might do. I remember one woman church member telling me that her attitude as a young woman contemplating marriage with a husband was "Go get one and see what you can get from him!"[22]

In such contexts sex is not typically embraced as an important vehicle for cultivating emotional intimacy or romantic love in marriage. In fact, the growth of new models of marriage involving romantic love in the United States, points out historian Helen Horowitz, doesn't take place until the mid-19th century, and then among urban professionals in New York City.[23] Outside such contexts sex isn't felt to hold the meaning of sharing intimately who you are with a partner. Rather than being part of your very identity, it can be seen as just fun, as recreation done on the side, and not something, apart from procreation, at the heart of marriage. AIDS spread to East Tennessee and West Virginia, for example, by truck drivers having sex with gay prostitutes at truck stops and returning to their families without any sense, by and large, that this was part of their identity.[24] Similar patterns can be found among aristocrats in Europe or the propertied upper class in the United States, where extended families congeal around family fortunes and are lived out on family estates and in upper-class men's and women's clubs. I remember, for example, a friend from such an upper-class family in New York City explaining to me that her father's mistress had signing privileges at their country club. And, in Ghana and other parts of Africa, husbands and wives, while maintaining steadfast loyalties to one another and to their progeny and wider families, and firmly upholding family obligations, may live apart from one another for years.

If sexuality as a vehicle for emotional intimacy is not seen as so important in such contexts, then, why does the issue of homosexuality raise such opposition? And why is something like gay marriage seen by some as a threat to the family? It is important to note that homosexual acts themselves, if discrete, often do not; but publicly declared homosexual identity and the public right to marry can. In such contexts, same-sex ties often trump couple relationships. In a teenage gang of African-American women in one inner city neighborhood near me in western Massachusetts, for example, to become a member of the gang a girl must have sex with several guys among a list of neighborhood "studs" the gang recognizes. Notice,

rather than being a vehicle to build emotional intimacy with the man involved, sex is used here to create bonds of mutual dependence among girl gangers. In such cultural contexts, how might making homosexual marriage legitimate be seen by these girl gangers, their parents and their community?

Or, to take a different example, in much of sub-Saharan Africa men and women usually sit separately at church or public meetings, not with their spouses. And in Ghana, for example, men walk hand-in-hand with one another freely on the streets, sharing physical affections of a purely fraternal kind. Now, imagine how the idea of homosexual marriage might be seen in any of these contexts of same-sex solidarities, where the opposite sex is seen as "other" and sex is not seen as a vehicle of emotional intimacy at the heart of marriage. In such contexts could not campaigns for homosexual rights and homosexual marriage be felt to threaten the kinds of family lives they know? Rather than seeing these people as hopeless homophobes, more liberally minded Americans need to bear in mind the seismic changes in gender and sexuality we experienced through the cultural *tsunami* of the "sexual revolution," feminism, and so on, in the 1960's and 1970's, forces that transformed our taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and sexuality. To cite one telling example, in just one decade we saw most of our colleges and boarding schools suddenly convert from being same-sex to co-educational institutions. We should also bear in mind that it was during this period that the divorce rate in the United States skyrocketed and that, even after it subsided, we still lead the world in divorce by far, pointing, perhaps, to some of the challenges modern marriage based on romantic love fueled by sexual intimacy holds.

Conclusion

I hope these reflections help readers see the potential value, the wisdom, of sociological thought—that it might serve to help us think more clearly, for example, about important problems we face, like police-community relations, or family-value conflicts paralyzing our nation's politics, or conflicts over homosexuality now threatening to divide brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. These are simply a few of the infinite number of important problems that cry out for better understanding that would benefit from sociological reflection. But, a few caveats are in order before I close.

As I mentioned above, useful and profound insights in sociology are likely to come from deeper understandings of the nature of culture and society that only a minority of

practitioners achieve. Operating at a more superficial level, many are swept up by fashionable waves in their disciplines marked often by novel terminology that soon becomes *de riguer* to mark one as *bona fide* members of a fashionable movement--for example, in "post-modernist" thought, terms like "discourse", "narrative," or "hybridity," to name a few.

Moreover, many social scientists, I've observed, are unaware of some of the most taken-for-granted elements of their own culture that differ from those of people outside their particular world, or "bubble," as some observers call it—for instance, their more individualistic nuclear family patterns versus the close-knit extended family ties commonly found among working-class, small-business and even upper-class folks described above. Consequently academics generally hold decidedly more liberal views on the family-value issues dividing our nation, and generally are puzzled by, and routinely misread, those not sharing those views. This is evident, among other things, in their repeated failures to predict, and take account of, the popular appeal of social conservatism in American politics.[25]

Furthermore, when social scientists frame questions for standardized questionnaires used in their research, and interpret the answers to those questions, their ignorance of realities many of their subjects take for granted lead to errors in understanding subjects' responses and, therefore, in measurements they tabulate as "proof" of this or that generalization. While some realities are easier to measure than others, too many fall under the assessment Egon Bittner shared about quantitative research one day in class at Brandeis. "I'd like to be able to measure my results, like anyone," Egon admitted to us, but added tellingly, "I just don't think they often know what they're measuring."[26]

In addition, as heavy bearers of the post-Enlightenment culture of higher learning in the West, social scientists generally have no place for spiritual realities, for God, in their intellectual frameworks. They are often are puzzled by, and not infrequently look down open, people of faith. And, perhaps given historic and ongoing battles they've experienced with those defending tradition, often from Christian standpoints, not a few have distinct prejudices against Christians *per se*. In my own journey as both an academic sociologist and documentary filmmaker, I've encountered both kinds of prejudices: from being pilloried by feminist colleagues for exploring reasons why some women were antifeminist to seeing my documentary work on African Christianity brushed aside with a grimace by public broadcasters in the West uncomfortable with its matter-of-fact, non-dismissive portrayals of African Christians' spirituality (while some were proudly promoting films featuring wildly distorted and purely negative portrayals of African Christians).[27]

I remember returning to attend the American Sociological Association's annual meeting to show my film *Born Again* and noticing there was a meeting of the Christian Sociological Association at the same time as my screening. I was curious to see what it represented. So, once I got my film running, I ran to their meeting and found 30-some generally young academics, mostly white but some of color, in intense conversation, mainly sharing "war stories" about the reactions colleagues had when learning of their Christian identity. Most were disapproving, even hostile. Yes, this was over a generation ago. But, I have continued to encounter and observe such prejudices and lack of tolerance in academic communities, leading me to identify with, and find comfort in, Bob Dylan's song recounting similar prejudices he experienced because of his newfound faith in Christ: "*And they, they look at me and frown*," Dylan sings,

They'd like to drive me from this town,
They don't want me around,
`Cause I believe in you.

They show me to the door
They say `Don't come back no more,'
`Cause I don't be like they like me to. . .

And I, I walk out on my own,
A thousand miles from home,
But I don't feel alone,
`Cause I believe in you. [28]

So, have faith. God will be with you. Find those teachers and practitioners of social thought-- whether they be sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers or economists—who can help you understand its most profound and useful truths. And embrace fellow travelers, fellow pilgrims, to share, and grow with in your understandings. And, above all perhaps, remember that your journey is not something you can predict or control; it remains in God's hands. When I think about my arbitrary choice to study Africa, about my carrying certain ideas about family-value conflicts to the Valenti's fundamentalist church and the impact that experience had on my own faith journey, and about my finding in

documentary filmmaking work that both draws heavily on my sociological formation, but also resurrected artistic sides of me suppressed by higher learning at the time, and work that draws on pastoral gifts, I came to see, inherited from my father with his all-embracing love of all people as God's children, I find myself saying simply, "Thank you, God."[29]

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[1] I did not embrace Marx's commitment to socialism and took no interest in his limited thinking about religion.
[2] Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.
[3] See the founder of Ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.
[4] Weber, *Economy and Society, Vol. I*, 4ff.
[5] Schutz, *Collected Papers*, Vol I., 59.
[6] Bittner, *Functions of the Police.*
[7] In recognition of the lasting value of Bittner's insights, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies and the International Association of Chiefs of Police annually present the Egon Bittner Award to police chiefs who have contributed in exemplary ways to public safety. http://www.calea.org/content/egon-bittner-award
[8] Bott, *Family and Social Network*.
[9] For a full interpretation of how class differences in family structure affect support for sixties feminism, see Ault, *Class Differences in Family Structure*.
[10] For an account of this research and of my making an intimate documentary on this fundamentalist congregation, see Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*.
[11] Falwell, *Strength*, 182.
[12] I eventually coproduced and codirected this film, *Born Again: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church,* with Michael Camerini, and it was principally edited by John Marshall's editor for his classic *N!yae: Story of a !Kung Woman*, Adrienne Miesmer.
[13] For example, Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion*, and Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever.*
[14] One reviewer said our final film, *Born Again*, was like a soap opera, but real, and set in a fundamentalist church. This approach proved effective also in my *African Christianity Rising* documentary film series exploring the sources and directions of Christianity's explosive growth in Africa and bringing viewers into the cultures and worldviews involved.
[15] Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*.
[16] Ault, "What Liberal Delusions About Conservatism Teach," 8.
[17] For more examples and further discussion, see Ch. 12, *Spirit and Flesh*.
[18] From Stephen Hawking quoted in the film, *A Theory of Everything*. Quoted by Robert Barron in his review, "The Theory of Everything: A God-Haunted Film." http://strangenotions.com/a-theory-of-everything-a-god-haunted-film/
[19] Andrew Walls interviewed by James Ault, online here: www.vimeo.com/10825114
[20] Mohr and Ault, *In the Feet of African Christians*, 16-17
[21] Ault. *African Christianity Rising* films and Ault, *In the Feet of African Christians*.
[22] Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*.
[23] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex.*
[24] Verghese, *My Own Country.*

[25] For an exploration of liberal academics' repeated misunderstandings of social conservatives, see Ault, "What Liberal Delusions About Conservatism Teach."
[26] And there are times when both authors and their critics miss problems in what's being measured. To take just one example from a much-praised and otherwise insightful study on American politics based on quantitative research, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, Putnam seeks to measure the degree of "social connectedness" of people, versus their "social isolation" or "individualism," by how many voluntary associations they join. But, the people I met at Shawmut Valley Baptist Church were so busy with their extended-family relationships, and with their one voluntary association, their "church family," that they had little time for becoming involved in any other voluntary associations, and generally did not. But, were they more socially isolated or individualistic than the upper-middle-class housewife who gets involved in voluntary associations to free herself from the social isolation of home? Putnam's misjudgment in this regard leads to significant errors in conclusion he draws. Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*, 112, fn 27, 382.
[27] Cf. *Saving Africa's Witch Children* and several films following its example including *Britain's Witch Children*.
[28] Portions from Bob Dylan's song "I Believe in You" on his album *Slow Train Coming*, 1979.
[29] For an account of my return to faith in the wake of the release of our film *Born Again*, see Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*, Ch.22.

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