# The Way that You See

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*It depends on what you look at, obviously, but even more it depends on the way that you see.*
Bruce Cockburn, "Child of the Wind," *Nothing but a Burning Light*

If you search the internet for optical illusions, you'll come upon the classic "Young Woman/Old Woman" drawing that dates back to the early 1900s. Viewed one way, the cartoonish figure resolves into an old woman reminiscent of *Hansel and Gretel's* "witch," with large nose, pronounced chin, and a headscarf concealing her voluminous hair. Viewed another way, the image depicts a delicate, beautiful, and demure young woman with graceful jawline and aristocratic bearing, turning ever so slightly away from the observer. When I display the image in an Interpersonal Communication class, after a bit of gazing, squinting, and rearranging of their own facial features, most students can see both women. However, there are always a few who, try as they might, can see one, but not the other.

During the same class, I place stereograms (Google them!) on the lecture hall screen, and let students pull out their phones to look at them up close. To the untrained eye, stereograms appear to be just a sequenced abstract pattern. However, move within a couple of inches of the colorful swaths, then back away, relax your focus, "widen" your eyes, and "enter in," and you may find yourself inside the picture, where you will discover well-defined, three-dimensional objects previously hidden from view. The stereogram below contains the Eiffel Tower under a Crescent Moon. Seeing the hidden world is astonishing and delightful, and the difficulty in finding it makes it all the more pleasurable. These examples, both of which require adjusting one's gaze to see the unseen, illustrate the effect that sociology has had on me for the past 25 (or so) years since I first glimpsed life through its penetrating lens.


I fell into sociology in my late 20s through a bit of serendipity. After completing an undergraduate degree in music, and working through a Master of Education Administration program, there were still few vocational goals that held my interest. During this time of liminality, I received a call from Russ Heddendorf, the founder of what is now the *Christian Sociological Association*, and a sociologist at Covenant College where I had completed my undergrad and where I now teach. One of my co-workers had told him that I was more interested in the sociological parts of my M.Ed. program than the professional credentials it offered. This was true. Before coming to Covenant, Russ had taught at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, at the same time that my grandfather, J. G. Vos was teaching in their Bible department. With this social connection established, Russ explained that he was only a few years from retirement, and if I were interested, he would be willing to serve as a mentor as I worked through a Ph. D. in Sociology and then applied for his job! This out-of-the-blue offer

felt like the closest thing to a "calling" that I had ever experienced. I thought about it for a short time, accepted his kindness, and began my journey.

Though I'd never taken a single undergraduate course in sociology (not recommended!), my M. Ed. credential gave me a "foot in the door," and after taking the Graduate Record Exam and agreeing to a few remedial courses, I was accepted into a Ph. D. program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In those early parts of my program, I remember calling Russ, excitedly reading him things I'd written about sociologists like Max Weber, W. I. Thomas, G. H. Mead, and C. Wright Mills, asking "does that sound right?" and hearing his kind, patient response, "Well… no!" I've come a long way since those days, and am eternally indebted to Russ for letting me stand on his shoulders awhile. His emphasis on faith over fun, calling over career, wisdom over information, and his question "What does it mean in this situation to be in, but not of, the world?" continue to influence me. He became my very good friend, valued mentor, and his death in 2008 was and is a great loss to me and to Christian sociology.

More than a method, more than a particularly compelling theory, more than the mastery of a body of knowledge, sociology is, for me, a way of seeing. In cultivating "sight," sociology tries to examine phenomena from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in an effort to understand something without diminishing its complexity or negating unseen factors. Sociologists pay close attention to social location, privilege, power, and social control. It is frequently the weaker things that are negated by stronger and more powerful actors and forces. Accordingly, the discipline tends to identify and amplify marginal voices or perspectives that are lost, diminished, or obscured by the deafening normal. Questions such as "who is advantaged or disadvantaged?", "Who has voice or is voiceless?", "Who is visible or invisible?", "Who controls and who is subject to control?" are all questions that lie at the center of sociological concern and approach. With these tendencies, it is little surprise that sociology tends more toward the prophetic than the priestly – toward disrupting order rather than maintaining it.

The prophetic calling of the Christian sociologist is, at once, exhilarating and dangerous. Christian sociologists, I find, face greater threat from the Christians around them, than from those outside Christian circles. We must tread lightly, for in revealing the unseen – unsettling the settled – we disrupt the sacred normal. For example, one of the "trickiest" subjects I teach is sociology of sport. Sport is sacred territory for many – Christian and "non" alike – and to call into question its practices and customs, asking whether various dimensions of the thing we so love are in conformity with scriptural teaching, invites a painful deconstruction that pushes "sports fans" into existential crisis. Sport has fallen into an easy alliance with Christian religion, and most of its norms are forged on the secular side of that equation. Many ministers promote "big sport" as a public good that should be embraced, celebrated, and supported. Sermons

offering sport illustrations featuring "Hail Mary" passes, pairing deviant overconformity with perseverance in spiritual matters, and highlighting oblique scriptural references to "running the race" as evidence that Paul was a sports fan, are regularly served up in numerous churches.

In the aforementioned class, when I probe whether the violence and hegemonic masculinity celebrated in the NFL and some Division 1 college sports are practices that Christians should support or contest, students aren't quite sure what to say. Many have never considered that there might be a conflict between power and performance sports and the teachings of Jesus. When I read quotations from NFL players that testify to their love of breaking the ribs of an opponent, hearing the breath go out of him, feeling his body crumble, and so on, I have difficulty finding college athletes willing to speak against such practices or to offer a theology of the body relevant to understanding sport violence. "As long as it's within the rules of the game" seems to be the governing principle for Christian ethics in big sport. And I have dozens more examples. It's uncomfortable. It's disruptive. In these examples, and in countless other ways, a Christian sociology challenges God's people to examine allegiances, surrender advantage, stand with the powerless, and perhaps suspend practices sustained by a commitment to secular paradigms. But it's a dangerous place to stand, because sociology calls for change at fundamental levels. In sport, as I point out, "Touchdowns for Jesus" and "Prayer in the End-Zone" mostly serve to sacralize that which we've already placed out of reach of Christian theology. So who is coming to the Super Bowl party? I am… but not as a fan!

Peril aside, the most delightful part of my sociological journey has been the extent to which the discipline offers a counter-intuitive view of the world. Jesus frequently offered such a view, in effect, "de-reifying" the social world. He was always saying things like the following: "The last will be first," "When you are weak, then you are strong," "If someone asks you to walk a mile, walk two," "If you have two coats and your neighbor has none, offer one of yours," "If you want to be rich, then give away all you own," "Consider others better than yourselves," and (perhaps most radical of all) "If you wish to gain your life, be prepared to lose it." These are alarming ideas for anyone committed to success in the worldly order. Jesus couldn't keep himself from touching the "unclean" (thereby re-interpreting the meaning of "clean"), "hanging out" with social pariahs like Zacchaeus, re-focusing shame off of the sexually deviant and onto the religious intelligentsia, and so on. Jesus' disciples, like you and I, frequently seemed oblivious to the new social order Jesus was proposing and living, over and again. Just picture Jesus' disciples arguing over which of them was the greatest. But we do this. Jesus, so unlike us, refused to build identity on the shifting sands of downward social comparison. Rather, he embraced those of low position and sought out strangers to be neighbors and friends. He came to serve. He came to challenge the normal. And challenging the normal got him killed. Want to be like Jesus? Really?!

For me, sociology offers the opportunity to (try to) look at the world through the lens of the subordinated – to take the perspective of the other. I recently wrote an article about the Nike Corporation, asking what the world looks like from the perspective of the young women of color in Southeast Asia who make our shoes for poverty-level wages. We regularly hear the opulence-laced stories of NBA superstars who use Nike gear in their relentless push to attain greatness. We rarely hear from the oppressed who make their – and our – lifestyles possible. Sociology compels us to seek out and listen to the hidden voices all around us. Sociology asks us to resist the hegemonic normal and to bring to public expression the violence, social control, and manipulation frequently employed in support of dominant views and lifestyles. Sociology is about learning to see the unseen.

In closing, I offer two sociological ideas that have been profound in their influence over me. The first is that society is an act of imagination. The reality we perceive around us, structured by language, values, norms, various forms of stratification, race, gender, and various institutions, reflects the limits of our collective imagination. Little of it is "real." What we perceive as "natural" is frequently the reified (and socially constructed) "normal." From time to time, imaginative and courageous people (Weber's "charismatic leader") challenge this natural/normal, and under the right conditions, help society edge in a new direction. We have seen such changes take place in the domains of gender and race, though much imaginative work still remains.

When economic legitimations take priority over human rights in how citizens evaluate the success of their governments, it reflects failure at the level of imagination. When nations in a global society build walls – figurative and "real" – to keep the poor away from "their" resources, imagination has grown cold. And so on. The Old Testament prophets were called by God to rekindle imagination. They showed up – they interrupted – when the imagination of God's people had stagnated. They pointed out how very harmful a reified society can be, and how the marginal ones in society suffer when left out of the collective vision of how resources should be shared. Seen one way, the prophets' call to repentance, ("Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!") is a call to renewed imagination ("Reimagine things, for the kingdom of heaven is quite close!"). You can just "imagine" the prophets chiding people something like this, "You mean this is all you can imagine? God gives you this world and you hoard for yourselves? You solve your problems through violence? You treat whole groups of people made in God's image as less than you are? What's up?! Back to the drawing board, people of God. You can do better. Where's your imagination?" For me, sociology at its best, centers around a call to renewed imagination, perhaps something we've picked up from the prophets.

The second idea I offer derives from an article written by Robert Wuthnow entitled, "Living the Question: Evangelical Christianity and Critical Thought." The longer I've been a

student of sociology, the greater my awareness of the complexity of the world has grown. Why is prediction so elusive for sociologists? In large measure, it's because so many factors combine in myriad ways to produce an effect. Sure, we love to act as though we live in a simple cause-and-effect world. When we boldly proclaim, "If you spank/don't spank your children, 'this' is how they will turn out," we (parents) reassure ourselves that we are in control over something as elusive as a young person's emerging character and behaviors. Ha! But, if we're honest, parental modes of discipline are just one factor in an unfathomably complex array of influences that combine to produce some hoped for outcome. So in truth, we just like answers. What causes this? What causes that? If we do this, what will happen? If we don't, what will be the result? Answers are comforting, and they offer the illusion of control. At times I find myself offering a sociological insight into some issue or problem, whereupon my conversation partner will ask, "has that been proven?" Answer: "no." At best we find "strong" relationships between phenomena that hold under very particular conditions. The social world resists clear answers.

Addressing a Christian audience, Wuthnow (1990) writes, "I have borrowed the much-used phrase 'living the question' because it seems to me that Christianity does not so much supply the learned person with answers as it does raise questions." Developing this idea, he draws a compelling example from the parable of the Good Samaritan – something that ends, not with an answer, but with the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Had Jesus stated a concrete answer to his challenge, we, the people of God, may well have "over"-concretized it in self-serving ways that would exclude poor migrants at our national borders. God forbid. However, the question Jesus floats requires different answers in different societies across the expanse of history. Undoubtedly, faithful Christians in first century Palestine could not have imagined that for their 21st century Western counterparts, neighbors would include those on the other side of the world who make their shoes, share the internet, wither under the effects of climate change, and have to migrate when trade treaties benefitting the wealthy erode traditional ways of making a living. Who is my neighbor is a question that will never be completely answered, and which must be subjected to fresh imagination again and again.

Living with questions is difficult – even anomic! We can "solve" the question, but that often does violence to the other. We can avoid or deny the question, but then what does it mean to be the people of God for the world? Alternatively, we can live the question. As God's people, we are called to live by faith, or, put differently, to live amidst questions. And as we grapple with perennial questions like "who is my neighbor," in a complex world that seems to be coming apart, we are called to fresh imagination, to view things differently from the so-called world, to enter into the stereogram to discover its hidden reality, and to view the picture from a slightly different angle.

The quotation from Bruce Cockburn (1992), placed as an epigraph at the beginning of this essay, offers an eloquent summary: "It depends on what you look at, obviously, but even more it depends on the way that you see."

Sociology, these past 20 years, has helped me learn to see.

## References

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