

## ESSAY

## A Review Essay of Joseph Scimecca's *Christianity and Sociological Theory*

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Early in Joseph Scimecca's *Christianity and Sociological Theory: Reclaiming the Promise* (2019), the author tells of a moment where, in response to a question from the audience during a panel discussion, he replied with a three word answer: "Yes I do." The question was whether he believed in a personal God. The moment and the answer, Scimecca writes, was for him a turning point.

By this time Scimecca had established himself as an accomplished author and distinguished professor, and had served as president of the *Association of Humanist Sociologists*. And yet his response to that question forced him to consider implications he says he had long avoided. As he puts it:

It became clear to me that by not overtly acknowledging my own religious views I had at best been timid, and at worst hypocritical, as a sociologist. But more important than my timidity was that contemporary sociology had failed its early promise by not facing the phenomenologist's basic truth: human beings cannot live without meaning . . . [and that] sociology, by embracing a naturalistic/secular worldview, has reinforced meaninglessness. (6)

Going forward, Scimecca builds a case that sociology from the thirteenth century on began as an attempt by intellectuals to reconcile their faith in the age of reason. He further describes a process whereby this endeavor was abandoned by degree. Furthermore, he argues that sociology, nay the world, is the worse for it. In the end, his book seeks to promote a correction by endorsing contemporary theorists whose theory is more akin to the original enterprise than to mainstream practice. For those of us who care about theory and the welfare of the sociological enterprise, this book is a must read. It also is an enjoyable read. Scimecca is an engaging writer who provides fruit worth savoring.

As I read the book after having recently met the author and noting that we are roughly peers, I could not but reflect on the rather different career paths we have each taken as we

practice sociology. He, New York City born and reared, built a career through scholarship and employment at primarily public universities. I, by circumstance if not by intention, found my niche at smaller Christian colleges. We share a love of classical theory, but whereas he worked out his response to this shared love in what I would call the academic mainstream, I was either the only sociologist where I worked or later, the senior member of a small cadre of colleagues. I was more or less free to indulge my own idiosyncratic interpretations of the great theorists with little opposition and much encouragement from the local powers that be to integrate my Christian faith as I did so. Throughout this review this experience will color the way I respond to Scimecca's reflections. I discovered one thing we do share in common is that both of us were introduced to Christianity via Scandinavian Lutheranism, albeit mine by birth and his by marriage (he dedicates this book to his mother-in-law, Solveig Lundberg and to his father-in-law, Rev. Walter Lundberg).

Scimecca's thesis is straight forward, startling, and profound. He argues that the era emerging in the early nineteenth century as Saint-Simon was giving way to Comte in France, and Hegel, via the Young Hegelians, was giving way to Marx in Germany, did not mark the beginning of the sociological endeavor. It marked a turn, a redefinition, a perversion if you will, of an enterprise begun six hundred years earlier by the Scholastics (Grosseteste, Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, William of Ockham), continued in the next two centuries by the Christian humanists (Peterach and Erasmus), and handed off to the Philosophes (Newton, Locke, Hume, Adam Ferguson, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and Holbach). Then Kant, and yes, even Hegel.

What all of these pre-nineteenth century writers shared, Scimecca argues, and what virtually all post-Comte sociological theorists (*sociology* now being so named by Comte) did not, is that *truth*, embodied in God in Christ, was an established certainty. The enterprise of pre-nineteenth century writers was not to define truth but to discern how it played out in human society. The enterprise post-Comte has become a dog chasing her tail (my metaphor, not Scimecca's).

When did this turn happen? Scimecca marks a couple of places. One was with the Young Hegelians. As a Christian, Hegel's dialectic was his description of the process of God's revelation. Via the Young Hegelians, Marx famously turned Hegel on his head, or up-right depending on your point-of-view, with his dialectic materialism.

Another more or less contemporary turning point was from Saint-Simon to Comte. Late in his life, Scimecca argues, Saint-Simon began to doubt his Christian faith but held to the belief that Christianity was essential to human morality. His advocacy of a "New Christianity" gave

way to Comte's vision of a secular catholic church.

Before moving on to Scimecca's assessment of modern theorists, I take a digression. At this point in my reading of the book, I began to experience some dissonance. I think I was sharing some of the same disquiet experienced by the author when, as part of a panel he disclosed that he was, in fact, a theist. Before finding my niche as "the sociologist" at evangelically oriented liberal arts colleges, I too navigated my academic identity in the mainstream, for me at public universities. Early on, and still now, I would self-identify as a Weberian. When we get to my critique of Scimecca's view of Max Weber I will have more to say about this, but the "moral imperative of ethical neutrality" is foundational to my presentation of sociology. How is it that after twenty-five years of presenting sociology to students in an openly confessional Christian environment, I experienced disquiet at embracing the thesis that the application of sociology at large had been, and would be, better served by framing the discipline in Christian context?

An anomaly of my academic preparation is that at just the time I had decided to return to the academic life by pursuing a doctorate in sociology, I had also ended my rebellion against the church. Even as I was reading Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in preparation for commencing doctoral studies, I was also looking for a church to join. As noted earlier I had been reared in the tradition of Scandinavian Lutheranism, so when I rejected the church, the church I rejected was Lutheran. In reading Weber, I discovered that Weber held that the Protestant Ethic was properly understood as Christian reformed. It was Calvin, not Luther, who framed the ethic. Lutheranism, Weber argued, was more catholic (i.e., other-worldly) in its sacramental emphasis and hence not fully conducive to a proper work ethic. Without explaining why, unintentionally, Weber, somewhat to my chagrin, was redirecting me back to the Lutheran Church. This would eventually lead me to employment in Christian colleges, but I would take Weber with me when I went. I would discover that I was constantly responding to questions from students with: "do you want me to answer that as a Christian or as a sociologist?"

I had long since discovered that this response was often not adequate to the task of mentoring students, and I had developed a nuanced understanding of my vocation as a Christian sociologist. Scimecca was bringing all this to the surface, which I suspect was precisely his intention.

The dissonance I experienced as I read the book emerged often and in varied ways. Early on, for example, it occurred as Scimecca was defending his argument that Enlightenment writers were generally unpacking the Christian worldview. I had over the years, largely from the

influence of Robert Nisbet, developed a suspicion of many 18<sup>th</sup> century writers. None more than Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Scimecca argues that Rosseau's rejection of Christianity is not a rejection of the gospel but of the institutionalized (read Roman Catholic) church. Rosseau's Deism is fashioned in a Christian context, says Scimecca, and his proposed social contract reflects a view of human equality predicated on the Christian notion of the equality of all under God. In effect, the Enlightenment authors may have been quarreling with the church, but they were quarreling with a "Christian" God demanding that He (or His representatives) put up or shut up.

At no point in reading this book does my dissonance rise to the level of disagreement. It does occasionally, as here, find me wanting to raise questions. Scimecca sometimes seems to conflate "religious beliefs" or "Christian beliefs," as in Rosseau's or Voltaire's acceptance of moral values derived from Christianity, and at other times with faith in God in Christ. The latter category includes Margaret Archer and Christian Smith. I will have more to say about Archer and Smith later, but my question for now is this. Is theory generated by an acceptance of shall we say a Christian based culture, equivalent to theory following from faith in Christ? Scimecca is going to close his book with a call to return to a sociology committed to its initial promise to combine empiricism with moral philosophy. Perhaps the distinction between Christian moral philosophy and faith is a distinction without a difference. I am inclined to think they probably lead to the same place vis-a-vis the generation of Christian sociological theory, but it is a distinction I would enjoy unpacking.

Back to the point that if in the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century Rosseau, Voltaire, and company were continuing a long tradition of seeking to construct a society grounded in Christian moral philosophy, the seeds to the replacement of this enterprise with a materialistic worldview were also in place. In France, Diderot and d'Holbach were laying the ground work for Saint-Simon and Comte in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany, the Young Hegelians were preparing the path to Marx. Scimecca's take on the conflict between Saint-Simon and Comte is particularly intriguing. Scimecca summarizes it this way:

My contention is that because of the distortion of Saint-Simon's *New Christianity* by the Saint-Simonians and the ridicule of Comte's 'Religion of Humanity,' the term he borrowed from the Saint-Simonians, when mixed in with the enveloping secular trend, caused sociology to lose its moral philosophical base. And furthermore, this is something that sociology needs to reclaim if it is to go beyond its narrow epistemology when it does not consider the impact of moral philosophy (primarily Christianity) on an individual's actions. (66)

In the end, Scimecca prescribes a course for sociology to reclaim its pre-nineteenth

century promise. Before he gets there, he provides specific critiques of how he believes several of the masters departed from the earlier moral philosophical base. The masters, of course, generally wrote a lot of material over a lifetime. Most of us who have devoted our attention to these masters have probably not read most of that material in the original. We have instead developed our understandings of them as filtered down to us by more recent text-book authors. Scimecca is one of these. No doubt these text authors differ in emphasis and interpretation. If we assume that Scimecca's departure point is consistent with mainstream consensus, then his Christian moral philosophical emphasis is where he departs from the mainstream.

Meanwhile, those of us operating in the backwaters of sociology, in my case largely in small confessional Christian colleges, develop our own interpretations. If, as is often the case, we largely operate alone in this enterprise, we may develop some pretty idiosyncratic interpretations. In my years of teaching, I had long since been conscious that I was interpreting the masters in ways that enabled me to develop my own particular moral philosophy. Reading Scimecca's book confronted me again with the question of the degree to which, when I presented Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, et al. to my students, I was promoting my own theory versus what they had actually said. This is not to say that I found any real disagreements with Scimecca. It would be more appropriate to say that I had often developed different attitudes towards the masters.

This is nowhere more evident than in Scimecca's critique of Marx. This critique is not lengthy, and summarizes class consciousness, dialectical materialism, and alienation well. Marx's transformation of Hegel's dialectic is well explained: "this materialistic worldview represented a very real turning point in the history of sociology, a turning point that led to a rejection of viewing religion as essential to the foundation of a moral social order" (84). Scimecca uses this summary statement as a transition to later theorists, particularly Durkheim and Weber. In truth it is not clear what Scimecca's own attitude towards Marx is. I found myself at this point thinking yes, but . . .

I do not know that I have ever met a sociologist who did not confess appreciation for Marx having shaped their sociological consciousness. I suspect this is true for Scimecca as well, but I cannot be certain. My own appreciation emerged from the outset, but was enhanced when I discovered Jacques Ellul. In one of his books, Ellul included a direct quote from Marx that I have not been able to find but that I can paraphrase. Marx's quote was to the effect that while it would be necessary to destroy Christianity as an institution to facilitate human liberation, we must anticipate that faith in the risen Christ might persist. In this circumstance it

would be necessary to reconsider the veracity of that faith.

Over the years I developed an attitude toward Marx that I expressed to my students. My attitude was that Marx was more conflicted than generally presented. Marx the critical humanist versus Marx the revolutionary, if you will. When I discussed social class, of course I offered the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Here was Marx the revolutionary. But I would transition to viewing class in the context of the dialectic; Marx the critical humanist.

The tendency to “classify,” I would say, is inherent to humans. We tend to objectify people by such markers as gender, age, complexion, possessions, and so on. By this process of externalization these classifications become real, and people so classified to a large degree define themselves by these classifications. And thus they are internalized (with resulting alienation). I think this is consistent with Marx’s view of social class (and alienation), but probably not his preferred expression of class consciousness. Teaching at Christian colleges, I would now take the next step and say that Jesus rejected such classifications. Depending on the circumstances, I would then suggest that Marx, via Ellul, was open to the possibility that Jesus might yet prevail. This was perhaps a stretch, but my point was that, as Ellul said, institutions were the modern manifestations of the “powers and principalities” Paul warns of (Eph. 6:12). This was especially true, I would say, of religion (Ellul would say that Christianity is the anti-christ). In effect, I was saying that Marx and Paul were on the same page.

Had I been in less obscure places than small Christian colleges and promoted this argument I no doubt would have been roasted by both church and academe. At any rate, and acknowledging that Scimecca’s presentation of Marx is in the larger narrative of the secularization of sociology and therefore not in a larger critique of Marx, I found myself wanting to be kinder to Marx.

Scimecca’s assessment of Weber and Durkheim are particularly well done. Remembering that they were contemporaries, Scimecca provides the reader with a clear sense that options were available even as modernity was driving the narrative landscape of each. Durkheim would accept the death (to use Nietzsche’s term) of Judeo-Christianity and seek to plot an alternative morality grounded in modernity. Scimecca’s Weber is a modern day Jacob wrestling for the place of Christian faith at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Weber’s own life was imitating art – or was it science? The Christianity of Weber’s mother clashing with the modernity of his father was a kind of metaphor for 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The story of how the abuse his learned father visited on the faithful innocence of his mother, resulting in a fateful clash between father and son which traumatized the younger Weber for the rest of his life, is recapitulated as the abuse modernity visited on Christianity.

Scimecca's description of the central Weberian concepts (verstehen, ideal types, rationality, bureaucracy, power) are well and poignantly presented. If I have any departure from his presentation of Weber, and again it is not so much a disagreement as an attitude, it is on Scimecca's presentation of value-neutrality. Scimecca tends to portray value-neutrality as a kind of stoic compromise on the part of Weber. I have no quarrel with this, and in Scimecca's presentation we see a Weber who (as his mother's son) grieved letting go of the moral guidance provided by Christianity.

I have confessed to being a Weberian and like him had to learn to wrestle with the role of objectivity vs. prescription. I learned early on to define "objectivity" as the attempt to view a phenomenon from all conceivable points of view. When I first started teaching at a Christian college I was confronted by colleagues who said my students needed more than "on the one hand – but on the other hand." My students deserved, my colleagues argued, moral mentoring. Fair enough. But need I say, evangelical Christians can be notoriously righteous. My life-line was "ethical-neutrality." Early on in Introduction to Sociology I, would present "the moral imperative of ethical neutrality" as the cornerstone of sociology. Seeking the truth, I would say, is our principal endeavor. Suspending bias is necessary to this endeavor. Suspending bias is a learned discipline. Holding to one's principals while suspending bias is the true art of sociology. Scimecca makes a powerful case that this same conflict tormented Weber, at times to the point of despair. I learned from this book that Weber died in 1920 during the great flu epidemic, not from the flu but from the misdiagnosis of flu when he in fact had pneumonia. At any rate there is the apocryphal legend that Weber's last words were "the truth is the truth."

If one follows Scimecca's description of the hand-off of mainstream sociology from Europe to North America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is more the influence of Durkheim than Weber that drives this process. And more is the pity.

The one persistent question that emerged for me more or less constantly as I read this book is most clearly present with Durkheim. The question goes to the proper distinction between institutional Christianity and the role of personal faith in the articulation of sociological theory. Scimecca says, and I agree, that Weber's struggle was with his faith. Durkheim is different. It has been reported that Durkheim often remarked that to evaluate his work it was necessary to remember that he was descended from a long line of rabbis. Yet he seems to fairly easily, almost happily, have rejected his Judaism in favor of agnosticism early in life.

Early on in my career as a sociologist, I ignored Nietzsche. Later I began to see that the ghost of Nietzsche, along with Marx, haunted the era of Durkheim and Weber. Weber was

clearly wrestling with the ghosts of Marx and Nietzsche, his German predecessors. I am not aware that Durkheim ever addressed himself to Nietzsche. It is perhaps an odd confession to make that my own faith walk in later years led me to appreciate Nietzsche more and Durkheim less. I used to extol the virtue of Durkheim's "metaphoric parallelism" the idea that religious symbols anchored the foundations of social order. In those days I had not yet had my own "who do you say that I am?" conversation with the risen Christ. Metaphoric parallelism was a convenient way of accommodating my Christianity with my self-identity as a sociologist.

There came a time when I learned to respect the frank nihilism of Nietzsche's critique of modernity; that if there is no God there is no foundation for morality, let alone social order. Only power matters. I came increasingly to view Durkheim's functional prerogative more cynically as "if there were no God we would have to invent Him." Nietzsche, if not lamenting the death of God, at least acknowledged the gravity of His departure. This reflection is perhaps a digression, but it describes my attitude as I read Scimecca's description of Durkheim's influence on the emergence of American sociology.

Scimecca unpacks Durkheim this way. Population growth and expanding division of labor weakens collective conscience and the integrative effect of religion.

For Durkheim, the rejecting of the truth-claims of Christianity with its sense of authority had seriously weakened society. But, because Durkheim was a non-believer, he was torn between his non-belief and his conviction that an alternative form of authority needed to be found. For Durkheim, this took the form of the alternative authority within the parameters of Positivism and social facts. And what better social fact than society itself to explain the origins of religion. It was a short step for Durkheim to equate society as a functional equivalent for God. . . . He did so because Positivism precluded all metaphysical phenomena and, because he was a positivist, Durkheim had no other choice. . . . Durkheim's agnosticism put him at a real disadvantage. His goal was to create a Christian-like morality completely devoid of what he considered to be the false premises of Christian beliefs. . . . [He] saw that the history of Western society could not be understood apart from Christianity, and living and writing in a culture with its basis in Christianity, even though he was a non-believer he simply could not escape the theological implications of his own sociology. His positivistic sociology, by claiming that the sacred was no more than the functional manifestation of society, could only measure the applications of the sacred and not the sacred itself. (98)

And so the die was cast. Henceforth a sociology that followed Durkheim's lead would be confined to a Platonic cave (my metaphor) casting its attention to the shadows of the sacred.

Having set the stage, the last three chapters of Scimecca's book follow the path of sociological theory through the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup>. In chapter seven he traces the

emergence of North America as the dominant mainstream of sociology. He provides critiques of Sumner, Ward, Ely, Small, Ross, Cooley, and Giddings, and how each in his own way negotiated his way around and through evangelical Christianity. The death of Albion Small in 1926, Scimecca asserts, marks the end of Christian influence in American sociology and the triumph of “the quiet respectability of objective science.” Sociology was now turned inward focused on gaining respect as a scientific discipline and eschewing moral reflection.

Chapter eight further unpacks this scientific endeavor, starting with the influence of psychology, especially Freud and the behaviorists. Scimecca then moves to larger critique of Mead, Park, Ogburn, and the Giddings men: Chapin and Odum. He concludes with critiques of two holdouts opposed to the triumph of positivism, Ellwood and Sorokin but concludes they were fighting a losing battle.

In chapter nine, Scimecca turns to contemporary theorists, starting with Parsons, Mills, and Blumer, and proceeding to later 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Max Horkheimer, and Jurgen Habermas. He presents a picture of a cauldron of overlapping and competing theories that describe a discipline in disarray. This sets up the final chapter of Scimecca’s book where the author provides his recommendation on how sociology can reclaim its original promise.

Beginning with a concise and well-articulated critique of post-modernist theorists, Scimecca moves to what he sees as fruitful emergent 21<sup>st</sup> century corrections, especially the emergence of *critical realism* and most especially the work of Margaret Archer and Christian Smith.

In introducing Archer, Scimecca focuses on her description of St. Mother Teresa. Archer says of St. Teresa that her work, her behavior, is incomprehensible without reference to her faith. And yet positivistic empiricism has no real way of factoring in faith, except perhaps as a kind of illusion best described as materially functional. This follows from Benton Johnson’s summary of the post-Durkheimian consensus that “religion is a good thing but that religious ideas are false-” (193). Archer notes that “disbelief ever since the Enlightenment has become the privileged default of social scientists-” (187).

Scimecca concludes that the foundational realities most central to the critical realism of Archer and Christian Smith are transcendental experiences such as love and faith. Any inability or unwillingness to account for these realities must necessarily result in an impoverished sociology. As Smith puts it: “We have not really come to terms with human beings – ourselves – until we come to understand human persons as fundamentally moral, believing animals” (190). In offering the work of Christian Smith as the model for a reinvigorated sociology, Scimecca

observes that apologetics has no place in academia. Yet Smith rightly points out that sociologists are apologists for particular sets of value commitments, which are taken for granted in academia. These value commitments are grounded in positivistic empiricism. A further comment on this later, but to this point Scimecca quotes Smith to the effect that “sociology suffers from ‘physics envy,’ the result of which is that much of the social sciences, informed by positivist empiricism, give us views of the human person and social life that is much too simplistic” (191).

I whole-heartedly endorse Scimecca’s promotion of Smith’s (and Archer’s) path forward as a means to reclaim a more coherent sociology. I pause at his categorical assertion that apologetics has no place in academia. I understand his point and do not dispute it. My underlying departure point, as I provide my review of his book, is from someone who has spent most of his career in the backwaters of academe. In these backwaters, the primary task is always pedagogy. Those of us who labor here may occasionally provide reflection to the larger academic community via publication and public presentation, but this is rarely our central task. Those of us who labor in the backwaters of Christian higher education nearly always are called primarily to instruct undergraduates.

When applying for my last position, as a Lutheran seeking a position at a Southern Baptist university, I was required to submit both a statement of faith and a reflection on my teaching philosophy. I wrote that I taught because I loved my discipline. The study of sociology from the beginning was for me a liberating experience. I hoped my presentation of sociology to my students would provide them with a similar experience. As I suggested earlier, when I first starting teaching at Christian institutions I was counseled by my colleagues that students would care little that I provided them sociological counsel. It was Christian mentoring that would matter. For me there was no distinction. I am a Christian sociologist. Sociological mentoring and Christian mentoring are one and the same.

I remember once while teaching a class in criminology as an adjunct at Eastern Michigan University (a public institution) being asked by a student if I was a theist. I replied that I was a Christian and so, yes, I was a theist. His response was “good, now we can talk.” His point was that questions of law and criminal justice could not be separated from questions of Christian morality. While I would never proselytize, apologetics was necessary to provide context for discussion of such things as common law and rationales for penology. At my own Christian university, the task was different. There I had to provide counsel in the context of a religiously pluralistic world. There my job was to show how sociology could make them better witnesses. I took to placing Matthew 10:16 at the top of my Introduction to Sociology syllabus: “Behold, I

send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” I would then offer that sociology was a serpentine enterprise.

So, perhaps apologetics is to be avoided in academic endeavors, but I am persuaded it is central to sociological and Christian pedagogy.

And so we come to end of this extraordinarily valuable text. Scimecca concludes by restating his central thesis: sociology has abandoned its initial promise to combine empiricism with a moral philosophy:

By eschewing Christianity and any semblance of transcendence, of the importance of a metaphysical worldview sociology has embraced nihilism. . . . Since sociological theories have resulted in a severely limited sociology, we need to reclaim sociology’s original promise. We need to restore a relevant moral philosophy and a non-positivistic, non-limiting empiricism in order for human beings to flourish in a world that again has meaning and hope. (193)

*Christianity and Sociological Theory* is a must addition to any course in sociological theory at a Christian college or university. In a better world it would also gain wider distribution in academic sociology at large. It would probably best be coupled with any one of a number of larger survey texts of sociological theory, but this is a book that should be read by anyone who cares about sociology.

## Reference

Scimecca, Joseph A. 2019. *Christianity and Sociological Theory: Reclaiming the Promise*. New York: Routledge.

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