



Prophets and Products: The Current Cultural Context of Christian Sociology

Dennis Hiebert, Providence University College, Canada

My first career was as an Athletic Director at a private Canadian Christian university. My second career has been as a sociologist at the same university, which began when I turned forty, despite being unable to schedule my dissertation defense on my exact fortieth birthday. When I meet new people today and they hear of my two rather contrasting careers, they often inquire how and why I transitioned from athletic administration to academic scholarship. I explain that my first Master's thesis was on "Prevailing Protestant Ideology Concerning Sport," which ultimately steered me toward subsequent immersion in sociology, which not only opened a whole new world for me, or more precisely revealed a whole new way of seeing the world I already inhabited, but gave me superb tools to understand it vastly better. Sociology articulated and elaborated workings of the world that I had at times suspected, and gave me a profound sense of real calling, a sense of both Christian and professional vocation.

My doctoral dissertation was on James Fowler's stages of faith, which elucidated my own faith journey better than any developmental theory I had ever heard. Its revelations humbled me, profoundly affecting my perception of various others in my faith community, and myself, and compelling me to extend more grace to others, and myself. So my publications in the early years of my truer calling tended to focus on the micro level of analyzing Christian faith, in articles such as "Toward a Post-postmodern Christian Concept of Self," "The Insufficiency of Integrity," and "Toward Adult Cross-Sex Friendship." Then, pertaining to the meso level, I published articles such as an application of George Ritzer's thesis in "The McDonaldization of Protestant Organizations," as I had come to perceive and experience them. More recently, and in this journal, I have addressed more macro issues, such as "Alternate Forms of the Sacred: Family, Sport, Nation," "Is it Homophobia or Homoppression?," "Climate Change and Christian Anthropocentrism," and "The Mechanisms and Morality of Capitalism: A Brief Christian Critique." Of course, like all scholars, teaching and publishing have been only one

dimension of who I am. Everyday relationships and collective experiences have been every bit as formative and expressive.

Throughout my second career I have become keenly and sometimes painfully aware of two patterns which have characterized it. One pattern is the persistence of an interest in the integration of sociology and Christianity, such as “Can We Talk? Achieving Dialogue Between Sociology and Theology,” and “The Community, Courage, and Compassion of the Christian Sociologist.” I find psychologist David Entwistle’s six models of relationship between social science and Christianity most helpful—enemies, spies, colonialists, rebuilders, neutral parties, and allies under one sovereign—and I align with his allegiance to the allies model. But overall, I have left the concept of integration behind, if by integration we mean unification of differing worldviews, assumptions, methods, language, and history into a single whole, because I think in the final analysis that is impossible. Instead, I have come to think in terms of the conversation between, or the intersection of, sociology and Christianity. I regard Christian Smith to be the leading contemporary model of a Christian who is able to write persuasive sociological theory at the highest levels of scholarship without blatantly propagating Christian beliefs in an off-putting manner, much less writing in Christianese, while still working from deeply Christian presuppositions.

The other pattern in my career as a sociologist is the conviction that sociology’s service to Christianity is, in Max Weber’s classic conceptualization, prophetic, not priestly. As I wrote in “Problems and Possibilities of Sociology as Prophetic,”

Sociologists are not priests who speak *for* the religious establishment from within it. They are more like prophets who speak *to* the religious establishment from its margins. Sociologists are not the conservative majority of religious functionaries who faithfully repeat sacred messages and carry out sacred rituals. They are the radical minority who critique those messages and rituals, the change agents calling the faithful to a higher plane. . . . Sociologists are not like the choir that renders sacred choral music. They are like the truth-telling, forth-telling voices of Bob Dylan, Bruce Cockburn, and U2’s Bono.

Furthermore, I must confess that I have consequently long realized that most of my teaching and writing and living as a sociologist has been reactive to the hegemony I see all around me, hopefully not blindly proactive on its behalf. My book on marriage, *Sweet Surrender: How Cultural Mandates Shape Christian Marriage* (2013), critiqued historical and contemporary Christian concepts of marriage as mostly conformity to Western culture, not essentially biblical. It was, in essence and effect, just a case study of what I have taken as my professional Christian mission, which is to separate out the purely Christian from the merely cultural as much as possible. Granted, all Christianity, like all worldviews and social practices, is always embedded in one cultural context or another, but until Christians can with some degree of awareness and

accountability tell the difference, they will remain culturally illiterate and vulnerable to being duped.

In my local community, I have earned a rather negative public reputation (though also a small minority of support) through my engagement with public affairs and writing for local media. I have even been ushered out of my lifelong home church for espousing apparent heresies such as the social construction of reality, the pervasiveness of social structural evil, and the biblical call to social justice. Therefore I readily identify with theologian Jamin Hubner's *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* (2020), and with ethicist David Gushee's autobiographical *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism* (2017). At best, as James K. A. Smith put it, "evangelicalism is a mission field for evangelical scholarship" (2018:148). My most recently published book entitled *Rationality, Humility, and Spirituality in Christian Life* (2020) may turn out to be the definitive statement of my life, and I don't so much care if anyone reads it, I just wanted to say it.

Beyond my personal experience with sociology, I am growing increasingly apprehensive about its ability to hold its ground in the constantly evolving ethos of higher education. And my concern extends beyond sociology to all the social sciences, reaches out to the humanities as well, and ultimately encompasses the whole tradition of the liberal arts. Its publicly perceived value is fading rapidly, as it is being challenged and pushed to the margins by more pragmatic academic enterprises. And I say "enterprises" instead of "disciplines" very deliberately. Today's challengers to the liberal arts are not disciplines in the sense of disciplining the mind and heart to seek greater understanding of the human condition and experience. They seek not the enlightenment or enhancement that leads to greater depth, insight, and wisdom. They seek only the instrumental, the utilitarian, and the means to a self-serving end. They seek only the educational credentials to get a better, higher-paying job. Christlikeness be damned.

In his article entitled "Truth be Sold: How Truth Became a Product" (2020), Rob Wijnberg differentiates astutely between premodern truth as faith established by revelation, modern truth as knowledge established by discovery, postmodern truth as a construct established by construction, and now post-postmodern truth as a product established by production. In today's zeitgeist of self-affirmation, profit-maximization, and satisfaction of wants, truth is formatted, consumer-based, and commercialized—truth be sold. Depicting current political affairs as "post-truth" has no doubt become cliché, but there can also be little doubt that truth has been reduced to power, as Michel Foucault taught us, and sold to eager buyers. Facts, even of the alternative kind, don't matter much anymore. Just figure out what they want, package it in power and charisma, and sell it to them for your own benefit. This economization of worldview has resulted in the commercialization of society, and more salient here, the commodification of education. Literal, quantitative, financial profitability of both the

individual and the institution has become the only measure of success that really matters in higher education and research.

In the academy, this is by now routinely manifest in an increasing emphasis on what are euphemistically termed professional courses and degree programs. Many such courses actually profess nothing, seeking only to provide practical skills to succeed in the marketplace. In my own university, the basic first year philosophy course in Critical Thinking has been discredited as insufficiently “professional” due to its apparent failure to deliver said requisite skills for “professions” in the marketplace. Beyond students understanding themselves as consumers instead of citizens, that is, as rightfully preoccupied with their own commercial self-interest instead of understanding themselves as members of a community for which they share responsibility, university accrediting agencies and government funding alike are increasingly pushing the professionalization agenda. So, what kind of a job can you get if you major in sociology? Will you get your money’s worth out of it?

In Wijnberg’s terms and assessment, the current aim of higher education has become neither the redemption of pre-modernity, the progress of modernity, nor the social liberation of postmodernity, but only the infinite satisfaction of personal wants characteristic of post-postmodernity. But tragically, we have hardly any idea to what end, or for what purpose beyond personal desire. This is what Jacques Ellul so insightfully exposed as the society of “technique,” rife with the how, and bereft of the why. This is precisely where the liberal arts and the Christian voice and worldview is so desperately needed today to enlighten, guide, and redeem. And as Christian Smith observed in *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*, “Worth noting is how closely sociology’s sacred, spiritual project parallels that of (especially Protestant) Christianity in its structure of beliefs, interests, and expectations” (2014:18).

In my assessment, the commodification of higher education is now the greatest challenge that lies before sociology in general, and Christian sociology in particular. Perhaps Christian sociology’s greatest service in this era will be first to reveal prophetically the core essence of this age for what it is—in Harvard theologian Harvey Cox’s title, *The Market as God* (2016)—and then to call us all to a higher, more virtuously ethical, Christ-like plane. And may anyone with ears to hear listen.

References

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