



On the Journey: Reflecting on the Intersections of Faith and Sociology

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The article “(Re)telling the Fragmented Story of Michal” (Vol. 3 No.2 of this journal) briefly recounts my initial encounter with sociology, and how that first sociology course I took raised challenging faith questions. Not mentioned in that paper is my distinct memory of asking the professor, the late Howard Mattson-Boze, if my faith-based beliefs were true or simply an aspect of my own culture. Mattson-Boze was certainly no stranger to such questions, as he was an active member of what is now the Christian Sociological Association. But his response troubled me, as it was only a rather enigmatic “yes” followed by silence and a raised eyebrow. A response which, at the time, was neither satisfying nor one I could accept. However, decades later when we talked again, I confessed I had learned to value the real wisdom demonstrated in his response.

The process of my wrestling with the intersections between the discipline of sociology and Christian faith started in Mattson-Boze’s class. As also recounted in the previously mentioned article, it continued in graduate school when reading and discussing texts such as Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy*. The more I worked to understand the social construction of reality and to explore how human beings are profoundly shaped, molded, and constrained by their particular cultures, the more I was challenged to ask difficult questions and examine my own faith traditions. At times it felt impossible to hold to both faith and the sociological perspective, a challenge that was amplified when I heard from the pulpit at the church I attended that “Sociology is hostile and antithetical to the Christian faith. It is doubtful a person could be a sociologist and a Christian at the same time.”

A few years later, I used that provocative statement in the introduction of my faith integration tenure paper (<https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/tenurepapers/5/>). Not because I agreed with it, but because that statement was similar to opinions of some conservative Christians that Richard Perkins mentions in his book *Looking Both Ways: Exploring the Interface*

between Christianity and Sociology. Early in his book, Perkins relates how he has met many Christians who warn their children to avoid liberal arts schools because they might encounter sociology and lose their faith. However, Perkins indicates there are ways of moving away from this false dichotomy or choice between faith and sociology. In particular, Perkins suggests that faith and sociology are two distinct ways of understanding the world based on different underlying assumptions. Influenced by Perkins work, I suggest in the conclusion to my tenure paper a metaphor for integration: to imagine sociology and faith as participants in an ongoing dialog. This metaphor was suggested in Fraser and Campolo's book, *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith*. It imagines a dialog where participants view the world from a very different terrain, but as equal members. In an ongoing relationship, these partners have an opportunity to share from their differing perspectives, not to assert that their view is the only view, or the only correct view, but to have an opportunity to learn from the insights of the other. Thus the conclusion to my tenure paper indicated how I was coming to embrace Mattson-Boze's enigmatic "yes" in my own journey.

Viewing integration as an ongoing conversation or an enigmatic yes should not gloss over the fact that the product of such a dialog can be unsettling or disconcerting. The quote from the pulpit and the opinions of some Christians about the hostile nature of sociology to faith reflects the way the discipline of sociology can be quite challenging to various faith traditions. For example, in the paper retelling Michal's story, I draw attention to the way the reader of the biblical text is shaped by participation in particular reading communities and traditions. I conclude that this makes it highly problematic, if not impossible, to be certain that there is a single way to read the biblical text. This is similar to the perspective that sociologist Christian Smith takes in his book *The Bible Made Impossible*, a book that is highly critical of evangelical faith traditions which employ modern forms of "biblicism." No doubt the paper on Michal's story and Smith's book are likely to be seen as threatening to such faith tradition's quest for certainty and a definitive reading of the biblical text.

Beyond raising questions about the way faith communities read the biblical text, attention to the social construction of reality raises questions about the practices and beliefs of different faith traditions. It raises questions of how institutionalized concerns or cultural ideals support or work to preserve the social class or structural positions of those faith traditions at the expense of others. This is one of the issues that Perkins raises, and I highlight this in the tenure paper as one of the reasons that many conservative Christians find sociology problematic. As many conservative Christian faith traditions are highly individualistic in approach to faith and social life, they may be antagonistic to the way sociology focuses on structural issues and explanations. This particular tension is examined in Michael Emerson and Christian Smith's book *Divided by Faith: Evangelicals and the Problem of Race in America*. In

that book, the authors argue that white evangelical Protestants employ the cultural tools of accountable freewill individualism and anti-structuralism on the issue of race, with results that further exacerbate instead of reduce the racial divisions in the United States. Perhaps it is not surprising some people of faith might respond with hostility when a sociological argument is made that one's practices and beliefs are actually causing more harm to others. And perhaps this is also why my first response to the enigmatic yes was less than enthusiastic.

Thus, even if we embrace the metaphor of sociology and faith as equal partners in an ongoing dialog, we cannot avoid the moments when it appears that sharp disagreements or conflict can shape the conversation. However, I wonder if such moments of conflict are also opportunities for us to reflect on the deeper issues fueling the tension. For example, consider pyro-theologian Peter Rollin's treatise *How (Not) to Speak of God*, where he speculates that all too often we participate in the idolatry of belief. By this he means we have come to worship *what* we believe instead of the one in *whom* we believe. Or consider Rollin's work *The Fidelity of Betrayal* which I cite in the paper on Michal. In that text he argues that sometimes in order to be faithful we need to betray our faith. That is a provocative claim, and one I examine in more detail in a paper "Faithful Betrayal" (<https://reformedjournal.com/faithful-betrayal/>) where I state that Rollins "is asking us to consider if we, at this moment in time, need to set aside some cherished and deeply held traditions and beliefs, those traditions and beliefs that keep us from seeing and loving the people that Jesus loves – the least, the outcast, the oppressed." Such a "faithful betrayal" implies both a commitment to living out the gospel and a commitment to take the insights of sociology seriously.

I started this particular reflection with the story of an early conversation with Howard Mattson-Boze and his enigmatic "yes" to my question of whether my faith was true or simply a product of my own culture. And I've highlighted here some of the ways I have moved from resistance to that answer to fully embrace the wisdom of his response. But I must acknowledge that when one of my own students recently asked me the same type of question, I was not able to answer simply with a single word and a raised brow. Nevertheless, I do hope that encouraging my student to embrace the challenge of holding both faith and sociology in conversation and creative tension captured the spirit and wisdom of Mattson-Boze's "yes."