

RECASTING THE SOCIOLOGICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA

the contribution of Christian sociology

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- **Introduction :**

Over the past 10 - 20 years there has been a consistent refrain from Christian scholars - one's religion cannot be divorced from one's scholarship². But a Christian sociologist's contribution is not simply a consultant's advice proffered in the private confines of a spiritual conventicle; it should be a contribution to sociological research per se and is an inner constraint which often leads to a sense of spiritual embarrassment.

- **Teaching Christian sociology in Academia**

In the university the attempt to present a Christian approach within the teaching programme of sociology - its theories, methods and research strategies - involves an attempt to put a Christian modality alongside of all the other schools. A Christian view of theory, and an explanation of research style and strategy takes its place alongside all other views. We should be wary of the way the matrix of pedagogical convention shapes what is taught and how, even if it cannot be avoided. A Christian theory of society still needs to be set forth in the midst of all theoretical streams in sociology which have their own philosophical orientations which in turn are indicative of some religious belief or other³. But the non-neutrality of any particular theoretical approach does not derive from its disagreement with other approaches. Neither is any particular theoretical approach neutral with respect to the overall direction of the university teaching programme. And the administration of the university teaching programme is never neutral with respect to these contending ideologies. But their non-neutrality with respect to each other is not to be derived from their ideological differences. The non-neutrality among and between different theoretical approaches is a function of the religious character of theories, philosophies, pedagogy, curriculum and university administration. These human activities, as dimensions of the academic task, are always executed **Coram Deo**, motivated and directed by religious commitment.

². The little booklet by John Stott **Your Mind Matters** 1972 develops this refrain.

³. Here I find the argument of Roy A Clouser **The Myth of Religious Neutrality** University of Notre Dame Press 1991 particularly cogent.

The greatest challenge of a reformational sociology is to place sociological reflection within the entire scientific encyclopaedia, and in so doing ground social science in the "transcendental critique of theoretical thought" pioneered by Herman Dooyeweerd and hopefully present it as a genuine analytic possession of the scientific community. "Reformed" and/or "reformational" scholars outside of Holland have only rarely presented the insights of this philosophical movement in this manner⁴.

- **Christian Philosophical Sociology on the World Stage**

It is for this reason that I believe that the exposition of Roy Clouser in **The Myth of Religious Neutrality** deserves special attention by reformed scholars in my own field of sociology. Clouser's exposition bears the marks of having been refined in the secularist and state university system; it does not have some of the communication problems which "Christian college" type expositions tend to produce. On the other hand, **Myth** has had to run the gauntlet of those who, in the public university system, cannot conceive that a Christian philosophical approach has any place at all in the so-called "secular" public sphere. At academic conferences, especially those convened to discuss "religious" or "Christian" topics, there is an ongoing moral refrain which implies that it is somehow un-Christian for a Christian scholar to take an approach which presupposes an adherence to biblical religion. This thoroughly misguided appeal to an ethic of "Christian charity" is but a secularist complaint having more in common with liberal bourgeois "polite society" than with a life ruled publicly and privately by "speaking the truth in love" or "Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness"⁵.

The true *catholicity* of such Christian sociology is at stake here. We need to face up to our distinctive principle, not just to ensure we tell the truth to others; Christians also need to begin to tell the truth to themselves. Such not only means we seek to be honest about the tradition within which we work, or the insight we seek to develop, nor upon the contents of our theorising. It strikes to the heart of our task as students in the "school of Jesus Christ". And if we are university academics it will have a definite impact upon the way we approach class-room teaching. The question of developing a Christian sociology in the academy must also address our historical situation.

⁴. Paul Schrotenboer has observed that of the 100 Christian colleges and universities in the USA today none are genuinely public institutions, as they were in earlier centuries. Has the dream of Christian **public** higher education been dreamt? See his comments "IAPCHE Debrecen Regional Conference Aug 16-19, 1993" in **Contact** 5:2 December 1993 3-4.

⁵. see Harry Blamires **The Christian Mind** SPCK 1963 pp.39-40, where he identifies the privatisation of belief as a personal possession as the origin of this misguided approach. see also the comments by Michael Griffiths **Take My Life** IVP 1967, pp.141-2.

There has been no greater reformed Christian contribution to public and scholarly debate about modernity and the place of social science therein than that line of critique initiated by Groen van Prinsterer⁶, carried on by Abraham Kuyper⁷ and brought to definitive philosophical formulation in the work of Herman Dooyeweerd⁸.

But we in the "Old Commonwealth" are continually having to reckon with the power of North America. American social theory is very concerned, if not overly so, with finding its roots in Europe, and is now very conscious of the "hyphen" which now re-appearing among the various European-ethnic groups. Americans might also be disposed to dis-entangling their ethnic-genealogies from the democratic melting pot. In 20th century sociology America has been the frontier and the future? As we develop a Christian sociology we need to discern the degree to which Sociology, itself, has been a way of thinking compatible with the American democratic experiment, led eschatologically by a hope in the "world tomorrow"?

The sociological theorist within the American polity has an important role to play. The attempt by Americans to understand the role of European ideas remains a very important part of American intellectual culture. With persistent fervour Americans return to this question to the amazement of outsiders.

Americans are also somewhat pre-occupied with finding and tracing their roots from Europe to the Frontier, the land which Seymour Martin Lipset has called **The First New Nation**, or in Talcott Parsons' terms "the new lead society". Such is the intensity of the search for historical connections and continuity that the fact that it was Europeans, and not Americans, who actually found their (social, spiritual, theoretical, scientific, philosophical) roots in the cultural soil of the American experiment is sometimes overlooked, especially in countries like Australia. **The North American "adolescent", obsessed with the task of establishing maturity, is a child of European parents after all.**

The question of how to **teach** sociology in a Christian way may not be the same as the question concerning how to **think** sociologically in a Christian way. But the two questions are related. At times, I have had to run the gauntlet of reformed and fundamentalist

⁶. Harry van Dyke **Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution** Wedge Ontario 1989. J L van Essen & H D Morton **Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer** Wedge Ontario 1990.

⁷. Abraham Kuyper's address "Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie" (1891) was initially published in this city by Piet Hein, 1950 as **Christianity and the Class Struggle**. James W Skillen's edited translation has also appeared **The Problem of Poverty** (Baker 1991). See also Kuyper's famous **Lectures on Calvinism**, delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898.

students who underestimate the curricular constraints that are upon the Christian academic in the academy. Why spend so much time teaching students to **read** Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Pierre Bourdieu and Jane Flax and the entire inter-change bench of modern and post-modern theorists? We need to "think these thinkers thoughts after them," I say, but students often cannot see that this has anything at all to do with the Christian student's task.

We have to reckon with the fact that "sociology" is being formed anew within the framework of our dominant intellectual traditions. And if Christian students are to think as Christians they will have to come to terms with "history", "economics", "aesthetics", "philosophy", "mathematics" etc and not stay confined within their narrow areas of expertise and specialisation. We need insight into how the many academic disciplines are packaged, marketed and delivered in the university super-market. But we need theoretical insight into the structure of the academic division of labour which pertains among these disciplines. We need to uncover the implicit assumptions, the "hidden curriculum", **for our own spiritual well-being** as scholars.

- **The Christian sociological Contribution :**

"Christian sociology" is not a matter of mediating between the social philosophies of the "secular academy" and the thought world of the "Christian community". Such a "mediating" approach subordinates scholarship to the consulting role of the "public intellectual" and is epitomised by Harold Bloom in USA and Paul Johnson in UK. Karl Mannheim referred to this academic style in his famous concept of the "free floating intellectual", In Australia this kind of intellectual is very common, the pragmatic motif having led social thinkers to a remarkable degree.⁹ Such an approach, for all its other merits, is not a direct contribution to sociological theory **as such**. Sociological analysis might subject public intelligence to critical investigation and this may derive sharp philosophical and sociological insights.

Apart from engaging, publicly, critically and constructively in the academic discourse of sociological theory as well as developing critical insight concerning the historiography of sociological theory. Christian sociology will involve a philosophical **and** empirical approach to social research.

⁸. Herman Dooyeweerd *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* 1935-6; *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* 1955-8 and numerous other publications.

⁹. see Sol Encel, Hugh Stretton, F W Eggleston. Even the contribution of Manning Clark, the doyen of Australia's historians, can be clarified by viewing it from this angle. Among Christian thinkers this is a common theme. Two such are Hugh MacKay and Keith Suter of the Club of Rome. Stuart Fowler (see Bibliography), an independent

It is not a "spot the ideology" exercise¹⁰, nor is it merely a study of "world views". But how are we to re-define the encyclopaedia of theoretical thought so as to clarify the task of sociology? If we keep in mind that all social research (political legal theory, linguistics, ethics, economics, aesthetics) cannot avoid a philosophical overview of human society, what then is the focus of a science of the "societal"?

- **The Specialist Study of the Social Aspect.**

Manners and customs are the focus for the specialist science of the social aspect. When social manners are identified as the special focus in this way it might appear that we have capitulated to an a-political and a-historical ideology. It might seem as if we have adopted an approach to empirical reality which is more akin to a hobby than to serious academic discipline.

An examination of the actual empirical form of social manners, within the full ambit of social life reveals that the social aspect encompasses all of social life in its own way. Sociology, via the differing contributions of Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault and Irving Goffman, has been re-discovering this aspect in recent times. The norms of politeness, giving due deference, social convention are found in all social settings and cohere with all other aspects of the human cultural task. Social conventions are revealed historically by particular lingual expressions; they have been formed in an historical process in which language and social manners give expression to normative states of affairs.

Let us consider the social conventions in their various social and institutional settings. We here confront the historical fact that social conventions are tied in one hundred and one ways to the process of differentiation and disclosure. In the undifferentiated social setting of the tribe familial manners are not just a matter of filial piety; as a system they constitute a society-wide symbolic allegiance to the tribal powers. They are at once familial, political and cultic. The entire ethos of the tribe is dependent upon the hold which such a traditional and undifferentiated set of rules of allegiance, obedience and deference has upon members.

Language, in a closely knit militarised social setting (as with the Magyars in Hungary, and in traditional Korea), becomes a political and historical resource to be shaped according to

educational consultant, adopts this approach as well. The "scholarship" that is thereby promoted is an ongoing interaction between various facets of one person's public involvements.

¹⁰. There is also the problem of the 20th century - sociology has been viewed as a Jewish conspiracy at times and a discussion of Christian sociology needs carefully to distinguish itself from all racism and all ideologically-inspired triumphalism. see Henk Woldring **Karl Mannheim 1986:66**, and the essay by Sol Encel "Sociology, Politics and Social Democracy" in Ann Daniel (ed) **Social Democracy, Social Science : Essays in Honours of Sol**

the dominant powers, and the psycho-social impact of such domination is to be seen in the taken-for-granted linguistically formed customs that present us with "national character" in specific terms.

But as society undergoes historical differentiation and disclosure, the different social structures of family, state and church form their own distinct identities; so also do the social conventions which become a part of the social structural complex. But which if any social structural power has the leading role in the process? Family life can take on a quasi-military form; the state can adopt a cultic character; the church shaped as an extended family-circle.

When in a Court Room we are required to stand for the entrance of the magistrate we do so, and the body of the Court thereby shows its respect to the Court's Authority. Yet Court-room etiquette varies from society to society; a Court in a society with a rich legal tradition in common law contrasts markedly with the Court convened by the Dictator shortly after a successful revolution.

In our kind of differentiated and complex society we make our way to the Court on the tram. We do not break any social convention by refraining from standing (the behaviour we adopt by convention in the Court) when the man, who is the Court's Chief Magistrate, boarded our crowded tram and stood grasping the strap. In fact social convention may require that if he was lucky enough to have a seat he must give it up to another - and it might reflect very poorly on his profession if he does not - and in our society the person who could be deferred to in **that** situation could be one who is older or possibly a woman. If the judge is a woman, as is quite possible, the setting will be somewhat different, due to the difference in deference given in such public places.

Standing to show respect is a social act that is manifest in various settings, but the meaning of the respect is dependent upon the social structure in which the customary behaviour takes place. Compare the Christian congregation which follows the practise of standing to pray, the school assembly which stands for the national anthem, the polite gentleman who stands when a lady enters the room, the orchestra which stands to acknowledge the arrival of its conductor, the crowd at the football final standing to cheer as the winners run their victory lap of honour, and the parliamentarians who stand as the Mace is brought into the chamber. All these acts involve people, groups, assemblies, crowds and congregations in the physical act of standing, getting out of one's seat. Such acts are not the polite ones of

Encel 1991:75-94 at p.75. For further reflection on this I would recommend the 1993 Reith lectures by Edward Said.

offering any seat to a woman or an elderly person. They function as marks of respect for authority within the routines of various social settings.

In a society where the ethos can be characterised by its democratic character we witness the erosion of the rule that says a man should stand for a woman on public transport. The rule nowadays seems to focus more upon age. This is not to say that chivalry is altogether dead. But in a democratically shaped public sphere the manners which could be characterised as "chivalrous" are displaced by other more subtle interactions.

Manners have their lingual form; they are explained in terms of living accounts that people give for their actions. When they no longer have a vibrant cultural expression, functioning solely in terms of an earlier generation's memory, then they become artefacts and lose their cultural formative power to shape social setting in new ways. Sometimes such out-of-date manners might be characterised as "quaint", as in the case of the elderly gentlemen giving up his seat on public transport to the woman in her thirties. In this case such manners will be viewed as a personal habit, part of a person's (ethnically-shaped) personal demeanour. On other occasions such acts might be viewed as "vulgar", "oldie worldy" or "manipulative".

In secularised families dominated by utilitarian life-style the passing of one set of manners and its replacement by another set is not always clearly seen. Take for instance the way in which families eat meals together. Daily and weekly routines are now much more diverse than they were in earlier times. The advent of television and TV snacks heralded the advent of far-reaching changes in the way families eat meals together. Rituals, feasts and commemorations have undergone significant changes. We still have such "formal" occasions, but our routine meals are now much less formal.

Christmas dinner in Australia for over a century was modelled upon the kind of stuffed-chicken roast which was an appropriate meal for a cold climate and hence somewhat inappropriate in the new environs. But that did not hinder its emergence as a social form. Christmas dinner, like Sunday lunch through the rest of the year, was usually a roast. Even as late as twenty years ago such a convention was considered a normal part of family life on the day of rest. Christmas dinner conventions functioned as a part of formal eating arrangements in families. It is still a regularly held and elaborate affair in which the whole family sits down in formal attire, with best silver, best crockery and best linen. But because the Sunday lunch has disappeared its character is somewhat changed. Moreover twenty years ago the family might have been at its most refined, having just arrived home from

Church. Prayers were also intoned at the meal-table as a matter of course. Those days seem to have gone.

Nowadays, when children are asked not to refrain from talk whilst eating it may well be that the television programme is the centre of attention. Once "children were seen and not heard" and instructed that it was "rude to talk while you are eating." The so-called Victorian manners of genteel society prevailed.

But just because the holding power of Victorian manners has dissipated, along with the holding power of the former British Empire and its Anglican-utilitarian culture centred on Oxford and Cambridge, does not mean that people nowadays are "unmannered". Other social manners and ways of doing things - alternative conceptions of "republican" propriety, perhaps - have arisen to social prominence to take their place. The discussion of these issues in Australian society, but also in many other places throughout the world, is encapsulated in the political term "multiculturalism". Manners and ways of doing things are not only historical artefacts; they are always at one time living and vibrant expressions of renewed cultural developments.

After the second world war Australia underwent its own cultural transformation. Up until that time the Commonwealth had been populated by immigrants from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. There had been some Chinese who flocked to the gold fields in the second half of the nineteenth century and German settlement had also occurred. But in the main Australian culture remained Anglo-Celtic, if not Anglo-Saxon. The manners of the indigenous blacks were ignored by the dominant Anglophone society, with some notable exceptions. But with the end of hostilities and millions rendered homeless or uprooted by the unprecedented carnage Italians, Greeks, Germans, Dutch, Scandinavians, Yugoslavs, Czechs, Scandinavians, Russians and others immigrated to this "Great South Land". The language, etiquette, dress, food and life-style of the Anglo-Celtic culture could no longer function as the only system of manners and etiquette appropriate to the country. Of course, there were those who saw national harmony to be dependent upon cultural uniformity, advocating a British Anglophone derivative life style as norm, and forgetting that its "home country" was the anglo-celtic amalgam of a United Kingdom with English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh components. But after the second-world war Anglo-Celtic customs could no longer function as they had heretofore. A new stage of the development of Australia's own social customs had arrived. And when the Vietnam War ended in 1975, and boat people arrived fleeing the communist terror, this process gained momentum and today a more

republican and democratically-horizontal society is the result. This does not mean that vertical forms of integration are absent. The possibility of new forms of social deference, based upon the over-reaching economic power of the media and power corporations (the high-fliers of the 1980's), has already showed itself in the creating of a class of administrators eager to please their masters and keen to maintain their control of the workplace, the management of the Government's business and the setting of the agenda of the nation's future including the manners to be adopted in public life.

There are many social settings for the analysis of manners :

1. Unionism and work manners - the solidarity of workers united against "scab" labour. 2. School and class-room etiquette - peer-group pressure - the increasing devolution of the primary and secondary school systems. 3. Popular culture and the "rad" & "cool" approach to the future¹¹ - media and public morality. 4. Law and order in the context of revenue raising - manners on the roads - taxation and bureaucratic threats - punishment - "politically correct" language - form letters. 5. Entertainment and sport - corporate sponsorship and contracts - democratic society and contractual obligations to promote sponsors products - loyalty to the team - larrikinism - winning at all costs. 6. Sexual permissiveness and the "cool manners" of a libertarian culture; pluralism, multiculturalism, toleration, permissiveness, libertarianism; "shoving your ideas down the throats of others". 7. Public legal "equal opportunity" - litigation and discrimination.

Manners are formed across social groupings of the same ascribed characteristics : age, ethnicity, gender, religious belief. I do not claim to have solved all the problems here, but simply put this forward as a contribution to a reformed re-consideration of the sociological encyclopaedia.

- **Conclusion**

Christian sociology has a future. It will need to be self-critical. It will involve an ongoing and constructive critique of intellectual "fashion". It will seek to contribute from within the intellectual "mainstream", even if it swims according to an alternative spiritual cross-current. This will involve an ongoing critique of the history and historiography of sociological theory. It cannot afford to remain aloof from French, neo-Nietzschean thought (Foucault and others) nor from a de-constructed Marx, nor from the various feminist currents.

Christian sociology must develop its own systematics - articulating theory, research and "practise" to sociological insights in all professional areas. Christian sociology should develop an explicit "up-front" methodological *apologia* for sociological research.

Christian sociology cannot be done without philosophy and social research working hand-in-hand. 'Success' will be gauged by the critical contribution made to scholarly discourse in the variegated sociological mainstreams.

- **Some literature on Christian sociology**

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¹¹. The volume by Quentin J Schultze et.al **Dancing in the Dark - Youth Popular Culture and the Electronic Media** Eerdmanns 1991 is an excellent ethnographic exploration and would be a worthy model for further research in "manners" in other modes as well.

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