



The Tasks Before Us: Faith, Trust, and Scholarship

Kenneth A. Schmidt, Brandman University, California

When I became the general editor of the precursor to the current journal, it was a new experience for me. Never having served in that capacity before, there was a considerable amount of learning needed. Thankfully, Dr. Steve Mittwede came to my aid and joined the team of editors that included Drs. Basil Jackson, Matthew Vos, and Joshua Reichard. Dr. Mittwede's prior experience with academic journals was invaluable. The journal slowly became a voice for Christian sociologists, thanks to the sponsorship of Oxford (now Omega) Graduate School and the many contributing authors. I offer heartfelt thanks to the editors, past and present, and the authors for their support in creating this superb academic journal.

As I write this essay on the Feast Day of Saint Richard of Chichester (April 3, 2020), the world is amid a pandemic the likes of which not seen for many years. As with most disasters, dramatic changes will result in both societal institutions and the ordinary lives of individuals that function within them. Just as medical researchers attempt to find cures for the diseases that plague humankind, social scientists and scholars try to understand the social causes of and responses to the problem. Historians will seek to understand the human response to such disasters by looking to the past. There, the historian will find the grim tales of xenophobia, repression, and economic strife, and speculate on the long term political, social, and cultural changes (Snowdon 2019).

Psychologists will examine the internal struggles that strike the individual and uncover the stresses that occur during such times of rapid change. Economic uncertainty, fear, social distancing, and unemployment bring a rise in alienation, suicide, and drug abuse. Sociologists will observe the changes in social and cultural norms, noting how humanity responds to the stresses placed on institutions political, economic, and religious. There, sociologists may find familiar historical trends; however, there may well be novel and exciting discoveries about humankind's ability to adapt to a new environment socially.

Undoubtedly, there will be a multitude of faith-related challenges. Spiritual challenges bring about responses in religious expression. The current pandemic will undoubtedly test Christianity's ability to achieve its duties not only in service to its members, but in its performance of the Great Commission. For example, online worship is now commonplace as social distancing is encouraged. However, for some Christian denominations, the issues of receiving Holy Communion and other sacraments are problematic. How does a community celebrate a Means of Grace and a sense of unity when physically distanced? What doctrinal shifts might occur when socially distanced communities are limited to technologically communicating? How will education, from pastoral training to Sunday School, be accomplished to continue doctrines, traditions, values? How will the Church continue its outreach to a world in need of the Gospel? How will churches negotiate the resulting financial burdens? How will family life change as a result of societal changes? So many questions will be raised! What were once academic questions are now practical dilemmas, and the Church is obligated to respond. To do so, the Church will depend upon the unity of its members working together toward the common goal. Each member has gifts and a God-given purpose, and for the Christian sociologist, the time has come to use those gifts all the more.

For the Christian sociologist, it is not enough merely to study societal problems as a scientist would examine the virus in a microscope. While some social scientists may do that, Christian sociologists are called to a higher purpose. As Craig and Gould (2007) remind us, our task is to serve Christ through our research. Integrating faith and sociology is not an easy task in a world increasingly accustomed to regarding the Gospel message as a quaint myth unworthy of pure academicians. The core of the problem separating academics is in the definition of and trust in truth. Where some sociologists prefer an instrumentalist or pragmatic theory of knowledge providing them with truths, Christian sociologists proclaim a Truth firmly rooted in Scripture. As the Thomist scholar Jacques Maritain observed, "Without trust in truth, there is no human effectiveness" (1971:13).

In 1527, when the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Luther received a letter from his friend Johann Hess, a pastor at Breslau. Hess asked Luther if it was permissible for a Christian to run away from the plague. Luther's response, entitled *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, was an exquisite missive urging doctors, pastors, and governors to remain with the ill. It was the Christian duty to stand with those in need. Duties are neither discharged nor distanced during such daunting times, but rather become a cross we bear to His greater glory. As Maritain noted, "We do not need a truth to serve us, we need a truth that we can serve" (1995:4). The Gospel Truth is worth serving and preserving in the academic community. To that end, I urge Christian sociologists to grasp this moment in history to examine how the Church can respond and help society even more vigorously, and maintain a strong Christian voice among academia.

A prayer attributed to St. Richard of Chichester is appropriate to consider:

Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ
 For all the benefits Thou hast given me,
 For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.
 O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
 May I know Thee more clearly,
 Love Thee more dearly,
 Follow Thee more nearly.

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