
Editorial

Social Practices of the Christian Sociologist

In the interminable sociological debate about whether individual agency or social structure is more efficacious, social practices are oddly both. Social practices, as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Alasdair MacIntyre, are the taken-for-granted beliefs and routinized actions which simultaneously and dialectically create both the consciousness of individual actors and the structural conditions that make those practices possible. They pertain to the whole range of how we manage our bodies, handle objects, treat subjects, describe things, and understand the world. They shape thought, knowledge, desire, and the discourse that is both the genesis and product of practice. Seen in this light, both the individual agent and the social structure in which the individual believes and acts are products of the routines that lie at the heart of social practices.

Friendship, for example, is a social practice. A friendship between two individuals takes for granted certain beliefs about friendship and routinized actions within friendship. These beliefs and actions simultaneously and dialectically create both the consciousness of the two friends as friends, as well as the structural conditions of friendship that make their interactions possible. The two individuals initially create the friendship, and each time they interact they subsequently re-create it. Their friendship then becomes an objective reality not only to the two friends themselves, but to all others who observe it, with all parties understanding the meaning of the relationship as such. As a reality external even to the two individuals involved, friendship therefore acts back on both individuals, obligating them to do what friends do in terms of sharing interests, time, care, resources, and so on. Friendship thus becomes a social practice embedded in the social structure of a collectivity.

So too is religion. Earlier in his career, Christian Smith conceptualized religion as a moral order of belief. However, in his recent book entitled *Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters* (2017), Smith represents many scholars who have come to understand religion primarily as socially prescribed practices. Religion is “a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad” (2017:22). Contrary to Max Weber’s or Peter Berger’s conceptualization, “religion is not most fundamentally a cognitive or existential meaning system. Rather it is essentially a set of practices.... ‘making meaning’ is not the heart of religion” (2017:41).

What then might the prescribed social practices of the Christian sociologist be? If we are primarily Christians and only secondarily sociologists, who or what are we going to be? That will be determined more by what we do than by what we think, by our practices more than our beliefs, though our beliefs are one particular kind of practice. Of course, in the end, we only truly believe what we actually do. When we are introduced to someone new and they ask us “What do you do?” they will probably be inquiring about our job, employment, career, or profession, as if those activities define who we are. But what we do, what we practice, is obviously much more than how we earn a livelihood, or even what we think. As Aristotle put it, we are what we repeatedly do. We are what we practice, far beyond our profession. And so too our religion, faith, or spirituality is no more or less than what we practice. We are either a practicing Christian or not a Christian.

Church historian Diana Butler Bass observed that “practices weave together a way of life. They shape character, create connections between people, order our choices, and deepen our wisdom about living in the world” (2013:146). Christian practices fall into two general sub-categories: love of God, which are practices of devotion, and love of neighbor, which are practices of ethics, as outlined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and modelled in his life. Most essentially, Christian practices simply imitate Jesus. The phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” which originated in the Social Gospel movement at the beginning of the 20th century, not in the tacky Christian merchandising at the end of that century, simply calls Christians to incarnate the Incarnate One.

What then are the fundamental social practices of all Christians, beyond the professional practices of a Christian sociologist? What are the individual practices of a Christ-follower that are embedded in the social structure of the Christian collectivity? What should we Christians “do?”

I don’t preach much, though I’m prone to getting a little preachy at times in the classroom. But Micah 6:8 is a pretty simple, fitting, three-point sermon for the Christian sociologist. The two verses immediately prior speculate about which sacrifices please or appease God and win God’s forgiveness. But all such displays of piety and human efforts by God’s people to worship God fail to impress God. Only the great triad of verse 8 matters. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

So what is justice? Well, that depends on the kind of justice being addressed. Retributive justice is concerned with “just desert,” the idea that people deserve to be treated in the same way they treat others. Restorative justice is concerned with returning offenders, victims, and their communities equally to well-being and harmony. Procedural justice is concerned with “fair treatment” as enshrined in human rights and the rule of law. Distributive justice is concerned with all members of society receiving a “fair share” of the benefits and resources available, and with the criteria used to define fairness. The particular sense of justice

in Micah is that it is concerned with caring for those who are unable to care for themselves. In the Old Testament, justice is frequently paired with righteousness, and in the New Testament, the Greek word *dikaiosune*, which is almost always translated as righteousness, could just as accurately be translated as justice. Hence, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...” (Matt 5:6). And as Cornell West has explained repeatedly, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

What is mercy or kindness? According to the old adage, grace is receiving something good that you don’t deserve, whereas mercy is not receiving something bad that you do deserve. As such, surely all we fallen need mercy. Sometimes we don’t even enact retributive or punitive justice because we love mercy more. And such loving is a passion of the heart, not the mind. Christian living may well be more about the right affections of orthopathy than about the right doctrine of orthodoxy, or the right practice of orthopraxy. The alternate translation of the Hebrew word *chesed* as kindness instead of mercy, what Paul later identified as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), is to recognize that the other person, no matter how foreign, is one of our human kind, or kin, and to be done unto as we would have done unto ourselves. That requires much more than merely being gentle or nice. People can say and do the unkindest things in the nicest manner. The Dalai Lama, for one, got his priorities in good order when he said that “I’d rather be kind than right. You can always be kind.” When the full grasp of absolute truth eludes us, as it always will, the faithful practice of empathetic love should guide us, as it always can.

And what does it mean to walk humbly? Humility is constantly seeing ourselves realistically, admitting our intellectual limitations and weaknesses, restraining our egotism, and focusing on others rather than ourselves. Or as C. S. Lewis put it, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less” (2015:109). According to Confucius, humility is the foundation of all other virtues, just as Aquinas maintained that pride is the root of all other vices. Indeed, humility has been empirically associated with generosity, empathy, gratitude, altruism, benevolence, patience, and forgiveness (Wolfteich 2016). And Proverbs tells us that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Prov 29:23), which both James (4:6) and Peter (I Pet 5:5) later repeat for emphasis. Furthermore, to walk humbly is the opposite of strutting arrogantly, as if we know better, or simply are better, than the other. To walk humbly *with* is not to walk *away from*, or to walk *toward*, but to walk *beside*. To walk humbly with our God is to walk in open-minded trust in the one with whom we are in relationship, not some distant God of the universe. We move with God, and God moves with us.

The verbs of this triad in Micah 6:8 alone are even more fundamentally instructive for Christian life. “Do,” be active, don’t be fatalistically passive. “Love,” feel passion, don’t engage in meaningless, mechanical behavior. “Walk,” keep moving, don’t stand still. Christian life is a journey, a quest in the company of God and sojourners. It’s not standing still on a putatively firm foundation. We are “people of the Way” (John 14:6), or more fully, “pilgrims on the Way” (Horton 2011).

Both sociology and Christianity are social practices. No academic discipline calls for justice, mercy, and humility more earnestly and effectively than sociology. As for Christianity, God has told you, Christian sociologist, what is good, and what practices the Lord requires of you. To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God are much greater requisites than the taken-for-granted beliefs and routinized actions of any particular academic discipline or career. They are on-going, for life, and will ultimately define who you are by what you do.

References

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