

Asking Questions in a World of Answers

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Abstract

Sociologists frequently raise difficult and uncomfortable questions in and about the organizations which they inhabit. Because institutions depend on full confidence in orthodox answers for their stability, the prophetic voice of question-raising sociologists can be threatening to the priestly class of institutional gate-keepers. Raising challenging questions in the face of reigning answers often puts sociologists at odds with institutional interests and certainty, and therefore they sometimes face marginalization by and even exclusion from the organizations and communities in which they live and work. This article examines some of the ways in which sociologists deal in the currency of questions, and explores the idea that certainty of absolute knowledge can undermine Christian faith, distort the meaning of the Biblical text, and reduce the sense of wonder, enchantment, and mystery that a life of faith can offer.

Key Words: Sociological theory, questions, uncertainty, doubt, Protestant principle, living the question, sacred canopy, enchantment

Growing Questions: A Personal Prologue

I clearly remember not having many answers when I was new to academic sociology. As I studied through graduate school and then began teaching, the vastness of the discipline loomed over me, and I wondered if I would achieve even the most basic competence, much less master my chosen field. Would I ever navigate the classic sociological theorists – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Mead – with the confidence and authority of my more accomplished mentors and peers? It seemed unlikely.

As the years passed, I found myself growing in knowledge and competency, but my questions about everything only seemed to multiply proportionally rather than dwindle accordingly. My increased understanding of sociology began to loosen rather than tighten my grip on the world around me. In turn, I found myself becoming somewhat resistant to

institutions – educational, religious, political, and so on – viewing their tendencies toward tribalism and certainty with mounting suspicion. Institutions appeared to me to be, in effect, “answers,” because their very existence was inextricably bound up in their rightness, in their ability to ward off wrongness by the truth they proclaimed. As time went on, even as I gained higher status in various organizations and grew in confidence, I found my voice less decisive, more tentative, uncharacteristically cautious, and even hesitant. Even more alarming (for my career!) was that my heart jumped a bit, and not in a good way, when I found a chink in the institutional armor, when I discovered some place where “our” answers were in need of an overhaul, because the accepted truths to which we clung begged to be reconsidered. If nothing else, sociology had taught me that “truth” rarely floats free from the various vested interests, material and otherwise, of the groups that profess it.

In recent years, I’ve become conscious of the privilege conveyed by in-group membership in my organizations such as my church, and I’ve retreated ever so slightly away from their centers, away from their certainty. Taking a stronger role in maintaining the boundaries defined by institutional answers would undoubtedly garner greater rewards for me. But sociology, and my interaction with other Christian sociologists, has placed me in tension with some of the “certainties” in my organizations. And for me, like others, resisting entrenched answers, whether by taking the role of the marginalized among us who challenge our answers, or by downplaying self-congratulatory institutional rhetoric, comes with a price. Questioning orthodoxy, challenging dominant paradigms, pushing against institutional “normal science,” – all forms of tension with stabilizing answers – is risky and exclusionary. Those who challenge certainty, who raise questions that confront reigning answers, are less able to access the sheltering canopy offered by the priestly class of boundary keepers. Answers provide powerful identity markers, and form the core of what sociologists call plausibility structures. As such, they are at once both necessary and dangerous, inclusive and excluding, comforting and disturbing. They help us pretend that we’ve resolved all our questions. And we like that. It lightens the darkness... Or so it would seem.

For better or worse, sociologists are questioners – they raise questions, debate questions, and live with the tension and ambivalence that questions produce. The exhilaration of a good question is, for a sociologist, more interesting and enchanting than a discussion-ending answer. Answers close things down; questions open things up, raising possibilities. Answers narrow our gaze; questions expand our horizons. Living with questions cuts against the grain of our world and helps us maintain the mystery and enchantment that so quickly fade when suppressed by institutional hegemony, rigid answers, and the forces of rationality. It’s a wonder that any sociologist can interview successfully for a faculty position at a college or university! The priestly class of interviewers want to know one’s “position” on matters of importance. What are your answers? Will they match ours? But sociologists trade in questions, questions harbor uncertainty, and uncertainty is threatening and destabilizing.

Nonetheless, people and institutions need the questioning, prophetic voices of sociologists, voices which can help them challenge cherished orthodoxies, re-examine organizational priorities, return to authentic humility, and renew commitment to justice. Where questions are suppressed or avoided, in-group members easily reify and sacralize self-serving patterns that ignore and oppress those marginalized by the established order. What follows is an elaboration of the ways that sociology, when taken seriously, can help a group examine its orthodoxies, or its “answers,” consider the perspectives of marginalized others, understand better the dynamics of power, and learn to live with and appreciate mystery and ambivalence in social life. In this exploration, attention will be drawn to the relationship between faith and questions, the importance of doubt, the problems with “communities of answers,” and the Christian call to people of faith to engage the world by “living the question.”

Faith as a Call to Uncertainty

A life of faith is a life of questions. In the Eden narrative, the serpent enticed Eve with the promise of answers: “... and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5b New International Version). The very presence of a forbidden “tree of answers” planted in Eden by God suggests that we humans ought to content ourselves with unanswered questions, and not simply seek to resolve or otherwise dispense of them. Oddly, the first sinful act is an illicit grab at “knowledge.” The primal desire to resolve all questions, and the control that seemingly grants, is the root of human disobedience. God’s intent was never for humans to master all of life in complete certainty and self-dependence. Rather, Adam and Eve were, as we are, called to live with a sense of wonder, enchantment, and dependence as they cultivated the Garden. And imagine the questions that arise in a wild, uncultivated garden. Questions preserve wonder; answers can diminish it. Questions and wonder are characteristic of children, and we, like children, must rest in God’s goodness and provision amidst the unanswered. We live by faith, not by sight. Faith asks questions and lives contentedly amidst uncertainty.

Now, here in the “city,” far removed from the “garden,” God still calls us his children to live in wonder amidst the tension of questions, and with the faith of a child secure in the hand of her parent. Perhaps Christ’s admonition that, “... unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3), is intended to remind us to live with mystery, dependence, and a sense of enchantment.

The Unsettling Questions of Sociological Theory

Sociology has a rich heritage of asking and provoking questions. Much of the delight in teaching sociological theory comes from watching students entertain questions they’ve never considered before, questions that sometimes profoundly reshape the way they approach the

world. Sociological theorists frequently not only ask questions that few are asking, but propose answers that can stimulate a lifetime of questioning. For example, Karl Marx leaves us asking questions about false consciousness, alienation, and the way social structures can suppress humanness (Marx 1932/1964; Marx and Engels 1974; Marx and Engels 1986). Herbert Marcuse (2002) raises questions about the effects of technology and about how a one-dimensional society can suppress human wholeness and thriving. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) helps frame questions about social class and its replication through symbolic violence. Immanuel Wallerstein (2000) reminds us to widen the scope of our questions, to ask how our local situation benefits from global systems of exploitation. Patricia Hill Collins (2000), with her concept of intersectionality, asks us to consider and ask questions about the multi-dimensionality and complexity of inequality in society. Standpoint theorist Dorothy Smith (1990), reminds her readers always to ask whether the people being described, sanctioned, or stigmatized in or by our organizations have been able to speak for themselves and be heard in the places that matter. Her concept of “New Materialism” pushes us to ask questions about the ways in which so-called “facts” (and texts) are organizational achievements, and as such are used by the powerful to maintain their power. Finally, Jean Baudrillard stimulates questions about the effects of mass media on society. His concept of hyper-reality, his book on simulacra, his ideas about fragmented identities, entropy and advertising, play, spectacle, passivity, and the death of the subject all contribute to a reframing of the world around us through a new set of questions (Baudrillard 1983; 1994). And these theorists are just a sampling. When students take a sociological theory course, they frequently come away, not with a complement of answers, but with a set of new questions – questions that at first are overwhelming, but which will continue to ignite their imaginations, simultaneously disturbing and delighting them, as they walk by faith along the various paths to which God has called them.

Consider two other questions raised by sociologists: The first is from African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois who asks, “How does it feel to be a problem” (2011:3)? For sociologists concerned with marginality, power, hegemony, symbolic violence, and the like, this question, in one simple phrase, communicates precisely what needs to be asked, and reminds us to take the role of the marginalized other. The second question comes from a guest chapter on “Contemporary Feminist Theories” which explains that, though feminist theories are wide ranging and address a host of concerns, they all originate in the deceptively simple first question, “And what about the women” (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2014:440)? The explosion of popular literature addressing and developing this basic question (cf. James 2010; Evans 2012; Sandberg 2013) testifies to its centrality and global importance in the quest to promote human flourishing. It is a question that opens our eyes to the ways that privilege is unequally distributed along gender lines. It is a question that can help men become conscious of, and learn to stand back from, the privilege that they “enjoy” in their gendered social locations.

Sociologists are frequently aware that their identities and mere presence raise implicit questions in their organizations. The frustrated groan “You sociologists!” is usually delivered with a modicum of humor, but reflects the discomfort some people feel about opening issues up to sociological scrutiny, the discomfort with questions otherwise not even thought, much less asked out loud. Again, sociological questions can quickly position one outside the safe inner core of the group. “You sociologists!” is a friendly signal reminding those who practice the discipline of asking difficult questions that they stand on the periphery of the group.

Questioning Strangers

This condition of being somewhat both “outside” yet “inside” the group is developed in Georg Simmel’s famous essay on the stranger as a social form. Simmel identifies two important features of the stranger. First, “The state of being a stranger is of course a completely positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction... The stranger is an element of the group itself, not unlike the poor and sundry ‘inner enemies’ – an element whose membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting (questioning) it” (Simmel 1971:143). The second feature concerns the objectivity of the stranger. “Because he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions [peculiar attitudes and biased tendencies] of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly ‘objective’ attitude, an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement” (Simmel 1971:145). From Simmel’s perspective, the stranger is a group member of sorts, who is positioned both outside and inside the group, who is not “radically” committed to it, and who has a measure of objectivity that insiders do not possess. For our present purposes, the stranger is one whose unique relationship to the group enables him or her to frame and ask questions that entrenched group members cannot or will not.

Questions, Conflict, Uncertainty, and Doubt

Christians generally accept Paul’s call in Romans 12 not to be conformed to the world and its “answers,” at least in principle. Asking questions is one proper way to confront the world, its answers, and its values. Sociologist Russ Heddendorf explores Jacques Ellul’s ideas about how Christians are to be salt and light in the world, and how they are to offer a distinctively peaceful response to conflict. Salt, Ellul explains, is a preservative. Christians are to preserve the world for Christ’s return. Christians are also light, in that we reveal to the world the truth about its condition. But, Ellul cautions, in confronting the world’s evil by being the people of God in the world, we should not resort to the violence frequently associated with revolutionary activity. Writes Heddendorf:

What Ellul calls for is a permanent revolution, one that continues with the abiding presence of God's kingdom in the world. This means that God's order will be preserved in the world and his Word will be available to others. But it will be a revolution because of its conflict with the world and all that it stands for. By resisting the basic assumptions ["answers"] of our society and challenging its claims ["raising questions"] over people, this revolution attacks the basic elements of the world's order. In short, it supports God's work by attacking man's work. (2010:89)

Ellul is suggesting that Christians are to "attack" human order by asking questions that challenge assumptions, questions such as what about this? what about that? what about this assumption? what about that one? He calls for a "permanent revolution" because our questions and challenge are ongoing, until Christ's return. When people of faith fall into hegemonic lock-step with the so-called world, stop questioning its means and its ends, and embrace its answers, we become indistinguishable from its culture. Consequently, we effectively reject God's order, forget those marginalized by current arrangements, and envelop ourselves in the idolatrous answers of the present age, and the sheltering canopy they provide.

The scriptures make numerous references to the importance of asking questions rather than aligning with entrenched answers, especially religious answers. In 1 Corinthians 1:27, Paul writes "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." The passage is about the "foolishness of the cross," in contrast with the "wisdom of the world." The "foolishness" or "weakness" of the cross is manifest in how it raises all manner of questions about the answers supplied by the principalities and powers of the world. The weak things of the world are those who have less standing and are less certain about their situation. Weakness and questioning go hand in hand, while to be strong is to have an answer. In the counterintuitive world of Jesus and the kingdom, weakness and questions and faith occupy the center, not answers, sufficiency, and strength. Who are the "strong" in the New Testament narrative? Most often they are the Pharisees, that is, the orthodox, the ones with the answers, the ones who position themselves against the marginal and the uncertain. To the Pharisees, questions pose threats to their power, their position, and their reality. Note how the Pharisees have no real questions for Jesus. Any questions they ask, are designed to catch him opposing their answers. He is a threat to their certainty. And note the disdain they have for those whose very presence raises questions about their answers (e.g., the Pharisees' aggressive "questioning" of the man born blind, healed by Jesus in John 9: 13-21.). The Pharisees are always full of answers; their hands are never empty enough to receive the free grace Jesus offers, a grace and acceptance in which questions and dependence hold more currency than answers.

Furthermore, to commune with God through prayer is also to engage in questioning. Prayer is an act of dependence and faith in the face of our questions. And prayer does not remove questions, replacing them with answers; rather, it enables us to persevere, and maybe

even rest, in the face of uncertainty. Our notion of looking for “answers to prayer” is, perhaps, the wrong approach. Think of the contrast between the publican’s prayer and that of the Pharisee in the Lucan Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). In Jesus’ story, the Pharisee prays with a sense of strength, certainty, and rightness. He knows the answers and has apparently lived by them. The tax collector offers no sense of having any answers at all, and falling on God’s mercy, goes home justified.

In the Old Testament, idols like the Golden Calf in Exodus 32 function as answers in the face of uncertainty and questions, providing a way around a life of faith or a life of questions. No more waiting for Moses. The Israelite’s longing for Egypt during the Exodus represents a desire for answers – even enslaving ones – in the face of the looming questions engendered by their escape and ongoing wandering. Oddly, answers were supplied in their slavery; but freedom was found in a wandering life of questions. And interestingly, as Walter Brueggemann (2001) explains, the Israelite’s wilderness “complaining” is itself a form of questioning (“What in the world are we doing here, God?!), and thus of faith and belief in God. Crying out in complaint about God can be a kind of recognition of God’s presence and ability, but reluctance to act in the world.

Recent work by sociologists and theologians draws attention to the importance of questioning, the ability to hold questions in tension, and the problems associated with “communities of answers.” Christian Smith’s (2012) book *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* details the futility of and problems associated with absolutizing parts of the Biblical text. Smith offers as examples the titles of Christian “answer” books on various matters: *The Bible Cure for Cancer; The World According to God: A Biblical View of Culture, Work, Science, Sex, and Everything Else; Bible Answers for Every Need; Queen Esther’s Secrets of Womanhood; God’s Blueprint for Marital Intimacy; Body by God: The Owner’s Manual for Maximized Living*, and so on. With no small measure of humor, Smith points out the audacity of claiming *the* “Biblical” perspective on _____. There are no questions here, only the biblical answers. And the biblical text can be easily obscured by the plausibility structures we erect to prop it up. Seen thus, the Bible is a book of answers that we scour in an attempt to live successfully.

Theologian Peter Enns (2016) writes about the problems associated with conflating so-called, and assumed, “correct” knowledge with faith. Enns observes that “correct thinking” constitutes a kind of faith in itself, and provides a sense of certainty. When we are preoccupied with correct thinking that brings comfort, stability, and certainty, we spend enormous energies defending and supporting familiar beliefs, “... at all costs” (2016:18). And in defending answers, we stifle questions and faith. “Aligning faith in God and certainty about what we believe and needing to be right in order to maintain a healthy faith – these do not make for a healthy faith in God. In a nutshell, that is the problem. And that is what I mean by the ‘sin of certainty’” (2016:18).

In “Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty,” Peter Berger (1998) observes that belief in an absolute understanding of the biblical text undermines a life of faith. He writes that “The Protestant principle implies a rejection of all absolute claims, ipso facto of all offers of restored taken-for-granted certainty. It insists that the believer should live by faith alone – and that, by God’s grace, this is actually possible” (1998:794). He suggests that one of the main ways its adherents undermine the Protestant principle is through “an absolute understanding of the biblical text” (1998:785). “The offer of certainty on the basis of the biblical text, is, of course, powerfully present in American Protestantism. Whenever a question arises, one finds the answer in this or that biblical passage, and then nothing else can happen to one, so to speak” (1998:785). In other words, the biblical text is reified at the level of a group’s understanding, problems are solved, and no more questions need be asked. Belief in a group’s interpretation of the Bible as absolute ends questions, and evidently removes the need for faith.

Peter Berger and Anton Zijderfeld’s (2009) treatise *In Praise of Doubt* echoes similar sentiment. The book explores modernity, relativism, pluralism, fundamentalism, doubt, certainty, and moderation. About doubt they write,

Doubt is most common and most prominent as a *middle ground* between religious belief and unbelief on the one hand, and knowledge and ignorance on the other. These two opposites are, in fact, interrelated, as we just saw. Knowledge can foster unbelief, and ignorance can foster belief or faith. As to the latter, a medieval theologian introduced the notion of the *docta ignorantia*, the learned ignorance, as a method to deepen one’s mystical sense of the divine. On the other hand, if one analyzes the sacred texts of religion scientifically – that is, historically and comparatively – one’s faith may easily slide off in the direction of unbelief. The middle ground of all this is doubt – a basic uncertainty that isn’t prepared to let itself be crushed by belief or unbelief, knowledge or ignorance. (2009:106)

Thus, doubt is a form of questioning, but a questioning that comes from within, and is committed to a stance of faith. Perhaps without deep and abiding questions there is no such thing as deep faith.

Certainty is not benign. Berger and Zijderfeld (2009) provide a chilling anecdote from John Calvin’s theocracy (a political system where little theological questioning is permitted) in 16th century Geneva. “Calvin’s theocracy was plagued by strife and conflict, yet he managed to hold a firm doctrinal and moral grip on the citizens of Geneva” (2009:98). They explain that there was of course various opposition to his theology, but by 1539, Calvinism had become an established ideology. “All criticism was fanatically suppressed, but the critics couldn’t be silenced.... In 1553, Michael Servetus, a somewhat confused lay theologian who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, was publicly burned at the stake – a very painful death to which Calvin objected, unsuccessfully proposing the rope as an alternative (‘gentleness indeed!’)” (2009:100-

1). This serves as a visceral reminder of the dangers inherent in any system, theological or otherwise, that permits no further questions.

Living the Questions Amidst Absolute Answers

Three quotations from Robert Wuthnow's *Cross Currents* article "Living the Question – Evangelical Christianity and Critical Thought," offer ample summary:

I have borrowed the much-used phrase "living the question" because it seems to me that Christianity does not so much supply the learned person with answers as it does raise questions. It has been said of Marxists that even apostates spend their lives struggling with the questions Marx addressed. The same can probably be said of Christianity. It leaves people with a set of questions they cannot escape, especially when these questions face them from their earliest years. (1990:167)

Putting it differently, we might say that Christianity sacralizes – makes sacred – the intellectual life. It gives the questions we struggle with in our work and in our lives a larger significance. Living the question becomes possible because our questions are animated. They have life breathed into them, not literally of course but by becoming part of the stories, the webs of significance, in which we locate ourselves. (1990:170)

Lived as a question, rather than a set of absolute answers, Christianity can stimulate critical thought. And in so doing, it is likely to continue bearing the burden of misunderstanding and prejudice. But that response should only galvanize its courage to tell a different story. (1990:175)

Therefore we should be encouraged as we strive as Christians who practice sociology, or simply as people of faith, to continue living the questions, not settling for entrenched, self-serving answers. Doing so will likely alienate us from certain religious groups. Doing so will probably keep the rewards of institutional religion in the opposite corner. But doing so may position us among the marginal, where we will have the honor of raising questions for those who most need them raised. Doing so will necessitate that we live by faith in a world that abhors living by faith, in a world that has done all it can to do away with faith. And living the questions – not just hanging onto questions, but learning to live with mystery – though painful at times, will keep us engaged with that which is most enchanting in this world. And it is for enchantment – that mysterious, disturbing, wild, and uncontrollable walk through the garden, past the forbidden tree of answers that is only necessary while questions still exist – that we have been made.

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