The sociology of religion has lagged behind other fields in the ways we think about how we generate knowledge. Where other disciplines argue about the relative merits of positivism, social constructionism, critical realism, and standpoint theory, we, with few exceptions, rehash the thirty-year-old debate about objectivity versus subjectivity—and do so in relatively naïve terms. I had hoped that the collection on reflexive ethnography that some colleagues and I pulled together a few years ago would change this (Spickard et al 2002). We wrote of the reflexive turn that anthropological ethnographers have taken in the last couple of decades, and showed how this turn has strengthened, while changing, our knowledge claims. Alas, I have not seen much effect. Too much work still treats subjectivity and objectivity as the only two possible poles.

Maybe I should not be surprised. After all, the sociology of religion has something of an inferiority complex among the social sciences, studying as it does a phenomenon that many sociologists imagined to be disappearing (Bruce 2002). Even folks who study what Peter Berger (1999) now calls “resurgent religion” typically see it as a reaction to

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1 A previous version of this article was presented at the 30th Biennial Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 27–31 July, 2009.

2 I owe a debt of gratitude to the late Charles McCoy, Professor Emeritus at the Pacific School of Religion, for four years of conversations on these issues. His views can be found in McCoy (1980). We disagree on several key points, some of them central, but I would have been unable to write this article, had we not taken each other’s work seriously. Thanks also to the late James McClendon, to Mary Jo Neitz, and to Ole Riis for further dialogue.

3 In this article, I maintain a typographical distinction between words in double-quotes and those in single-quotes. I use double-quotes to indicate actual quotes from identifiable authors; single-quotes are shudder-quotes, which I use to draw attention to concepts whose ontological referent is open to question.
modernity—i.e., as something grounded in the past, something opposed to scientific views of the world, and so on (Spickard forthcoming). The irony, of course, is that Christian theology has been reflexive for the last hundred and fifty years. By this I mean that many, though not all, Christian theologians recognize that only God has certain knowledge; human knowledge is at best a guess, shaped by culture, history, and socially situated points of view (McCoy 1980). Truly objective theology is thus impossible. This does not leave theologians mired in subjectivity, however; it means that they must start their thinking from their actual situation, not from some suprahuman standpoint (Niebuhr 1989). Fortunately, locational beginnings do not necessarily imply subjective endings. One would think that the sociology of religion, with its interest in religious matters, would have absorbed this lesson. One would think that we would be leading the epistemological discussion instead of failing to notice it. This, unfortunately, has not happened.

It is time to try again. In this essay, I shall describe the four-fold division of research epistemologies that I mentioned above: positivism, social constructionism, critical realism, and standpoint theory. Then I shall outline a fifth position, compatible with but in fact underpinning the last two, which I think are the strongest of the four. I shall explore the logic of this fifth position, which I call eschatological realism, in an attempt to push beyond my previous work on the subject (Spickard 2002). I shall then comment on the implications of this form of realism for social-scientific inquiry.

II

Joey Sprague (2005: 31–52) provides a particularly clear formulation of the differences between four research epistemologies in the social sciences, which she calls “positivism”, “constructionism”, “critical realism”, and “standpoint theory”. Without arguing that every self-proclaimed positivist, constructionist, etc. identifies with the exact positions that she outlines, she identifies four intellectually distinct and coherent approaches, which seem to me summarize current thinking, albeit ideal-typically. She focuses on the different knowledge claims made by each of these approaches. She also focuses on the presumed relationship for each between the knower and the known.

Positivism, in Sprague’s account, claims that there is a real world ‘out there’ and that human beings can know that world through the facts