

# Chapter 1

## Religion and Knowledge: The Sociological Agenda

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### Knowledge at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century

During the preparation of this book, in December 2011, Christopher Hitchens, the internationally renowned British-American writer, journalist and political agitator, died from esophageal cancer. Hitchens had become famous – and infamous – for a variety of reasons, but in his final years he had used his public profile most effectively to denounce religion and call for what he called a ‘renewed Enlightenment’ (2007: 283). For Hitchens, religion is the ‘main source of hatred in the world’,<sup>1</sup> the cause of countless wars and inexcusable human suffering; it is also based on ignorance and is an enemy of ‘free enquiry’, so that tackling the ‘problem’ of religion, as Hitchens sees it, is about raising awareness and engaging in a free public debate about the ‘proper’ bases of knowledge. It is quite understandable then that Hitchens should choose to promote his book *God is Not Great* not by engaging the intellectual classes of the American East Coast, but by holding a series of public debates among religious conservatives across the Deep South. Hitchens’s criticism of religion sits to some extent within a long-standing tradition of post-Enlightenment rationalism, championed by figures like Thomas Jefferson, who, like Hitchens, associated the ‘new world’ with freedom not just from old political ties, but also from the tyranny and ignorance of traditional religion. Indeed, it was Jefferson who rewrote the Christian New Testament as an account of Jesus as an ethical teacher, with all reference to miracles expunged for the more enlightened, modern reader (Jefferson 2006). Despite his indebtedness to well-known proponents of the Enlightenment, Hitchens’s perspective is also firmly rooted in the circumstances of the contemporary world. A ‘renewed Enlightenment’ could be ushered in on the back of a broader democratization of knowledge, which in turn is part of the collapse of old hierarchies and the levelling effects of the World Wide Web. Religion can be challenged anew because the late modern age is one in which knowledge is no longer the preserve of a privileged few, but accessible to the masses *via* media that empower as well as intellectually enrich.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from a speech given by Hitchens at the university of Toronto; available at: [http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2007/03/free\\_speech\\_6.html](http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/2007/03/free_speech_6.html), access date: 2 February 2012.

Just months before Hitchens's death, another iconic figure passed away: Californian inventor, IT entrepreneur and CEO of Apple Inc, Steve Jobs. Heralded as one of the foremost innovators of the personal computer revolution, Jobs became a charismatic leader within the knowledge economy, influencing millions of individuals worldwide *via* his technological innovations, most notably the iMac computer, the iPod, the iPhone and the iPad. Jobs's inventions are emblematic of the democratization of knowledge alluded to in Hitchens's diatribes against religion, carriers of opportunity and empowerment that lessen the distance between the individual consumer and the global circulation of knowledge. Possibly the most well-known brand of the early twenty-first century, Apple's ubiquitous logo is the simple outline of an apple with a bite taken out of it, for some a reference to the Eden story in the Old Testament book of Genesis, in which Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to eat from the tree of knowledge. What was once widely viewed as a solemn warning about the sins of lust and pride is now symbolic of a consumer quest for knowledge, filtered by IT products and lauded as aspirational and progressive across the globe.

However, the optimism associated with Jobs's inventions and inherent in Hitchens's vision of a 'new Enlightenment' is not universally shared. Such is the paradoxical quality of late modernity that the same processes heralded as almost utopian can also disempower and intellectually impoverish, not least because of the uncertainty surrounding the reliability of the sources from which knowledge is now drawn. With democratization comes the destabilizing of old certainties. Related anxieties have a long and painful provenance and religious identities have often had a significant stake in emerging debates. Hitchens's comments illustrate how questions concerning the status of the knowledge claims made by religious people are of enduring importance; controversies over the weight which should be properly attached to such claims have framed and shaped some of the most tumultuous periods in history. New religious movements emerge on the basis of novel and often controversial understandings of how the world works and about where individuals and communities can turn for ultimate meaning; governments have risen and fallen on the basis of such differences and global conflict has often raged around competing claims about what constitutes a legitimate interpretation of religious texts or of where religious truth is to be found.

This book addresses the relationship between religion and knowledge from a sociological perspective, building on historical foundations but offering a distinctive focus on the changing status of religious phenomena at the turn of the twenty-first century. The chapters approach the theme in various ways, focusing on religion as a channel or institutional context for the production of knowledge, religion as a form of knowledge to be transmitted or conveyed and religion as a social field in which controversies about knowledge are fought out. In recent years, a series of factors have brought questions of the relationship between religion and knowledge into sharp relief and reconfigured them into a set of concerns that have acute social relevance. This introductory essay addresses these conditions

and their significance, before exploring some emerging questions concerning the status of religion in the light of developments in the sociology of knowledge.

### **Religion and Knowledge in the Contemporary Context**

There are three main reasons why the relationship between religion and knowledge is in particular need of sociological investigation at the present time. First, the contemporary world makes an unprecedented volume of knowledge available on an unprecedented scale. This is often cynically characterized as a surfeit of information, driven by the twin forces of late modernity: information and communications technology and consumerist economics (Lyon 2000), which together shape a global market in information, much of it delivered in conveniently packaged consumer products or expressed in readily accessible forms on the Internet. Such developments have engendered widespread concerns about an 'information glut'. In the age in which the Internet and related new media shape so many of our experiences, information – rather than being rare and precious – is now relatively inexpensive and plentiful and, as a consequence, often radically devalued (Shenk 1997: 26–7). These developments raise a host of new questions about the nature of knowledge and the authority upon which it rests, about how the forces of late modernity challenge or undermine traditional sources of knowledge and about the reliability and accessibility of the forms of knowledge that appear to be taking their place. For example, what does the rise of Wikipedia tell us about the democratization of access to knowledge and of the authorship of knowledge and what do such changes suggest about shifting conceptions of expertise, training and leadership? Does the acceleration of knowledge production and dissemination in late modernity heighten secularization by undermining traditional authorities or does it generate new opportunities for religious innovation? Put another way, if our lives are now framed by what management consultant Peter Drucker (1969) calls the 'knowledge economy', what are the implications of this for the social status of religion? When the handling and distribution of information appears increasingly central to the global economy, how do knowledge claims made by agents and opponents of religion feature in wider processes of knowledge production? Perhaps most strikingly, the acceleration of knowledge dissemination across the globe has seen the prominence of religious movements within public knowledge considerably heightened. Whether driven by a sense of scandal, controversy or a group's own ambitions for a public platform, religion has been re-positioned from being marginal to taking centre stage within human consciousness, intensifying the perception that religion is a socio-political force to be reckoned with.

Secondly, disillusionment with authority figures and established institutions appears to have reached a new peak, with the global economic downturn, scandals about political corruption and financial mismanagement and electoral apathy contributing to a sense that conventional systems of governance and capitalist economics have failed. Against this background, narratives of re-enchantment or

non-Western rationality have renewed resonance, feeding into expressions of social discontent, protest and a quest for new meaning. Some look to Eastern philosophy, others to a self-focused spirituality that has no truck with 'tradition', others to Judaeo-Christian traditions of the past, such as Celtic Christianity or monasticism, all of whose apparent antiquity or cultural exoticism appears untainted by the polluting influence of Western culture. The drift of current sociological research is towards emphasizing subjectivity, individualism and experience as key motivating factors (for example, Heelas and Woodhead 2005); what it often fails to address is how such developments constitute alternative ways of apprehending the world and thus shared bodies of knowledge (Shimazono 1996). A striking example is the religious self-help literature, which is rightly highlighted for intensifying the cultural importance of self-focused spiritualities. But these best sellers also constitute new channels of knowledge acquisition, with their own readership and shared cultures of understanding (Frykholm 2004), triggering novel forms of religious empowerment and, potentially, subversion. They also present a contradiction: while celebrating the self and the authority of the self, the authors of self-help literature are knowledge gurus in their own right who assume the task of telling the reader what to do and how to think. For example, the significance of evangelical Joel Osteen, author of *Become a Better You* and *Your Best Life Now*, is not just as a measure of individualization, but as one stream in a market of new perspectives, offering new ways of understanding the world (Sødal 2010). Mistrust of governments also has implications for education, often creating a discomfort with state-sponsored institutions as contexts for secondary socialization, especially sensitive when issues of moral or religious education are concerned and fraught when central government is perceived to support a particular agenda. Here, the emergence of dissonant bodies of knowledge, such as creationism or intelligent design, takes on significance, not just in reflecting the destabilization of Western science, but also as political protest and a resurgence of counter-cultural religion. When such issues are connected to what is taught in the classroom – and thus endorsed as 'legitimate' knowledge – the public relevance of religion as a focus of social tensions becomes even more salient.

Finally, in an age shaped by post-9/11 perceptions of religion and its capacity to foster social deviance, there is more support for the agendas of those whose aim is to monitor, control or delimit the processes whereby religious knowledge is generated, publicized and circulated among interested parties. The UK government's 'Prevent' agenda presents a striking illustration<sup>2</sup> and its concern for how religious ideologies contribute to social conflict and incitements to hatred has triggered debates about the influence of religious groups on university campuses, the 'proper' training of Muslim Imams and the use of the Internet for recruitment to terrorist groups. It is in reference to such sites for the transmission of religious knowledge that politicians devise new forms of community intervention, focused on influencing

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism/review-of-prevent-strategy/>, access date: 10 February 2012.

the dissemination of religious knowledge and on steering those instrumental in its formulation towards a less culturally subversive agenda. Claims about an insidious surveillance culture engender worries about freedom of expression and questions about the limits of government intervention (Lyon 2003). The question arises: when does religion become dangerous and, when it does, how is knowledge about such matters appropriately managed? Moreover, what is the knowledge base on which governments devise their policies on such issues? The Internet age encourages expectations of ease of access to knowledge and transparency of knowledge production, yet the security agenda of Western governments has moved in the opposite direction, provoking questions of how knowledge about religion – especially religion viewed as deviant – might be controlled and how much classified knowledge can be shared or made public. While religious censorship remains normative in some countries that have more centralized government control (for example, China), liberal democratic governments have addressed this problem by introducing counter-discourses into the public arena, narratives of state, national identity and democracy that marginalize religious ideologies defined as inimical to the desired cultural norm. Conversely, they also valorize constructions of religion that reflect this norm, as seen in romanticized expressions of Islam and Christianity common among policymakers in Britain, both of which are often rooted in the same notion of ‘moderate’ religion: universal, tolerant, rational and respectful of difference (Gutkowski 2012). Further illustrations can be cited in relation to the treatment of Islamic communities in a variety of Western nations (see for example, Birt 2006) or in the treatment of New Religious Movements in relation to the definition of *laïcité* in France (Altglas 2010). It is in this sense that the public negotiation of religious identities is always entangled with parallel emerging discourses of secularity.

## Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge

These contextual factors achieve sharper illumination when they are grounded in insights drawn from the sociology of knowledge, which has a history of providing valuable theoretical tools for the study of religion. Knowledge – as distinct from information – connotes an interest in the active subject, about the *act of knowing*, and thus implies a set of questions that are quintessentially sociological. How do we come to know things, through what means and with what kinds of resources and how are such processes shaped by the social situations in which we find ourselves? What kinds of ‘knowledge’ are viewed as most reliable and why? Who gets to arbitrate when knowledge claims appear to be in conflict? And what is the relationship between knowledge and power, how does knowledge bestow advantage, privilege or cultural capital? Thus, while Robert Merton may have pointed out that the term has been ‘so broadly conceived as to refer to every type of idea and every mode of thought ranging from folk belief to positive science’ (Merton 1968: 521), the concept of ‘knowledge’ nevertheless directs us to a

very specific set of sociological questions, which are especially relevant to the sociology of religion.

Early ventures into the sociology of knowledge fused these questions with a concern to clarify what is true and what is false. This lay at the heart of Karl Marx's approach to ideology, which he understood as thought alienated from the real life of the thinker, that is, knowledge that is misleading and thus in need of challenging, so that the true nature of social reality may be unveiled (McCarthy 1996: 34). According to this line of thinking, phenomena can acquire the status of 'knowledge' because of distortions in the social structural arrangement of society. The emergent sociological critique of power (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1977) has continued to influence the sociology of knowledge and early analyses of ideology have given way to discussions of discourse, both concerned with how forms of knowledge acquire legitimacy and predominance. And yet an equally influential tradition has moved in a very different direction, instead favouring a focus on knowledge as constituted through everyday life, as a 'common sense' phenomenon by virtue of which human life achieves meaning. This approach, epitomized in Peter Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's seminal work, has as its object 'whatever passes for knowledge' within a given context, regardless of its ultimate validity or invalidity (1966: 15). Berger and Luckmann's work has also been important in reorienting the sociology of knowledge so that its quest is not simply to attribute patterns of thought to social conditions – as with the deterministic tendency within the work of Marx and Karl Mannheim – but to address the dynamic, complex processes whereby 'subjective meanings *become* objective facticities' (ibid.: 30, emphasis in original). For Berger and Luckmann, knowledge makes human life possible, as it forms the foundation of everyday life, emerging as pre-theoretical knowledge – including myths, morals and 'common knowledge' – and moving to ever higher realms of abstraction, up to the 'symbolic universe', a shared structure that has the capacity to render everyday life plausible (ibid.: 110–146; Wuthnow et al. 1984: 47–9). In this sense, individuals and social institutions share a common project – the quest for a coherent reality – and the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the everyday construction of that reality.

Within the sociology of religion, the latter perspective has become enduringly important, most obviously with respect to secularization, and what the sociology of knowledge can tell us about the conditions under which religious worldviews endure or fragment. The apparent erosion of a shared knowledge base in Western societies (for example, through lack of religious socialization and the splintering of knowledge interpretation), exacerbated by rapid social change and detraditionalization, raises questions about the assumptions upon which religious or secular truth claims might be based. This is not new and is associated with the long-term effects of secularization, not least the fragmentation of traditional forms of community, disenchantment, social differentiation and heightened cultural and religious pluralism, all of which can be traced to accounts of modernity formulated by Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies around the turn of the twentieth century. They also emerge in parallel with the intensification of knowledge

production outlined above. What makes these processes especially worthy of critical re-examination now is the evident diversity of religious responses to them and the implications of this for the sustainability of religious identities. While there are those who remain wedded to a 'hard-line' secularization model, which associates modernization with the irrevocable weakening of religion as a social force, its ever-increasing detractors point to religious phenomena that exhibit a proclivity for creative adaptation, reinvigoration and a capacity to forge alliances that reinforce their appeal and power as social movements (for example, Beckford 2003; Casanova 1994; Davie 2002; Lyon 2000). This is not the place to address ongoing debates about secularization; the point of raising it here is to highlight theoretical implications for how we handle religion and knowledge sociologically. To take an example from the US, Christian Smith's research into evangelical Christians during the 1990s (Smith 1998) demonstrates not simply the vitality of this contemporary movement, but the inadequacy of existing sociological models in accounting for this. Contrary to influential frameworks originating in the work of Peter Berger, but also applied by subsequent commentators on evangelicalism (for example, Hunter 1987), occupying a culturally and religiously pluralist context does not necessarily undermine religious truth claims. Rather, American evangelicalism appears to thrive on the resulting conflict and tension, it is strong 'not because it is shielded against, but because it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it' (Smith 1998: 89). In the terms of the sociology of knowledge, 'sacred canopies' might not be as fragile as Berger (1967) first argued and thus the possibilities for affirming and sustaining religious knowledge claims within advanced Western societies may be more wide-ranging and less curtailed than many secularists – and many sociologists – would have us think. Moreover, processes of 'cognitive bargaining' (Berger 1992: 41–5), as believers negotiate their relationship with their cultural environment, may best be theorized as patterns of elasticity, rather than a simple spectrum ranging from resistance to capitulation. Striking illustrations can be found in the public discourse of evangelical leaders and shifting perspectives of evangelical voters in the run-up to the 2012 US presidential election. While recent history leads us to associate evangelicals with the Republican Party and with a set of fairly intransigent moral standpoints, such as anti-abortion, pro-Israel, anti-homosexual, pro-small government and so on, empirical analyses of the evangelical movement reveal a more internally complex picture (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Allegiances are forged and defended across traditional lines and with different priorities accorded to religious, moral and political dimensions; what matters more – a candidate's past moral indiscretions, his/her orientation to economic matters or the visibility of Christian references within the public speeches s/he makes? (Goldberg 2011) The connections between religious and political values appear complex and unpredictable, to say the least, and, as a consequence, questions traditional to the sociology of knowledge, seeking connections between professed values and social conditions, demand innovative methods of study.

One aspect is the recognition of the different relationships between forms of knowledge and methods of knowledge acquisition. For example, there is an increasing interest in embodied knowledge, which opens up new ways of understanding religious identities and their relationship to culture. Indeed, the theorization of knowledge as embodied can be presented as a critique of Peter Berger's cognitive approach, which foregrounds the cerebral, discursive aspects of meaning-making. Beginning with the question, how do we know what we know?, Marion Fourcade (2010) outlines how many aspects of human learning amount to a physical training of the body, which involves processes of socialization of which we are rarely fully conscious. While the most obvious illustrations relate to common social manners – the way we walk, the rituals surrounding dining in restaurants, for example – this approach has a striking relevance for religious phenomena, for example, in the learnt behaviours associated with pilgrimage, preaching and prayer (Mauss 2003). Michal Pagis (2010) has analysed how practitioners of meditation in the tradition of *vipassana* Buddhism receive philosophical teachings via sensory experience, learning about liberation from yearnings for worldly attachments via experiences of physical discomfort and pleasure. Pagis does not suggest that embodied experiences take precedence over abstract ideas, but that different dimensions of knowledge – the embodied and the conceptual – enter into a dynamic relationship of mutual influence (Pagis 2010: 487). Another example is Bill Gent's research into learning the Qur'an by heart among young Muslim males in London, which demonstrates how embodied techniques of knowing can be transferred between different learning contexts, such as the mosque and school; this raises interesting questions about the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices (Gent 2011).

On the opposite end of the scale are the most abstract forms of knowledge – systematized and codified, at some remove from embodied experiences. As Fourcade observes, these achieve authority only 'if certain rules are followed: standardization, reproducibility, consistency, and publication in legitimate channels' (2010: 571). An extreme example, a ubiquitous feature of Western modernity, is statistics – aggregated data that are accorded special status in societies that prioritize what can be quantified, measured and packaged into easily digestible portions. Again, religion has not been immune from such trends, as we can see in the use of attendance figures by evangelical missionary organizations to reinforce their image of success; in the popularity of standardized introductory courses as ways in which potential converts can be introduced to religious traditions; in the use of statistics within anti-religious polemics; and in the policing of religious education via the production and implementation of standardized approved textbooks. It is in their adoption of and adaptation to these forms of knowledge that religious phenomena exhibit their shifting orientations to contemporary culture.

It is worth noting that these different forms of knowledge – and of 'knowing' – do not simply map on to different cultural or historical contexts, for example, with statistical knowledge *attributable to* broader changes characteristic of post-industrial society (Kumar 1978: 220). Rather, they capture 'strategies of knowing'

that cross cultural boundaries and, while different *forms* of knowledge may emerge to be relatively dominant in certain contexts, embodied knowledge and what Daniel Bell called 'theoretical knowledge' (1973: 378), to take one example, often coexist. Moreover, it is in recognizing their interrelatedness and directions of influence that we better grasp how they respectively foster or challenge religious identities.

This approach is reflected in Doyle McCarthy's book *Knowledge as Culture*, in which she charts how forms of knowledge have, in late modernity, been reconstituted as 'powerful *cultural forces*' (1996: 10, emphasis added). McCarthy's rethinking of the sociology of knowledge reflects both a return to intellectual currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a shrewd appreciation of more recent cultural changes. In taking seriously the power interests behind different ideologies, how claims to knowledge often mask as much as they reveal about social relationships, McCarthy echoes Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) as well as Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* (1846). At the same time, she moves beyond these writers, away from their social determinism to a sense that 'knowledges' are negotiated among invested parties and away from an understanding of knowledge as primarily textual or internalized, instead preferring Michel Foucault's approach to knowledge as cultural practice. According to this perspective, knowledge is not to be understood in distinction from culture, as a more or less accurate rendering of 'genuine' social reality; rather, knowledge and culture are mutually constitutive and exist in complex, decentred relationships with institutions, discourses and social structures (McCarthy 1996: 44).

McCarthy's reconception of the sociology of knowledge places the connection between knowledge and power at its very centre, with emerging 'cultural practices' considered in light of their framing by dominant institutions. A striking example is the penal system, as the relationship between knowledge and power is no more pronounced than within closed or highly regulated, hierarchical organizations. Indeed, prisons have the capacity not simply to police access to forms of knowledge, but to define their terms as well. This is explored in James Beckford's chapter in this volume, which is a comparative study of the management of religion in prisons in Britain and France; here, wider notions of legitimacy are deployed within institutionalized discourses, focused on order and control, but ultimately embodying state-sponsored understandings of religion as a public phenomenon. Comparable patterns can be observed in the way governments deal with religious education (RE) in schools. In Britain, for example, state legislation makes schools responsible for promoting cultural cohesion and compulsory religious education is in practice treated as a vehicle for this. However, the subject receives limited resources and minimal recognition, as central government negotiates competing pressures from academics and educationalists reluctant to recognize RE as an important subject alongside the need to be seen to encourage mutual understanding between those of different faiths, especially among younger generations (Jackson 2004; King 2010). Hence a reconceptualization of knowledge *as culture* carries significant advantages for the sociology of religion, although not without losing sight of empowered institutions as key nodes in the exchange of resources and the process of meaning-

making. This is no more profound than when religion enters into a relationship with institutions charged with being the key producers and accrediters of knowledge within a given society. The remainder of this essay discusses this problem by considering the modern university and those who embody it and reflecting on their impact upon the destabilization of religious knowledge.

## Religion and the Institutions of Knowledge

It was the Victorian polymath Herbert Spencer who claimed the object of education to be the ‘formation of character’ (Spencer 1851: 180) and there remain some within the contemporary higher education system who maintain such lofty traditional ideals. All the same, in the light of recent changes in university life, certainly in the UK, the purpose of the contemporary university is now more associated with its capacity to ‘produce’ individuals who are enabled to contribute to the global economy – a project often assumed to have little truck with religion or indeed with any of the disciplines traditionally located within the humanities. This echoes Peter Berger’s (1999) argument that one of the enduring forces in the erosion of religious identities is the ‘knowledge class’, a term which Daniel Bell (1973) used to characterize post-industrial society and which Berger associates with the university educated élite within liberal Western democracies. There are at least two dimensions to this phenomenon: one has to do with the capacity of certain educated groups to maintain dominance among powerful élites and this often has as much to do with the institutional pedigree of one’s *alma mater* as it does with qualifications or skills. But alongside this is an equally important issue, which is more directly concerned with the value accorded to different forms of knowledge and the perceived intellectual compatibilities or incompatibilities between them. It may not be higher education *per se* that undermines religion, but that certain academic subjects tend to be more compatible than others with particular religious perspectives on the world.

The natural sciences and religion are often presented as epistemologically at odds, although recent research warns against simplistic arguments about the relationship between these different forms of knowledge (Evans 2011). For example, in a study of science professors at 21 of the US top research universities, Ecklund and Long (2011) found that a significant number of these academics affirmed a particular kind of spirituality, which was taken to be coherent with their work as scientists and involved in their work as researchers and teachers. As work overlaps with self to such a significant degree for this group, the most natural way to integrate spirituality into their lives is to express it through their work, raising questions about whether other professional groups – such as doctors, lawyers, politicians – may offer parallel examples of the integration of religion with other forms of specialist knowledge. Other research has challenged the assumption in the work of Bell and those influenced by him that there is a necessary tension between the worldview of the intelligentsia and the worldview of the religious. Neil

Gross's and Solon Simmons's work on university and college professors across the US reveals a variety of orientations to religion, calling for an abandonment of loose formulations like 'the intellectuals' in favour of a more empirically nuanced understanding of the cultural location and status of knowledge producers and disseminators within the higher education sector (Gross and Simmons 2009: 125). Moreover, from a purely epistemological point of view, it could be argued that laboratory-based sciences and dogmatic forms of religion rest on the same kinds of assumptions – both are inductive and tend to foreground univocal claims about reality, with little room for uncertainty and a tendency to assume a straightforward relationship between evidence and the claims it is purported to support. The opposite argument could be made for some social sciences and humanities subjects, whose hermeneutical subtlety presents significant problems for religious believers whose faith rests on an unequivocal set of certainties and the avoidance of the ambiguity that often characterizes academic rumination. The social scientific call for reflexivity, which highlights the contingency upon which knowledge claims are ultimately based (Davies 1999), may be an even greater threat, as it potentially undermines human as well as divine authority.

It appears incontestable that, as part of a broader process of secularization, universities have encouraged a quest for knowledge that, at one level, has diverted attention from sources of guidance associated with religious tradition (Bebbington 1992; Marsden 1996). This would seem inevitable within contexts in which the status of religious institutions as guardians of knowledge is gradually eroded as modernity advances. But the consequences of this in epistemological terms are far from straightforward. A de-validation of the supernatural may foster atheism (see Voas and McAndrew 2012), but it has also spawned the 'god of the gaps' and 'death of God' tendencies (accommodating religion within a framework that excludes the supernatural or at least accords it non-essential importance). As the chapter by Douglas Davies and Daniel Northam-Jones demonstrates, involvement in religious institutions and networks can and does coexist alongside highly sceptical perspectives on the truth claims associated with them. Even those that point to a supernatural dimension to reality may be abandoned or marginalized in the lives of individuals who otherwise exhibit all the outward signs of orthodox religious commitment. To lose faith in this dimension is not necessarily to disengage from the institutional structures responsible for perpetuating associated claims, although one's orientation to these structures may enter into a process of painful and unstable negotiation that has little foreseeable resolution.

Following the transition from an industrial to a service economy, we enter a climate in which the acquisition of certain forms of knowledge is viewed as key to securing a competitive edge in the global economic marketplace (Kenway et al. 2006). Hence the growth of universities in advanced Western nations and among their poorer cousins in the two-thirds world, in which the expansion of higher education has become a major component of the modernization process (Shipman and Shipman 2006: 5). Universities become crucial for the validation of knowledge – and consequently of power – as a resource and thereby influential

in facilitating flows of ideas and patterns of thought that influence the perceived legitimacy of religious knowledge. Universities may be conceived as institutional extensions of Weber's 'iron cage', promoting a form of utilitarian rationalization ordinarily associated with industry and being driven by a pervasive and ever-expanding bureaucratization. The difference with universities is that they not only embody associated assumptions about knowledge, they also explicitly model these assumptions *via* the teaching and learning process. Critiques of modularization, the standardization of curricula and the expansion of the educational audit culture (for example, Apple 2007; Roberts 2004; Strathern 2000) all point to this issue and highlight the strong relationship between one of the primary carriers of modernization – bureaucracy – and the forms of knowledge prioritized within contemporary society.

However, few would go as far as to say that universities, especially in the Western world, exhibit a homogeneous rationality across disciplinary boundaries; as argued above, the epistemological assumptions underpinning social sciences can be very different from those framing life sciences, for example, and thereby foster very different orientations to religion as an object of knowledge. Moreover, universities as institutions exist in a variety of relationships to religion; therefore, their tendency to embody rationalistic assumptions has to be qualified with reference to issues of ethos, subject coverage and historical connections to religious organizations. Contrast the overly secular ethos of some of the post-1960s universities in the UK with the Christian universities of the US; often teaching the same subjects, their institutional identities encourage very different assumptions about religion and its relationship to academic learning. We might also consider the argument that of all of the major components of the secularization process, rationalization appears to have a very limited influence on patterns of religious decline in different nations (Martin 2008), suggesting that science and religion are by no means inimical as bodies of knowledge at the popular level.

Beyond debates about the intrinsic rationality of religious claims, there is the question of how universities adhere to the wider logic of the market economy. Jeremy Carrette argues that the production of knowledge in late modernity has shifted from a binary dialogue between established academic disciplines to a situation characterized by 'self-regulating and decentralised knowledge productions in the free market of knowledge' (Carrette 2007: xii). This analysis raises questions about the complicity of academia in wider economic agendas and how religious agents may echo or contest this dominant discourse. Carrette himself has, along with co-author Richard King, pointed to how formulations of 'spirituality' in Western democracies reflect a wider neo-liberal agenda that prioritizes individualism and market deregulation, so that 'religious' developments become vehicles for economic values (Carrette and King 2005), and similar arguments have been advanced about the 'Prosperity Gospel' tradition in contemporary neo-Pentecostalism (Coleman 2000). Less clear is the status of different religious traditions within the 'market' of ideas operative in the pluralist contexts of university campuses. How do different traditions fare and to what extent do they enjoy freedom of expression alongside different claims

to knowledge legitimacy within both academic and social contexts associated with university life? Related issues are explored in Ian Fairweather's chapter in the present volume, which addresses how students negotiate issues of truth and knowledge within the context of the social scientific study of religious phenomena. The author's own research into religion among university students across England also highlights the importance of social class and institutional identities in shaping localized religious markets engaged and co-authored by students seeking religious meaning in a new environment (Guest et al. forthcoming). In this sense, life-changing transitions of a religious, social and educational character enter into mutual dialogue with results that are by no means predictable.

### **Religion and the Vocation to Knowledge**

The issue of the role of intellectuals evokes debates about the status of different forms of scholarship and the status of the knowledge claims they make. For example, the long-standing debate about reductionism in the study of religion offers a striking illustration of how interdisciplinary engagement can illuminate dominant assumptions about the relative weight accorded to different forms of knowledge. This has been highlighted in recent years by the growing influence within religious studies of cognitive science, which attempts to formulate explanations for the origins and persistence of religion, based on the neural systems in the brain. Researchers in the cognitive science of religion argue that forms of human cognition – the human act of knowing – thoroughly explain, that is, provide a plausible and evidence-based causal explanation for, religion. Some point to a specific 'God gene', while a more common argument explains religion in terms of the evolutionary advantage it has supposedly bestowed on those who embody it. While this sits uncomfortably with many sociological (and psychological – see Reich 2009) perspectives that seek a more culturally embedded approach (Carrette 2007), the influence of cognitive science reaches well into the human sciences and well beyond its psychology-based advocates, with some arguing for a paradigm shift that demands a re-rooting of cultural explanations in the work of neuro- and cognitive scientists (Slingerland 2008). This kind of approach has been called 'eliminationist reductionism', as it offers a causal explanation for religion that claims thoroughly to explain its very existence as a human phenomenon. Thus it easily slips into an imperialist discourse, claiming a privileged, epistemologically neutral position from which religious beliefs can be unmasked as misguided or fallacious, what Robert Bellah (1970) has called an 'Enlightenment fundamentalism'. More widely accepted are the culturally reductionist approaches that explain religious behaviour in terms of social, psychological or economic factors, that is, conditions external to the individual and hence open to social scientific analysis. Indeed, popular versions of such arguments are often used by public advocates of atheism and secularism, keen to 'debunk' religion as a psychological crutch, tool of oppression or cultural fiction (see Teemu Taira's

chapter in this volume). What both versions of reductionism share is a conviction, sometimes left implicit, that religious phenomena are best understood not in the terms expressed by their advocates, but by its dispassionate academic observers. Knowledge is somehow unreliable when filtered by the 'biased' perspectives of religious people, as it is when contaminated by the identities of academics whose subjectivities are often veiled in the interests of 'scientific method' (Davidman 2002). This speaks volumes about the way religion and rationality are frequently set in opposition within Western public discourse, which overlooks the internally consistent, rational structure of religious phenomena (Weber 2009; see Bourdieu 1987) and the embodied, emotionally laden character of much religious knowledge and academic commentary on it.

The potential tensions between academic knowledge about religion and the knowledge claims made by religious people have been the subject of much intellectual wrangling throughout the modern period. One standard sociological response that remains influential is Peter Berger's 'methodological atheism', the bracketing out of questions concerning the ultimate truth of religious definitions of reality on the grounds that sociology may only properly comment on what is empirically available (Berger 1967: 100, 180). For Berger and those who follow him, religion is a human projection, a result of the universal quest for meaning, but this insight carries no decisive implications for the reality or non-reality of the divine or supernatural entities *believed to be real* by religious people. The separation of sociological from ontological concerns has been adhered to by a large number of sociologists of religion, carried further by those who claim that one's personal religious convictions can be – indeed, often ought to be – separated from the act of studying religion, if the disciplinary values of critical distance and 'objectivity' are to be maintained.

The possibility of such mental compartmentalization has been questioned by a range of scholars from across academic disciplines, with the 'disinterested scholar' criticized as a Western myth veiling the perpetuation of power inequalities between east and west, white and black, intellectual and popular, male and female, discursive and practical, religious and secular. According to this argument, most thoroughly explored by anthropologists such as James Clifford and George Marcus (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and Talal Asad (1973), the very notion of scholarly objectivity forms part of a complex project in which an interrelated class of individuals lays claim to define and objectify 'the other' and hence maintains its position of empowered privilege. For Catherine Bell (1992), it also represents the privileging of discursive over embodied knowledge, a deep structure within Western culture that perpetuates the inequalities alluded to above. For many anthropologists, and likewise feminist ethnographers and academics in cultural studies who followed them from the 1970s onwards, the focus of the critique had to do with Western culture, social class and masculinity. These were the factors claimed to skew academic writing in favour of the powerful rather than the impoverished, which often masked more than they revealed about the way things really are. Markedly understudied is the function of religion as an identity marker,

how the orientations to religion on the part of the sociologist might frame the kind of topics being researched, the kind of analysis that is being presented, the kind of knowledge claims being affirmed and those being excluded from the discussion.

These are issues which have concerned the sociology of knowledge throughout its history, from Karl Marx's arguments about the deceptive powers of ideology to the critiques of technology and medicine issued by Michel Foucault (1989). Central are questions about the production of knowledge and the processes whereby it is accorded legitimacy, which are questions of direct relevance to academia as a 'knowledge industry', no less susceptible to critique than the discourses of politicians or the machinations of the mass media. University scholarship, that of advanced Western nations in particular, has as one of its key functions the perpetuation of norms of rationality that can be radically conservative, despite the apparently progressive politics of some of its advocates. This was understood by Thomas Kuhn, whose classic work on 'paradigm shifts' demonstrated how scientific discovery often serves to reinforce existing frameworks of meaning rather than challenge them, with dominant paradigms only giving way to new ways of thinking after they are brought into periodic crisis (Kuhn 1962). Related arguments have been advanced about tendencies in the humanities and social sciences and about how emergent traditions of interpretation treat different forms of religion and secularity (Fitzgerald 2000). Long before he formulated his influential general theory of secularization, David Martin (1965) called for the word to be excluded from sociological vocabulary on the grounds of its ideological associations with rationalist, Marxist and existentialist streams of thought. Consistent with his argument is Joseph Tamney's (2002) claim that the secularization debate has been distorted by the cultural myopia of its principal advocates in Western Europe; in this sense, 'Eurosecularity', as Berger has called it, rather than religion, may be the more intriguing sociological phenomenon (Berger 2001: 194).

Karl Mannheim's legacy includes his call for a self-critical approach within sociology, based on the insight that intellectuals are often agents for the generation and perpetuation of ideology (Mannheim 1940). Such a model of scholarship has been realized in attempts to maintain reflexivity as a central aspect of the academic enterprise and is reflected in McCarthy's rethinking of the sociology of knowledge, which recognizes academics not just as knowledge producers, but also, and as a consequence, as producers of culture (McCarthy 1996: 110). It is paradoxical that religion and knowledge – often conceived as carriers of ultimate truth – actually reflect the most interested agendas and most tendentious perspectives. The resulting confusion reveals a great deal about changing power relationships and the processes whereby religions achieve legitimacy or infamy; as a consequence, the responsibility of those constructing a field for its study is most serious indeed.

## **The Present Volume**

This book follows a tripartite structure, focusing on institutions of knowledge, the knowledge economy and academic knowledge, respectively. Part One features chapters on some of the major institutions through which knowledge is legitimized and in which religion acquires a particularly important role. Beckford examines the negotiation of religious identity within prisons in the UK and France, while Fairweather focuses on how religion is treated in British universities as an object of social scientific study. The family forms the focus of Elisabeth Arweck and Eleanor Nesbitt's chapter, particularly the process of socialization within families with parents of different faiths; engaging with the perennial issue of how religious knowledge is transmitted across generations, this chapter draws on recent empirical research probing the challenges arising from an immediate form of religious pluralism. Part One closes with an analysis by Elizabeth Cooksey and Joe Donnermeyer of the Amish in the US, a religious movement whose identity has depended on distancing itself from the forms of knowledge and experience characteristic of modernity. This is a study in cognitive resistance and thus explores the sustainability of alternative bodies of knowledge within a contemporary Western context.

Part Two forms the largest section of the book and includes a variety of case studies which illuminate how religion and knowledge interrelate within the contemporary knowledge economy. Taira tackles the topical issue of the 'new atheists', arguing that the work of public figures such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris is best understood not in terms of a debate about knowledge, but as identity politics. Richard McCallum turns to the presentation of Islam among evangelical writers and hence to the way in which evangelical public discourse constructs the religious 'other' in a very particular kind of shared knowledge. Stephen Jones draws from his research into British Islam in delineating how new forms of knowledge inform emerging expressions of Islamic identity in response to cultural change. Sylvia Collins-Mayo's chapter is concerned with religious knowledge among young people and with how existing perceptions of religion are validated through involvement in Christian institutions, while Dawn Llewellyn's chapter explores how women resource and negotiate their religious or spiritual identities through reading and thereby engage in a more private kind of religious knowledge acquisition. Steve Fuller addresses the Intelligent Design movement in the contemporary US, arguing for a reassessment of its legitimacy as a quest for new knowledge, while Ryan Cragun, Deborah Cragun and Jason Creighton draw on recent empirical data in investigating how fundamentalist believers engage with theories of evolution within a high school context. Davies and Northam-Jones discuss the British Sea of Faith movement, drawing from recent empirical research into this collective of post-traditional seekers, whose scepticism about the supernatural has not undermined but merely transformed their involvement in organized Christianity.

We conclude in Part Three with a brief section addressing the status of knowledge about religion within the academic endeavour. Peter Collins examines the construction of religious knowledge and identity among the Shaker community in the US, thereby reclaiming the material and embodied dimensions of religious knowledge. Rebecca Catto reflects on the sociological study of new religious movements and how ventures into the realms of religious controversy generate their own challenges surrounding the 'proper' and ethical management of knowledge – knowledge that is respectful of its boundaries and yet respectful of its audiences as well. In this respect the volume ends as it has begun, with reflections on the relationship between scholarship and knowledge and how religion is handled responsibly by those claiming to advance our understanding of it.

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