

Otto Maduro, Drew University



*Otto Maduro (b. Venezuela 1945) is a philosopher and sociologist of religion. He has an MA in philosophy of religion (1973), another in sociology of religion (1975), and a PhD in philosophy (1977) from the Catholic University of Louvain, all magna cum laude. Involved in the Latin American Liberation Theology movement since its inception, Maduro has published nearly 200 essays and five books, and he has edited three other books on themes of religion, knowledge, and liberation. His latest book is *Mapas para la Fiesta: Reflexiones Latinoamericanas Sobre la Crisis y el Conocimiento* (La Paz, Bolivia: Verbo Divino, 2008). Since 1992, Maduro has been a professor of World Christianity at Drew University Theological School. In 1999, he began a study of United States Latina/o immigrant Pentecostal churches in Newark, New Jersey, with grants from the Ford Foundation and the ATS/Henry Luce Fellows in Theology program. Since 2006, Maduro has been the national director of the Hispanic Summer Program.*

RSN: How did your parents and your extended family influence your early career and education?

Maduro: My parents were the first in their families to go to college. My mom, the elder daughter of a cabinetmaker and luthier, was the only woman in her family to do so — and she went on to be the first woman lawyer in my country of origin, Venezuela.

Without resources to flee a late nineteenth century pogrom led by a Catholic priest in their region in northwestern Venezuela, my paternal grandparents — Sephardic Jewish peasants of Dutch origins — converted to Roman Catholicism several years before my dad's birth in 1900 (I didn't know of these family origins until I was fifteen years old, long after I was born in 1945).

Born and raised Roman Catholic like my mom, my dad entered high school already in his thirties, and soon became an atheist, largely as a reaction to Pope Pius XI's refusal to receive Mahatma Gandhi in the Vatican in 1931. He also became an attorney, working, like my mother, as both a high school teacher and a government employee in child and family services.

Our house was full of books, and my parents were constantly reading, writing, publishing, and discussing social, political, and philosophical issues. This fact, alongside their example as hard-working students, teachers, and attorneys in the service of the needy, certainly predisposed me to take the path I did in life — becoming a philosophy professor with a strong interest in issues of social justice.

RSN: At what point did you decide you wanted to become a scholar of religion?

Maduro: My interest in religion was indeed aroused both by my dad's Jewish origins and atheistic views, as well as by my mom's ambiguity toward Roman Catholicism — taking us to church only for Ash Wednesday and only once in a blue moon while constantly criticizing the authoritarianism and elitism of the Roman Catholic Spaniard clergy in Venezuela. We were not raised as religious believers, but almost everybody else around us was. Around 1957, I decided to get baptized as a Roman Catholic — maybe partly an expression of a teenage rebellion against my parents. I then became quite a staunch church activist, joining Roman Catholic anti-Communist underground groups in the 1960s to the shock of my left-leaning parents.

About to finish high school, I decided to become a priest, entering a Roman Catholic seminary. I left it just six months later (mainly because I couldn't see myself leading a celibate life), but the experience deepened in me a lifelong, passionate interest in religion, philosophy, theology, and church history.

Right after leaving seminary, when I entered college and took philosophy as my major, I began to see myself as preparing to be a scholar of religion. I'm convinced that an added — subliminal, but no less important factor — was that, for most of my teenage years, I showed no salient qualities to elicit appreciation from my age cohort (I was no good at sports, grades, street-fights, or getting girls to go out with me). This was the case until a day when I took a very strong stand against an anti-Semitic German neighbor, arguing with him in a way that apparently impressed my teenage friends. Days later, I got a call from one of them at home, asking me to come and resolve another religious-political argument that had erupted among the neighborhood youth. I discovered then not just what I was interested in, but how it gave me a

positive identity. I guess that was the day I began to evolve into a religious scholar. Shortly thereafter, I started writing short essays on religion and society for political and religious newsletters, college newspapers, and the like.

While completing a very intensive major in philosophy in college, I underwent another important change that would later impact my scholarship. Examining during four years the major philosophies throughout European history, I began to realize that my own brand of Roman Catholicism was but one plausible interpretation of the Christian tradition among many others. The Second Vatican Council confirmed and deepened that realization. During a semester where I had to lie in bed with hepatitis and nothing interesting to do besides reading books twelve hours a day, I stumbled upon a French Jesuit's critical exposition of Marxist thought (Jean Yves-Calvez's *The Thought of Karl Marx*). After a careful reading of its nearly 500 pages in the Spanish translation, I began to distance myself from the simplistic understandings of both Christianity and Marxism that I had learned in my church groups and to appreciate both the complex historical interrelations between religion and society, and the resources Marxist theories may hold for understanding those interrelations. That change marked more precisely the direction of my scholarly interests.

I had my first teaching position in higher education in Venezuela in 1971 — fresh out of college in a nation with very few people with masters or doctorates. There was not much interest in religion among Venezuelan intellectuals or institutions of higher education, and seminaries were not interested in lay teachers, either. The 1970s oil boom gave many a chance of studying abroad. I immediately grabbed the opportunity and obtained a five-year scholarship to do graduate studies in philosophy in the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. I soon realized there was a dearth of studies on the Latin American religious landscape. I decided to focus my graduate studies in this area and from a social-scientific perspective: first by obtaining a Masters in philosophy of religion, then a Masters in sociology of religion, and finally a PhD in philosophy of religion. In the meantime, I fell in love with European languages, partially succeeding in trying to master six of them.

As soon as I got back home to Venezuela in 1977, I published my three Louvain theses and a series of essays related to their main two themes: Marxist theories of religion, on the one hand, and, related to it, religion and social conflicts in Latin American recent history.

RSN: What has compelled you to research, publish, and lecture in the area of Latino/a philosophy and sociology of religion?

Maduro: Well, one thing led to another. The interest in those themes was growing all over the Americas in the 1970s and 1980s as liberation theologies — and the violent elites' backlash against them — multiplied and spread across the Americas and beyond. I was invited to teach in the United States on these issues first in 1982, both at the department of sociology of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and in Maryknoll School of Theology, New York, and later in several institutions in Central and South America. I continued researching, writing, and publishing on these themes, as I became increasingly interested and involved in what was happening among Latinos/as in the United States, particularly in the religious arena.

In 1992 I was invited by Drew University Theological School, New Jersey, to teach in the area of World Christianity and Latin American Christianity. That position gave me an opportunity, among others, to cross paths with a growing number of American Hispanic scholars in religion, theology, and related disciplines. More and more, my reading, lecturing, and writing started to revolve around U.S. Latina/o religions. Then, in the year 2000, I obtained a sabbatical grant from the Ford Foundation to begin a study on Latina/o Pentecostal churches in the city of Newark, New Jersey. Seven years later, the ATS/Luce Fellows in Theology Program honored me with a similar grant to resume that research, at the same time that I was invited to be national director of the Hispanic Summer Program — an independent program for enhancing the education of American Latina/o graduate students in religion and theology.

RSN: Can you tell us about your current academic life at Drew University?

Maduro: I used to change academic jobs at least every four years. When I began to think of leaving Drew at the end of my fourth year there, I realized I was in the middle of the most gratifying academic, scholarly, and intellectual experience of my life, among a wonderful array of colleagues from which I learned more than I could teach my students — and with whom a solid, supportive, and enriching community of friendly colleague camaraderie was rapidly taking root.

I decided to stay. That was sixteen years ago, and I haven't regretted it for a split second!

Together, with the help of two wonderful deans throughout the last twelve years, we have expanded our academic life to include bringing students into a prison for semester-long courses alongside inmates; taking students abroad to live for two weeks amid a different culture; connecting our courses with struggling nearby communities to discover what we can contribute to and gain from their experiences; traveling abroad as a faculty to ponder together the social

and religious life of other nations; team-teaching — as well as auditing each other's courses — in an effort to learn from each other and model for our students a collaborative pedagogy; and mentoring our students in a way that helps them grow as writers, presenters, researchers, authors, teachers, public intellectuals, and team-workers.

If you attend our annual Drew University Theological School reception at the AAR you will notice and appreciate the large attendance and deep collaborative work that characterizes us. I have indeed grown and been enriched by my two decades in this milieu.

RSN: What is your greatest joy in teaching?

Maduro: I could say it in very few words: witnessing students discover their own voice, their own ideas, and their own life projects — academic or otherwise — including over against what they have read and heard in my courses. I certainly cherish more the students who go on their own creative dedicated path than students who learn and repeat only what I bring to the classroom. 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.

RSN: What are your goals as the Academy's President in 2012?

Maduro: I recently answered the same question from a group of Drew students. I told them that, fortunately, the AAR presidency is nowadays much more a part of a long-haul team effort than an individual affair. And, in any case, we AAR presidents don't have enough power or time to do much individually anyway (it is a volunteer labor spread, above all, through three or four face-to-face meetings over the year and several e-mails and phone calls in between). True, each president brings to the job their unique "stamp," as it were. Mine, which has been partially hindered by health issues during this year, I see as focusing on:

- To continue improving the presence and contributions to the academy of underrepresented constituencies
- To develop further the ways in which the AAR can help young scholars of religion in an increasingly tight and complex job market

- To enhance our role in promoting a more serious consideration of the importance and roles of religion in the public square

The most "individual" part of our job as presidents lies probably in choosing a theme for the Annual Meeting in the year when we end our presidential duties (Chicago 2012 in my case), organizing three plenaries for that meeting, and, of course, preparing and presenting a presidential address in that same meeting.

I chose as our Chicago 2012 Annual Meeting theme "Migrants' Religions under Imperial Duress."

Let's hope the coming months provide further opportunities to continue walking in these directions!