

# *In memoriam* James A. Beckford (1942-2022) Scholar, Teacher, Mentor and Friend

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## *In memoriam* James A. Beckford (1942-2022)

Scholar, Teacher, Mentor and Friend

*In memoriam James A. Beckford (1942-2022). Chercheur, enseignant, mentor et ami*

*In memoriam James A. Beckford (1942-2022). Académico, profesor, mentor y amigo*

Grace Davie et Danièle Hervieu-Léger

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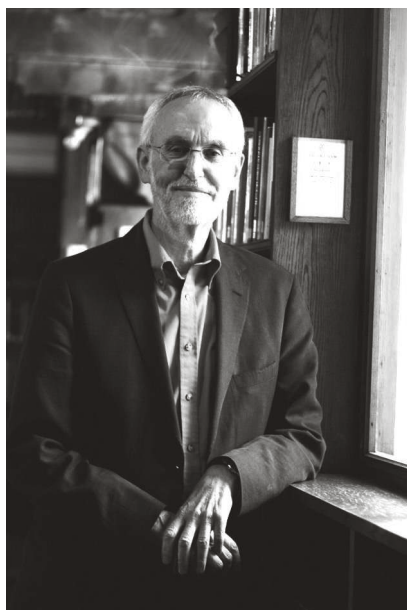
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## ***In memoriam* James A. Beckford (1942-2022)**

### **Scholar, Teacher, Mentor and Friend**



James A. Beckford.  
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All of us who work in the sociology of religion – and indeed many beyond – were taken aback to learn of the death of James A. Beckford, Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. Jim, as he was known to friends and colleagues alike, was a distinguished sociologist, who sought to understand better the place of religion in human societies. He was in addition an exemplary colleague who worked tirelessly for both the discipline and sub-discipline of which he was part, not only in each of the Universities in which he was employed, but in the professional organizations of the sociology of religion across the world.

Jim's first degree (1965) was in French Studies at the University of Reading (United Kingdom), where he stayed to complete a PhD in Sociology in 1972. In 1966, whilst still a doctoral student, he was appointed to a Lectureship in Sociology. It was in Reading that I first met Jim; our paths crossed briefly and rather by chance in the late 1960s. I moved to Liverpool in 1971 and he went to the University of Durham in 1973, remaining there for some ten years before a spell in the United States at Loyola University in Chicago. Jim returned to the UK in 1989 to a Chair in Sociology at the University of Warwick, retiring formally in 2008 but remaining active in the discipline for more than a decade, continuing to travel widely as he had throughout his career – notably to Europe, to the US and Japan.

Countless tributes to Jim will appear in a wide variety of academic journals. As a British scholar invited to write a short piece in a primarily French journal, I have chosen to highlight selected points. Jim was an accomplished linguist, fluent in both French and German from his first degree and always keen to extend the list. His commitment to comparative study followed from this, allowing him to demonstrate how the place of religion in any given society could be more fully understood if set in a broader perspective. He was also a distinguished social theorist, determined to hold together empirical enquiry and theoretical insight, maintaining correctly that each element not only informed, but enriched the other.

Much of Jim's early work was focused on new religious movements. His doctoral thesis broke new ground as the first sociological study of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This in turn formed the basis of his first book entitled *The Trumpet of Prophecy. A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (1975). Ten years later, Jim published *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to New Religious Movements* (1985), a much-discussed volume that not only stressed the enormous variety of these movements, but examined them in relation to their host societies: in particular Britain, (then) West Germany and France. How exactly did new religious movements insert themselves into the societies of which they were part and how did those societies react to them? The issues that arise vary from case to case for sociologically identifiable reasons external to the movements themselves.

A rather similar process happened with respect to Jim's work on religion – and in particular Muslims – in prisons. *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society*, co-authored with Sophie Gilliat, was published in 1998. In this, the focus lies on the place of religion in prison systems of England and Wales. Specifically, it examines how prison chaplaincies, hitherto dominated by the established Church of England, were coming under strain in an increasingly diverse society, recognizing that the minorities in question wanted to identify themselves as religious rather than ethnic communities. The project becomes, therefore, a case study of a wider phenomenon: of a society that – at one and the same time – is becoming both more secular and more religiously diverse. The combination is hard to manage in that over attention to the former (growing secularity) undermines not only the

knowledge but the sensitivities required to manage the latter (growing religious diversity).

A decade and a half later, Jim (together with Danièle Joly and Farhad Khosrokhavar) developed these themes in a more rigorously comparative project, paying particular attention to the French and British (once again English and Welsh) cases. The immediate goal was to discover how Muslim inmates were treated in their respective prison systems. The question, however, was set within a broader comparison of the countries themselves: their political regimes, their criminal justice systems and their religious histories. Did the combination of these political, legal and religious pressures have an effect on the treatment of Muslim prisoners, and if so in what ways?

*Muslims in Prison: Challenge and Change in Britain and France* (2006) answers this question. In England and Wales, religion is an accepted factor in prison life: prisoners are asked their religion on entry to the institution and provided for accordingly. Vigilance, however, remains necessary, to combat amongst other things social exclusion, racism and anti-Muslim sentiment. In France, the issues are very different: here – as ever – the challenge lies in the interpretation of *laïcité*. Is it possible both to respect this principle and to allow the practice of Islam in prisons? Put differently, will the latter violate the French insistence that religion should be relegated to the private sphere? And what will be the consequences if this view prevails? As is so often the case, the debate in England is approached in terms of practical or organizational issues; in France, a principle is at stake. Keeping this contrast in mind *Muslims in Prison* can be read at several levels; unsurprisingly, it has become an influential volume, spawning similar work elsewhere.

Jim, it is important to remember, was active as an editor as well as author. A particularly significant venture in this respect concerns a two-volume publication (some 1,400 pages) that incorporates 66 already published articles relating to the complex and continuing links between the two fields captured in the title. *Migration and Religion* was published in 2015 and brings together a rich and varied body of work that examines both how “religions inspire, manage and benefit from migration” and, conversely, “how the experience of migration affects religious beliefs, identities and practices”. This necessarily complex interface is tackled at a variety of levels, ranging from the local to the global, and from the individual to the faith community.

Both volumes are divided into themed sections. Part V in Volume I caught my eye: it is entitled “Contexts of reception”. The chapters in question concern migration into Europe and the US and were written between 2002 and 2013; the issues that they raise, however, continue to resonate. Would that our politicians thought more carefully about these things before embarking on policies that – at least in the British case – are ungenerous in the extreme and very unlikely to work.

The comparative element in Jim’s work persisted through more than forty years of publication. Equally present was his insistence on thinking theoretically about the issues at stake. Once again it is helpful to consider

a pair of books: first *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (1989) and, just over a decade later, *Social Theory and Religion* (2003); both have been widely read and frequently cited. Both, moreover, are concerned not only with the relationship between empirical enquiry and theoretical reflection, though that is important, but also between the sociology of religion and what might be termed its “parent” discipline.

*Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, for example, explores what Jim terms the “insulation and isolation” of the sociology of religion and the consequences of this estrangement for the sociological understanding of religion. The message is clear: both partners in this dialogue (*i.e.* specialists in the study of religion and those active in sociological thinking more generally) are impoverished by the lack of communication between them. It cannot be otherwise given that both are – or should be – engaged in a better understanding of advanced industrial society. Only by paying attention to the changing nature of society as a whole can the place and attributes of late modern religion be fully understood. Conversely, as the sociology of religion begins to regain a more central place in these discussions, the discipline as a whole will be enriched. The constructionist account of religion in *Social Theory and Religion* continues the story.

An interesting subtext can be found in both volumes: the process of secularization may (or may not) lead to less religion; it will, however, result in forms of religion that have come adrift from their historic moorings. The consequent deregulation of the religious field is the key point. New, unexpected and at times controversial forms of religion have emerged that demand our close attention, theoretical as well as empirical.

My account of Jim’s work has been selective. It points, however, to a corpus of publication which includes empirically-based research, rigorous theoretical analyses, single-authored monographs, jointly-written texts and a number of edited books. An additional point is worth noting: among the jointly-written publications were collaborations with a variety of colleagues, many of whom were younger scholars. The invitation to co-publish, often with a doctoral or post-doctoral student, reflects an element of Jim’s career that needs underlining in its own right. That is his excellence as both teacher and mentor. Alongside a high-profile career in research, publication and academic leadership, Jim was an exemplary teacher. Many of his doctoral students have spoken since his death of their good fortune in having Jim as a supervisor: not only did he see the potential in a student but enabled them to reach it. The same was true of the post-docs and research assistants lucky enough to be employed on his various projects.

At a very different stage in my career, I too was privileged to co-write a short piece with him. This was a biographical memoir of David Martin published by the British Academy in 2019. It was a particular pleasure to work with Jim on a piece that honoured David. I have been deeply influenced by both scholars.

Grace DAVIE  
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La nouvelle du décès de James A. Beckford a été reçue avec une grande tristesse parmi les sociologues des religions, des deux côtés de la Manche et outre-Atlantique. Jim n'était pas seulement un collègue reconnu et apprécié pour la richesse de la contribution qu'il a apportée, pendant un demi-siècle, au développement de notre discipline. Il a aussi incarné au mieux parmi nous un style intellectuel, qui conjugait rigueur de la pensée, clarté du raisonnement et élégance de l'écriture : un style qui s'exprimait également à travers la générosité et la courtoisie qui marquaient ses échanges avec ses pairs et avec ses étudiants.

Ma propre relation avec Jim est ancienne : nous avons fait ensemble nos premiers pas dans les rencontres internationales de la discipline, lors de la Conférence internationale de sociologie des religions de La Haye en 1973. Les conférences de la SISR (Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions) – et un bon nombre de colloques – nous furent, dans la suite, des occasions d'échanges réguliers, grandement facilités pour moi par la maîtrise subtile qu'avait Jim de la langue française ! À la fin des années 1990, Jim vint enseigner à l'EHESS à Paris à mon invitation et je garde un souvenir précieux de la qualité des liens qu'il sut créer à cette occasion avec les doctorants du séminaire et avec les collègues qui appréciaient sa conversation scientifique.

Dans le texte qu'elle a remis aux *Archives* en mémoire de Jim, dont elle fut proche, notre collègue Grace Davie retrace et commente les étapes de sa trajectoire académique. Les mots que j'ajoute à sa contribution veulent seulement dire le respect et l'admiration que beaucoup de collègues français partagent avec moi pour le chercheur qu'il était.

Jim Beckford a été, en premier lieu, un homme d'enquêtes. Si la chose mérite d'être soulignée, c'est que bien des sociologues confirmés, soucieux avant tout de reconnaissance sur le terrain de la « théorie », s'éloignent souvent de la recherche de terrain, considérée comme un exercice d'apprenti. Jim avait le goût de la théorie, mais il n'interrompt jamais le travail d'observation qu'il mena sur de nombreux terrains tout au long de sa carrière. Cet engagement empirique a été le socle d'une pratique continue de la description, elle-même inséparable de l'exercice comparatif dont il avait fait le ressort principal de sa méthode sociologique. Depuis ses nombreux travaux sur les Nouveaux mouvements religieux jusqu'à ses enquêtes plus récentes sur la religion en prison ou sur les dimensions religieuses des phénomènes migratoires, il n'a pas cessé de tenir ce fil comparatif, en s'attachant avec une grande précision aux données historiques (sociales, culturelles, politiques, juridiques et religieuses) qui configurent, dans chaque contexte national concerné, les conditions d'émergence, de développement, d'organisation, de réception et de régulation des mouvements religieux. Son intérêt constant pour les groupes religieux minoritaires et pour les controverses religieuses qu'ils suscitent se comprend, à cet égard, comme un moyen de mettre concrètement en situation la diversité et les contrastes de ces configurations.

En plaçant l'accent principal sur les interactions – propres à chacun de ces contextes – entre le religieux, le social et le politique, cette perspective comparative ne lui a pas seulement permis d'enrichir et de pluraliser l'analyse des dynamiques de la scène religieuse contemporaine, en desserrant, du même coup, le prisme homogénéisant d'une « sécularisation », d'une « individualisation » ou d'une « globalisation » s'imposant de façon uniforme dans les sociétés occidentales de haute modernité. Elle lui a également permis de construire une relation particulièrement féconde à la « théorie sociale », en mettant à l'épreuve, à partir de cette scène socioreligieuse plurielle, la pertinence de la boîte à outils conceptuels que celle-ci met à la disposition des sociologues des religions (et à laquelle, note-t-il, ils recourent trop peu). Son ouvrage *Social Theory and Religion*, paru en 2003 aux presses de l'Université de Cambridge, déploie de façon exemplaire cette perspective critique. En resituant dans leurs contextes différenciés de construction et d'utilisation les concepts (sécularisation, pluralisme, globalisation) et les notions générales (nouveaux mouvements religieux) communément mobilisés par les sociologues des religions, il montre avec efficacité l'intérêt d'une confrontation renouvelée, et surtout réciproque, entre, d'un côté, des théories du social qui se sont trop souvent développées en niant ou en refoulant la question de la religion et, de l'autre, des sciences sociales du religieux qui ont, trop souvent aussi, consenti à leur propre enclavement. Tous les chercheurs qui s'efforcent de penser les conditions d'une sociologie critique de la modernité religieuse savent, sur ce terrain, ce qu'ils doivent à l'œuvre de Jim Beckford.

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