



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Sociology

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Accepting as the purposes of science and of the scientist the twofold objective of making the world more intelligible and generating information useful for humankind, this consideration of the spirituality of a scientist focuses on the social sciences, specifically, sociology. After a brief definition of terms, the paper proceeds through a discussion of sociology as a science, followed by a reflection on the role of spirituality in the author's endeavors as a sociologist. A relationship with God motivates and sustains his efforts in sociology.

The following definition of terms will serve as the basis of this consideration. Spirituality is the constant cultivation of our relationship to God in and through the Church. Science is the effort to make the world more intelligible through the objective, systematic and logical gathering and analysis of empirical information about the world in which we live. A scientist is one who engages seriously in the practice of science.

As a social science, sociology uses the scientific method in order to study and form empirically-based conclusions about the various ways in which human beings relate to each other, for example, through the creation of social structures, such as families and kinship groups, organizations and institutions, all of which involve shared patterns of behavior.

Sociology grew out of a dual European social context: the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which posited the rational perfectibility of humankind, and the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution, which demonstrated humankind's ability to generate social problems desperately in need of rational concern.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), a French intellectual, is called the father of the discipline and, in fact, coined the term, sociology. Typical of the thinkers of his time, Comte formulated an evolutionary schema of human knowledge in which humankind progressed through the three stages of thought: theological, metaphysical and scientific. In the most advanced stage of human thought -- empirical science or positivism -- sociology would emerge as the provider of scientific solutions to social problems.

So great was Comte's faith in the ability of sociology to find scientific solutions to humankind's problems that he saw sociologists functioning as the "high priests" of scientifically-driven modern societies. Fortunately for sociology and more fortunately for society, Comte's vision was never realized. The contributions of the discipline to the solution of social problems have in fact been modest.

Nonetheless, sociologists proceed on the assumption that the world of human beings and their behavior is so important that it merits careful conceptualization and systematic empirical observation. Freedom from uninformed opinions, much less prejudices of various forms, seems the least we could expect of a consideration of the social world. Sociologists also assume that human behavior in a myriad of social settings is not normally random and that therefore an underlying social order exists, can be discovered and elucidated.

In this endeavor, our gains have not reached the magnitude of the physical sciences. This fact has benefits and liabilities. On the one hand, we are not tempted to pride (or at least we should not be) in the way physical scientists might be with their obvious accomplishments. Sociologists cannot claim scientific breakthroughs of the proportions of nuclear fission or the cracking of the DNA code. Nonetheless, we strive to keep an empirical eye on human behavior, while recognizing the plethora of factors influencing such behavior, not the least of which is the capacity to choose.

We stick to our task of explaining shared human behavior by relating the observable to the observable among human phenomena. Thus, for example, we can relate variations in political opinion or religious behavior to variations in socioeconomic status or social class. This is not a total explanation of human behavior, even in empirical terms, but it does advance our knowledge of human society in an empirically based way.

But human life and the search for meaning are not confined to the empirical. Sociology operates in a realm where the non-empirical makes many claims. One such claim is that of religion. Religion transcends the empirical study

of human behavior. Yet at the same time, religious behavior, as a shared human response to the sacred, can be an appropriate object of empirical study. Sociology can observe, but not contain the phenomenon of religion.

Chesterton has said that the only element of Christian doctrine for which there is empirical evidence is original sin. One can go much beyond this limited empirical view and argue that the totality of human experience, collectively, historically and radically cries out for God. As a Christian, I believe that the Incarnation is God's response to this human cry.

God became man in a world of human beings who live their lives together in such a way that no human life is possible - physically, emotionally or spiritually -- without relationships. Together, human beings establish families, build communities, draw sustenance from the earth, establish governments and worship God, to name but a few inherently social endeavors. God chose to dwell among and sanctify these shared endeavors, and the relationships they generate.

As a sociologist, I am interested in the systematic description, analysis and interpretation of such relationships and endeavors with the hope that some day we will be able to understand, predict and promote the development of society in a constructive way.

My Catholic faith inspires this effort, a fact which leads to a discussion of the spirituality of one social scientist, namely, myself.

As a Catholic Christian first and then a sociologist, I trust that my faith would influence whatever vocation I might have in the world. If I were involved in some other occupation or profession, I would probably write much of this in the same way. Nonetheless, sociology expresses my deepest interests and concerns about how the social world works and how it might be made to work better.

My faith and my interest in the social sciences intertwine in that Christianity radically prescribes a particular kind of social relationship, namely love. Two Scripture passages come to mind here, First the two laws of love, of God and neighbor, summarize all of Christianity. Second, the reality test of these two laws consists in the response to this question: How can one claim to love God, whom he does not see, if he does not love his neighbor, whom he does see?

Given this motivation, a Christian thus might be inspired to study agronomy as a way of increasing the earth's food supply or medicine as a way of relieving human suffering. I was drawn to the study of sociology as a way of contributing to the rational alleviation of social problems, like poverty and underdevelopment.

As with many dreams, this one has not been fully realized. For encouragement, I recall from graduate school days the words of a Mormon professor of deep religious and social commitment: "They say that at age 20 a man wants to save the world and at 40 he wants to save a little of his paycheck." Nonetheless, the dream remains alive and functional.

My spirituality sustains me and motivates me in my teaching and in my research. In teaching, I try to act with a sense that it will be a service to the students to help them understand better the social world in which they live and that such understanding will enhance their lives as rational creatures.

In my research, I take a practical bent and try to generate information which will be useful to service organizations and institutions. For example, a colleague and I do survey research for the a major police department in order to aid in their efforts to provide quality service in the variety of encounters, most of them non-criminal, which patrol officers have with citizens. Currently, I am working on a study of a traditionally strong Catholic parish in a neighborhood which is changing demographically, culturally and economically. This phenomenon characterizes many big city parishes in the United States today. Accurate information about it could serve the Church.

Finally, like all Christians, regardless of their specific vocations, I regard my work as worship. True worship has a deeply social dimension, as indicated in the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy. "To worship and pray

to the God of the universe is to acknowledge that the healing love of God extends to all persons and to every part of existence, including work, leisure, money, economic and political power and their use, and to all those practical policies that either lead to justice or impede it.”(1)

Approaching one’s life and work as worship requires the sustenance of personal prayer, Mass and the Sacraments and the reading of the New Testament on a regular basis. As St. Vincent de Paul said, “God demands our hearts, then our work.”

A prayer life cannot substitute for serious efforts. An incident in my undergraduate days at a small Catholic men’s college serves to remind me of this principle. One evening during exam time, the dean of the college, a priest and a Latin scholar, walked through the study hall used by underclassman. He noticed a religious statue on a student’s desk and admonished, “Get that thing off your desk and study!”

So it is when we approach God through our scientific disciplines: We strive to make the world more intelligible and to generate knowledge beneficial to humankind

Endnote

1. *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy.* Wash., D. C. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986, p. 165.

Questions

The author points out that sociology operates in a realm where the non-empirical makes many claims. Does this hold true for politics? for science? for just getting by with only modest amounts of disappointments? Does “an underlying social order” truly exist today in the U.S.? Is it really possible in the ‘gotta do my own thing’ world of the 21st century? Can work really be worship? How? How can scientists, hard or soft, best serve the Church? Is there something they can do together ? and separately” to improve the life of the Church?

The author mentions the statement of St. Vincent de Paul: “God demands our hearts, then our work.” Is he advocating first prayer and then work? He maintain that a prayer life cannot substitute for serious effort. Is he denying or reinforcing St. Vincent statement?

The author regards his work (as a scholar) as worship. Is he using a broader definition of “worship” than cult? Is this use valid? Can we worship God by work? If we can, what should our attitude toward excellence be?

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