

Isomorphism, Institutional Parochialism, and the Sociology of Religion

Stephen C. Poulson · Colin Campbell

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Abstract This article investigates whether the field of sociology of religion is occupied by parochial concerns. We characterize *institutional parochialism* as the degree to which people in an academic field tend to study their own societies. This study employs a content analysis of articles published in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Sociology of Religion* from 2001 to 2008, with particular attention paid to the incidences in which Muslim and non-Western groups were studied before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. There was no change in the rate that “Muslim” communities were studied following the 9/11 attacks, but it appears journal content did change to reflect ongoing debates in the West and in response to mimetic pressures being placed on the field. Overall, if the sociology of religion can be characterized as parochial, we contend that the broader field of American sociology is likely far more so.

Keywords Institutional parochialism · Institutional isomorphism · Sociology of religion · Islam · Gender studies · Christianity · 9/11

This study investigates the degree to which scholars in a sub-discipline within the field of sociology—the sociology of religion—are occupied by *parochial interests*. By this we mean that Western sociologists, whatever the diversity of their interests and backgrounds, tend to study their own societies. *Institutional parochialism* is apparent despite the fact that many within the discipline are calling for an increase in the study of other societies. In effect, we believe that there are few symbolic taboos against

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S. C. Poulson (✉)
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, MSC 7501, James Madison University, Harrisonburg,
VA, USA
e-mail: poulsc@jmu.edu

C. Campbell
Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA
e-mail: colin1@email.unc.edu

pursuing studies of “the other,” but that such studies are neglected because they remain an afterthought in the daily practice of most sociologists who live in the West.

Sociologists have often investigated how academic disciplines affect the production of social knowledge (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1972; Bryson 2005). Many have asserted that the construction of *symbolic boundaries* is one manner through which professional and academic identities are maintained (Lamont and Molnar 2002). For example, social boundaries are often constructed as a means of delineating and debating the appropriate content areas within the humanities and social sciences (Bryson 2005; Griffin and Tempenis 2002). Generally, work inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has described educational systems as a “field” of cultural production and reproduction. In this respect, some academic disciplines and sub-disciplines can be characterized as having a remarkable amount of homogeneity with respect to the ideas that bind practitioners together (Cappell and Guterbock 1992). Still, some who observe the same academic fields have been impressed by the emergence of new sub-disciplines and new knowledge, as well as by the diversity of methods and the increasing diversity of the people who work within these disciplines (Clark 1999).

There is also a considerable “sociology of sociology” literature that investigates the history, ideas, organization, practices, and demographic composition of those within the discipline (Abbot 1988; Cappell and Guterbock 1992; Collins 1986; Crane and Small 1992; Gans 1990; Halliday and Janowitz 1992; Kain 2007; Turner and Turner 1990). Many regard the increasing diversity of the field, in terms of methodologies used and content areas contemplated, as problematic because it creates a lack of cohesiveness among academic practitioners (Crane and Small 1992; Collins 1986; Gans 1990; Halliday and Janowitz 1992; Turner and Turner 1990). Others regard this increasing diversity—in terms of the increasing diversity of its membership and the creation of new content areas—as a positive fact (Clark 1999; D’Antonio 1992; Roos and Jones 1993; Stacey and Thorne 1985).

Our primary interest regards the tendency of sociologists to focus on “parochial” issues that less often concern societies outside of the West. While this is not a common debate, critics have noted the parochialism of American sociology. In the past, this parochialism was seen in the content of the papers presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (Tomasson 1978), in the focus of the articles published in prominent sociology journals (Brown and Gilmartin 1969; Webber 1981), and in the sociology textbooks used in American colleges and universities (Najafizadeh and Mennerick 1992).

We regard “parochialism” as a tendency for sociologists to focus on issues that are being debated within their own society. Likewise, when academics do study “the other,” they tend to study people with whom they share a cultural affinity. Institutional parochialism can be characterized as a cultural boundary apparent in many academic disciplines that is most often maintained through the unconscious choices that scholars make. While there is clearly a “conscious” and “comparative” component in the creation of many social boundaries, the largely “unconscious” choices that people make also help to maintain insular academic cultures. These institutional “blind-spots”—cultural boundaries that are maintained by institutional ignorance—contribute to the maintenance of institutional parochialism. In effect, these boundaries exist because people in institutions have little contact with, or

interest in, the experiences of “the other.” To be clear, it is unlikely that the phenomenon of institutional parochialism is limited to Western scholars and Western academic disciplines; institutional parochialism is likely a condition in many academic communities.

Here, we are particularly interested in the paradox that while the sociological discipline is increasingly diverse in terms of its members’ backgrounds and perspectives, the discipline can still be characterized as “parochial” because many still study Western societies as opposed to societies elsewhere. Using a content analysis of articles published in two sociology of religion journals, this study explores the degree of institutional parochialism within the sociology of religion, while considering possible influences on the content of published scholarship.

Institutional Parochialism and the Sociology of Religion

The sociology of religion has often been criticized for focusing an inordinate amount of attention on the study of “mainline” Protestantism (Beyer 2000). But, more recently, the field has become associated with inquiries into “new religious movements,” Scientology, the rise of Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the study of cults, and the increased support for evangelical Protestantism among the peoples of Latin and South America. Indeed, the disciplinary focus on religion would seemingly orient this field toward attracting scholars who are more often inclined to investigate non-Western societies and non-Western religions.

We chose to code sociology of religion journals for article content just previous to, and then directly following, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. During this time period there was greater public interest in Muslim movements and Muslim societies. Thus, we are able to capture the extent to which scholars within the sociology of religion responded to these events and produced more scholarship focusing on Islam and the Middle East. The coding of journal articles—as opposed to scholarly monographs—offers an opportunity to gauge the most immediate response that an academic community has to an event. While we did not code scholarly monographs, it is likely that the content of monographs—over a broader period of time—is similar to that of articles in terms of the topics and faiths that are studied.

Parochialism, Cultural Boundaries, and Institutional Isomorphism

We regard institutional parochialism as a cultural form of institutional isomorphism, a process in which institutions shift from initial diversity to “startling homogeneity” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). To paraphrase DiMaggio and Powell (1983:148), many look at the sociology of religion and are impressed by the breadth of ideas surveyed and the diversity of subjects covered; instead, we ask, to what degree do social scientists in this field study their own society to the exclusion of others? We posit that institutional parochialism should be conceived of as a form of normative isomorphism. In effect, it is largely normative for Western sociologists to study Western society.

Normative pressures are intrinsically tied to professionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Through professionalization, organizations set standards for membership. These standards produce members with a common background and force members of an organization to follow a common career path. For example, within academic sociology, normative pressures are built into the acquisition of academic credentials, the graduate training process, and the requirements established for career advancement.

In addition to normative pressures, mimetic and coercive pressures also increase isomorphism. *Mimetic pressures* occur because of uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). When members of an organization are unsure of the organization's future or legitimacy, they often imitate organizations viewed as successful and legitimate. In effect, if members of the sociology of religion are concerned about the position of their discipline in the academy, as a means of remaining productive and securing tenure and promotion, it is likely members would begin to model the sociology of religion after the broader discipline of sociology and adopt the popular content areas and research agendas of the larger field.

Coercive pressures occur when formal and informal rules influence the way an organization functions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Formal rules or laws may require an organization to act in uniform ways. Similarly, informal rules, such as cultural expectations, also influence how an organization functions. As it relates to higher education, sociology departments at colleges and universities were compelled by The Council of the American Sociological Association to adopt a major curriculum that met certain criteria (Eberts et al. 1990). Similarly, colleges and universities are subject to legal and political pressures that cause policies and standard operating procedures to conform to certain expectations (Levinson 1989).

All of these isomorphic pressures affect the content that academics produce. In this respect, if there is no normative or coercive pressure to study Islam within the sociology of religion, then it becomes unlikely—in the absence of any mimetic pressure—that the study of Islam will be conducted by scholars in the future. For example, if relatively few academics consider it normative that their department should have a member who specializes in the study of Islam, then fewer people will be trained who can competently study the faith in the future.

Previous Analysis of the Sociology of Religion

Scholars who study religion have previously investigated the content of articles published in journals and presented at conferences within the discipline. Most recently, there were several surveys of this literature that appeared in the December 2000 issue (v. 39 n. 4) of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (JSSR)* on the occasion of the journal's fiftieth anniversary. Most of these articles investigated the continuity and change in the field that had taken place during the past half-century. Most concluded that the field had changed dramatically, specifically in that significant progress had been made in terms of investigating faiths other than "mainline" Protestantism (Neitz 2000) and that studies of "the other" had steadily increased since 1950 (Beyer 2000). However, when these changes were described, the comparative analytical categories used were extraordinarily broad. While Beyer

(2000) demonstrated that “mainline” Protestant faiths were less likely to be studied in 1999 than in 1950, he did not create categories that specified the other faiths being studied (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc.). In effect, increasing diversity was characterized as a tendency to not study Protestants as much as in the past. Though the tenor of many of these review articles was often self-congratulatory, many also alluded to the fact that sociology of religion was often considered an insular discipline somewhat “out-of-step” with respect to issues being debated in the broader field of sociology (Beyer 2000).

Overall, the articles in this review issue tended to express optimism when evaluating the progress made within the discipline, contending that article quality was better, the methodologies used were more complex, and the number of topics studied was more diverse (Maus and Hammons 2000). One exception to this trend was the critical assessment of the field offered by Wallace (2000) in which she discussed her early attempts to “bring women into” the study of religion. She also offered specific recommendations for increasing the number of women in leadership positions within the discipline.

Again, to paraphrase DiMaggio and Powell (1983:148), while a case can be made for the increasing diversity of members (and ideas) within the sociology of religion, we investigated whether Western social scientists who study religion tend to investigate their own society to the exclusion of others. We argue that, despite increasing calls for an expanded focus on non-Christian faiths and non-Western societies (Smith 2008), the field is marked by institutional parochialism. In particular, institutional parochialism in the sociology of religion can be conceived as a form of normative isomorphism. Despite the recognition that studying “the other” is an enterprise that social scientists should undertake, the composition and preoccupations of scholars in the sociology of religion make the study of “the other” difficult.

Propositions

Because of institutional parochialism, our expectation was that scholars publishing within the sociology of religion would not produce much academic work associated with the study of Islam or Muslim societies. We focused on Islam because the time period studied, from 2001 to 2008, was generally a period when Westerners were becoming more interested in Islam and the Middle East. Nonetheless, it seemed unlikely that the focus of scholarship within the field of sociology generally, and sociology of religion specifically, would change much during this time period as it relates to the study of faith groups. Overall, because of the institutional isomorphic pressures noted earlier, we expected that Western sociology, despite the existence of a few notable cross-cultural enterprises, was primarily occupied by parochial interests. In effect, we expected that the study of Islam, and particularly Islam as practiced by people outside the West, would not be commonly studied after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

At the same time, scholars within the sociology of religion are sometimes preoccupied with the idea that the field, prominent when the discipline was first founded, has experienced decline in recent years. As such, we did expect the

sociology of religion to “change” as a result of *mimetic pressure*, leading researchers to adopt programs closely associated with more prominent sociological sub-disciplines. Consequently, we also expected that members of the discipline, because of concerns of decline, and in an effort to increase the legitimacy of the field, were more likely to pivot and focus on topical religious issues that were being debated within Western society as opposed to focusing on religions, and religious practices, that occur outside the West.

Data and Methods

Data

This study is a content analysis of 490 articles published from the years 2001 to 2008 in two journals associated with the sociology of religion discipline, the *Sociology of Religion* and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (JSSR)*. The journals are published respectively by the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). It is important to note that while *JSSR* content has been dominated by sociologists, the journal has also become increasingly interdisciplinary and includes research conducted by non-sociologists, primarily psychologists and, increasingly, political scientists. Also important is that both associations that publish these journals explicitly characterize their members and their research programs in international terms. For example, the ASR website states that:

“Our 700+ members come from all continents of the world, and their interests and perspectives are just as diverse and global. The Association encourages and communicates research that ranges widely across the multiple themes and approaches in the study of religion, and is a focal point for comparative, historical and theoretical contributions to the field” (Sociology of Religion 2008).

Likewise, the *JSSR* journal website states that,

“Drawing on a rich interdisciplinary cross-section of scholarship—including religion, sociology, political science, and psychology—the journal offers perspectives on national and international issues such as brainwashing and cults, religious persecution, and right wing authoritarianism. The journal is an exciting and timely publication to keep readers current with the role and impact of religion in today’s world” (Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 2008).

Generally, our criteria for coding articles, which is outlined in the [Appendix](#) at the end of this paper, led to a significant undercounting of studies and articles of Christian communities. For example, articles that broadly investigated the relationship between religiosity and well-being, religiosity and morality, prayer and well-being, church attendance and spousal abuse, etc., were not coded as articles that were a study of a specific religion or faith community even though the data used in most of these studies were predominately from Christian communities. We also coded Mormonism, Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventist as being distinct faith traditions that were not coded as studies of Christian communities. At the same

time, most of these articles were clearly studies of “Western” social groups, and were coded as such. But, our criteria also caused an undercount in the number of studies that could have been characterized as studies of “the West.” This was primarily because we did not include studies of Eastern European groups as studies of a “Western” group.

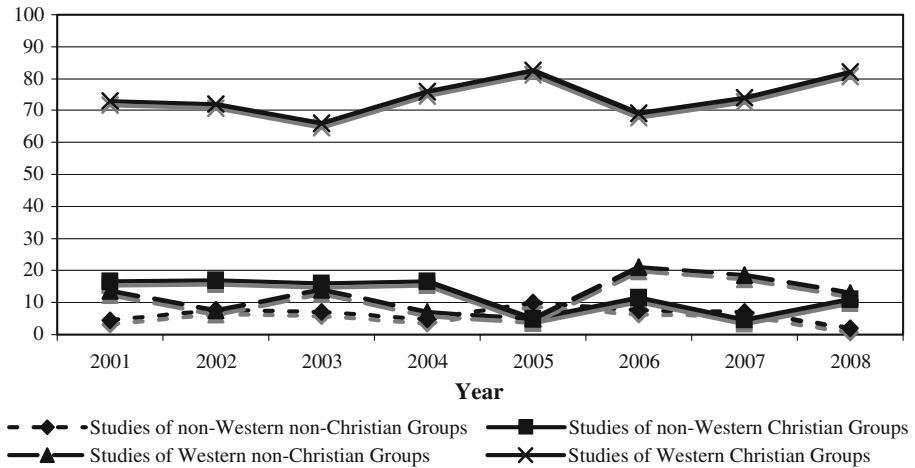
Measures and Possible Reasons for Content Change Over Time

When we compared the article content of the two journals or analyzed article content over time, we employed a simple test of statistical significance, a chi square test. We used Phi as a measure of association when comparing journal content and Lambda as a directional measure to indicate if journal content had changed over time. These are not powerful statistical measures and were used only to give an indication of whether the article content differed significantly both across the two journals and over time. We can only indirectly infer as to the reasons why, or why not, the content of articles changed over time. In this regard, the period in which these articles were published corresponded with two events that could have caused a change in the focus of social scientists who study religion. The first was the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States by Islamic extremists and the subsequent American invasions of Afghanistan and, in 2003, Iraq. The content of articles published in 2001 and 2002 serves as a baseline concerning the diversity of articles, particularly articles that studied Muslim communities, that were published by these journals previous to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Given the time it takes to have journal articles reviewed and published, the year 2003 would be the earliest that an increase in studies on Islam could appear in these journals.

The second factor that could affect journal content was an attempt by editors of *Sociology of Religion* to increase the diversity of its content. From 2001 to 2005, Nancy Nason-Clark, a sociologist employed outside of the United States in Canada, served as editor of *Sociology of Religion*. At the beginning of her editorship, she stated that the journal intended to encourage “submissions that would enable our journal to reflect diversity across gender, ethnic, cultural, religious and career lines” (Nason-Clark 2001:iii). Given the emphasis on diversity, Nason-Clark’s editorship provides a good opportunity to explore how academics within a discipline respond to centralized attempts to change journal content. In effect, we think the attempt to diversify journal content by Nason-Clark and others who supported the *Sociology of Religion* during her editorship can be read as an example of how academics within a field respond to mimetic pressures.

Findings

On the one hand, the range of topics and geographic regions covered by these journals is quite broad. All of the major faiths and a wide range of geographic areas were represented. Still, studies of religion were concentrated on the study of Christianity generally, and Western Christianity specifically (Fig. 1). Of the 409 articles published during this period that explicitly studied aspects of a religious faith or a religious community, 82% ($n=335$) included the study of Christian communities. Of these,



Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 percent because of comparative studies.

Fig. 1 Faith group and geographic region studied as percentage of articles in sociology of religion journals, 2001–2008.

90% ($n=302$) included the study of Western Christian communities and 15.5% ($n=52$) included the study of a non-Western Christian communities. From 2001 to 2008, studies of Christianity dominated the content of sociology of religion journals.

The inclusion of non-Western societies in studies of both journals was 17.4% ($n=83$ of 477 articles), but there was a significant difference (.012) in the frequency these studies appeared in the two journals. In this respect, the *Sociology of Religion* was more likely to include studies of non-Western societies from 2001 to 2008 (Table 1). This difference is likely attributable to the fact that during Nancy Nason-Clark's editorship of the *Sociology of Religion* from 2001 to 2005, when the

Table 1 Studies that included non-Western geographic regions in sociology of religion journals, 2001–2008

Sociology of religion	Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	Combined	
2001	6 (25)	9 (17)	15 (21)
2002	6 (30)	11 (22)	17 (23)
2003	10 (42)	3 (7)	13 (20)
2004	5 (28)	5 (16)	10 (20)
2005	2 (11)	4 (14)	6 (13)
2006	6 (23)	5 (16)	11 (19)
2007	0 (0)	5 (14)	5 (10)
2008	3 (20)	3 (7)	6 (10)
Total	38 (24)	45 (14)	83 (17)

Percentage of articles published in parentheses

journal's leadership sought increased diversity, the proportion of studies of non-Western communities (through the year 2006) was particularly high. Indeed, following Nason-Clark's editorship, during the years 2007 and 2008, there was a drop in the rate of articles that included study of non-Western groups. In effect, both journals have published studies of non-Western societies at roughly the same rate following Nason-Clark's departure as editor of *Sociology of Religion*. One additional factor could be that *JSSR*, while traditionally dominated by sociologists, has recently published more research conducted within other fields, such as psychology, that may be more parochial than sociology.

We did not find a significant change in the study of Muslim communities following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in either journal (Table 2). Indeed, the number of studies of Muslim communities actually declined during 2004–2005. In 2002 and 2003 there were seven articles that included the study of Muslim communities and Muslim faith. In 2007 there were also seven articles that included the study of Muslim communities within these journals, but most of these (five articles) appeared in one special edition of *Sociology of Religion* that investigated the act of veiling by Muslim women residing in the West. Two articles in 2003 investigated a Muslim community in association with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As it turns out, only one other article in our data specifically addressed how Muslim communities, or Western perceptions of Muslim communities, responded to the 9/11 attacks. Also notable is the low threshold as to what constituted a study of faith. In comparative studies the information provided on Muslim communities, compared with that of other faith communities, was often cursory (e.g. Voas 2006).

Overall, during the eight year period we investigated, 9.8% ($n=40$) of the articles of faith communities ($n=409$) included study of a Muslim community. Of these, 35% ($n=14$) were non-comparative studies of a Muslim community that resided outside the West. Nearly half ($n=18$) of these studies investigated Muslim communities that resided in the West. Relative to the study of other faith traditions, Muslim communities were the third most commonly studied ahead of Buddhist communities ($n=23$), Mormon communities ($n=18$), Hindu communities ($n=16$).

Table 2 Studies that included Muslim communities as percent of articles in sociology of religion journals, 2001–2008

	Sociology of religion	Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	Combined
2001	1 (5)	5 (11)	6 (9)
2002	1 (6)	6 (13)	7 (11)
2003	3 (14)	4 (11)	7 (12)
2004	1 (4)	1 (3)	2 (4)
2005	1 (6)	1 (4)	2 (5)
2006	1 (4)	4 (15)	5 (10)
2007	5 (39)	2 (7)	7 (16)
2008	1 (8)	3 (9)	4 (9)
Total	14 (10)	26 (10)	40 (10)

Percentage of articles published in parentheses

New-pagans ($n=13$) and New Age groups ($n=13$). The study of Islamic communities ranked behind the study of Christian communities ($n=335$) and Jewish communities ($n=69$). The two journals generally covered different faith traditions at roughly the same rates.

Overall, studies of Islam were not particularly common in either journal. At the same time, there was a statistically significant difference (.012 phi) in terms of the rate at which these journals included information on non-Western communities. In this regard, the content of the *Sociology of Religion*, particularly during the editorship of Nason-Clark, is less parochial compared to the content of *JSSR*. Overall, China ($n=10$) and Israel ($n=7$) were the best represented countries within the non-West regions. However, many studies that included non-Western regions concentrated on Christian traditions brought during Western colonization or through missionary work. The most understudied region, by far, was sub-Saharan Africa. The region appeared in 7 studies. Four of these studies were broadly comparative and included most regions of the world. Of articles that were non-comparative studies that concentrated on non-Western communities ($n=58$) only 5% ($n=3$) were studies of an African community. These three articles represented less than 1% of all the studies published during this period.

Mimetic Pressure and Change within the Sociology of Religion

While the scholarly output associated with the study of Islam did not change in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, output within the field did appear to change during this time as a response to mimetic pressures. Further, the field did produce scholarship associated with ongoing contentious religious debates that were taking place in Western communities. In effect, the content within the sociology of religion does change and respond to pressure to be more productive in certain content areas.

Generally, it is apparent that in the late 1990s there was a small but significant nexus of women within the field of the sociology of religion who were arguing for the inclusion of women's studies and feminist perspectives within the discipline. For example, in the 50th anniversary edition of the *JSSR*, there were calls by women scholars to "bring women into" the study of religion (Wallace 2000). Conversely, in this same journal, there were general calls for a need to increase the study of other faiths, but there was no clear nexus of scholars closely associated with a program designed to study Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

The study of gender issues within all fields of sociology has become increasingly common. In fact, from 2001 to 2008, the American Sociological Association section on Sex and Gender had more members than any other section (American Sociological Association 2008). As such, it is increasingly rare that there are not a few prominent academics who "do gender" within the sub-disciplines of sociology. The field of sociology of religion was a relative "late-comer" with respect to publishing feminist academic studies, but scholars within the field did feel pressure from some of their peers to bring more women into the sociology of religion (Wallace 2000). Moreover, it was common for some to make the argument that adopting broader perspectives was one way to "revitalize" a field that was often characterized as insular (Nason-Clark and Neitz 2001).

We do not have a baseline for the diversity of articles that appeared in the *Sociology of Religion* previous to Nason-Clark's editorship at the journal, but there are some indications that journal content from late 2001 through early 2006 reflects Nason-Clark's editorial decision to address blind-spots and to increase the breadth of topics considered. As stated previously, while studies of different faiths were represented in the two journals at roughly the same rate, it was more common to find the study of non-Western societies in the *Sociology of Religion* than *JSSR*. The other compelling difference between the journals concerns the incidences in which studies that explicitly focused on women's issues and religion were published. In this respect, the *Sociology of Religion* was far more likely to publish this type of scholarship when compared to *JSSR* (.001). Table 3 shows the distribution of articles, by year, in the *Sociology of Religion* and *JSSR* that focused on the study of women.

We also found incidences in which it appears that content changed in both journals to reflect broader social debates taking place within Western society. This is particularly true concerning studies related to religion and homosexuality. For example, studies related to religion and homosexuality were published with significantly higher frequencies in both journals in 2001 and 2002 when thirteen articles on the subject appeared. Most of these articles clearly reflected the fact that Western congregations were increasingly debating the role of openly gay parishioners and priests (e.g. Olsen and Cadge 2002; Reimer and Park 2001; Wilcox 2002; Yip 2002).

Studies of religion and homosexuality declined after this period, but it seems that researchers in the field have responded to an ongoing social debate associated with religion in the West. Another reason that academics in the sociology of religion may have become interested in the study of homosexuality and religion—beyond the fact that the issue was increasingly part of the public discourse—is related to the fact that studies of sexuality have also become more normative within the broader field of sociology. In effect, while debates associated with the acceptance of gay parishioners and ordaining gay priests were topical issues in the West in 2001 and 2002, the field may have also been responding to mimetic pressures to produce studies associated

Table 3 Studies of women's issues published in sociology of religion journals, 2001–2008

Sociology of religion		Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	Combined
2001	5 (21)	5 (9)	10 (13)
2002	7 (37)	5 (9)	12 (17)
2003	3 (13)	1 (2)	4 (6)
2004	1 (6)	3 (8)	4 (9)
2005	2 (11)	0 (0)	2 (4)
2006	4 (16)	4 (11)	8 (13)
2007	5 (36)	2 (6)	7 (14)
2008	0 (0)	6 (14)	6 (10)
Total	27 (17)	26 (8)	53 (11)

Percentage of articles published in parentheses

with sexuality and religion because these studies are increasingly normative within the broader field of sociology.

Discussion and Conclusion

Counts of religious adherents worldwide are often contentious (see Hsu et al. 2008), but a recent Pew Research Center Report (2009) estimated that there are currently 1.57 billion Muslims in the world, representing 23% of the world's population. The number of Christians worldwide, based on the World Christian Database (WCD), are often estimated at around 2.1 billion (Barrett et al. 2001). Estimates concerning the growth rates for the major faiths generally indicate that Islam is among the fastest growing religions worldwide. Still, the study of Islam—and particularly Islam as practiced outside the West—is not well represented within the sociology of religion.

We believe Islam is a neglected topic of study because scholars within the sociology of religion face little institutional pressure to study the faith, particularly as it is practiced outside of the West. In effect, while many in the sociology of religion recognize that Islam is a neglected area of study, few are inclined to study Islam themselves. Moreover, because of the absence of mimetic pressure within the field to study Islam it seems unlikely the faith will be studied more in the near future. We feel this condition is exacerbated by institutional parochialism. In effect, academics within institutions sometimes exclude ideas, fail to adopt innovative approaches, and fail to explore change not because there are symbolic boundaries that make change taboo, but because people are simply unaware of how to engage in, conduct, and invite the changes they may at times desire.

The training process often compounds institutional parochialism. Early in their undergraduate education, many young sociologists receive minimal exposure to studies of non-Western groups, as demonstrated by the Western focus of sociology textbooks (Najafizadeh and Mennerick 1992) and content of undergraduate courses (Kain 2007). In graduate school, institutional parochialism is further intensified during the advisor-advisee relationship, the pressure to publish research in academic journals, the pressure to present papers at academic conferences, and the teaching of undergraduate courses, all of which are primarily concerned with, or dominated by, issues relating to religion in the West.

There are clearly structural reasons why academics within the sociology of religion respond to religious debate that takes place in Western society and neglect other areas of the world. Most obviously, Western researchers have greater access to Western communities. Moreover, particularly as it relates to quantitative data, there are far more data collected in the West than data collected in the global south. Nonetheless, there are data sets—particularly the World Values Survey administered by researchers at the University of Michigan—that could be used by those interested in the values associated with faith in non-Western societies. Additionally, researchers may lack skills, such as foreign language fluency or historical and cultural knowledge of a region, that are needed to research non-Western societies. Still, while issues associated with geographic proximity are important, we believe that institutional parochialism exacerbates these structural impediments. In effect, if the study of Islam was normative within the sociology of religion, more resources would

be devoted to training scholars to study the faith. Likewise, greater resources would be devoted toward collecting data in communities outside the West and toward producing more studies of Muslim communities.

Overall, most scholars within the sociology of religion are not well-placed to study non-Western societies. In particular, the study of Islam has not been a preoccupation of Western sociologists who study religion and there does not appear to be an organized group of scholars who are primarily concerned with increasing the study of Islam and Muslim communities in the future. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that the broader discipline of sociology, while it often calls for creating multi-cultural approaches and maintaining diversity within the field, tends to frame this call as a need to study diversity as it exists within the West.

While it is hard to characterize the content of scholarship published in sociology of religion journals as entirely parochial, it was far more common for Western sociologists who study religion to study their own society. Notably, although we did not conduct a systematic study concerning the backgrounds of those scholars who did study non-Western communities, it was apparent, judging from author surnames, that the inclination to study groups with which one has a connection—whether it is a common faith group, a common ethnic group, a common national group etc.—also existed among the scholars inclined to study non-Western faiths as practiced outside the West. In effect, those inclined to study Eastern European countries had Eastern European surnames (e.g. Tchepournaya 2003). Chinese surnames were most often attached to studies of mainland China and Taiwan (e.g. Liu 2002; Yang 2005;). And in the studies of Middle Eastern groups, the surnames often indicated an Arab, Turkish and Iranian ethnic identity (e.g. Tamadonfar 2001; Hashem 2006).

It was a fortunate coincidence that during the period we investigated there was an ongoing attempt to diversify journal content published within *Sociology of Religion*. Indeed, we did find that *Sociology of Religion* included more studies of non-Western regions than *JSSR* during the period we investigated. At the same time, there was not a significant difference in the rates that non-Christian faiths were studied. And, even when non-Western groups were better represented in a journal, it was apparent that some specific groups (e.g. studies of African communities) still had extraordinarily low representation. We do believe that mimetic pressure to increase article diversity within the sociology of religion is likely one reason why editors and supporters of the *Sociology of Religion* pursued change within the journal, but that institutional parochialism within the field placed limits on how much change was possible.

Overall, institutional parochialism might best be conceived as a continuum. In this respect, we actually suspect that the sociology of religion is far more “worldly” in its orientation than most other sub-fields within the broader discipline of sociology. As such, it would be interesting to study whether the scholarship generated within other prominent subfields of the discipline (e.g. social movements and collective behavior, sex and gender, social psychology) are more or less parochial than the sociology of religion. We suspect that if scholarship in sociology of religion is largely parochial that the scholarship produced in other sub-disciplines of sociology is far more so.

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Appendix

Coding Methods and Criteria

Campbell initially analyzed all articles for content. Poulson then reviewed the coded articles and together we reconciled differences of opinions concerning article content. The articles were coded for variables ascertaining a) if the society of inquiry was located in a Western or non-Western region, b) the religion(s) studied, c) the gender and university of the researchers, d) the general topic studied (e.g. social movements, gender relations, social inequality etc.), and e) the perspectives (theoretical) and methodology (qualitative or quantitative) that researchers used. In most cases, nominal variables were used to code for the incidence in which a content area or methodology was used within a study.

We excluded introductions, book reviews, lectures, “Forum” contributions (in *JSSR*) and Presidential addresses from our analysis. Also, despite using data from predominately Christian communities, articles that broadly investigated the relationship between religiosity and well-being, religiosity and morality, prayer and well-being, church attendance and abuse etc. were not coded as articles that studied a specific religion or faith community (e.g. Ellison and Anderson 2001; Maclean et al. 2004; Maynard et al. 2001). Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventist were treated as a distinct faith groups and not coded as Christian communities. Generally, past studies often consider these groups as distinct from “mainline” Christian groups, but most adherents would self-identify as Christians. As a practical matter, if we had included these groups in our counts of Christian studies then journal content would have appeared even more Christian-oriented

Overall, our definition concerning what constituted a study of a faith community significantly undercounted the total number and proportion of articles that did, as a practical matter, study Christians. For example, if studies of religiosity that used datasets which primarily or exclusively surveyed Christians were included, then the number of articles coded as a study of “Christianity” would have increased significantly. In effect, our coding guidelines, combined with the exclusion of book reviews and addresses, undercounted the incidences in which an article was a study or discussion of Christians. Of course, there were those rare instances when public addresses and book reviews of non-Western cultures and non-Christian faiths were also omitted from the analysis.

As others have found with respect to coding academic articles for content, some judgments were difficult to make. For example, a study concerning the increasing number of academics in China who study religion often made references to the study of Buddhism and Christianity in China (Yang 2004). It also briefly discussed why the study of Christianity was a sensitive topic in China, but, relative to most articles on faith communities, it did not include a substantive discussion or comparison of either of these faiths as practiced in China. This was clearly a study of a non-Western society, in this case Chinese academics who study religion, but was it a study of Buddhism and Christianity too? In this case we ultimately decided that there was enough substantive discussion of Buddhism and Christianity (a few paragraphs) that the article was coded as a study of these faiths. The article also met the criteria to be included as a study of atheism.

The most difficult articles to code were those that broadly discussed theory, academic trends, or broad social trends. These articles often included a list of religions that were mentioned briefly but were not discussed in a meaningful manner. After reviewing these articles closely, we decided that a substantive discussion of some aspect of religious faith—at least a paragraph—was necessary for it to be coded as a study that investigated a religious community (e.g. Machacek 2003). Conversely, there were also a few articles that were primarily discussions of theory, such as Sharot (2002), that we judged had sufficient discussion of religious ideas—in this case beliefs associated with Hinduism and Buddhism—that they were coded as including a substantive discussion of these faiths.

For empirical studies, if a group was included in one graph or table that reported information on that religious community (e.g. Muslims, Buddhist, Sikhs etc...) we coded the article as including information on that faith community even when these communities were not discussed in the article. For example, Voas (2006) did not really discuss Islam in Scotland because the number of Muslims in Scotland is, as was briefly noted in the article, quite low. Still, Muslims were represented in tables presented in the article, so the article was coded to indicate that it was a study of Muslims (and many other religious groups) in Scotland.

One last important category with respect to this study concerns whether an article focused on a “Western” society. Academic debate as to how to categorize the “West” is usually associated with different economic and cultural conceptions of the region. Often, scholars characterize the wealthy countries in Western Europe and a few former colonies—the United States, Australia and New Zealand—as the “Western” nations. Others broaden the West to include countries that have some cultural affinity (often based on religion) with these countries. For example, the predominantly Christian countries of Eastern Europe—following the demise of the Soviet Union—are sometimes conceptualized as “Western.” We used the standard established by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR 1975–1995) in their codebook for the “Westernization Comparative Data Set” (ICPSR codebook). This includes European Union countries, the United States, Australia and New Zealand as the members of the West. It excludes the former Soviet Republics, Russia and Eastern European countries. Again, this is a conservative definition as to what constitutes the “West” in that some former Communist-Bloc countries—particularly East Germany—are now often considered to be “Western” or “Western-oriented.” In this study they were characterized as non-Western. As a practical matter, if we had expanded our definition of “the West” to include Eastern Europe and Russia then journal content would have appeared even more Western-oriented. Studies of Israeli society, which were the best represented in the Middle East region, were also considered studies of a non-Western society.

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