Critical self-reflection is a necessary practice for any academic discipline, particularly one that propagates a narrative of social justice. Unfortunately, it is rare that scholars step back from their narrow lens of research and academic focus to examine the larger disciplinary project at hand. Christian Smith's *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* is a bold and unfettered attempt to name the central project of American sociology today. At a cursory glance, sociology is a purely scientific, albeit secular enterprise. However, at a deeper level, Smith asserts that contemporary sociology is indisputably a *sacred* project, as sociological inquiry is “animated by *sacred* impulses, driven by *sacred* commitments, and serves a *sacred* project” (p. x). Smith defines *sacred* in a strictly Durkheimian sense – a sacred-profane dichotomy – as “things set apart from the profane and forbidden to be violated.”

In the opening chapter, Smith outlines his argument for sociology as a sacred project using the following definition of the discipline:

American sociology as a collective enterprise is at heart committed to the visionary project of realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential material, and bodily pleasures. (pp. 7-8)

Sociology, at its best (and most sacred form), engenders social emancipation, operates towards a particular telos, and exhibits a strong moral inclination with a central concern towards the welfare of all human beings. Smith describes sociology’s project as ultimately spiritual and sacred, a discipline with deeper ends than its often reductionist categorizations of political, ideological, and/ or moral ends. He suggests that sociology’s project is essentially a “secularized version of Christian gospel and worldview” (p. 18). He notes that the dominant culture of sociology operates out of this sacred project, despite the fact that only a small percentage of sociologists are actually conscious of this project. Smith identifies the central purpose of his work is to simply name the disciplinary project at hand and to identify some larger ramifications, not to engage in a diatribe or champion this project over other interpretations of the discipline.

Smith distills his argument over the next three chapters, providing evidence and historical sociocultural influences of this sacred project. Smith conducts a content analysis of the discipline through common sense observations of academic scholarship, courses, conferences, and publications to support his analysis of the discipline. He openly admits the primary limitation of his work, which is the lack of a scientific approach, as his observations are purely anecdotal and based on critical reflections of his own experience.

Smith is concerned with the existence of a myriad of widely accepted axioms often left unexamined and unchallenged, coupled with the underlying attitude of most scholars who think of sociology as “God’s gift to society” (p. 196). This American sociological orthodoxy problematically lends itself to groupthink, with an inability to engage dissent in a thoughtful manner. In his most thought-provoking argument, Smith tells the story of his academic colleague, Mark Regnerus, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas in Austin, who published controversial findings on same-sex families in a reputable and peer-reviewed journal. Regnerus’ findings did not fit the emancipatory narrative of American sociology, and therefore, his colleagues held him in utter contempt. Smith stridently defends the work of Regnerus, as his findings did not point to a particular policy recommendation but were assumed by the scholarly community to be against gay marriage. Moreover, Smith points to the fact that Regnerus’ publication met the academic rigor of a double-blind peer-review process, yet his academic counterparts quickly changed their tone once the article went to press. The unfortunate result of this story is not simply the public condemnation of Regnerus by his colleagues, but that this adversarial (as opposed to scholarly) response makes it nearly impossible for sociologists to conduct open and honest research or publish similar findings on this topic in the future. In another example, Smith argues that sociological inquiry on the study of Christianity is often considered to be “too normative” (p. 92) and antithetical to robust academic inquiry, and therefore, is relegated to the periphery.
In the remaining chapters, Smith summarizes his critique of the sacred project into seven consequences: dishonesty, internal self-contradictions, standardized thinking, myopic socio-logic, corruption of the peer-review process, alienated sociologists, and self as blind spot. He is most critical of a sociology that privileges certain worldviews while discounting diverging viewpoints, which can create a disciplinary culture that is academically dishonest, inauthentic, and hypocritical. For Smith, there is inherent contradiction with ideological elitism in a discipline that espouses emancipatory aims. A laudable quality of sociologists is their ability to critique the world around them, but Smith challenges them to be more self-aware about personal biases as well as the disciplinary project at hand.

A limitation of Smith’s work is the lack of definitive research methodology, as he conducts a content analysis without a rigorous technique of sampling. While he openly acknowledges this empirical deficit, scholars may discount his work altogether due to its unscientific approach. In addition, Smith’s critique of the discipline is filled with visceral language that presents itself, at times, as spiteful and defensive. This is typified in his defense of Regnerus, where he considers the negative reaction of his colleagues as “scholarly review by mob intimidation” that marks “the end of credible social science” (p. 161). Likewise, in his attack on online blogs and open-access journals, Smith refers to these resources as “extra-institutional vigilante peer reviews” (p. 166). He also reveals a strong political bias when he questions whether sociology is “the criminal investigation unit of the left wing of the Democratic Party” (p. 21). While Smith explicitly states that the purpose of the text is not to engage in a diatribe, the tone of his work suggests that he is frustrated by leftist groupthink and is using this work as a platform to antagonize leftists and settle the score with those who have wronged him and his colleagues. Unfortunately, Smith’s radical dissent undermines the central purpose of his work, which is to help sociologists identify and think critically about its sacred project.

Smith has many astute points that are helpful reflections for any sociologist regardless of rank and status. I am thankful for the positive vision of sociology he sets forth in the opening chapter. By connecting the discipline to a sacred vision, Smith’s reflections provide a larger sense of purpose and ambition to my scholarship. The seven consequences he offers of this sacred project challenge me to be more honest and intentional in my work, encouraging dissent when it may be easier to adhere to the dominant vision of sociology. Given the fact that most of these consequences transcend sociology (e.g. groupthink and corruption of the peer-review process), Smith’s work could also be read as a critique of the entire academic enterprise.

I believe his work gives voice to those who come out of a Christian or religious worldview, especially those who feel that institutionalized religion has been improperly displaced from the academy. He should be applauded for his critical analysis of the discipline and for presenting uncomfortable truths that challenge sociologists to think deeply about the project at hand.

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