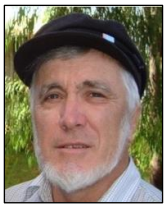

After a Collision at the Intersection of Sociology and Christianity

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Sociology and Christianity

In my first years of university (1969-1970), I was only vaguely aware of how the material we were reading could be opposed to Christianity. But in time, I came to view myself as a Christian student of sociology. And that was after I realized I was studying in the context of a "collision" between Biblical religion and an alternative faith that informed sociology's pre-scientific commitment guiding those who had formed the discipline. Ever since, I have referred to myself as one who seeks to develop a "Christian social perspective" or a "Christian sociology."

My PhD is in sociology and my contribution to the discipline has been in "secondary studies" seeking to show how sociology is part of a *humanistic religious* project that can be seen at work in the ongoing disclosure of sociological theory. Basic to this project is the myth of the religious neutrality of scientific theories (Clouser 2005).

That, then, is what this essay is about. But first let me describe my high school background prior to the discovery of this "collision." In my eastern suburbs of Melbourne High School I had been a senior prefect, captain of the football team, and leader of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship. In 1969, I was one of the two out of 50 students in 6th form to gain entry to university.

My matriculation results would have given me entrance into medicine or law, but I decided to study sociology which was on offer in the BA at Monash University. As a young Christian, I sensed a need for a better understanding of "society." But what exactly is "society"? Life was becoming more and more complex. Sociology seemed an obvious choice, and so I entered "uni" seeking answers, even if now I'm pretty sure, like Charlie Brown, I didn't know exactly what the question was.

Monash "uni" had opened its doors in 1959. It was located in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. These were the Cold War years. Australia's military was serving in Vietnam, and in a few year's time my birthday marble would go into the conscription lottery barrel. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones had visited our shores to hold concerts. We were

a generation intent upon "doing our own thing." We joined in student protests. And as well, a strong post-war American evangelical influence prevailed in Protestant churches and among many Christian university students.

Since that time, "positivism" in sociology has been repeatedly and persistently exposed as a flawed and dogmatic ideology. When I entered "uni," the positivist outlook was still dominant. I had assumed that by studying sociology I would gain a greater understanding of life. The more I studied the more I became aware that sociology did not explicitly suggest a different way of life, but it did work with an alternative understanding of Christianity. Religion was investigated to explain "secularization." Christian influence had declined; religion was on the way out. How could religion still prevail despite the "objective" fact that a person's faith was merely a projection of subjective psychic aspirations? Christian belief was highly problematic, and science was supposed to advance by discounting religious dogma and getting beyond prejudice.

The "collision" was not just in my head. And there was a variety of collisions. Many entered uni expecting greater "freedom," only to find things turning sour when free enquiry was curtailed. Lecturers and tutors, and not only students, experienced this collision.

Some were sensitive to the disorientation that overtook students. How could they not be? Consider Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* (1963). The Arts Faculty Handbook had listed this as "recommended pre-reading." The author wrote that it was "intended to be read not studied." But its content evoked the suspicion that faith was merely a social construct, an invention devised "to drown out the howling hyenas of the surrounding darkness," and to transcend society, "the walls of our imprisonment in history" (Berger 1963:7, 171, 109). Berger claimed to be a Christian and his long career bears witness to his own reflections on this collision (Berger 2018).

Looking back I cannot deny the benefits of BA study, but I do so with an awareness of a problem that arises from sociology's dogmatic assumption of religious neutrality. When I realized that this dogma was part of sociology, I set about contesting its validity in the coursework of my final third year. I gained clarity as I challenged the sociological catechizing that wanted to believe that religious neutrality was itself established by the findings of scientific (sociological) research. I may have been an apprentice in the discipline in those days, but I got away with it and graduated.

Let me hasten to add that I am here explaining a basic failure *in my own "world-view,"* until I faced up to the collision caused by the underlying positivist dogma that needed to be examined critically in a scholarly way. To that extent, if I were a victim, it was due to my own failure as a *Christian* student.

I was a student, an apprentice of sociology. The basic curriculum for sociology at Monash and across Australian universities had been set by an older generation. I came to the view that in such an academic course the question of the "intersection" between one's studies and one's religious beliefs should be front and center for all students, ***whatever the***

science with which we are occupied. After all, we, with the guidance of an older, more experienced student generation, were being trained for future service in our society. And the collision between Christianity and sociology, in actual fact took place in the midst of an intense spiritual struggle about the rightful contribution of the university to our lives.

In the BA, I had learned that any fragmentation in my emerging Christian world-view was my own responsibility. The discovery of personal "splitness" brought forth a challenge not only to find a way to express dissent from the discipline's base-line assumption (i.e., sociology's religious neutrality), but also, with other Christian students, to find ways to challenge the ideology driving the university itself.

This account of a collision is also about discovering myself as a university student, as one qualified to serve as a student. "It really is important," the Vice-Chancellor declared, as he dismissed the demands of New Left students he obviously wanted to expel, "that university teaching and research be neutral and objective." What the Vice-Chancellor ignored was how his declaration of science's "neutrality" and "objectivity" **in that context** effectively declared the university on the side of the Australian Government's military involvement in Vietnam and the undeclared war initiated in August 1964 by the US Congress's Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Students thereby felt deeply politically compromised. The V-C had inadvertently politicized his own philosophy of science.

Some sociology lecturers and tutors, even those opposed to Australia's war effort and vigorously dissenting from the V-C's handling of the student agitation, still insisted upon this "neutrality" and "objectivity" as the only starting point for sociology or scientific study writ large. They too were involved in the (academic) "collision." The VC's appeal to objectivity sought to stifle dissent by appealing to the university's supreme purpose—the search for truth. But twinning this appeal with neutrality simply enflamed the campus unrest. "Values" were personal, merely subjective, and just didn't come into it. And such sentiments were regularly intoned in tutorials or underlined in red biro marginal comments on term papers, as I was to discover in this comment that my essay received. I was a naive student who had not yet had the mysteries of "critical reflection" explained to me but I'm quite sure that this nasty comment was undeserved:

> This reads more like a religious tract than a serious intellectual exercise. You pass because you give well organized pseudo-attention to the theorists you go through the motions of considering. You gave yourself away . . . (reference to where I referred to the ubiquity of the incest taboo as having something to do with "the mystery of human nature").

Even without knowing it, I had used words in my essay that had transgressed, presuming to criticize a prevailing version of the positivist view. But this underlying curriculum assumption was never set forth for discussion; if it was ever argued, it was presented as the conclusion of any discussion, *as if it were an empirical finding from the scientific research*. It was no such thing.

But there were some academics who were deeply critical of this ruling ideology and sensed the destructive consequences of this educational ideology. They saw it as an attempt to cut students off from their own vital sources of self-criticism that had been imbibed, as in my case, before entering university. Such critical views of the positivist ideology were alive. And they also took aim at the elitist arrogance enshrined in the social science curriculum.

Hugh Stretton (1924-2015), a historian of economic and social theory, would later describe the defining characteristic of the academic ideology regnant in those decades.

> In the disciplines which embraced this sort of positivism, the scientific effects were bad enough, but the social and intellectual effects on students may prove to have been worse and harder to cure. Students were taught that their values and their moralities were almost literally **childish**. They were taught that their values were merely rationalized appetites, or that they were non-rational beliefs acquired at home or at church, by faith or authority. . . . They were taught to sneer at valuing thought as stupid and unscientific.[1]

Stretton, a social democrat, understood how university education can malform a person's outlook, making a truly negative social impact. His exposé helps me explain the "collision" of my introduction to sociology. His trenchant critique suggests a hypothesis for further sociological research that might, if explored, help redefine the sociological discipline *tout court*, and make a constructive world-wide contribution to university reform.

Current Public Intersection of Sociology and Christianity

Are the assumptions of a curriculum guided by "positivistic professionalism" still at work in academic sociology and elsewhere in university education around the world? I suspect they are, despite later post-modern criticism, even if these days an equally dogmatic but subjectivistic relativism demands an obedient "politically-correct" salute to the incredulity of all meta-narratives.

As Christian sociologists we share responsibility for forming a generation which now needs to resist the commercialized nihilistic nonsense that challenges us all on all cultural sides. We are challenged to respect our scientific calling *coram Deo*, even if the dominant intellectual outlooks of our time are still on a collision course with our sociological work and profession.

[1] "The Political Effects of Positive Social Science" in Hugh Stretton 1987 pp. 167-174 at pp. 172-3. "Max Weber, Value Freedom and Classroom Politics" (pp. 175-183) presents a non-positivist interpretation of Max Weber's insistence upon a sharp distinction between scientific fact and pre-scientific values. Stretton would later be a trenchant and lone voice critic of the Australian Government's disastrous "economic rationalism" policies in higher education.

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The Journal of Sociology and Christianity is a small and vital venture, maintained by a committed band of Christian academics who acknowledge their corporate responsibility to help shape the discipline of sociology. ***JSC*** promotes and encourages scholarly contributions to sociological research and reflection. There are complex challenges and demands facing our societies, and ***JSC*** encourages students and academics to engage in sustained sociological reflection and research to promote wise stewardship, justice, and hospitality.

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What ***JSC*** seeks to do it should do well. We ask God to bless the work of ***JSC.***

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