

Constructing a “Christian Sociological Re-Imagination:” Creation, Fall, and Redemption as a Unifying Analytical Framework

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Abstract

While most introductory textbooks in sociology make use of functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist theoretical perspectives in the analyses of societal dynamics, they demonstrably make no attempt to integrate these paradigms either in theory or in practice. Yet even a casual look at the social world evidences a transcendent reality not limited to the discrete and narrow analysis of each respective perspective. By unsatisfactory default, the discipline of sociology thus appears to consistently present a very fragmented and seemingly irreconcilable view of the social world and its problems. This article explores the development of a Christian sociological integration model at the meta-theoretical level. Applying a unifying Creation-Fall-Redemption view of society and its functions and dysfunctions bridges the disparate and isolated perspectives in the discipline. This meta-theoretical lens is best entitled the Christian Sociological Re-Imagination approach. In proposing this theoretical alchemy of sorts, the present discussion affirms the viability of an integrated approach for achieving a biblically informed, sociologically robust, and arguably more holistic understanding of social reality and its complex social issues than afforded by mainstream introductory sociology textbooks.

Key Words: sociological theories, Christian Sociological Re-Imagination, frame alignment, creation-fall-redemption, social problems, faith-discipline integration, worldview

Introduction

“...that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.” (Colossians 2:2-4, ESV)

I’ve been reading and writing about the dialogue between the sociological and Christian worldviews for many years now (e.g., Chiareli 2002; Dockery and Thornbury 2002; Claerbaut 2004; Foster 2006; Hiebert 2008; Chiareli and Vos 2010, among many others), and my reflections are still taking me into territory I find remains relatively uncharted in my discipline. The present article extends my exploration of the integration of faith and learning to a broadly theoretical focus, and there is a significant and paradoxical reason for why I have had to take to the theoretical field for this conversation: empirical social reality.

I have taught an introductory course in sociology – as well as a course on social problems – in excess of two-hundred times over the years as a faculty member at my current and former Christian liberal arts institutions of higher learning.¹ In doing so, I have consistently chosen to adopt very good but secular mainstream sociology textbooks for these courses. The reasons for this are many, and I suppose I will continue to use mainstream textbooks because they are well researched and written, are updated frequently, and offer a plethora of supporting resources for both instructors and students. Over time, however, I have grown dissatisfied with one ubiquitous and common feature among them. To put it simply, almost without exception, each of the various textbooks available on the market for teaching introductory sociology courses begins with a theoretically foundational presentation to students of the three main conceptual paradigms in sociology: Structural Functionalist Theory, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionist Theory. While I have no qualms with the fact that these core theories are overviewed and employed in sociology textbooks, I have found that the way in which these perspectives are presented to readers, as mutually exclusive and competing explanatory frameworks for social arrangements, phenomena, and problems, runs contrary to my understanding of the social world and its complex empirical reality.

Furthermore, this utterly disjointed proposition for understanding the world sociologically creates for me – and I would venture to say, many of my Christian colleagues in sociology as well – an unnecessary burden when it comes to offering students a comprehensive view of society committed to truth. It is as if the discipline of sociology itself, as represented by scholars writing these textbooks, is, almost by persistent tradition, either unwilling or unable to resolve this conceptual fragmentation. Students are thus faced with two problematic options. First, they may choose to buy into a suspended reality, where they must make an artificial, forced choice for what they see as the better option between three limited theoretical narratives of society. Or, secondly, they may opt to simply overlook the apparent failure of the

discipline to capture the complexities of the social world or offer a comprehensive and valid understanding of it. Neither option is satisfactory if our goal is to uncover a workable, comprehensive, and more integrated picture of society and its intricate problems.

As a result of my growing sense of the inadequacy of my discipline, and my frustration with it, I have felt restlessly compelled to take on the task of rethinking my approach to teaching theory in these courses. In this process, and somewhat by surprise, I have found that the biblical, meta-narrative framework of Creation-Fall-Redemption² offers a promising pathway for helping me to re-think how to make sense of the social world, while still making use of valuable contributions in mainstream sociological theory. To this end, I want to make clear, I have not done away with these well-established frameworks in my teaching. Quite the contrary, I have maintained and perhaps even increased their relevance, at least in part, while proposing to fundamentally reconfigure their position relative to one another as complementary conceptual lenses, in the process of adapting them to an overarching and biblically-based theory for all of reality.³

As I have developed my thinking about how to integrate sociological theory and the Christian worldview, my investigations have focused on how these secular and competing sociological assumptions and claims about social reality can actually provide the Christian sociologist with “keyholes” through which to peer into God’s meta-narrative, comprehensive truth about that reality. I contend that, once examined and critiqued with the benefit of God’s perspective as revealed in His Word, these theories, taken together, can deeply inform a comprehensive and biblical view of human groups and their interpersonal and institutional workings. This integration arguably delivers a more accurate mode of seeing the social world, a world which God created perfectly, but which humans tend to continually, dissonantly, and degradingly recreate.

The following chart offers a summary glimpse of what I propose as an alternate conceptual framework, namely, a “Christian Sociological Re-Imagination.”⁴ This innovative integrated approach succeeds because it presents students with a view of society that is biblically guided, sociologically sound, and epistemologically coherent with the complexity of the social world in which we live, navigate, and negotiate daily.

Developing a Christian Sociological Re-Imagination Model

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|--|---|--|--|
| • <u>Sociological View</u> (disjointed) | • Structural Functionalism-----//----- | • Conflict Theory-----//----- | • Symbolic Interactionism |
| • <u>Application Lens</u> (disjointed) | • System-Based-----//----- | • Change-Based-----//----- | • Experience-Based |
| • <u>Empirical Reality</u> (unified) | • <i>Social things* are established</i> _____ | • <i>Social things* experience decay</i> _____ | • <i>Social things* must be restored</i> |
| • <u>Biblical Meta-Narrative</u> (unified) | • Creation _____ | • Fall _____ | • Redemption |
| • <u>Christian Sociological Re-Imagination</u> (unified) | • Creation View _____ | • Fall View _____ | • Redemption (Potential) View |
| • <u>CSR Application Lens</u> (unified) | • Created Order-Based _____ | • Social Disruption-Based _____ | • Restoration-Based |

*"Social things" here refers broadly to a whole range of social relationships, groups, organizations, networks, institutional arrangements and services, structures of power, systems, cultures, societies, etc.

It is this socio-theoretical alchemy of sorts, this transmutation of base sociological paradigms into a new and arguably more holistic Christian sociological perspective, that I propose with this essay. My goal here is to assert that forming a Christian worldview in sociology, even at the meta-theoretical level, ought not involve the fearful objection to, or complete rejection of, longstanding and academically robust secular bodies of knowledge in the discipline. Doing so would only perpetuate the marginalization of Christian scholarship in this field. Still, the arduous but refining work of testing the wisdom of secular paradigms in order to align sociological and biblical truth and reject distortion where it may be discerned in each secular approach is of central concern here, because of the fully permeating effects of the fall in all things. The end product, I believe, gives testimony to the existence of common grace, even in the treacherous terrain of "plausible" human arguments and understanding, as well as to the pristine, infinite landscape of God's omniscience, as applied to the examination of the social world.

What follows then are brief reviews of the three currently most predominant paradigms in the field of sociology, each followed by a direct critique from the vantage point of God's truth, as understood from Holy Scripture. This essay then concludes with an overview of the Christian meta-theoretical model I propose for exploring, expressing, and ultimately fulfilling Christ's preeminence in this academic arena (See Appendix).

Three Ways of Seeing:

Secular Sociological Paradigms and their Christian Critique

Mainstream sociology textbooks marketed by the biggest publishers in higher education have, almost without exception in the last thirty years, adopted a paradigm-based theoretical framework for structuring observations and explanations about how our social world functions

and malfunctions (e.g., Macionis and Plummer 1989-2018; Henslin 1995-2007; Shaefer 1994-2019; Tischler, 1988-2016, and others).⁵ They consistently employ the three predominant yet mutually exclusive analytical prisms known as structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism as theoretical lenses through which to see the world. One might say that each of these theoretical camps makes a divergent, absolute claim about social reality and distills the nature of that reality to their own fundamental question about society. They each then go about generating plausible insights and propositions about observable culture and social structure – and in the case of interactionists, the social self – from within their respective worldviews. While the first two approaches offer sociological analyses at the macro-theoretical level (system-based and social structure-focused), the third approach presents a view of society that focuses on micro-level interactions (subjective experience-based and shared culture-focused) among social aggregates.

As I offer a brief critique of each perspective presented below, I aim to move toward the construction of an alternative theoretical framework that is deeply informed by a biblical worldview that encompasses “creation, fall, and redemption,” and ultimately, “restoration and consummation” (Colson and Pearcey 2004). Doing so takes some careful “frame alignment” work.⁶ Simply put, frame alignment here means finding and establishing linkages between the secular paradigms and a Christian meta-narrative, such that some set of sociological interests, values, and truth claims are congruent and complementary within an overarching Christian interpretive framework. Let us begin then with the analysis of structural functionalist theory.

Structural Functionalism: “How is society *integrated*?”

Structural functionalism in sociology is derived primarily from the 19th-century writings of the French social thinker Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) on social systems and their internal dynamics resulting from various social phenomena. Its early influences were rooted in the anthropological work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) which focused on the social organization in tribal societies that produced cohesive systems (Hedderdorf and Vos 2010; Johnson 1995). This perspective was formalized in the post-World War II era in the works of American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), with important contributions by Robert Merton (1910-2003) and others (Schaefer 2018; Tweedell 2010).

Parson’s functionalist approach construes society as a living organism, a structure composed of various interconnected systems and parts, all of which function simultaneously to form an orderly and stable whole. In his view, human beings and their social institutions (e.g., family, religion, education, government, economics, media, etc.) must work jointly and harmoniously to maintain the “natural” social tendency toward systemic stability. Society, therefore, tends toward a state of order, which humans not only need but seek and achieve

primarily via societal consensus (Parsons 1951). For example, in America, the high value placed on education arguably reflects this type of public social consensus, and much of society organizes itself materially, non-materially, and at different levels in order to fulfill this “order-goal.” Here sociologists use Merton’s concepts of “manifest” and “latent” functions to examine how institutions such as colleges and universities act in overt and covert ways to bring about social cohesion (Merton 1968). For example, an intended and recognized function of a university is to certify academic competence. In addition, such institutions also serve the ostensibly unstated or at least unofficial purpose of providing a meeting ground for individuals seeking prospective marital candidates of a similar or better social status ranking. Either way, societal order and stability are served and reinforced by the many functions of institutions of higher learning, such as the reproduction of social class.

Talcott Parsons’ functionalist approach further contends that if an aspect of society and its many arrangements are “malfunctioning” and are thus not contributing to the overall equilibrium of the social system, such elements must be corrected via existing and predictable channels for reform, or they will not be passed on from one generation to the next. According to this view of society, the maintenance of the status quo must be emphasized via social control mechanisms, such as laws and their enforcement agents, all of which act to prevent deviant human behavior via reinforcing sanctions, both formally and informally. In this sense, an assumption in this paradigm is that, if social problems do exist or persist, their cause is not attributable to the system *per se*. Rather, individuals are seen as the root of social problems when they fail to adhere to mainstream normative values,⁷ either due to outright rebellion or countercultural tendencies, or to poor socialization in weak families, dysfunctional communities, individual or group moral failings, and the like. The overarching proposition in functionalist theory, then, is one that views the system as essentially good, yet subject to the corrupting influence of social actors who deviate from the expected rules of behavior.

From this prism, responsible and responsive government should work to promote and carry out societal initiatives that can counteract the corrupting forces found in some individuals, their families, their communities, or their subculture. Social policy campaigns in recent memory, such as “Just Say No (to drugs),” “Abstinence Education,” or “No Child Left Behind,” could serve as illustrations of the type of programs governments have implemented in order to engender greater social conformity. It may go without saying that such a theoretical perspective is compatible with much contemporary American political and social conservatism.

Structural Functionalism’s Frame Alignment with the Christian Faith: “Creation View”

As the Christian sociologist examines the theoretical assumptions and claims of the structural functionalist paradigm, what appears most immediately striking is this perspective’s distinctive argument, namely that society is largely characterized by order. The view that

society is stable and its many parts well integrated, and that people and their subcultures must not only exist within a prescribed normative order but also contribute to its reproduction, does resonate with Christian perspectives. After all, was it not God Himself Who unilaterally moved, in both the Old and New Testaments, to set apart for Himself a people who would bear His Name, and to whom He provided prescriptions and proscriptions about how they should live and how their society was to function?⁸ There is no incongruity in this regard between secular theory and biblical doctrine. Neither is it troubling for the Christian sociologist to accept the functionalists' notions of individuals being socialized to perform various stabilizing functions in a complex but harmonious social order. This notion can easily be reconciled with the Christian ideal of being taught, rebuked, corrected, trained in righteousness, and thus made "thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17, ESV). Widespread cooperation and social consensus can indeed lead to orderly social arrangements in either worldview.

Additionally, from the Christian perspective, it is quite possible to recognize within the structural functionalist framework a certain allusion – though not ostensibly biblical – to the original goodness of God's created order. This perspective's seemingly "sunshine" or "Garden" (as in "Garden of Eden") view of the system, itself, can be seen as making reference to an idealized version of society and its arrangements. I call this a "Creation View" of society, not because it is overtly biblical – it absolutely is not – but because it acknowledges the need for stability, harmony and, to some extent, looking back to find utopia, as is typical in most conservative ideologies. As such, this view bridges the functionalist, order-based view of the world, with the created order-based view as one important element within the Christian Sociological Re-imagination approach.

Finally, individuals in this sociological paradigm are deemed to be the cause of social problems. Frame alignment is certainly possible here, at least initially, in that one of the central tenets of Christianity is that human beings, having been conceived and born in a sinful state, carry their depravity into their daily social lives, and are thus capable of and culpable in a wide range of problem-causing deviations from both social and religious norms.

But not all is well in this "Garden" or "Creation" view of society. For while this perspective may be consistent with biblical notions of sinful individuals acting in society, functionalists over-idealize the social system. In fact, structural functionalism typically supports maintenance of the status quo, blatantly overlooking the fact that authority structures are capable of inflicting great injustice on those over whom they rule, and especially those whom they oppose. They can produce deeply errant and oppressive systems that make it impossible for Christian sociologists, called to seek truth and justice, to affirm. Moreover, since it is flawed and sinful human beings that make up our social institutions, assuming that such institutions and their power elites will not be sinful themselves, or at least subject to the universal effects of human depravity, is unworkable within a framework of a Christian sociology.

Structural Functionalism ultimately fails to treat seriously issues of power abuse, and it also incorrectly assumes a social consensus. Social harmony and balance are more elusive than this theory is willing to concede. For God's truth to be well represented in any Christian sociological framework, a more biblical view of both the individual and the social system must be adopted, one in which blame is not placed solely on individuals, and in which the status quo is not simply assumed blameless. As the apostle Paul reminds us in the letter to the Ephesians, our struggle as humans includes that with powers and principalities on earth, not only those that exist in the spiritual realm:

“...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12, ESV)

In searching for a more comprehensive view of society and its woes, exercising a Christian Sociological Re-Imagination requires that we take from structural functionalism that which we can affirm biblically. As we have seen, although there is much in this perspective that does align well with biblical truth, we are left with an incomplete picture of empirical conditions, one that calls for further exploration via a different theoretical prism. In order to continue this quest, consider then the contributions by the conflict theoretical approach in sociology, offered next.

Conflict Theory: “Why and how is society *divided*?”

Conflict theory differs from structural functionalism in almost every way, save that it too views society macro-sociologically, paying attention to the overarching workings of the social structure and its effect on societal members.⁹ Fundamentally, conflict theorists directly dispute the central functionalist claim by arguing that tension and struggle, not consensus and order, characterize society.¹⁰ According to this view, the nature of this conflict is class-based at its core. Conflict theory is thus well situated within the Marxist tradition, which sees the struggle between class interests as inevitable. In this view, class struggles result from the scarcity and unequal distribution of socially valued resources (e.g., power, wealth, prestige, and social influence), and because of the historically ubiquitous condition of oppression and exploitation of subordinate social groups or entire masses by the privileged and system-controlling elites (e.g., the landed aristocracy, political dynasties, capitalist entrepreneurs) (Marx 1965; Marx and Engels 1955; Tucker 1978).

While 19th-century European Marxist thought on the conflicts between the bourgeoisie (owners of capital) and the proletariat (oppressed wage laborers) provided the philosophical underpinnings of this theoretical perspective, it was in America during the late 1960s that this genre of social critique found its most fertile academic and empirical ground (Mills 1956; Dahrendorf 1958). Conflict tenets began to be formulated and expressed pragmatically in

response to widespread social unrest witnessed around the world, but especially in American society and stemming from American anti-communist geopolitical interventions in many parts of the globe (e.g., Korea, Southeast Asia, Latin America, Cuba). In addition to the American Civil Rights Movement, “the war in Vietnam, the rise of feminist and gay liberation movements, the Watergate political scandal, urban riots, and confrontations at abortion clinics [all] offered support for the conflict approach” (Schaefer 2007:15). Given the seemingly inexhaustible examples of conflict around the world, exponents of this theoretical approach have continually found confirming evidence for the enduring viability of its core assertions, first expressed in Marx’s famous words: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Feuer 1989:7).

In essence, therefore, conflict theorists turn functionalist claims on their head and generally assert that individuals are not “bad,” but rather, good. In other words, they are not subjects who primarily cause social problems, but are instead objects upon whom social forces exert their disruptive effects. Good people therefore become corrupted by perverse and unjust systems that maintain an unequal distribution of rewards, and that institutionally oppress, structurally marginalize, and socially disinherit major segments of their society’s populace. Given its conflict-based views of social reality, this perspective’s emphasis is strongly focused on social change. By necessity, given the deeply socially and politically entrenched status quo, the nature of any social challenge ought to be swift and radical, rather than gradual and conventional, due to strong system opposition to the sharing of power and the rearranging of the social structure. Countercultural elements in any environment emerge as necessarily militant responses to coercion, violence, abuse, and self-serving authority structures. Individuals who do not revolt in the face of such alleged injustice are seen as victims of “false consciousness,” intentionally conditioned by benevolent-sounding myths found in the rationalizations of global market capitalism and in traditional and dogmatic religious systems used to deceive and pacify otherwise discontented masses (Shaefer 2007). Thus, any promotion, defense, or elite-sponsored mechanisms for the maintenance of the status quo are seen in conflict theory with utter suspicion and contempt.

This view’s deep concern for decreasing, if not entirely eliminating social inequality, and their remedy (socialist revolution) for dealing with entrenched and oppressive systems, betrays its typically hyper-liberal intellectual and political bent. Utopia, from this lens, lies somewhere ahead on a future timeline as a result of commonly protracted struggles for systemic change. Lastly, it is important to note that not every social critique under the conflict paradigm is militantly insurgent. Some rather espouse more moderate forms of activism and social commentary in their desire for social change (Schaefer 2007).

Conflict Theory's Frame Alignment with the Christian Faith: "Fall View"

Undoubtedly a sociological paradigm which conservative Christian students in general tend to view with the most skepticism due to its Marxist and socialist roots, conflict theory nonetheless need not be shunned by the Christian sociologist. That is because even upon a cursory examination of the claims present in this approach to social conditions, one finds interesting places for potential frame alignment with the Christian faith. One of the primary examples of this is found in conflict theory's strong emphasis on the pervasiveness of struggle and tension throughout all ages and across all societies. It is here that this paradigm finds some common ground with Christian doctrine, namely that of the fall of humankind. To find this common ground, one need look no further than the concepts of social injustice, oppression, exploitation, separation, and extreme social inequality, all of which are central to the social critiques found in the conflict approach. Similarly, Christian theology readily acknowledges all such social dynamics as being byproducts of the Adamic fall. Corrupt systems, their interests, and their actions can be seen here as being consistent with the moral corruption and rebellion of humankind. Nowhere in sociological theory is this more evident than in the way conflict theory predictably indicts the ideological manipulation and economic exploitation of powerless minority groups (e.g., the working poor, racial minorities, women, the elderly, poor immigrants) by the hand of the state and its elite classes, or majority and socially dominant groups. From this prism, these conflict claims might be thought of as resonant with the numerous biblical passages where God expresses his concern for the powerless and the oppressed.¹¹ Perhaps it is in its evident concern for bringing about justice to the social conditions it views as unjust that we find the greatest opportunity for frame alignment between conflict theory and the Christian worldview.

It is fitting to point out here that the conflict paradigm uses systems of oppression as the point of departure in its analyses, with an implicit or explicit nod toward capitalist greed. Yet it never looks further back to the underlying cause behind the use of such oppressive apparatuses. I refer here to the question, *What explains the human propensity for self-interested competition and for building related systems of sometimes extreme forms of inequality?* Whether we look at traditional societies or modern and postmodern social arrangements, the fact remains that humans tend toward inequality in some form (e.g., stratification systems derived from status differences based on age, roles, gender, religion, wealth). Interestingly, a secular theoretical approach to social reality that acknowledges a certain form of evil in the world, although often relative in its nature and not necessarily derivative of the biblical understanding of evil, can therefore afford the Christian sociologist some conceptual opening for infusing in it an explanation for why evil exists and where it comes from, even while conflict theory itself is found clearly lacking in such explanations.

It seems entirely plausible, having briefly examined its claims, to regard the conflict sociological paradigm as a sort of "Fall View" of society. The multiple ways in which human

history is replete with examples of dictatorial regimes, for instance, whose status quo must be maintained through force and coercion, and which eventually meet their fate through a violent populist overthrow, points to the need for a framework which explains the reasons for such recurrent human patterns of oppression and deceit. A Christian sociological approach is singularly equipped to provide such an explanatory framework in order to complement this evident shortcoming in conflict theory. This biblically informed Fall-View, a disruption-based element within the Christian sociological model I propose, is reminiscent of the conflict, system challenge-based view of society because it focuses on brokenness and calls for social justice as a way to bring about wholeness.

However, that is not to say that this theoretical “marriage” is without problems. Clearly, conflict theory’s assumptions that people are “good,” and that the agency of “good” people can correct a “bad” system, are erroneous and naïvely utopian from the vantage point of just about any other paradigm, including the Christian perspective. It is true and empirically evident that, although fallen, humans are capable of doing great good in society, including the removal of oppressive regimes. Nevertheless, to affirm, as conflict theorists do, that corruption resides primarily in the power structure, as if it existed on its own and outside a pre-existing context of human agency and its ethical and moral failure, is tantamount to proverbially burying one’s head in the sand. In this regard, the gap between this perspective and the Christian worldview is astronomical indeed.

Lastly, conflict theory underemphasizes the necessity for order and consensus in society. Conflict and revolution, after all, while useful in initially undermining enemy systems of power, have never produced sustainable replacements without soon calling for some type of regimented order. In addition, conflict theory’s critical framework is ill-equipped to recognize God’s grace and His good work through His vessels, even institutional ones. Government authority is often approved in many parts of Scripture, even when rulers are imperfect, as their authority fulfills part of God’s eternal plan. As it is written, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17, ESV). Here, too, Christian sociology, informed by a Christian worldview, would stand in stark contrast to this secular sociological camp.

As a conceptual framework that offers a singular view of society, conflict theory suffers from the same insufficiency as does Structural Functionalism when it comes to fully expressing the complexity of empirical social conditions. Taken together and considering where these perspectives align rightly with biblical truth, they compose a fuller picture that begins to approach the observable workings of the social world. Still, drawing on these macro-level theories alone, one is arguably left unable to fully grasp micro-level interactions and phenomena, especially those replete with symbolic meaning as part of the subjective reality that touches all of our experiential lives. Filling this obvious gap in our understanding of social actors, the motivations behind their behavior, and the meaning-rich social and cultural worlds

they inhabit requires that we also explore the micro-sociological realm of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism: “How do I experience society?”

Symbolic interactionism differs from both above perspectives in that it views society from an entirely different analytical angle: micro-sociologically (Henslin 2014). First developed in America by George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, and others, and formalized by the late 1950s (Mead 1959), this view’s main paradigm assumptions contend that society is made up of individuals who make up groups that interact with one another in “meaning-full” symbolic social contexts. Herbert Blumer, following Goffman’s work, coined the term “symbolic interactionism,” basing his perspective on the following key assertions: 1) As social beings, humans ascribe meaning to social things in their lives (i.e., material objects, actions, other people, relationships, symbols), and interact with such things in response to the symbolic meanings they give to them; 2) Social meaning ascribed to anything is a product of the social interaction that one has with others and with society as a whole; 3) Social meanings are always handled and modified through an interpretative process used by the person as he or she encounters them; and 4) People interact with each other by interpreting and defining their actions, instead of merely reacting to each other’s actual actions themselves (Blumer 1969).

Thus, in practice, interactions are based on an interpretive system of symbols, meanings, definitions, and communication (including non-verbal). A similar interpretation of reality, or “truth-claim,” between individuals or groups will lead to successful communication and more generally to positive and constructive interaction. A differing or contrasting understanding of reality between them, however, will yield greater difficulty in communication and can ultimately lead to tension-filled and negative interactions, if not worse forms of mutual treatment, such as hatred and violence. Thus, as individuals in society interact, they create, maintain, change, or reinterpret *their* lived experience.

The “natural” state of society, therefore, depends on these micro-level “negotiations” about everyday life (e.g., marital roles, parent-child relationships, worker-boss interactions, racial-ethnic relations, inter-faith understanding). In contrast to functionalists or conflict theorists, proponents of the interactionist perspective make less absolute claims – although they do so absolutely – about what the “right view” of reality ought to be. Furthermore, as they see it, the cause of social problems likely stems from the improper or unsuccessful sharing of meanings and the existence of different definitions of the situation among individuals and groups, which guides their behavior. In this sense, “going with or against the grain” will determine the type of social experience one is likely to have.

From this premise, we conclude that societies and their members are really neither bad nor good, as respectively claimed in the other competing paradigms. Still, individuals and their

actions may be labeled as deviant by opposing interests, especially if these are powerful enough to impose negative labels on things, social processes, or people (Becker 1963, 1964). Of the three sociological paradigms reviewed thus far, the symbolic interactionist perspective embodies the most subjective and postmodern assumptions about social life, and, like conflict theory, is usually deeply rooted in the liberal side of the social and political spectrum.

Interactionists agree that there is potential for very positive and constructive social interaction at all levels of society, but only to the extent that shared meanings are achieved on an ongoing basis. Much of this perspective's emphasis on the quality of interaction to be had rests on individual or group attitudes, which usually reflect their free will, motivations, and their accumulated, personal social experiences. For example, people respect laws or disobey them based on their own past experience with the law, as well as their perceptions of others' experiences with the law (Shaefer 2007). Ultimately, say theorists in this camp, social reality is built from the ground up, via every micro-level interaction, which in the aggregate constitutes and arranges entire groups, cultures, and societies.

Lastly, according to the interactionist method known as *dramaturgical approach*, humans behave much like actors on a stage, putting on social performances. This role-playing functions either as an attempt to manipulate others' impressions of those performers, or to avoid embarrassment in public situations by engaging in "face-work" (Goffman 1959). Based on this approach, social actors continually perform to create impressions meant to satisfy particular audiences. The question this view raises, then, is this: are human beings merely the product of all of the meaning-rich social roles we play? Symbolic interactionists would utter a resounding "yes."

Symbolic Interactionism's Frame Alignment with the Christian Faith: "Redemption View"

As we examine the assumptions and claims of this micro-sociological paradigm, it is important to recall that not only does symbolic interactionism maintain the subjective nature of social experience, but it is also solidly grounded in socio-psychological conceptions of human interaction. Of the three meta-theoretical approaches, this view of the social world is the most compatible with the state of postmodernity, since it sees truth as mutable and specifically defined by an actor's idiosyncrasy and eccentricity. According to interactionists, human beings respond to one another on the basis of shared meanings produced in their symbolically constructed socio-cultural contexts. Perhaps surprisingly, then, this worldview is at the same time promising and problematic for the Christian sociologist.

Consider first the many ways in which these micro-level interactions among social actors are being constantly shaped, defined and redefined by various social inputs. Past and new experiences, knowledge, and relationships form the cradle in which social relations are nursed. These are ever evolving and not predetermined and unchangeable. Thus, the realm of social interaction presents a potentially fertile ground for redemptive agency in society. Human

beings, in this view, ultimately have free will choice in how they respond to each other and to each new circumstance in their lives. This represents a promising point of contact with a Christian approach to sociology, in that such an approach sees society's renewal as God's principal goal for earthly life. Truth, therefore, is found in symbolic interactionism, despite its secular and relativistic tenets, since individuals and groups in society have a free will potential for acting redemptively in order to improve human relations and their world. This view, therefore, I call the "Redemption View" of society, which aligns well with the interactionist, experience-based view of society.

Naturally, the potential to act rightly in society is precisely that; a potentiality. As this interactionist perspective also rightly suggests, social contact does not always produce positive interactions. Sometimes, the roles humans play and the identities they assume are intentionally counterproductive, deceitful, and even destructive. Here we find the very essence of a central contradiction at work in humans: self-serving and self-glorifying in one point, and in another, altruistically other-focused and even God-glorifying. Much can be borrowed from this secular approach in the development of the Christian Sociological Re-Imagination.

Therefore, it is not in what symbolic interactionism claims that makes frame alignment with a Christian worldview problematic. Rather, it is in what it fails to see. Namely, that broad-scale patterns of society also reveal structural reasons for the behavior of individuals, and that the human condition is not simply reducible to the micro-level. From a biblical framework, for instance, sinful patterns of human behavior and interaction stem from the individual, yes, but also from sinful social arrangements, institutions, and whole systems, as evidenced in Scriptural accounts from Sodom and Gomorra, to Mount Carmel, to Pilate's palace.¹²

In the final analysis, Christian sociology agrees that human social conduct and agency is highly variable. Worldly individuals will indeed be generally conformed to the pattern of this world. Still, there is hope, in that some of God's goodness can still be manifested in humans and their relations with one another. Certainly, we can find hope in that God's own elect are called to set an example daily and urged to establish a redemptive tone for their own contact with others in their specific social surroundings. As the apostle Peter exhorts us, "...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16, ESV).

As we conclude this theoretical overview and critique, it must be acknowledged that each of these conceptual paradigms that undergird sociological thought have value in their own right. At the same time, separately they each generate a variant view of the world that seems inadequate to grasp fully the human social experience in its entirety. Yet, we find in each one what Heddendorf and Vos (2010) called "hidden threads" that evidence possible linkages to biblical truth. Therefore, they provide valuable perspectives that together can bring necessary pieces for the construction of the sociologically grounded, Christian analytical framework I am proposing for a fuller understanding of society.

Having reviewed and critiqued the three secular theoretical perspectives in the discipline of sociology, we now turn to a concluding discussion of the promise of their integration within a Christian Sociological Re-Imagination framework.

The Christian Sociological Re-Imagination: Toward the “Consummation” of All Things

The Christian Sociological Re-Imagination approach I am proposing in this article provides one option among many for achieving the integration of faith and learning in the field of sociology. Noteworthy endeavors around this topic span over half a century (Moberg 1968, 1989; Ellul 1972; Lyon 1975, 1983; De Santo, Redekop, and Smith-Hind 1980; Burwell 1981; Maritain 1986; Perkins 1987; Leming 1989; Wuthnow 1990; Fraser and Campolo 1992; Chiarelli 2002; Clark 2002; Hiebert 2008; Heddendorf and Vos 2010; Tweedell 2010, among many others). While many Christian sociologists have pursued other avenues of integration, the promise of the present proposition lies in its serious and novel engagement, at the meta-theoretical level, with the discipline’s well-regarded tradition of thought, resulting in a unified view of social reality. It has been my contention that any attempt at integrating sociological theory with the Christian faith must be preceded by a careful evaluation of the truth claims of such clearly disparate secular frames. While carrying out this analysis, I have sought to demonstrate how foundational sociological theories can be critiqued in light of God’s truth, even as they maintain a prominent place in the proposed framework, pointing to the enduring value of a distinctly sociological view of reality, with the benefit of God’s mind.

Although I acknowledge my secular colleagues’ difficulties in accepting such an integration as valid, especially due to the non-empirical nature of faith or religious dogma, I maintain that such a synthesis is plausible on the basis that this theoretical alchemy is not interested in simply denying the usefulness of the secular sociological body of works and its valuable overarching paradigms developed to explain the social world. To the contrary, as we have seen, there is much that seems compatible in sociology between the secular and the Christian worldviews. What emerges out of this conversation then is a new, biblically sound, but empirically testable view of social actors and society. I contend that this “Creation, Fall, and Redemption” analysis of social reality is therefore consistent with both the principal themes in Holy Scripture, as well as with the most refined and truth-compatible aspects of the three sociological theories presented: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Each of the dominant theoretical camps in mainstream sociology presents a challenge to Christian thinkers, who must view them critically in light of God’s truth as revealed in His Word. Yes, there are aspects of society that in some ways reflect God’s original and orderly creation: Social things are established (Creation View; Functionalist Theory: System Stability-Focused;

Order-Based). Yes, we also live in a fallen world ridden with problems, human tragedies, and social injustices: Social things experience problems or decay (Fall View; Conflict Theory: System Challenge-Focused, Tension-Based). And, yes, ultimately society is made up of individuals mutually negotiating their roles and shaping their interactions on a daily basis: People interpret social conditions and interactions and work to try and solve problems and restore that which has been broken (Redemption View; Interactionist Theory: Shared Culture-Focused; Experience-Based). Yet in our biblical analysis, an important contribution to the discipline is evidenced. While there is much incongruence between secular sociological perspectives on their views of societal conditions, thinking Christianly about these sociological views affords us a better and more unified theory of society. I maintain that the biblical meta-narrative of “Creation-Fall-Redemption” is not just a biblical theme to be understood only theologically. In fact, this concept appears to be a “Law” of the entire universe – again, all social things (but otherwise as well, e.g., galaxies, the sun, our Earth, buildings, bridges, cars, mobile phones, suits, etc.) are established or created, experience decay or breakdown, and must be restored or transformed – and based on this law, which is not simply religious but rather natural, we can sum up all of reality (Maritain 1986). Undergirded with this powerful conceptual tool, the Christian sociologist can confidently take on the task of analyzing society and its problems, and pursue fully informed avenues for exploring effective solutions.

The Christian sociologist is uniquely positioned to perceive God’s truth in each mainstream perspective and, in essence, develop a new meta-narrative and analytical approach to perceiving social phenomena, to devising solutions to social problems, and ultimately to understanding, expressing, and fulfilling God’s truth about social reality.¹³ As such, while Christian sociology can endorse many aspects of existing sociological theories, it also moves on to the prophetic and liberating task of engaging the discipline and students in a biblical and transformational way, seeking to be salt and light by striving for the integration of this discipline and our Christian faith. This is the role to which I am called as a Christian sociologist. Here I am reminded of Colson and Pearcey’s statement that “Christianity is a worldview meant to be lived out in the crucible of a fallen world, and it comes most alive in the relationships in which we grapple to apply it day by day” (2004:491). I have ventured to do just that in my relationship with my vocation.

My identity as a faithful Christian and a trained sociologist keeps me from seeking either a purely theological or an exclusively sociological understanding of the social world. My conviction as a Christian sociologist demands that my daily teaching and professional practice be unapologetically committed to the interpenetration of both realms in my embodied vocation. I have demonstrated at the meta-theoretical level how this integration might be achieved in a viable, discipline-engaged way. Yet, I acknowledge that only the testing of the Christian Sociological Re-Imagination perspective, via an applied, empirical examples, can serve to truly validate the utility and practicality of this emergent integration I am proposing.

Therefore, in a subsequent article, I hope to demonstrate the application of this integrative model as a way of illustrating its plausibility for the analysis and hopefully improvement of actual objective conditions and social problems. May such an endeavor bring glory to God even in the field of sociology, as we await the consummation and final restoration of all things under Christ's pre-eminence. To bring together wisdom that is authentically biblical and robustly sociological may seem to some as a contradiction in terms. Yet, confident in this very calling, I offer you, esteemed reader, my sincere invitation to re-imagine the possibilities.

Endnotes

¹ For over two decades, I have served as adjunct professor at Bethel University (MN), assistant and associate professor at Union University (TN), and full professor at Covenant College (GA) and now Oklahoma Baptist University (OK).

² I borrow this framework of Creation-Fall-Redemption/Restoration, the roots of which are found in the Christian Reformed tradition, from Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey's 2004 treatise on the formulation of the Christian worldview. Its aim is to engage and restore culture and the world's many fallen arenas of social, intellectual, economic, political, and other realms of life.

³ In adopting this biblical theme of Creation-Fall-Redemption, I maintain that its value comes not just from its clear theological application, especially in the doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification. Rather, I contend that this theme is actually a law of all reality for everything that has ever been created. Thus, this construct extends beyond the theological domain into empirical reality. Nothing in all of creation, past, present, or future, escapes its grip. All things, including social things, are established at some point in time, undergo decay or experience problems, and are therefore subject to undergoing restoration, redemption, or transformation in some way, and under some agency, influence, pressure, force, or material modification or conversion. Therefore, the use of this biblical meta-theory in my argument for the construction of a Christian Sociological Re-imagination derives from a need to find coherence with immutable laws or rules that apply to all of reality, including social reality. Incidentally, as a believer, I hold to the fact that the only thing in existence that escapes this process of decay is the redeemed sinner, saved by grace, and being formed into the likeness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, "the founder and perfecter of our faith," according to Scripture (Heb. 12:2, ESV). Spiritually, the redeemed sinner's trajectory is therefore in the opposite direction of the physics law of entropy (or decay), the 2nd law of thermodynamics.

⁴ I make clear reference here to C. Wright Mills' term, "The Sociological Imagination" (Mills 1959) and its focus on establishing conceptual linkages as a way of better grasping social reality at the micro and macro levels.

⁵ Even a leading Christian Sociology text employs these sociological paradigms as conceptual frameworks through which to examine society, but without offering any systematic theoretical integration between these sociological perspectives, nor a unified Christian sociological approach (Tweedell 2003, 2010).

⁶ Here, the term “frame alignment” is borrowed from David Snow et al., 1986.

⁷ Mainstream normative values can be defined here as the expected rules of human social behavior that are prescribed and generally embraced by a cultural majority in a given society. Although in traditionally Judeo-Christian societies many such norms are based on God’s moral law, they are not typically generated directly by scriptural mandates.

⁸ See for example, Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23; Ezekiel 11:20; 2 Cor. 6:16; and Hebrews 8:10.

⁹ Social structure generally means the multiple ways in which society is organized via social positions (statuses), social roles, social groups, social networks, and social institutions (Shaefer 2007).

¹⁰ Ibid.; Theorists in this Marxist-based camp include W.E.B. DuBois, C. Wright Mills, and Ralph Dahrendorf, among others.

¹¹ These include Leviticus 6:2; Judges 2:18; Psalms 10:18; Psalms 103:6; Isaiah 14:2; and Isaiah 38:14.

¹² Genesis 18:20; 1 Kings 18-21 and 21:25, the Gospels in Matthew Ch. 27, Mark Ch. 15, Luke Ch. 23, and John Chs. 18 and 19.

¹³ In my sociology courses over the years, I have used the Christian Sociological Re-Imagination approach I propose to discuss a plethora of social problems, ranging from teen pregnancy to AIDS, from domestic violence to divorce, from chronic poverty to environmental degradation, from prejudice and discrimination to crime and violence, from drug trafficking to human trafficking, and so on.

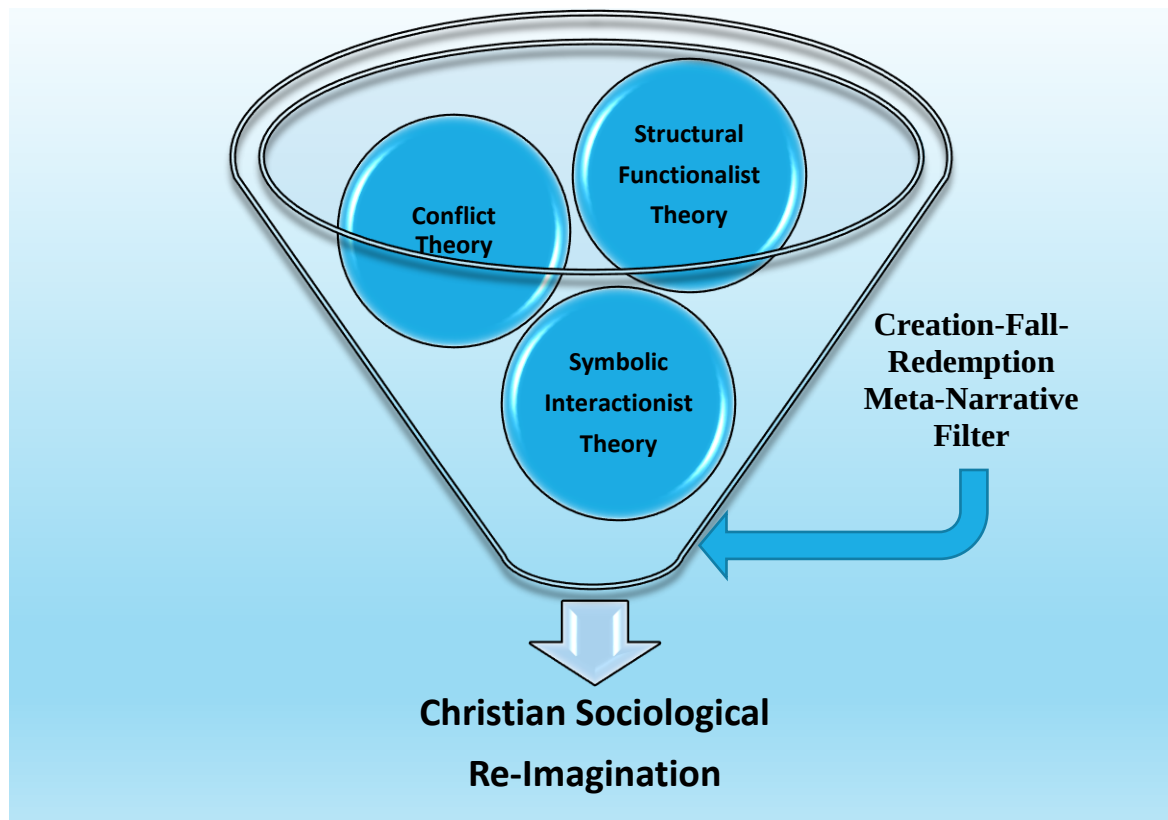
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**Appendix. The Integration of Sociological and Creation-Fall-Redemption Meta-Narratives:
The Christian Sociological Re-Imagination**



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