

THE FOUNDATION OF THE CISR: ISSUES OF THE FIRST TWO DECADES*

1948-1967

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1. The foundation: a nondenomination association for a religious sociology

Jacques Leclercq, professor of moral and social philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, was instrumental in founding the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse* (International Conference for Religious Sociology), CISR, of which he was the first president. In 1938, he had organised in his university the first conference on sociology in order to stimulate the development of the empirical study of social facts to promote the advancement of social philosophy. In 1948 he published his *Introduction à la sociologie*, an introductory textbook considered of no value in the USA, but that was translated in Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, which proved to him the necessity of sociology for the Catholic, Latin European public. In 1947, on April 2-3, he invited fifteen professors and researchers from France, the Netherlands and Belgium to meet in the drawing room of the Philosophical Institute of the Universitas Catholica Lovaniensis in Leuven. These scholars felt the need for further opportunities for exchange and for more permanent contacts with others engaged in similar research. Therefore they founded on the 3rd of April 1948 *La Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse*, an international association known under this name until 1989. Statutes were drawn up in which the founders specified that the association was to be a scientific non-denominational organization to promote a methodologically sound religious sociology (art. 3 and 4). It is clear that the purpose was in line with the objectives that Leclercq underscored since 1938: to stimulate a methodologically well-founded empirical study of social facts, i.e. the religious situation, in order to promote an efficacious pastoral action. There was a 2nd Conference in Leuven in 1949, where, upon invitation, studies were presented from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, enlarging the scope of the conference to two more countries, and a 3rd Conference was scheduled for 1951 in the Netherlands.

In 1949, J. Leclercq, canon of the Catholic Church, informed Rome of the founding of the CISR. Rome warned specifically against “social research in the field of religion which could be done starting from postulates and using methods of the ‘sociological science’, as it is

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understood generally". In fact, Rome warned against positivism and the Durkheimian school. In 1956, at the 5th conference which took place in Leuven, Leclercq, sharply formulated again his point of view: religious sociology did not need "speculative sociology" like Durkheim's, but an American-type of sociology which was characterized as a study of facts. The gist of the argument was almost "*Say it with Figures*", and this at about the same time that Sorokin was warning sociologists in his *Fads and Foibles of Sociology* against a quantitative sociology. Leclercq furthermore insisted that religion cannot be studied from the outside without the risk of false interpretations. Consequently, he argued that religious sociology only could be pursued by religious minds knowing theology.

2. The CISR becomes a Catholic Organisation

The 3rd conference took place in Breda (the Netherlands) at the invitation of KASKI (the Catholic Social-Ecclesiastical Institute). A central discussion in this conference was the status of religious sociology. Should it be based on theology, the position of Monzel, Geck and Furfey, or was it a positive science, i.e. an empirical study of religion, as defended by Leclercq? The latter viewpoint was divided about the object of the study. Some like De Volder and Zeegers, restricted the object of religious sociology to the empirical study of the social forms of religious life (organizations, religious orders, etc.), the relations between these structures, and the analysis of the relations between such religious structures and secular groups (social classes, etc.). Le Bras' approach, discussed in the conference, was clearly broader and included the study of objective data on religious life such as rituals, rules, ethics and so on, nor did he exclude relations between religious life and secular realities such as demography, economy, and the like. His position prevailed in the CISR, but the sociological approach remained religiously committed: not only was research to be at the service of the Church, but it was also to be undertaken by Catholics, whose schemes of analysis were necessarily tributary to their transcendent faith, whose observations had to be enlightened by their religious commitment (Labbens and Lebret).

The composition of the participants in this third conference drastically changed since the first two meetings. Here clerics, involved in pastoral work of the Church but who lacked any sociological background, attended the conference in great numbers. This majority elected a *Comité Général* (General Comity) charged to ameliorate the functioning of the CISR. Mgr. Koenraadt, president of KASKI, wanted to institutionalise the denominational flavour of the Breda-conference and make the CISR a Catholic association. Leclercq reacted in a letter

stating, that the society was intended and had to stay nondenominational, since, researchers could learn from the research methodology applied on other religions and from a comparative analysis of the results. On May 24th 1951, after the Breda conference, the initial statutes were changed at the meeting of the *Comité Général*: the CISR became denominational. In 1953, at the 4th Conference in La Tourette (France), Le Bras, appearing for the first time at the conference, stated in his intervention, "De Louvain à La Tourette", that the CISR had become "a pastoral and confessional, i.e. a Catholic organisation".

This reorientation had a major effect. From 1951 on, both clerics, who were interested in the results of the studies, and researchers, who were more interested in theoretical and methodological discussions, attended the conference. Their divergent expectations emerged very clearly at the plenary sessions. Clerics were not interested in scientific discussions, which they interrupted with questions about the results, and scientists interrupted the discussions of results with methodological questions. Whereas clerics wanted results, which could be helpful in their pastoral work, scientists wanted to improve their research instruments and to test their hypotheses. No one was happy with the mixed attendance at the conference and the resulting contradictory demands. Because so much discussion focussed on methodological and theoretical issues, the clerics, who attended the conferences, lost confidence in the results that were presented.

The conference of Breda also set a precedent: the conference was opened by the local Bishop, which was the case at subsequent conferences. The CISR asked for and received from the Holy See and the local Bishop approval for its conference programme and the first Acts were published with an *Imprimatur* and *nihil obstat*. Notwithstanding these options, the Vatican Secretary of State informed the President and the Secretary General in 1956 that the Holy See was of the opinion that the permanent "organizational structure" of the conference – i.e. a presidency and officers – was premature. Clearly, the Vatican worried about the position of the CISR in the organizational structure of the Church. Hereupon, the President of the CISR wrote a letter to a friend in Rome, asking him to inform the Secretary of State that the CISR was not an "International Catholic organism for socio-religious studies", but an instrument to improve the methodology of socio-religious research, in order to improve the validity and reliability of the sociological studies done for the bishops. For that reason, CISR also organized summer schools.

3. What is sociological in religious sociology ?

Despite the mixed audiences, scientists continued to set up the programme of the conferences. At the 4th conference in La Tourette (1953), under the heading of "Methods and Problems", reports were presented about the relationship between religious sociology and theology (Leclercq), pastoral work (Motte), canon law (Le Bras), religious psychology (Rozier) and human economy (Lebret). It is clear that religious sociology searched its place in relation to the traditional religious sciences, which limited its domain to a descriptive science. In fact it was defined as "sociography". It could defend its position in the Catholic Church only by stressing its methodological objectives and the services it could provide for the Church. This is not typical only for the Catholic world. I remember visiting the grave of Martin Luther King Jr in Atlanta (USA) where I could read "science investigates, religion interprets".

In their conferences sociologists exchanged results and discussed methods; however, they also wanted to improve the organizational structure of the church by relying on scientific research and principles. In Leuven, at the 5th conference in 1956, for example, they discussed the organization of the parish and searched for criteria to realize an ecological and demographic optimum for rural and urban parishes. At subsequent conferences sociological theory and concepts were more at the core of the programme. In Bologna (Italy) at the 6th conference in 1959 the theme was "religion and social integration", with contributions on functional analysis in the sociology of religion, the parish and social integration, religion and social change, catholic minorities and social integration. At this conference, the president, Labbens, again underscored that the CISR had a confessional character since religious sociology was called to take a place in the Church among the sacred sciences. And he underscored that religious sociology is required to be theologically justified. In a critical evaluation of the conference, Maître wrote in *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* (Nr 9): when studying the content of religious life, we are each time confronted with the same problem: theological affirmations prevail over sociological theory. Under the participants gradually a new spirit was emerging.

In Königstein (Germany) at the 7th conference in 1962, sociologists searched for a frame of reference to integrate the merely sociographic studies undertaken up to that time. "Church affiliation" became the frame of reference for the conference, a frame of reference scarcely different from studies about political participation, union membership and the like. This was, indeed, the period of sociological studies on "normative integration" in organizations, institutions, and so forth. At this conference, researchers of religions other than

Catholicism were on the official programme of the conference. At the end of the conference, Canon Boulard (France), heading a small group, protested vehemently in the Executive Committee against this. He even threatened to establish another international conference faithful to the origins of the CISR. He clearly forgot that the founders of the CISR intended it to be a scientific non-denominational organization. However, let me give you, in a little parenthesis, an idea of the Catholic flavour of the meetings in the 1960's. I remember the Sunday morning at the conference in Königstein, my first conference, nearly everyone went to mass and in rows – one after the other – to communion, and at the same time, colleague priests were saying mass at the different side-altars, a new mass starting every 15 to 20 minutes. And in Rome, in 1969, we were housed in a convent, like in Königstein, each day at noon there was mass, and we had rooms in the convent with doors we could not lock.

Our 8th conference was in Barcelona in 1965. There are no Acts of this Conference, except four articles published in *Social Compass*. At this conference an overview of books and articles published since the last conference in the field of Sociology of Religions was presented by Schreuder. In contrast to the overview made by Pin for the 6th conference, it was not limited to the "Sociology of Catholicism". Steeman called such overviews being an integral part of the conference a "happy custom" that, unfortunately, was discontinued after the 9th conference, presumably because it may have been difficult to motivate someone to analyze the growing literature in the field. In my trend report for the 9th Conference covering the publications of 1965-66, I was confronted with 370 publications per year.

Ecclesiastical problems still played an important role in setting up the programme of the conferences. At the 9th Conference in Montreal (1967), for example, "Clergy in Church and Society" was the central theme, with papers on the self-image and the malaise of the clergy; recruitment, seminarians and seminaries; celibacy; the economic and pastoral position of the clergy; and the position of the military chaplain. For the first time the Acts of the conference were published by the Secretary General. The studies in these Acts were very narrowly focussed, i.e., mere "religious sociology": only 40 % of the papers had references to studies outside this particular field (e.g. to general sociology and social psychology, sociology of stratification, sociology of the professions and sociology of organizations and bureaucracy). Of barely a dozen names cited outside the specific field of religious sociology, only Parsons and Weber were referred to in more than two papers. Even the selected bibliography presented in the acts was restricted to socio-religious studies of Catholic clergy. Consequently, religious sociology was self-centred and narrow. However, a change in the composition of the conference is emerging. The majority of the texts in the Acts were in

English. Where at the start the language of the conference was French, bit by bit English was more and more used. In fact, gradually, the society became bilingual and the acronym ICRS, which stands for International Conference for Religious Sociology, is being used more and more.

All in all, up into the sixties, CISR practiced a special type of sociology of religion: "religious sociology". This type of "sociology" was self-sufficient, particular, mostly at the service of one church, and "sociological" only in its methods. The Catholic church clearly wanted to control the output of religious sociology, and CISR could defend itself against the Holy See only by stressing its methodological objectives and the services it could provide for the Church.

4. The Professional context of the CISR

In the period under study, many centres and networks for religious sociology were established e.g. in Belgium by Leclercq and Houtart, in France, among others, by Boulard, Le Bras, Labbens, Lebret and Motte, in Italy by for example by Aquaviva, Burgalassi, Droulers and Pin, and in Espagne by Duocastella.. And KASKI had spread to Germany and Austria. In fact, study centres for socio-religious research emerged also in many dioceses. All these Centres asked for some coordination. In 1956, the President of KASKI founded in Geneva ICARES – an International Catholic Institute for Socio-ecclesiastical Research – which organized conferences in 1955 and 1957. In 1958 this institute was transformed into FERES, the International Federation of Institutes of Social and Socio-Religious Research, which changed its seat to Fribourg (Switzerland). In 1970, it was transferred to Leuven and finally moved to Louvain-la-Neuve with the *Université Catholique de Louvain*. Besides its European members, under the impulse of Houtart this federation also has members in Latin America and its international journal is *Social Compass*.

There was also an active Protestant Organization, which organized six European Sociological Colloquia on Protestantism in the period 1959-1965, and in Brussels two international colloquia on Jewish life were organized in 1962 and 1965. Finally, two International Colloquia on Religious Sociology were organized in Eastern Europe, first in Iena (1965) and later in Prague (1966). In the USA, 10 years before the CISR, the American Catholic Sociological Society was established, which, two years later, started a quarterly journal *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, a journal that became *Sociological Analysis* in 1964. At the 2nd World Congress of the International Sociological Association

(ISA) in Amsterdam (1956) and at the subsequent one in Stresa (1959) informal meetings were organized for those interested in the study of religious phenomena at the initiative of Desroche and Birnbaum. From 1962 on it became an official Research Committee of the ISA and still is as RC 22 Sociology of Religion.

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In order to be able to complete this document, I ask those of you who know one or more of the persons mentioned in the text to inform me of the discipline and the professional status of these persons.

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