



Otto Maduro

1945-2013

☞ a personal memorial ☞

Three public sociologists of religion have died so far this year: Otto Maduro, Robert Bellah, and Andrew Greeley. All were well known to members of the ASR. Bellah and Greeley were more famous, at least in the United States, in part because they represented an established way of doing scholarship, although they both went beyond just describing religion's role in social life; they also spoke as public intellectuals, calling Americans to live up to their higher ideals. Otto was more famous in Latin America and Europe, despite his long residence (and ultimate citizenship) in the U.S. Though prominent – the first ever Hispanic President of the American Academy of Religion, author of five books in five languages and over a hundred articles published in a dozen languages on five continents – he never spoke for the established order. Instead, he spoke for the marginalized and the oppressed. He sought social transformation for the poor, for women, for people of color, and for all those whom mainstream society had left aside. His was a prophetic voice, as well as a scholarly one. He used his skills to bring positive change. In doing so, he inspired and led us.

Otto was born in Venezuela in 1945, the son of two lawyers, each of working-class origins. He often described being raised in an intense intellectual atmosphere, but one with at best an ambivalent attitude toward religion. He studied briefly for the priesthood but soon left seminary to get a philosophy degree. He quickly realized that conservative Venezuelan Catholicism was just one strand of an extremely complex tradition. This led him to study philosophy and sociology at the Catholic University of Louvain, where he received a Masters in the sociology of religion and a Masters and PhD in the philosophy of religion, writing his dissertation on Karl Marx. His first major book, Religion and Social Conflicts, published after his

1977 return to Venezuela, grew out of his interest in a more complex understanding of the Marxian perspective on religion. It quickly received much attention for its analysis of religion's role, both positive and negative, in social and economic development; it is still in print. Otto soon became an important voice in discussions of what religion could do to help improve the lives of the Latin American poor. He remained committed to this task through out his career. He also remained committed to the discipline of the sociology of religion, serving on several organizational councils, on editorial boards and as an editor of journal special issues. He was nominated to run for the presidency of several social science disciplinary societies, including the ASR. At the SISR/ISSR, he was part of the famous multi-national "Class of 1973", which included Jim Beckford, Meredith McGuire, Jim Richardson, Daniele Herveau-Léger, Ole Riis, Cristián Parker and other sociologists of religion prominent on several continents.

In the early 1980s, Otto was invited to the United States to teach at the University of Notre Dame and in the Maryknoll School of Theology's "Justice and Peace Studies" program. Anthony Blasi remembers that Otto immediately became interested in the lives and work conditions of workers at Notre Dame, and others remember how he always made a point to know the names, and jobs, of all those who make a university run. He taught at Maryknoll for some years. While there, he nurtured the study and practice of Liberation Theology and encouraged Catholicism's prophetic voice. Not just Catholicism: Marc Ellis writes of how Otto supported his own development of a Jewish theology of liberation. Otto was never parochial in his religious outlook, though in this case he found a personal interest: his father was of Jewish descent, from a family driven from Spain by the Inquisition.

Otto returned to Latin America at several points in the late 1980s, teaching and working in Venezuela, Brazil, and Central America. He moved to Drew University in 1992 with his wife Nancy Noguera (now an Associate Professor of Spanish at Drew), to become Professor of World Christianity at the Drew Theological School. Their son Mateo was born in 1995. He retired from that post just before his death May 9, 2013. While there, he began to focus on the social and religious situations of U.S. Latino/as well as founding the Hispanic Theological Institute with his Drew colleague, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and actively contributing to the Hispanic Theological Initiative. He later directed the Hispanic Summer Program – an independent program for enhancing the education of American Latina/o graduate students in religion and theology. Two grants (from the Ford Foundation and the ATS/Luce Fellows in Theology Program) helped fund a study of Latina/o Pentecostal churches in Newark, NJ. These projects attracted a number of graduate students, many of whom are now active in scholarly and/or church settings. Inclusion and social transformation have always been at the top of his agenda. His more recent work, widely read in Spanish, *Mapas Para La Fiesta* has been translated into English, with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta, and will be coming out with Fordham Press in 2014.

At Drew, Otto and his colleagues developed several creative programs to give their students more than a traditional intellectual education. These included bringing students into a prison for semester-long courses alongside inmates; taking students abroad to live amid a different culture; connecting Drew courses with struggling nearby communities to discover what they can contribute to and gain from community members' life experiences; team-teaching courses and otherwise modeling a collaborative instructional style. In an interview after he was elected President of the American Academy of Religion, he described his main teaching goal as "mentoring students in a way that helps them grow as writers, presenters, researchers, authors, teachers, public intellectuals, and team-workers."

"I see myself as a sort of *agent provocateur* in the classroom; not so much transmitting knowledge as eliciting doubts, questions, and quests and not so much judging how much a student has learned from me or from the readings I assign as rather, how far a student has dared to go on her/his own search for knowledge. If I am useful in stimulating and nurturing that search, that is the greatest joy in my own teaching labor."

The numerous postings from friends, colleagues, and students worldwide on Drew's website honoring Otto on his retirement certainly attest to the impact that he had on those who knew him (<http://www.drew.edu/otto/>). It is still open for posting remembrances; his wife Nancy Noguera and his son Mateo value these greatly.

Personal reflections

So much for the externals. Those of us who knew Otto well remember him for his personality as much as for his message, though the two were inseparable. He was human, but somehow, he did it better than most of us, certainly more intensely. Interacting with people energized him. Laurel remembers him telling her how he would go to Venezuela and visit with his friends and family from morning to night, and how much he loved it, a true extrovert. At a memorial gathering in New York, ASR members from around the globe remembered him for his reappraisal of Marx, his use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, his commitment to feminist approaches and attendance at the women's breakfasts, his broad love of music and his habit of visiting a wide variety of musical venues during ASR conferences. They also remembered his intellectual vigor, his welcoming smile, and his love of his family. All of us remembered a warm, supportive, engaged colleague, always ready with a hug, a concern for us and everyone in our families; we also remembered that he was quite willing to challenge us to think more deeply, to critique, to call out, to name what was "bullshit", to unmask relations of power.

Jim remembers sitting with Otto in his kitchen, late at night as Jim's first wife lay in the next room, near death from cancer. The depth of that conversation, in which each of us shared his experiences of life's grievous hurts and its highest joys, shaped Jim significantly. Otto taught

Jim that love is indeed enough. In the end, the best we humans can do is stand together in solidarity, facing the abyss. A few years later, Otto played cupid, saying to Meredith (Jim's future spouse), "Jim is the only one of my male friends to whom I would trust my female friends." It worked, and Otto called on every anniversary to wish us well.

Laurel remembers most the comradeship of teaching together at Drew for 19 years. Having met Otto almost ten years earlier as a new graduate student, she found it very rewarding to team-teach with and learn from a master. Otto's fluency in multiple languages was reflected in his careful choice of words, when he would pause to paint a more nuanced and complex picture of any social concept he was explaining to the class. His teaching and work emphasized the interconnections between class, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and sexuality, as well as the importance of understanding how these dynamics produce complicated religious worlds. He constantly reminded students that people have multiple religious identities, not just one, and that they juggle these as they walk through life. His students at the ASR gathering remembered that he was always pushing them to understand social phenomenon in its messy complexity, never allowing them to rest easy with simple or reductionist views. He taught this with a gentle heart. One student commented that he taught her the value of choosing words of caring, not judgment. Another spoke of his ability to listen carefully to others, with generous and humane attention.

Otto was known among us for being willing to change his mind, for listening intently and taking into consideration other viewpoints. As a result, no one could ever entirely predict his position on something. We could, however, count on him to give voice to the larger context of all our work, a prophetic call reminding us of our responsibility as scholars and people of faith to think, understand and act, that politics, relations of power, privilege and injustice are always present in what we chose to study, and how we chose to act based on what we know, or have chosen to forget, indeed present in what we acknowledge as religion, theology, orthodoxy.

In his remarks for the 2003 Paul Douglass lecture for the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, a lecture that received a standing ovation, Otto challenged his colleagues:

"May our research and reflections on 'religion' contribute to, rather than hinder, the counter-imperial struggles of people everywhere to have their lives, and those of their children, neighbors, friends, and other loved ones recognized as sacred, worthy of tender care and respect, rather than consistently threatened, busted, bombed, or trampled by the this-worldly powers and principalities."

He said something similar in his AAR Presidential Address last year. After reminding his audience of the power of the American imperial Establishment to ruin ordinary people's

lives, to punish those who oppose it, and to make such violence seem 'normal', he called intellectuals and scholars to our responsibilities:

As intellectuals, we brandish a special kind of power. How do we use that power, with whom, for whom, what for? Power is an ethical issue. And it is a more urgent ethical issue when human lives are at stake, ... in the ever more inimical environment where immigrants to the U.S. find themselves after 9/11.

This is an urgent invitation for us as researchers, teachers, academics, scholars of religion – but also as plain citizens and simple human beings – to hear the cry of the oppressed and to respond to that cry, with our power, our ethical responsibility, and our role in the production and dissemination of knowledge, in any and all forms within our reach.

May we live up to Otto's call as we travel our roads without him.

-- Laurel Kearns, Associate Professor of the Sociology of Religion, Drew University

-- Jim Spickard, Professor of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Redlands

Of further interest:

- The American Academy of Religion's online "Religious Studies News" published a conversation with Otto in 2012, just as he assumed the AAR Presidency; it is available at http://www.rsonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1104&Itemid=1218
- Before his death, Otto's students and colleagues at Drew created a web page in his honor, to share their messages and reminiscences. It is still open for postings at <http://www.drew.edu/otto/>. Donations in honor of Otto for the Fund for Hispanic Latina/o Scholars and Ministry (Fondo Para Academicos y Ministerios Hispanos Latinas/os) can also be made through this page.
- Marc Ellis has written a personal reminiscence of his work with Otto in the Justice and Peace Studies Program at Maryknoll in the early 1980s: <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/05/prophetic-encountering-maduro.html>
- Kristen Chapman Gibbons, a former student, has written a longer reflection on what Otto meant to her as a teacher at <http://kchapmangibbons.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/he-lifted-me-like-a-superhero-but-showed-me-how-to-be-a-better-human-rip-ottomaduro-drew-thankateacher/>