

A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

Alan Storkey I.V.P., Leicester 1979

Storkey's A Christian Social Perspective fills out the framework for a christian approach to sociology found in David Lyon's Christians and Sociology IVP 1975 (reviewed in F.C.S. Newsletter No. 13, 1978). In contrast to Lyon, Storkey places his argument in close proximity to the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd.

This work, I predict, will set the tone for christian sociology, in our parts, for some time. Storkey calls christians, and others, to awaken from a humanistic slumber to a new life of Christ-honouring faith and action. Storkey turns the light of the Gospel onto all social sectors and gives a credible, professionally respectable social analysis throughout the wide spectrum of social topics.

The book is ambitious, over 400 pages long, and Storkey introduces his readers to the philosophical problems that have to be solved before fashioning a christian social perspective.

The book presents the reviewer with a difficult task. It resembles Sorokin's Contemporary Social Theories - an overall map of the theoretical options on the sociological terrain. It has aspects of Parsons' The Structure of Social Action - an alternative theory synthesized in the midst of the history of social theory. It also reminds me of the Introductory Textbooks to Stage 1 University Sociology, which discuss the wide breadth contemporary social problems. Most importantly, Storkey wants to set forth his analyses in the Perspective of the Protestant Reformation and in his historical backdrop (pp.15-51) Storkey pictures the development of British Christianity as the battle between the Reformation (18-24) and the Enlightenment (24-33).

What I find lacking in his historical discussion is any incisive explanation of the differences among those whom he lines up on the side of the Reformation and for that matter why christians could be supporters of the Enlightenment. He gives the reader little indication of why the Puritan contribution declined, and why the Enlightenment posed such a threat to the christianity of those who stood (and stand) in and for the Puritan tradition. Whereas the puritans of the earlier period "*found no difficulty in applying the condemnations of the prophets to similar situations in their society*" (p.23) their heirs were subsequently incorporated into, or swept aside by the onward march of Humanistic thought and action. Did they succumb to a method like John Locke who, according to Storkey, argued for christianity with reason as his final arbiter? (p.25)

A general historical framework of Reformation - versus - Enlightenment leads to problems in our account of movements and counter-movements and of individual historical cases. For instance, how are we to account for Richard Hooker, the Anglican divine, who in his writings sided with, and quoted, Calvin, against the Puritans. How are we to account for the continuing contribution of Catholicism - in either its Anglo - or Roman - varieties? Again, how do we account for Locke's defence of christianity? Surely, here is another form of British christianity which needs to be taken into account in its own right, even if it is mistaken?

But there may be an historiographical method in Storkey's utilization of such an historical backdrop. With this general framework for the history of British Christianity, since the Reformation, Storkey has a convenient "benchmark" against which to analyze the variations manifested by, and in, subsequent historical developments. He does not appear to rule out future historical investigation of the individual differences among the Puritans, but for his immediate purposes he ascribes a certain "consensus" to the Puritans et al., so as to account for some broad structural developments in the 16th and 17th century British society. Subsequent historical investigation in this context is concerned with accounting for the variability within the overall social context. Storkey acknowledges, in passing, the importance of the Restoration, the eclipse of Puritan style of worship and the exclusion of non-conformists from education and politics (p.24). Yet, though he does not explicitly endorse a Puritan = Calvinist equation, his method does assume that the differences, if any are a matter of historical variations on one basic theme; significant for the investigations of academic historians perhaps, but hardly relevant for those who wish to work with a christian social perspective in the concrete push-and-pull of social action.

What importance could a critical-historical appreciation of the Church of England have for christian social action in the 1980's? Surely any discussion about the differences among the Puritans is at most peripheral in any concerted attempt at christian political witness in the public realm of British life?

By no means! These issues serve to explicate basic principles about the public realm; the relation of the church to non-ecclesiastical structures; the relation of the creeds to political policy-making; the view of ecumenicity as it pertains to non-church christian organizations!

I realize that Storkey's primary qualifications are in economics and social science and I may well be imputing to him a self-conscious historiographical method which he has not fully thought through. But, as he points out, theoretical arguments are based on pre-theoretical assumptions. In this case, I am trying to point out the assumptions implicit in his historical backdrop, assumptions which must, in some ways, undergird the subsequent social analysis. Storkey does not give an incisive enough account of the different approaches to social organization found among the christians he lines up on the side of the Reformation.

I shall now discuss another aspect of Storkey's philosophical approach - his utilization of the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. After having outlined his christian ground principles (chapters 1-5), the narrative is then divided into what Storkey calls Primary Sociology (Chaps 6-10) and Secondary Sociology (Chaps 11-15). His reason for organizing his material thus (p.134) remains unclear until it is realized that this is his attempt to utilize Dooyeweerd's social philosophy. We are told that Primary and Secondary do not mean more or less important, but rather Primary Sociology is the core concerned with "free relationships", "non-institutional structures", the relationships of personal influence; Secondary Sociology is the analysis of social areas where the primary concern is not social, but "extra - social".

Primary sociology deals with community and class, marriage, family, the mass media. Secondary sociology includes Storkey's discussion of British party politics, the state, economics and the church.

The focus of sociology is societal interaction. Primary sociology studies social interaction in realms where social interaction, and its norms, are the focus. Secondary sociology studies realms of social interaction where non-social norms predominate. (These are Storkey's terms).

What is my response? The division into primary and secondary sociology strongly resembles private/public classification systems. I think that this division of his material casts some doubt against Storkey's attempt to utilize the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. Dooyeweerd did not rule out the possibility of studying all societal institutions from the aspect of social intercourse. (see e.g. Philosophia Reformata 41e 1976 1&2 pp.3-4). Would not the primary and secondary distinction have a place in economics, political studies, legal theory and ecclesiastical studies? Is it not possible to study Storkey's "primary groups" from a "extra social" vantage point? We need further systematic discussion from him on these points. There are other matters about Storkey's utilization of Dooyeweerd that warrant critique, but I will limit myself to one methodological matter.

As it stands, and without further explication from Storkey, his method appears to lead him to the view that the analysis of the aspect of societal intercourse is the same as the analysis of "free relationships" of a non-organized inter-personal kind. But is there not a primary sociological problem in explaining how organizations (church, state, business) form, influence and direct the inter-personal relationships which emerge in their own spheres? Or conversely, there is the influence of community, class, friendships, marriage and family in the state, business life and the church. Perhaps it is these complex interweavings of social influence that Storkey wants to highlight by his primary/secondary distinction, yet at the very least, further discussion of these interweavings-in-their-own-right is needed. Chapters 11-16 on the "Secondary aspects" do not attempt to do this. Rather, in these chapters, Storkey is concerned to confront dichotomous nature-grace thinking among evangelicals with an integral perspective. I am not sure that he has succeeded.

This brings me to my final point - Storkey's view of the relation of the bible to social science. Storkey wants to confront and counteract the humanistic world-view in current social science, and he takes the bible very seriously. He has not predicated his social perspective on any abstract exegesis of scriptural passages; he outlines the various christian approaches to the Bible which he rejects: proof-texting, moralism, idealism, spiritualism. The bible does not need de-mythologizing, nor is it a scientific or theological textbook. Storkey considers the Bible to be the source for the creation of a common christian mind - "provided the reader is not selective" and "as long as people do not interpret the Scriptures in the light of their own ideas, there can be substantial agreement about what it means." (p.123). Storkey's emphasis throughout is upon the scriptures as they address life in its unity:

*Theoretical knowledge has its own structure and place, and it is wrong to bring these structural characteristics to the Scriptures, which are pre-theoretical writings in that they recount God's dealings and communications with ordinary people in concrete pre-scientific situations. Thus it is incorrect either to expect that a particular science will accurately and exhaustively analyze Scripture, or to expect Scripture to be directly relevant to a particular science like sociology. The Scriptures speak to humble men and women at an immediate day to day level and not to specialists qua specialists. Therefore it would be a denial of the nature or (sic!) its revelation to treat it in a theoretical or scientific way. However, we argued in Chapter 3 that all theoretical positions depend on pre-theoretical assumptions about the nature of mankind, and this means that in moving from biblical teaching to social analysis, we need a christian understanding of the relationship between pre-theoretical biblical writings and knowledge about the various sciences that depend on them. (pp. 125-126)*

The above passage raises a few problems. If the scriptures are pre-theoretical writings, does this not structure and place them by means of an a priori distinction between theoretical and pre-theoretical? Undoubtedly the distinction is a theoretical one! In my opinion, the biblical message is non-theoretical in the sense that in these writings it is the Holy Spirit Himself who addresses us, calling us to put the full weight of our confidence, in all things, upon Christ. If we are seeking for the inner reformation of all scientific thought, then we can not rest content with allowing the scriptural revelation to speak to us only in our non-theoretical activities of everyday living, as if a christian world-view, developed in our daily lives, has the dominion over the theoretical aspects of our thinking. I must disagree with Storkey in the sense that I believe that the scriptures do speak directly to us also as specialists, qua humble christian office-bearers, who are following a scientific calling. This does not exhaust the revelational power of the gospel - we are called upon to obey God's Word in all things.

The book is worthy of careful consideration. The criticisms I make above are very much directed to certain directions Storkey appears to follow in his historical method, in his sociological theory and in his view of the relation of the bible to social science. We can look forward to further work from the pen of Alan Storkey, where he clarifies his position on these issues. We hope we do not have to wait too long because, among other things, A Christian Social Perspective presents a well-needed challenge.

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