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**Book Talk:**  
*Society and the Death of God*, by Sal Restivo  
(2021, Routledge)

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Written in a time of immense social turbulence (i.e., the present moment), retired Professor of Sociology Sal Restivo offers an anti-God apologetic with an emphatic moral imperative for social scientists. In this short but dense volume, he has the ambitious goal of “driving the last nails into the Old One’s coffin... to truly kill God once and for all” (x). By his own admission, the narrative is not linear but rather a “jungle of ideas, concepts and theories” (2). A noticeable lack of organization can be challenging for readers to overcome, but there are in my estimation three main points made throughout that emerge as a core argument, namely that (1) sociology has finally revealed that there are no supernatural beings, (2) belief in God poses existential threats to human survival, and (3) social scientists should be more honest and assertive about the non-existence of God. In the spirit of the Book Talks, I will summarize some key supports for each of these three points while posing questions for further dialogue.

Point 1. There is no all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, transcendent being that created everything, let alone the particular gods envisioned in the sacred texts of the world’s great religions. And critically, while we cannot arrive to this truth through philosophy (see Chapter 5) or physics, sociology does the trick. It is as if Restivo is finishing Durkheim’s thought that all gods are “real”—in the sociological sense, yes, because they represent the communities that worship them, but *not* in the ontological sense. Any claims of realism of the transcendent or supernatural must overcome not simply the lack of this-worldly physical evidence or the barriers of internal logical consistency; more importantly, such claims must overcome a sociological cogito, or sociological doubt (27). When you wash all claims of otherworldly truth through the social, cultural, and political processes involved in the construction of religious symbols, rituals, and bounded cultures (20-21, 43-44, 60, 87-98, 150), what remains?

Chapters 4 and 9 do the lion’s share of outlining the social evidence that contradicts the existence of God. Religion has for millennia largely overcome physical and logical challenges because it satisfies certain social and individual needs: a sense of belongingness and compassion (42-43, also 151-152), existential certainty (51), and a moral order that facilitates nation-building given its capacity for generating cohesion and cooperation (22, 47, 150-151).

Religion’s success notwithstanding, supernatural claims are still a mistake of reference, according to Restivo. To paraphrase, the natural and social environment of early humans favored the ability to find patterns and infer cause and effect. The experience of collective effervescence during religious ritual required an explanation before careful sociological analysis was able to provide one, so this experience was erroneously attributed to supernatural causes outside the group itself (116). Behold, the gods. Religion emerged precisely *because* it satisfies those individual and collective needs.

Perhaps nowhere is the conclusion stated more sharply than in Restivo's description of the Transcendental Fallacy in Chapter 4. On the possibility of supernatural worlds, he states assuredly, "There are no such worlds" (82). Indeed, religion is not alone in this error; he extends the criticism even to the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics and the simulation hypothesis. It is here, then, that Restivo subtly goes further even than Dawkins (2006), who concludes that "God *almost* certainly does not exist" (189, emphasis added). So two questions on point 1 that I pose to Prof. Restivo include the following, the first theoretical and the second strategic.

First, you mention E.A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884) analogy, which illustrates how beings limited to three-dimensional space might be blind to or misinterpret activity in higher-ordered dimensions. What do you think are the implications, then, for the possibility of higher dimensions (e.g., as suggested by superstring theory) for certain accounts of religious experience or miracles? Does this theory make *plausible* (even if not likely) the existence of higher-order beings that could be misinterpreted as transcendent or supernatural? Or do you see Durkheim extinguishing this speculation as well?

Second, why not stop with Dawkins at near certainty rather than go all the way to absolute certainty? Do you fear alienating a certain audience—we might call them Bergerian Bracketers—who otherwise might be on board but perhaps themselves still wrestle with the ontological status of super-empirical reality, Durkheim's insights notwithstanding? Does this strong stance threaten to impede the coalition-building you outline in Appendix H as part of a necessary transition between a god-dense society and a god-less society?

Point 2. Faithful devotion to a god with no ontological reality, according to Restivo, poses an existential threat to no less than society, the planet, and human survival (178). Even the moral order that religion provides may itself be harmful, whether to the collective good or to marginalized individuals within a society. Religious compassion, he says, is a "centripetal force" (58), echoing Putnam's insights about bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). Limited access to temples in antiquity manifested as real power of the priesthood over the masses (44). Jesus as representative of the God in Christianity, he says, is indeed representative of the Old Testament God that Dawkins and others find unpleasant (25). And attempts to address the existential threats against society will "surely fail if our efforts are burdened by the ghosts of philosophies and theologies past" (56). Quite a strong claim.

That said, he admits, "For the lower classes, religion was a source of hope and release from the trials and uncertainties of everyday life" (155). Studies revealing the "dark side" of religion (e.g., Thomson 2022) notwithstanding, much social research has also demonstrated that religion in certain contexts can be good for health, crime, and drug recovery (Bell, Winder, and Blagden 2018; George,

Ellison, and Larson 2002; Lee and Bartkowski 2004). The Black Church, in particular, stands out as a US institution that has not only generated tangible resources for an otherwise marginalized community (Caldwell, Greene, and Billingsley 1992; Pattillo-McCoy 1998), but has also left an indelibly positive mark on US society through its role in the Civil Rights Movement (Morris 1996). Albeit, in other contexts—usually those characterized by the development of bonding social capital rather than bridging social capital (e.g., white evangelicalism)—religion often is measurably harmful. A question for Restivo at this point might therefore be, is religion and faith in God—real or not—what we should be most concerned about? Or are we really talking about a certain *kind* of faith, one that like Weber’s religion of the privileged simply justifies and effectively reproduces their own privilege?

Point 3. Social scientists should be more honest about the evidence of God’s non-existence and more assertive about the necessity to give up belief in God. “We have an obligation as scholars and intellectuals,” he states (127), to assert this sociological truth. Restivo does not pull punches here. His position is one of *intolerance* for wrong beliefs, because of the dangers religion poses to the planet and society (50). Education, after all, is an imposition of knowledge against falsehood. He devotes Chapter 3 to defending the virtue of truth-telling vis-à-vis the unreality of God and dangers of religious belief. Sociologists of religion (like Berger, the self-proclaimed “incurable Lutheran,” incidentally) who adopt and teach “methodological agnosticism” without taking the step to assert the non-reality of supernatural forces “fail their discipline.”

One might even read, for example on pg. 125, an outright rejection of a policy for religious tolerance and religious liberty. A question for Restivo at this point is, do you think this interpretation is fair, and if so, what are the political implications? Berger (2014) himself noted the remarkable resilience of religion in the face of the otherwise secularizing forces of modernity, and Froese (2008) documented the humanitarian crisis resulting from the Soviet project to “kill God.” Albeit the stakes you outline (e.g., nothing short of human survival) are high, but how do you supplant religious culture without imposing a new kind of tyranny? And is there risk in disillusioning young impressionable minds before an alternative moral order is established? What kind of conservative backlash, like the current movement to criminalize Critical Race Theory, might a more assertive approach by sociologists trigger?

Restivo does admit, of course, that “it is not easy to escape the shadow of God” (44), that “ripping God out of the tapestry of society shreds the glues of belongingness and compassion that hold societies together and form the foundations for morals, ethics, and values” (45). He goes on to discuss the need to create a moral order devoid of supernatural referent, a “Newer Testament” (quoted from Peter Sloterdijk, 45; also 57). To this end, Restivo sketches some “first steps

toward a secular moral order” that entails replacing a social solidarity fragmented by competing centripetal religious communities with the centrifugal force of a moral community grounded in physical reality (124-127). The details seem thin, however. One can’t help but wonder what this might look like. Given the centrality of ritual in building religion, do we need alternative rituals to replace religion? Is it even possible for ritual to create centrifugal rather than centripetal compassion? What does this look like?

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## Author's Reply by Sal Restivo

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I want to thank Bob Thomson for his fair representation of the views I express in *Society and the Death of God*, and for his interesting queries. On the question of the existence of God I have been a skeptic since childhood. My mother was an immigrant from Italy and an untutored Roman Catholic. My father, however, was a non-believer. When I was about fourteen years old, I woke up one morning, opened my eyes, and discovered that I was unable to move. Suddenly, my small bedroom filled with a booming voice: "Yes, there is a God. Yes, there is a life after death." And suddenly I could move. I lay there for a long time, pondering the experience. Already a science nerd, it didn't take me long to figure out that I had just experienced an aural hallucination. Nonetheless, I was unnerved and thought to myself: "You're only fourteen years old and there's an unfathomable cosmos out there. Maybe there is a God." So that very night I went back to saying my prayers before bed, something I'd given up years earlier. I did this every night for several weeks with dampening energy until the activity faded away. At 81, my certainty about gods, God, and religion is occasionally interrupted by the thought that I'm only 81 and there is still an unfathomable cosmos out there. The fact that there is anything at all and then so much of it virtually compels me to ask: Why couldn't this infinity of unfathomables harbor a God? Why is a supernatural all-powerful being that is immune to all efforts to rationally, logically, and empirically establish its existence impossible or improbable in these circumstances? And then I remember sociology.

The first question Thomson poses is provoked by my reference to Abbott's *Flatland* (1884). The book illustrates the fact that three-dimensional beings limited to three-dimensional space might, as Thomson writes, "be blind to or misinterpret activity in higher-ordered dimensions." Could higher-ordered dimensions, suggested for example by superstring theory in cosmology, account for certain religious experiences or miracles? The higher dimensions Thomson refers to are mathematical constructs. There is no evidence that they reflect anything physicists recognize as part of the real cosmos. In fact, mathematically, you could describe anything from a sphere to the universe in any number of dimensions you choose. This involves adding new coordinate axes, or what mathematicians call "degrees of freedom." There is nothing mysterious or mystical about the concept of dimension as a mathematical construct that might be handy for physicists. It refers to the number of independent variables and not to realms of reality beyond those of our earthbound experience, in everyday life and in science. There is nowhere in this essentially mathematical world of "independent variables" for anything – natural or supernatural – to exist.

The effort to find a place for God in the new physics or new mathematics is simply the latest example of claiming that God might live in a place we humans do not have access to. In the past, God lived on high mountains or in the clouds or in the inner holy places of temples everyday folk could not enter. We've now explored all these places and have not found God. So now n-dimensional space, misinterpreted, gives us a new possible home for God. Durkheim already vanquished this way of saving the phenomenon of God, by rejecting transcendental realities. All of this begs the question of how we three-dimensional creatures could come to know a God of higher dimensions. Occam's razor recommends the sociological explanation.

On the question of whether I should choose "near certainty" rather than "absolute certainty," I choose "absolute certainty." This may sound paradoxical, but absolute certainty is not an absolutist position but a realist one. All knowledge claims escape their evidence and must be considered highly presumptive, corrigible, and fallible. There is no justification for investing any scientific claim with positive or absolute belief. This limits deterministic, universal, and invariant claims, but it does not eliminate them. The reason is that without certain levels of closure in the systems of our everyday lives, life would be impossible. Philosophically, we might be justified in claiming that definitive descriptions are impossible. But levels of closure make definitive descriptions in practice possible.

Imagine an alternative title for my book: *Society and the Death of the Flat Earth*. After reviewing all the available evidence through the centuries, should we be prepared to argue to "near certainty" or "absolute certainty" that the earth is not flat? We cannot be concerned about or fearful of alienating Bergerian Bracketers (as Thomson refers to them), any more than Galileo was in defending heliocentrism. The evidence accumulated in the research network my book stands on is in my view as convincing as the evidence that supports heliocentrism and an earth that is an oblate spheroid wobbling in precession. Furthermore, I do not stand as a scientist by myself, nor is my book scientific on its own. I am only a scientist and my book is only scientific when we enter the historical flow of the generations of scientists collectively and intersubjectively testing ideas, theories, and experimental results. At the end of the day, I am an experiment, my book is an experiment, and my claims are an experiment. However certain I am of their truth, this is ultimately a collective decision of the evolving scientific community. The argument I make for coalition building must take this science-in-process into account as presumptive evidence and not as a threat to coalition building.

On the question of the good that religion does, I have no objections to the evidence. Religion is designed to do good as an integral part of what a society is. It is not distinct from society. It is the glue that holds societies, communities, even families and selves, together. This is why the "new atheists" are wrong to think of religion as irrational or stupid. Consider the slave catechism. The Bible was used

to justify the lives of the slaves in their churches, and to justify the lives of the plantation owners in their churches. But both slaves and masters were bound in their communities by the glue of a religion that supported community and moral solidarity and that has nothing to do with whether Bibles, churches, and gods are or reflect verities. Power differences can and do fracture the solidarity of slaves and masters, and those fractures can be healed by solidarity movements and enhanced by rebellions. Religion is real; God is not.

I make no apologies for being intolerant of wrong beliefs. I can make a philosophical or literary argument for  $2+2=5$ , as Dostoevsky does in *Notes from Underground* (1866). I cannot tolerate it in the education of civil engineers charged with building bridges that will not break apart. What then of Thomson's question about "disillusioning young impressionable minds before an alternative moral order is established?" Some of my students, friends, and even some of my colleagues in sociology have questioned my efforts to correct the mistakes in reference at work in our traditional views of religion, the gods, and God. A classic answer was offered by Peter Berger, who recognized that the debunking, disenchanting sociologist is peddling "dangerous intellectual merchandise" (1963: 173). What right does s/he have to challenge the taken-for-granted beliefs of others who are more or less at peace with their worldviews? Why bother those who are not inclined to probe for deeper understanding? Why not leave them alone?

Berger maintains that liberal education is associated with intellectual liberation. This assumption does not apply to technically- and professionally-focused education (perhaps it should!). Where it does hold, sociology (and science in general) is justified by the belief that consciousness is better than unconsciousness and that freedom depends on consciousness. I agree with Berger in assuming that the "civilized mind" in our modern era requires contact with critical scientific disciplines, including sociology. Coming in touch with sociology in this context will make you a little less stolid in your prejudices, a little more careful in your commitments, and a little more skeptical about the commitments of others. To put it differently, right education induces a secular moral order guided by reason, understood in the modern sense as united with and not divorced from emotions. Science broadly conceived identifies things that must be unlearned as well as newly learned. Children who learn that there is no Santa Claus do not go to pieces, because their families embrace them in their solidarity.

I have always been struck by the ease with which authors can navigate their critics. Perhaps it's simply a trick of the trade I have achieved in replying to Thomson. But I have a confession. After a lifetime of sustained systematic credentialed inquiry, I cannot claim to know anything at all that isn't related to getting food, water, shelter, and sex. Even then, I'm burdened with uncertainties and failures. I can harbor these feelings along with the certainties that the earth is not flat and there is no God.



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