Sociology and Christianity in My Life

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On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of this fine journal, I am honored to share a story of my commitment to vocational service of God, the continuing Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer, and to an academic discipline carved in the image of humanity to show that all of culture and society is a human artifice.

Intersection of Christianity and Sociology in My Personal Life

In the last two years of my undergraduate programme, I was exposed by Professors John Vander Stelt and John Van Dyk to a socially engaged branch of the Calvinian Christian tradition that emerged, in part, from the life and work of Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper. This perspective proposes foundational critique of all disciplines and areas of society, culture, religion, and life. It also urges appreciation for social institutions, political engagement, and scholarship.

This branch that goes by the title "reformational perspective" deepened my relationship with God and, in turn, renewed my love for humanity. The movement it spawned propelled me and many others onto a quest for knowledge and peace. In 1970, I was accepted at this reformational movement's year-old Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) that still flourishes on the University of Toronto campus.

During ICS's early years, most of its 50 or so students spent up to four years there, as I did. Pouring myself into courses across biblical studies, philosophy, history, theology, ethics, and social theory, I acquired a broad base in these areas with a reformational perspective. Its critical scholarship was built on the work of its chief philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd, who developed a complex philosophy that seriously challenged Western thought. ICS's educational model included lectures, seminars featuring student research, and readings of both past and contemporary intellectuals. ICS's academic wealth gave me firm religious grounding and a solid base of knowledge. I owe particular gratitude to Senior Members James Olthuis, Hendrik Hart, and Calvin Seerveld, and to my mentor at Citizens for Public Justice, Gerald Vandezande.

After graduation from ICS, I applied my M.Phil. as a labour union representative and researcher in Toronto and Vancouver for the Christian Labour Association of Canada, also associated with this reformational Christian movement. After eight years with CLAC, Helen and I decided, with trepidation and faith, that I would leave that secure position to pursue a Ph.D. for my vocation in sociology, though anxious of the implications for us and our three young children.

When I began Ph.D. studies at the University of British Columbia, I felt ready to apply grounded progressive Christian thought to academic discipline, theory, and practice. I contended that Christian sociologists can critically consider any scholarship, perspective, and research, judiciously choosing among them in scientific investigation. I accepted Max Weber's principle that in research, "intellectual integrity" is the chief virtue. One respects intellectual integrity by maintaining "value neutrality" in one's analysis of others' actions, so one can truly "empathically understand" such actions (Weber's v*erstehende sociologie*). One must be willing to subject one's own values to analysis and accept the consequences of scrutiny. Simultaneously, believers in God are in a perpetual discerning search in the law-ordered world for what is right in our research.

At UBC, I found that, if one is open to new ways of analyzing and applying knowledge, and can articulate an academically sound position, one can function without compromising one's faith. In fact, I deepened and strengthened my faith in God and appreciation of colleagues and professors, with whom I discussed to mutual effect. Despite my perspectival differences, I secured several teaching assistantships and a graduate fellowship. I selected ethnic studies as my research focus, working profitably under a Sri Lankan Canadian professor and, later, under supervision of a British Canadian anthropologist.

Christian faith and sociological profession also intersected outside the classroom. I was asked by Reginald Robson, a seasoned professor, to become project director of a race relations survey for the BC Civil Liberties Association. With Robson's supervision and advice from research methods professor Neil Guppy, I developed, directed, interviewed 100 of 394 respondents, did a literature review, analyzed much of the data, and saw through publication an expansive three-year quantitative research project on discrimination, published with Dr. Robson as *Ethnic Conflict in Vancouver* in 1985. In that capacity, I was privileged to observe and interact within the ethnic and religious diversity of the Sikh and Hindu Indo Canadian population of South Vancouver.

Later, for two years following residency, I designed, conducted (including over a hundred interviews), and wrote a doctoral dissertation on the nature of ethnicity and ethnic

group formation and maintenance. In both projects, the place of religion, belief, and its structural implications were central.

After conducting research but before writing a dissertation, I was hired as an assistant professor of sociology at Trinity Christian College in a Chicago suburb. Trinity is an interdenominational Christian college, currently with around 25% of its students claiming an ethnic minority heritage or international status.

As department chair, I ensured that each course had explicit Christian perspective, with respect and critique for each historical period and theoretical perspective. Successive versions of this 2004-2014 statement framed the sociology program and show my approach to sociology:

> Confident of God's dynamic presence within the diverse relations, patterns, and structures that emerge from the interactions among world, culture, society, groups, and persons, this department seeks to develop critically engaged sociological knowledge and ability, in order to socially establish love, understanding, and peace.

This statement drove the department's emphasis on theoretical perspectives, urban issues, cultural studies, creation stewardship, and ethnic awareness. It began with the assertion that "relations, patterns, and structure" emerge from creational givens and outcomes.

My teaching and living have two major foci: First, *commitment* to God's original and ongoing creational presence and revelation, and its implications for how humans should associate with one another and steward the earth and its unique cultures. Second, *appreciation* of sociology's contribution to understanding human culture and society, interspersed with the first focus's critical integration of sociology and Christian conviction.

With Chicago's rich sociological tradition and Trinity's commitment to a social justice-oriented Christianity, it was obvious that our department should acknowledge urban sociology and issues, so I oriented features of most courses in the directions of urban, ethnic, and ecological issues.

Invoking the intersection of discipline and faith, I also led the establishment of a BSc program in Social Work, a BA in Criminal Justice – first under Sociology's umbra, then each in their own departments, and an Urban Studies inter-departmental minor. In each case, the opening rationale for such a move was the importance of justice, stewardship, and stability in pursuit of social and cultural development.

Here, I also give one example of practical application of sociological insight committed as chair of Trinity's Ethnic Diversity Committee, in which I steered a commitment to campus ethnic diversity. Economic inequality and the residential segregation of cities like Chicago make it difficult for ethnic minority students to succeed in the unfamiliar cultural climate of an

ethnically homogenous institution, so the diversity committee started by listing ten priorities we felt necessary before launching an initiative to change the campus culture.

These included targeted scholarships, intensified recruitment of minority faculty, ethnic and global studies curricula, parents and pastoral support groups, and cultural activities. We wrote a biblical rationale for cross-cultural and multi-racial inclusion within a comprehensive document that included a plan for diversity in employment, a proposal for curricular changes, a process for redress of complaints, and hiring of a director of ethnic diversity with a wide range of duties and access to the president and administrative council. This plan was adopted, and, within a year, the curriculum committee mandated each department to develop cross-cultural/global studies courses for meeting a new cross-cultural requirement.
Minority recruitment increased for faculty, staff, and student recruitment. We hired a God-sent director of ethnic diversity, Dr. Nelvia Brady, who had been chancellor of Chicago City Colleges. It was a great time at the college in the early 2000s. For a variety of reasons – much related to finances – the initial success was not sustained at its highest level. However, the documents, structures, curricular reform, and intent remain, and the student composition changed noticeably.

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These are a few of the ways I lived my primary profession. I provide, here, one example of the faith-sociology nexus *outside* the college. I was asked to assist in an ecclesiastical matter of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. In this denomination, largely composed at that time of Dutch and other European American ancestries, the African American membership was about 5%, with a total minority membership of around 15%. In the mid-1990s, Native American, African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American people called for greater recognition and relevance in the denomination. As one of few majority society members on the Race Relations Advisory Committee, I was blessed to bond with fellow members as we shared faith, common analyses, and experience. After meetings and consultations, I wrote the first draft of what, under another author, became the denomination's statement on ethnic matters. My status was not only sociologist, it was also fellow child of God. Sociological knowledge and acquired wisdom from the subjects of my research studies was my service.

The committee document pointed to God's love of diversity, later rejected by human sin. It showed God's redemptive work and intention for the chosen Hebrew people to be an example to bring all humanity to worship the only true God. It went on to show how God, as Immanuel in Jesus Christ, appealed to all humanity to join in praising God and loving one another. The report called for the adoption of "biblical and theological principles for the development of a racially and ethnically diverse and unified family of God." I had a sociological role in laying details for congregational study of these principles with concrete steps toward

inclusion and diversity. The plan called the denomination and its seminary to tailor its programs and curriculum to encourage pastors from minority ethnic populations, and it proposed to diversify boards and committees, among other measures. At least the committee's report was sound, and several of its recommendations became policy, bringing considerable change to the denomination's face and body.

As in the Trinity College *Commitment to Campus Diversity*, whether it worked out as commended is another matter. Sociologists lament this disjuncture between research-based solutions and everyday life resistance. As Christian Smith notes, "[M]ost people live their lives . . . compromising here, synthesizing there, compartmentalizing elsewhere" in spite of the mandate of a "superempirical order" (*Moral, Believing Animals*, p. 106). But our committee responded to a faithful request, and an institutional structure budged.

Such was my experience in the intersection of Christianity and sociology. That nexus has been my life, thanks to the loving and God-fearing farmers who were my parents and grandparents and to outstanding professors in two formative institutions – one radically Christian, one radically "secular:" Toronto's Institute for Christian Studies and Vancouver's University of British Columbia.

As a final example of the intersection of sociology and Christianity in my career, I summarize the pre-eminent focus of my career's empirical research. Since 1998, I have made three sabbatical research visits to, and conducted one student interim course in, South Africa (with a foray into Zimbabwe). In those sojourns, totaling 11 months and crisscrossing 11,000 km of territory, I formally conducted 399 interviews with 300 separate persons. Of these, there were 198 in 1998, 4 in 2000 before my US interim students arrived, 89 in 2006, and 108 in 2014.

Across this research, I also observed scores of meetings, gatherings, and other settings, as well as a profound social and economic transition. I chose South Africa for two main reasons. The first is that it is as close to a microcosm of global society as one is likely to get: a minority white dominant group of around 13%, a 75% indigenous population, and a 12% migrant and second-generation immigrant population, combining highly developed and under-developed sections of the country and population. (These figures are my rough estimates from many sources, and they have changed radically over the sixteen years I was researching there.) Second, religion and ethnicity are deeply interwoven, especially in South Africa where approximately 70% of black and 75% of white South Africans claim Christianity, and with almost all other black and non-white immigrant groups claiming allegiance to some other indigenous or world religion.

This article does not allow analysis of this body of research. Here, I only make these few observations based on my work. First, this research and the works that came from it show the deep and enduring effects of social inequality on society and individual persons. Second,

religion serves both as an ideological tool for separation and unequal status, and yet concurrently as a major force in the resistance against such disparity. Third, the social dynamics in a nation like South Africa and, by extension, globally, are seriously in need of social scientific investigations and analysis. Such analyses are fundamental to inform nationalist and geopolitical interactions, relations, and world order.

I believe that God's dealing with humanity moves along a trajectory of love for all creation and creatures. If that is so, cross-national understanding is essential to discern ways to conform to that trajectory in order, then, to conform to the law-ordered reality of our world. As a sociologist and Christian, I assert that we must do this kind of disciplined careful work in order to live out the purpose of sociology defined earlier in this article, which again is to develop critically engaged sociological knowledge and ability, in order to [assist in] socially establishing love, understanding, and peace.

Intersection of Sociology and Christianity in Current Public Life

If one looks at the current status of the intersection, one can be dismayed at the distortion of biblical narrative truths by political agendas that deny the value of scientific work as one of God's gifts to humanity. While it is true that some social science has sometimes allocated too much power to human design and reason, it is also true that social science – with or without critical integration with the ongoing Word of God – can show us wise, loving, and just ways of associating with each other on the course from the primeval to the eschaton.