

The Sociological Imagination and a Christian Worldview

BY DUANE C. MCBRIDE

Why do they act that way? I can't believe they really live like that! Can you imagine a religion that actually believes that? In the world of massive population movements, instant media images, and rapid social change, various groups—once isolated from one another—now must coexist and compete for the same socio-cultural time and space. They experience conflict over jobs, housing, education, religious observance, and legal definitions of right and wrong. For most of this century, sociology has sought to understand the development and interaction of human groups and to use that understanding to reduce the problems that occur when groups interact.

Sociological Perspectives and Societal Relations

In general, sociologists use three theoretical traditions to interpret their subject matter: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction. The *functionalist perspective* examines how human group interaction, institutions, and culture promote the survival and success of various groups. For example, these sociologists might study wealth and poverty to discover how social choice patterns affect income level. They would probably conclude that delayed parenthood, smaller families, and two-parent households have a major impact on middle-class status, and that teenage single parenthood contributes significantly to poverty. Functionalists tend to study prosperous and dominant

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groups, cultures, and societies, focusing on the values and behaviors that make them successful.

Conflict theorists see the same phenomena quite differently. They would likely believe that poverty is an outcome of group struggle over scarce resources or wealth. From this perspective, poverty results not from learned dysfunctional choices, but because the system oppresses poor people. Both poverty and the welfare system are believed to serve the ruling classes' need for cheap labor, consumption of excessive production, and soldiers to further their objectives. Conflict theorists see society as in constant flux because of social groups' competition for power. They tend to view all norms and laws as helping the dominant group retain its position.

Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes human creativity, especially through the use of symbols and language that create social order and cultural meaning. Like

About Sociology

Sociology is a relatively new academic discipline, even though sociological thinking appears in the philosophical writings of the Greeks and the Old Testament social-civil codes. However, as a body of scholarship and research, sociology began in the 19th century. The first U.S. university department dealing with this subject was organized in the 1920s at the University of Chicago. Sociology grew in popularity during the rapid social changes of the industrial revolution. In that era, observers sought to understand the social, political, religious and economic changes occurring throughout the world. Sociology draws its methodology from science's objectivity and order assumptions, and from the humanities' emphasis on subjective perceptions of reality. Sociologists believe that the social world has patterns and can be understood and perhaps affected by human beings. They focus on patterns of group interaction and the resulting folkways, mores, laws, institutions, structure, and cultures, as well as how those structures affect human interaction. Today, sociology is generally part of or an option in the general-education requirements of most colleges and universities, including Adventist institutions.

the functionalists, these sociologists study functional and dysfunctional cultural patterns. But they also tend to mirror conflict theorists since they believe that social groups seek dominance through use of normative/legal structures. However, symbolic interactionists focus on the human ability to create social and material reality based on a vision of the ideal society. In examining single parenthood in a culture, they would focus on (1) the symbolic meaning of children; (2) the relation of child bearing to adult roles, status, and independence; and (3) the ways that changing those meanings could affect the number of single parents.

Sociologists often criticize the existing social order. Conflict theorists and symbolic interactionists tend to be very critical of the normative order, while functionalists, though more supportive, do note its dysfunctional elements. Conflict theorists focus on how dominant groups use the normative system to justify and serve their own interests. Symbolic interactionists emphasize ways that human beings can create and change symbolic meaning to make society more just, fair, and inclusive. Both groups tend to be egalitarian and critical of hierarchical structures. From their perspectives, economic and social stratification systems are designed to perpetuate existing social arrangements that benefit only a few. Probably for all of these reasons, sociologists are not the favorite thinkers, teachers, or researchers of any established order. As a result, sociologists often find themselves in the less desirable academic buildings, criticized by those in positions of power, and cut off from research funding.¹

Sociology and Christianity

Sociology criticizes social systems and focuses on human creativity and action. These aspects can be viewed as hostile to Christianity. However, as we will see below, many elements of sociological theory are consistent with a Christian worldview. There are at least four major areas of conflict and agreement between the two perspectives: determinism and choice, humanism and

belief in God, cultural relativity and moral absolutes; and a critical egalitarian perspective.

Determinism and Choice

Some sociologists argue that all human group perception and behavior is determined by one's position in social structure or membership in a particular cultural group. Marx² and others have held that the material economic order and one's structural position in it determine every attitude and behavior—even perceptions about God. (Other sociologists argue that group membership and position in a social structure offer only a partial explanation of human behavior.) Sociological research reveals that our perspective and even our theology may be influenced by social-cultural group membership. Prosperous Christians tend to believe that their wealth comes from hard work and God's blessing. However, poor Christians usually do not see their

poverty as the result of God's displeasure, but rather the lack of opportunity.³

In looking at slavery, sociologists might argue that white Christians justified this practice because they belonged to the dominant slave-holding culture, not because of what the Bible actually taught. An up-to-date example would be opposition to women's ordination by the male-dominated hierarchy of various denominations. Sociologists would likely see such opposition as resulting from a gender and ruling class perspective that seeks to prevent members of other groups from achieving leadership, rather than an objective, independent reading of the New Testament. Revealing the ways that group membership affects attitudes and behavior can play a valuable role in helping the Christian church to re-examine its theology.

While most sociologists focus on the effects of social group membership on human behavior, others center their research and theoretical thinking on how

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human freedom allows us to create structure. Weber, while recognizing that one's position in a society helps to shape attitudes about God, also held that ideas about God could *create* social and economic reality. In fact, he persuasively argued that the Protestant ethic, with its focus on universal priesthood, personal achievement, and individual judgment, produced cultures that focused on hard work, sobriety, savings, and traditionally defined ethical behavior. In turn, these religiously based values and behaviors provided the foundation of modern capitalist, productive, and democratic societies. Thus, Weber argued that theology could and did create society.⁴ Sociologists who embrace symbolic interaction and conflict perspectives have consistently emphasized the role of human choice and decision making in social change.

Humanism and a Belief in God

Most sociologists tend to be humanists or secularists.⁵ However, their research on various human cultures has caused them to support cultural tolerance and acceptance of people's religious beliefs. Sociological studies have focused on how such beliefs contribute to meaningful individual and community life, public ethics, and morality.⁶ They have argued that dominant groups and governments should not interfere with religious practices in contemporary society, and that scholars should be more sensitive to the reality and validity of religious belief in everyday life. Sociologists have also documented the pervasiveness of religious belief in contemporary American society and the role of religions in socializing the individual.⁷ As a result, they have played a significant role in preserving religious freedom and documenting the importance of religion in human life.

Cultural Relativism and Christian Absolutes

Sociology tends to emphasize moral and ethical relativity in studying group behaviors, values, and norms. Traditionally, sociologists do not view one culture's way of doing things as better

or worse than that of another. Rather, they see group behavioral patterns as resulting from different norms and values that should be understood and even appreciated. On the other hand, many Christians believe in moral absolutes, which do not depend on one's position or membership in a human culture but rather on irrefutable principles from the Word of God. Accordingly, many Christians would accuse sociology of contributing to the moral decay in contemporary society.

Differences over cultural relativism and moral absolutes do cause some tension between sociology and Christianity. However, cultural relativism offers some important contributions to religious thought. As Adventism has become increasingly multicultural, we have had to recognize, if not accept, a

significant amount of cultural relativism. Adventist views on many important issues such as abortion, human sexuality, and the ordination of women vary significantly among cultural groups.⁸ Cultural relativity has helped to undermine the philosophical and theological bases for racism and imperialism and has contributed to greater ethnic inclusion in society as well as the Adventist Church.

Cultural relativity can be subjected to Christian critique. Obviously, sociologists themselves probably would feel uncomfortable with unlimited cultural relativity. One can hardly imagine them publicly arguing for the cultural values that advocate war and violence, enslave others, or encourage genocide. They would certainly prefer to emphasize such basic Christian virtues as eth-

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nic inclusiveness, peacemaking, and cooperation. Sociology and Christianity thus could profitably engage in dialogue, grappling with the tension inherent in cultural relativism.⁹

A Critical Egalitarian Perspective

As has been noted, sociology does tend to criticize the established order. Since the Christian church has become very established, it often feels uncomfortable with sociological thought and theory. However, certain elements of conflict theory and symbolic interaction are consistent with a New Testament perspective. The apostles took a critical attitude toward social structure. For example, the Book of James skewers the church's tendency to excessively honor members of the ruling class in their midst.¹⁰ Similar to today's critical sociologists, Paul (like Jesus) was no respecter of persons. Paul had many strong anti-hierarchical views, and saw no important social meaning in ethnicity, nationality, or gender.¹¹ In addition, like some egalitarian sociologists, the New Testament church was strongly communalist. Members turned over their property to the church and received back what they needed. The New Testament clearly shows that the early Christians held all things in common.¹²

Conclusions

Like any other academic or scientific discipline, sociology offers a particular perspective on reality. It reminds us that social group membership affects behavior, attitudes, institutions, and even theology. Sociology reveals that societies and even theologies often serve the needs of the powerful, and that human beings can reject the existing social or theological order and set about to change it. In addition, sociology reminds us of the rich cultural diversity of contemporary society and the Adventist Church, as well as the need to understand, accept, and integrate the diverse subcultures that comprise our community of belief. Finally, in its critique of stratification systems, sociology reminds Christians of their own egalitarian roots and tempers the

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human tendency toward organizational oligarchy and courting the world's wealthy and powerful. As a result, sociology can be and is an important part of the general-education curriculum at most Adventist colleges.

Our increasingly multicultural world and church demand that we strive to understand social/cultural/ethnic group processes and identity. Such effort will be, by definition, uncomfortable and difficult at times, but will help us to

shape wisely human group experience in church and society. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. See Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).
4. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1976). Talcott Parsons, trans.
5. Rodney Stark, "Religion and Conformity: Reaffirming a Sociology of Religion," *Social Forces* 45 (1984), pp. 273-282.
6. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Telling Congregational Stories," *Review of Religious Research* 35:4 (June 1994), pp. 289-301.
7. For example, see Jon M. Shepard, *Sociology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: West Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 433-459.
8. Michael Pearson, *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990).
9. For further reading in this area, see Richard Perkins, *Looking Both Ways: Exploring the Interface Between Christianity and Sociology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1987).
10. See particularly James 2.
11. See Galatians 3:28.

Sociologists focus on patterns of group interaction and how cultures affect human behavior.