



Where is Christian Sociology?

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Since the inception of the discipline, there have been sociologists who were Christians. There have also been sociologists interested in the sociology of religion, which includes study of Christianity, aside from their personal religious commitments. Christian sociology is something different, a distinctive conversation within the field. For the last seventy years or so, Christian colleges and universities have hosted the conversation, so to speak, by providing resources for departments, faculty positions, journals, associations, and conferences. Organizations such as the Christian Sociological Society (CSS), the Christian Sociological Association (CSA), and this journal, are all expressions of that conversation. A central focus has been the question, what is Christian sociology? That continues to be important, as a new question arises: where is Christian sociology?

I majored in Sociology and Anthropology at a Christian college in the 1990s, during an era of departmental expansion and student growth at Christian colleges and universities nationwide. I learned from those who had created liberal arts majors and departments, as Christian Bible colleges and pastor training colleges expanded to include fields such as sociology. There was a sense of danger and daring in the inception of sociology majors. Would such attention to “the world” (the very concept of society) encourage theological liberalism? Would mainstream disciplinary assumptions guide students toward atheism, humanism, and relativism? Does attention to classical theory encourage socialism, communism, and atheism? From the 1960s onward, scholars including David Moberg, Tony Campolo, Don Gray, Ron Burwell, Russ Heddendorf, and many others brought “sociology in Christian perspective” into being for Christian college students, colleges, seminaries, and churches. Christian sociologists also established strong presence in the field of sociology of religion, in particular, and contributed to graduate student education in a variety of universities.

In the twenty first century, however, Christian colleges have reduced sociology programs significantly, with fewer faculty, smaller undergraduate majors, and sometimes

retaining sociology minimally to service minors and general education. The digital age, among other factors, seems to have diminished the danger of crossing boundaries between church and world, and there is less risk perceived in attending a secular graduate program. Christian colleges have raised standards for scholarship for faculty such that faculty in all disciplines have very strong loyalty and ongoing scholarly commitments to the mainstream of their disciplines, often with thinner ties and lessened commitments to distinctively Christian scholarly endeavors. Employment insecurity also encourages faculty to maintain broader networks for job mobility, rather than investing solely in Christian networks within higher education and within their disciplines. These changes are in some ways a success. Christian sociologists have supported the church in moving more freely across the perceived sacred-secular divide, and have nurtured spaces in the academy for faithful Christians to pursue sociological study. They have supported evangelical commitments to social justice. They have raised the professional profile of faculty in terms of terminal degrees and scholarly productivity. These successes have a counterpoint, however, in weakening the density of social ties to Christian sociological organizations, employment, and networks.

In this new era of higher education, and of Christian higher education, with fluidity across sacred and secular, reduced resources for sociology departments, fewer faculty lines and smaller majors, where is Christian sociology? How will the conversation continue with younger scholars and faculty who work in a variety of institutions, who have a broad range of scholarly commitments, and who have thinner or no ties to the Christian college movement?

What is Christian sociology? This continues to be a vital question. Christian sociologists have drawn fascinating connections between sociological concepts and Scripture. We have encouraged evangelicals to make connections between personal piety and social justice, and equipped the church with concepts, methods, and theories that Christians can use as they engage society. We have woven classical sociological theory together with Christian theology. All this work has occurred over the full range of topics treated by sociology.

Where is Christian sociology? Exploring this question is increasingly important as our organizations, journals, departments, and networks move forward. Unlike the founders of sociology departments at Christian colleges several decades ago, today's Christian sociologists are less likely to commit to Christian higher education exclusively, and to stay at one or two colleges for the duration of their career. Christian sociologists today may be tenured professors or adjuncts, working in Christian higher education or not, and conversant with the faith integration conversation or not. Looking at sociology "through the eyes of faith" continues to be a spiritually meaningful, world-changing endeavor. We must also tend to the ground beneath our feet, where it is that we stand as we do this looking.