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Symposium: the achievement of David Martin

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Introductory Essay for *Society* special issue on David Martin

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The essays collected here show some of the collective debts that the sociology of religion – or perhaps better, sociology and religion in general – owe to David Martin. The authors include friends, colleagues, students, and admirers of his. Many of us did not know each other personally before taking on this project (which speaks to the great breadth of David’s work), but all of us greatly admired him and gained enormously from his broad-ranging work. And all of us miss the shining light that he offered as a human being and as a scholar.

Adam and Rob got to know David personally through several of his extended stints as a visiting fellow at Boston University. Partly as a result of that connection, Rob asked him to come to China to help teach in a summer program on religion. This was quite a different context from the graduate and tutorial supervision that some of the essays below mention, however, and made space for another side to his personality. Speaking mostly about global Pentecostalism, David spoke to large groups about his own childhood, with his Bible-quoting evangelical father who would stop to harangue people on the streets. At one point he left the small stage and fell dramatically to his knees, his hands lifted toward heaven in imitation of the charismatic experience of Pentecostals. Or perhaps “imitation” is not the right word at all, because at least to Rob, the voice of David’s father seemed to be right there. The audience was rapt.

David went on to talk about Pentecostalism in the ways that several of the essays below discuss. He spoke with great empathy for the lives of poverty that surround many Pentecostals, of the embrace of marginality that Pentecostalism can bring, and of the enormous changes it

brought, from literacy to giving up alcohol. The audience asked questions with some enthusiasm, especially because a significant number were themselves part of a newly growing Protestant surge in China at the time. Now David appeared not as an inspired sort of half-preacher, half-professor of the transcendent, but as the deeply empirical and realist sociologist that he also was. He reminded them that literacy – powerfully promoted by Pentecostals because everyone needed direct access to the Bible – was indeed revolutionary for people, above all for the children of that first generation of converts. Yet, for those children, literacy opened up an entire world beyond the Bible, and they often moved away from the parents’ beliefs into new directions, religious or not. And second, he pointed out that there was no reason to imagine that the surge in Christian conversions in China was any different than any of the other “awakenings” of the past, which soon faded back again. In retrospect, this seems like David in a nutshell: inspirational as he allowed the transcendent to flow through him, and equally sobering as he insisted on seeing the world as it really is, with all its ugly compromises.

Once in Boston he asked one of us to read over a letter he planned to send to an overzealous copy editor. It began, “I have divided your comments into two categories: errors of ignorance and errors of arrogance.” The sentence seemed to sum up several aspects of David’s personality that come through as well in the essays that follow: his wit and elegance of expression, but also his impatience with those who would not really engage seriously with facts and ideas, but just accepted the stereotyped and the standardized, whether as editors or as sociologists.

David’s academic work had three broad focuses over the many decades of his career, along with many smaller themes along the way. These were his very early and trenchant critique of secularization theory along with his alternative understandings, followed by a series of equally important books on Pentecostalism, and then his work on music and poetry toward the end of his

life. Although many of the essays that follow think about David across the entire corpus of his work, most of them expand primarily on just one of these areas.

Sam Brewitt-Taylor looks especially at David's work on secularization theory, and shows how far ahead of his time David was. Brewitt-Taylor praises *The Religious and the Secular* (1969) in particular as having anticipated post-secular scholarship almost half a century in advance. He shows how David's work went far beyond simply showing that secularization was empirically not a universal trend. David's work deconstructed the key ideas behind the very concept, showing how secularization theory was the result of what Brewitt-Taylor calls a "secular ideological program." He concludes that David Martin's ideas "did not simply critique a particular sociological theory, but the entire cultural self-understanding of Western secular societies."

Martyn Percy also develops David's critical thinking about secularization (and much else as well), but places it squarely into the context of the English cathedral. Following Mady Thung, he develops a distinction between organizational and institutional models of the church. The organizational model works something like an NGO, with a set membership and a kind of "frenetic activism." This one appears to be increasingly common in England, but with ever declining success. Cathedrals, Percy suggests, instead remain popular because they appeal to the institutional aspect of the church, meaning something broadly culturally resilient through its liturgical and aesthetic resources, always available to people even if it sometimes lies dormant. This, he suggests, is the church as envisioned by David Martin, both David the sociologist and David the priest.

The essays by David Maxwell and Grace Davie turn our attention to David's work on Pentecostalism. As Maxwell points out, David's work on this was just as pioneering as his earlier

work on secularization, and for similar reasons. As Maxwell says, David “sought to rescue the lives of ordinary adherents from the condescension of secular-minded sociologists and theologians.” Each of his three books on this topic, expanding out from his original research on the topic in Latin America, had broad influence. These writings inspired, for example, anthropology’s discovery of Christianity as a vital research topic around the world in the early 2000s.

Grace Davie focuses on *Forbidden Revolutions*, in which David compared Pentecostalism in Latin America with Catholicism in Eastern Europe around the transformational year of 1989. She stresses the empirically-minded and contextual-sensitive side of David’s work: “Times and places matter – a great deal more, it turns out, than the assumptions of sociological theory.” As David already began to show in the secularization work, we cannot start from Western assumptions built on one unique historical experience. David’s story is instead about how the marginal can take center stage, how people can choose actively to embrace that marginality, and its potential for social change. As David would be the first to recognize, of course, contexts continue to change, even after books are written. Davie thus updates his thinking from her own work to show for Eastern Europe how the tensions between real-world institutions and ideals of transcendence have continued to affect the church through new political bargains. The sobering general point that transcendence in the real world will always be compromised by the needs of power is an overriding theme in all of David’s work. His understanding of such power eventually led his lifelong interest in pacifism toward a recognition of the necessity to compromise with the use of violence in political life.

Toward the end of his long career, David turned more toward issues of art, poetry, and music. These are more generally thought of as topics for the humanities rather than the social

sciences, but for David such a division of labor was completely artificial, as Athena Leoussi points out in her contribution. Instead, he offered ways to think of the arts as inextricable from broader social change – not as mere reflections of underlying social transformations, but as critical parts of the very process of change. She also makes a revealing observation: “The twentieth century, through its series of cultural revolutions that culminated in the student and youth movements of the 1960s, would challenge the cultural centrality of both Christianity and of the ‘Western canon’ – the ‘high culture’ of Europe, its art, music, literature and poetry, as offering pinnacles of human creative and imaginative achievement. And David would fight for both.” This is absolutely true, but not because David was fighting a desperate rearguard action in defense of lost moral values. His work on Pentecostalism, with its deeply felt empathy for the desperately poor people who form the heart of the movement in some areas, shows that he saw a completely different dynamic. For David, religion and the arts were two of the areas in which we could feel the transcendent most intimately and richly. The end of the ritual or concert soon returned us to the banal world of power and its corruptions, but always left us with the vision of what might yet be possible.

This point is made very clearly by Bernice Martin in her essay. Study of the arts was certainly an unexpected move for a renowned sociologist of religion, but it showed clearly an overriding theme of all of David’s work: that secularization could never be the loss of the possibility of transcendence, but needs instead to be seen in its broadest sense as the evolving relationship between the world and the transcendent, which is always unsettled. He was thus never just a sociologist of the secular, or even the one who complicated the story of secularization. He was instead the geometer of the very different “angles of transcendence” that we can see across societies, and across aesthetic, economic, political and social worlds.

Nikos Kokosalakis, in his contribution, looks over the full vista of David's work, bringing to the fore especially the key point about the dialectic between transcendence and the necessities of life in the empirical world. He adds to the other articles an emphasis on what he calls David's "symbolist" approach, meaning an emphasis on the mythos of religious symbols as underlying any logos. That is, with David's work, we can always feel the transcendent in its many guises. And yet, at the same time, David never gives in to starry-eyed utopianism; he always recognized the inevitability of the demands of the world.

Finally, Seligman and Weller stress David's understanding of the individual in relationship to the broader world, and especially to the acceptance of difference. For David, the individual was never an autonomous isolate, but always part of a whole. Crucially, that individual part was never simply one among a mass of other identical parts with which it merged. It is a *differentiated* part, meaning that we always have to find ways to accept difference, because a complex whole cannot work without incorporating difference. Furthermore, liturgical order is one of the most fundamental ways of allowing space for such difference. Even though, as many of the authors here point out, power can never be avoided in David's sociology, religion (like the arts) can mediate power with the transcendent, even as religious institutions themselves are also implicated in power relations. Thus in the end David has given us a religious sociology of hope, which always lies in and relies on a vision of the beyond.

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