

# Toward a More Socially Aware and Active Christian Faith

Bennett M. Judkins, Lee University

## Abstract

Traditional Christianity is often viewed as having a perspective that focuses primarily on the transformation of the individual. Some elements of emergent Christianity extend beyond just personal renewal in salvation and a high standard of individual morality to a concern for social justice and institutional reform. Achieving this in a modern society may necessitate a change in what it means to be “Christian” and to “follow Jesus.” We may need to understand better the social, cultural, and structural elements that are different today than those present 2000 years ago when Jesus lived and when the Bible was written. By using the sociological imagination and examples from sociological research, this paper argues that a more socially and culturally informed faith can guide these new efforts. It also suggests that the Christian Church may be the best institution in society to lead these changes.

**Keywords:** Sociological Imagination, Progressive Christianity, Social Justice, Social Change, Race, Emergent Christianity, Faith, the Church.

Brian McLaren argues that emergent Christianity is more like a movement than an institution. Like Jesus’ original approach, it is decentralized and diverse rather than centralized and uniform. Instead of centralizing resources like expertise, education, and authority in a bureaucratic structure, it will multiply and democratize them. It does not reject the Church as an institution, but seeks to be trans-institutional. A key element, of course, is love, revolutionary love, the love of God and love of our neighbor (McLaren 2020).

What it means to be “Christian” and to “follow Jesus” today, however, is a different challenge than it was 2,000 years ago. The life of Jesus in the New Testament still provides the fundamental principles for Christians today, but the implementation of his mission requires an understanding of the context in which he lived compared to the one in which we currently operate—a modern social and cultural environment that has been fundamentally changed.

What does it mean to love our neighbor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? More specifically, how can a sociologically informed faith facilitate the process of showing that love in a modern, postindustrial, urbanized, global society? These are the questions I address in this paper.

### **Toward a More Socially and Culturally Informed Faith**

Most of us are brought up from birth focusing on meeting our basic needs, whether by our parents when we were young or by ourselves as we grow older. This gives us a very personal, individualistic view of ourselves and the world around us. As we look at what we have accomplished in life, or what others have accomplished, we tend to focus primarily on the personal for an explanation. When we experience problems in our lives, or when others experience problems, conventional wisdom is to put the responsibility primarily on the individuals themselves. Whether one is rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, educated or uneducated, altruistic or selfish, holds one ideology or another, we tend to give the credit, or blame, to that person.

In Western cultures, we have supported this approach historically through our religious, economic, educational, and political systems, and through various folk stories in our culture such as the concept of “rugged individualism,” or “picking one’s self up by their bootstraps,” or Horatio Alger type stories of success from the bottom up. This approach to life appeals to many people, especially those who seem to have come out on the higher end of the various indicators of what might be called the “quality of life.” After all, most of us like to think that what we have accomplished in life is due primarily to our personal abilities and efforts. This applies to every aspect of our lives, including our faith.

This is not to suggest that our individual motivations, desires, or actions are unimportant, or that we are not free to make decisions at various points in our lives. We may, for example, choose to study in school, or not. We may choose to get check-ups with a physician once a year, or not. We may choose to take psychoactive drugs, commit a crime, go to work, go to church, or make a thousand other decisions that we encounter throughout our lives, or not. The point is that these choices are greatly influenced by the period in which we live, the type of communities and institutions in which we reside, and all our lived experiences and relationships that precede any particular decision.

Considering this way of looking at ourselves and others is part of the sociological perspective, or what has been called the “sociological imagination.” The American sociologist C. Wright Mills introduced this concept in 1959. In what he describes as both its task and promise, the sociological imagination enables us to grasp the relationship between our individual lives—our personal biography—and the historical period in which we are living, including the culture, institutions, and structures at that point in time (1959:6). This is as important for people of faith as it is for people with no faith.

This realization can help us to understand better, and act upon, the various challenges that we will face in life. Germane to this is the distinction between what Mills calls "personal troubles" and "public issues." Troubles are those things that occur within the character of the individual and those limited areas of social life of which she or he is personally aware. The resolution of these issues is a private matter, generally handled by the individual (Mills 1959:8). Unfortunately, because of the many forces that influence the way we think, we tend to interpret most of our problems as "personal troubles," either for us or others facing the same situation. When others fail at school, we tend to blame them. If others fail at relationships, we see them at fault. If they get fired from a job, we often criticize them. If they become homeless, it must be something that they did wrong. We often blame ourselves in much the same way.

While analyzing what we might have done to contribute to these outcomes is at times a necessary and even healthy avenue of pursuit, it oftentimes fails to resolve the problem and leaves us devastated personally. More importantly, it may completely misapprehend the actual cause of the problem and therefore thwart the solution needed to resolve it. Instead of looking at these events as "personal troubles," Mills suggests that we see them as "public issues" (1959:9). Public issues need to be understood in the context of the social institutions of a historical society as a whole, and how these organizations and institutions overlap and form the larger structures of social life.

To give an example, take the highest 2020 unemployment rate in the United States of 14.7%, a function of the coronavirus crisis and the economic decline the nation was experiencing. A few months prior it was 3.6%. Around 10 years earlier, at the height of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate was about 10%. In 1933, during the Great Depression, the unemployment rate was 24.9% (Amadeo 2020). While it is tempting to see the unemployed person at any point in history as experiencing a personal trouble—lacking motivation, desire, education, skills, or having some other individual issue—these four statistics would suggest that the more appropriate explanation would look at unemployment as a public issue—something structural is going on. As Mills points out:

The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals. (1959:9)

Or consider marriage. I can think of no other institution where people who experience troubles tend to blame themselves or their partner more, without ever looking at the broader structural or cultural influences that may affect their troubles and their likelihood of unhappiness or divorce. Divorce in the United States has generally gone up historically, but there was a significant increase in divorce during the Great Depression and after WWII (which also witnessed a noticeable increase in marriages). While decisions to marry and divorce are

very personal actions, they are also very public issues, influenced by social and cultural factors of which individuals are likely unaware at the time.

Of course, the importance of these factors did not begin with C. Wright Mills. Several decades before his work, Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneers of the discipline of sociology, laid the foundation. As Canadian sociologist Galen Watts points out:

Whenever commentators argue that a social problem is "structural" in nature, they are invoking Durkheim's ideas. It was Durkheim who introduced the idea that society is composed not simply of a collection of individuals, but also social and cultural structures that impose themselves upon, and even shape, individual action and thought. In his book *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, he called these "social facts." (2018)

In 1897, Durkheim published a study on suicide which challenged a purely psychological approach to the issue and showed how social forces affect people's behavior. By comparing suicide rates in several European countries, he found that each country had a different suicide rate. Also dissimilar was the degree to which people were tied to their social groups, what he called social integration. People in countries with weaker social ties were more likely to commit suicide (Durkheim 1952). While the actual results are more complicated than this, it was the first piece of rigorous research to document the causal importance of these social facts.

Another founder of sociology, Karl Marx, asserted that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (1994:1).

Why is this understanding important? Mills tells us that what is needed in modern society is not just facts or even the skill of reason. What is needed is to develop a quality of mind that will help us use these facts and develop a way of thinking that will help us achieve an understanding of what is going on in the world, and what may be happening within ourselves. This understanding, however, is both a terrifying and marvelous lesson. On one hand, it shows that our fate is largely something that is done to us, regardless of our choices. On the other hand, by using the sociological imagination, individuals can comprehend their own experience and assess their own chances in life by locating themselves, and others, within their era of history (1959:8). By living out our own biography within a historical period, we then contribute to the shaping of this society. The impact we make, I would argue, is dependent on whether we use this sociological imagination, or not.

## **Christianity and the Sociological Imagination**

The sociological imagination is also important to understanding the different challenges that Christians face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in how to apply the fundamental principles of

the Bible. Marcus Borg argues that to grasp fully the meaning of Jesus' life, we must understand the context in which he lived, especially the context of early Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire. He also posits that the documents of the New Testament were not written to us or for us today, but to and for the ancient communities that produced them (Borg 2012:5). New Testament scholar Reta Halteman Finger argues more specifically that churches today are not equipped to understand the Bible's sociological context, and we often get it wrong. We live in a particular time and place, and this affects what we think about the Bible today and how we respond and act (Finger 2020:7).

One of the difficulties of applying a sociological perspective to faith is its support for some level of determinism in our lives. Sociologist Carl Hand has pointed out that a radical view of free will, adhered to by many religious people, is inconsistent with a sociological imagination. Faith traditions of all kinds might embrace a sociological perspective at some level, but not all faith traditions apply social analysis for understanding the individual. Even where they do, such perspectives are not well received in a hyper-individualistic culture like the United States today. Employing a sociological imagination requires, at least in part, a willingness to let go of our culturally received notions of human nature in general and personal agency in particular, in other words, to accept some element of social determinism. Hand suggests that many faithful people find this threatening because it undermines the simple notion of individual agency upon which the entire edifice of personal salvation appears to be premised (2020). Although sociologists have studied religion from the beginning of the discipline, sociologists today are considered one of the academic professions that are least likely to claim to be Christians, and the relationship between sociology and Christianity has historically been very contentious (Evans 2012).

Using the sociological imagination in the context of faith does not necessarily provide an alternative to the personal transformation emphasized in traditional approaches to Christianity. As Christians, we do believe that this individual transformation, whether it comes in the form of a very personal emotional one-time event or a long process of intellectual and spiritual commitment and study to follow the words of Jesus, is important. Too often, however, the immediate conversion to Christian faith does not last unless there is a community of believers and followers that reinforce a way of life that truly comprehends what it means to be Christian today, both in faith and action. Incorporating the sociological imagination can be a critical piece to this process.

Sociologist Thomas Kerson (2016) reminds us that many applied and academic sociologists seek to better the lives of people and communities. But we often have the identity of an outsider on the margins. George Simmel (1923) cast the sociologist as a "stranger," a member of the society in which we live and participate, but one who remains somewhat distant from others. More recently, Joe Feagin (2001) argued that sociologists have a "counter-system orientation" that challenges the status quo. While we are grounded in empirical and theoretical

research, we develop a more critical perspective that is less restricted by established institutions. It often puts us on the outside of most mainstream institutions, including the Church. The Church is a lot like sociology in this respect. As Christians, we live in this world, but we are not of this world. One might even argue that Christianity began as a "counter-system orientation" that challenged the status quo. Many emerging Christians today want to reclaim that revolutionary outlook that Jesus brought to faith before the Church became institutionalized. Let me discuss one contemporary example of this.

### **Grow in Faith and Knowledge: The Example of Race**

For most of the first half of the twentieth century, sociologists, and I would argue most of society, were generally focused on understanding the concept of prejudice as the foundation of racism. It was a very individualistic approach to the issue which argued prejudice was the cause of racism, and if we could eliminate individual prejudice, we could eliminate racism. Even the early Rev. Martin Luther King incorporated this understanding into his "hearts and minds" approach to the civil rights movement (Potter 2019). In the 1960s, with the help of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (1967), we began to recognize that another, perhaps more sinister, form of racism existed that was embedded in the structures of society, what was then called institutional racism. It originates in the operation of established systems in society. Carmichael and Hamilton argued at the time that society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation or is incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.

Over the last several decades, sociologists not only came to know more about institutional discrimination, but have focused a great deal of attention on it. One might even argue that it is now the major framework by which most sociologists understand race, racism, and racial inequality in society (now often termed systemic or structural racism). Current research demonstrates that institutional racism is reflected in the inequalities of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities in terms of wealth, income, criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, education, and a host of other factors. Has this understanding contributed to a significant change in society? It has, most certainly. The ways are too numerous to outline here. However, as late as 2016, 66% of all Americans and 70% of White Americans still stated that individual racism was a bigger problem than institutional racism in the United States (Discrimination and Inequality 2016). This statistic is important because it reflects the reasons Carmichael and Hamilton argued over 50 years ago as to why Americans did not do anything about institutional racism. Americans do not know about it because it has not generally been taught, at least until recently, as a part of their education, even to those with a college degree. If they have been introduced to the concept, few know how to do anything meaningfully about it.

Effectively addressing institutional discrimination will require a conversion on the part of the public, intellectually and perhaps spiritually. The Rev. Martin Luther King eventually recognized the importance of an institutional approach to racism, and in his later years spoke often and clearly about the need to change structures and systems, not only about race but also about class. He also understood that changing these institutions would require an effort from the bottom up as well as from the top down, especially from Christians and the Church. A key factor here was hope. He said if we lose hope, we lose “the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all” (King 2017). In conjunction with this, he also argued that Christians must rise above the narrow confines of their individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. To do that requires an understanding of those bigger issues, why they exist, and how they might be addressed. This necessitates a socially and culturally informed faith.

It is important to note here that how we see our faith is in large part a function of what we hear in church and what we want to hear. Recent research by the PEW Research Center found that Black Americans and White Americans have differing views on the role that political topics such as race relations should play in church sermons. Over 60% of Black adults say that it is important for houses of worship to address political topics such as immigration and race relations. Around 23% say covering these topics is essential. By contrast, only 36% of White Americans say it is important for sermons to deal with these topics, and only 8% say it is essential (Mohamed and Cox 2020). Also, Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to say they have heard political topics such as race relations addressed in sermons (Mohamed, Cox, Diamant and Gecewicz 2021).

As another practical example of this, think about the current COVID-19 crisis. As early regional and national data on race became available, it was clear that Black, Latino, and Native American communities were being hit the hardest by this pandemic (It’s Time to Lead with Racial Equity 2020). More recent research provides a clearer picture of the extent of the unequal impact (Johnson and Martin 2020). Why? One of the many structural contributions to this inequity was that people of color were more likely to be working in jobs deemed essential and therefore were at much greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. They also disproportionately held jobs that did not allow them to stay at home. Research also tells us that they are less likely to be insured, more likely to have existing health conditions (such as hypertension, obesity, diabetes, and asthma), and more likely to be denied testing and treatment or a lack of access to quality health care (Opiel, Searcey and Eligon 2020). All of these are structural factors that increase COVID-19 complications for patients of color. These racial disparities in coronavirus cases and outcomes reflect what happens when a viral pandemic is layered on top of deep-seated structural inequalities. There may have not been intentional individual racism on anyone’s part to create these conditions, but the outcome is the same. As Ta-Nehisi Coates

points out, racism is not only deeply rooted in American history, but it delineates “who gets the top privileges of being American and who does not’ (Coates 2015).

Class is often intertwined with race in these institutional inequities. Child care options, internet access, and extra living space, all important to the “shelter at home” strategy, left a gulf between rich and poor in coping with disruptions to school and work. Some have suggested a pandemic caste system is rapidly developing with “the rich holed up in vacation properties; the middle class marooned at home with restless children; [and] the working class on the front lines of the economy, stretched to the limit by the demands of work and parenting, if there is even work to be had” (Scheiber, Swartz and Hsu 2020).

From a Christian standpoint, we might begin to address these racial and class inequities by recalling that Christ and the apostles call the Church to foster justice and mercy, giving special attention to the marginalized and oppressed (Cartagena 2020). A systemic activist group puts the same idea forward regarding race and the coronavirus:

What we know is that the best science supports a racial equity approach and that a racial equity approach advances the fight against coronavirus. Ending the threat requires us to target our strategies and resources towards those who are most impacted by this pandemic, those least able to social distance or shelter in place, [and] those facing the worst health inequities. (Race Forward’s Statement on Inequality 2020)

## **The Church as an Institution for Social Change**

The struggle for social justice comes from many sources. The Church, however, might be the most likely institution to lead constructive change on not only racial inequalities but a host of other social problems that we face in America and the world. Other institutions have tried. The military has certainly played an important role in race relations that extends back at least to World War II. The government, especially on the federal level, has passed several pieces of legislation that have helped to reduce inequality of race and ethnicity, and even at times to encourage a national dialogue. Corporate organizations have diversified, if only to make sure they are operating within the law. Some CEOs have recognized the value of diversifying their employees from a marketing or business standpoint. Higher education has also played an important role, but mostly in advancing an understanding of the serious problems of inequality for democracy. However, none of these institutions have a built-in incentive to improve race relations or to address inequality and other social problems. The Church does. We are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

A recent book by Jonathan Walton argues that racism IS a “gospel” issue. For those Christians who are concerned about going to Heaven, he is more specific:

Your salvation is at stake, and your evangelism is compromised if you claim to be a follower of Jesus while building dividing walls of hostility and allowing them to govern your life. We are to be his witnesses, living differently in this world so we point others to him, and we cannot do that if we are not willing to engage with our differences to seek his justice and reflect his kingdom. (Walton 2019; see also Mattson, 2015)

Richard Rohr points out that the hidden nature of systemic oppression makes it all the more noteworthy that the revelation of God in the Bible is written from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized (2020). Solving social problems, then, whether from a secular standpoint or a position of faith, requires attention to both the individual and the systemic level. Events in the first few months of 2020, especially several killings of African American people by police, brought attention to structural and systemic issues in relation to racism and discrimination to the Church. Perhaps for the first time, leaders of some churches, White as well as Black, are beginning to talk about the importance of addressing the racial divide on a structural rather than just an individual level. This is a major shift for churches that have traditionally focused primarily on eliminating prejudice through personal transformation. As Cynthia Fierro Harvey, president of the Council of Bishops for the United Methodist Church, says of their new 2020 initiative “Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom:”

It’s the convergence of economic hardship, the lack of adequate health care, broken systems, antiquated structures, police brutality, the absence of accountability, the continuance of White privilege and power, all combining into a mass outpouring with one clear message: “Enough is enough.” (quoted in Patterson 2020)

Even among conservative Churches, recent writers argue for social justice on the structural level by defining Evangelical transformational advocacy as “intentional acts of witness by the body of Christ that hold people and institutions accountable” (Offutt 2015:11). However, Robert P. Jones reminds us that the legacy of racism still lives in the DNA of White Christianity today, and not just in the South. His research in 2018 found that Christians are much more likely than the non-religious to say monuments to Confederate soldiers are symbols of southern pride rather than symbols of racism. White Christians are also more likely to disagree that generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class. Most of us would like to believe that attending Church makes us less racist. However, according to Jones, at least among White evangelicals, the opposite is true. The relationship between holding racist views and White Christian identity is actually stronger among more frequent church attenders than among less frequent church attenders. (Jones 2020). The role of White Christian nationalists from across the nation in the Washington, DC insurrection events in early 2021 provides further evidence to support Jones’ findings (Kerby 2021).

Additional evidence to challenge a strong “social justice” role for the Church is found in research by Baker and Marti, who note a significant decline in both the prevalence and engagement in the Church of Americans who self-identify as both religious and politically liberal (Baker and Marti 2020:131-41). They argue that the lack of political involvement by the religious left may also unintentionally contribute to the partisan polarization of groups like conservative White evangelicals, who increasingly see religion and liberal political positions as incompatible. Consequently, progressive sentiments are viewed as inherently “secular” by religious groups like White evangelicals, while conservative attitudes are framed as “godly” in contrast (Marti 2020).

Seeking justice, then, for evangelical Christians has traditionally focused on individual sin and salvation rather than addressing issues systemically (Gjelten 2020). Many have actually opposed a more systemic approach. As recently as November 2019, the Southern Baptist Convention stated that critical race theory, which they define as a belief that racism can exist within and be perpetuated by systems or organizations, was incompatible with the Baptist faith and message (Massey 2021). A similar argument was made in a recent article in the more liberal *Christian Century*, suggesting that without a vision of grace to guide us, in both intent and method, the Church just becomes just another player in a political fight (Williams 2016).

This state of affairs has been developing for decades. Almost 30 years ago, in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, sociologist James Davison Hunter (1992) observed a growing divide in the United States between the religiously orthodox and their progressive counterparts. He saw the historic conflicts between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were replaced by new alignments that brought orthodox believers together in all three religions as well as progressive believers together in those same religions.

This division was revisited in late 2019 when then-Attorney General of the United States William P. Barr delivered a speech to the Law School and the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame. The speech, mostly about religious liberty, gained some media attention, primarily by critics who saw it as a misreading of the First Amendment. Little, if any, media coverage was given to another part of his speech - an attempt to differentiate Christianity from secular society and ultimately from what he calls “secular religion.”

Barr’s most significant characterization of secular religion was its dependence on the government to alleviate the problems of society. Christianity, he argued, teaches a “micro-morality,” where Christians transform the world by focusing on their individual principles and transformation. The new secular religion, he argued, teaches a “macro-morality,” where one’s morality is not gauged by private conduct, but rather by “collective action to address social problems” (Barr 2019). He drew a portrait of a country divided into camps of secularists on one side and people of faith on the other.

Of course, what Barr termed "secular religion" is not just secular and not particularly new. Mae Elise Cannon pointed out that during the two Great Awakenings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christians focused beyond personal renewal in salvation and a high standard of individual morality to a concern for social justice, especially in response to the poor (Cannon 2009). In the wake of the Second Great Awakening early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evangelicals charged into the enterprise of social reform, "including common schools, peace crusades, the abolition of slavery, temperance, prison reform, and women's rights" (Balmer 2020). Balmer posits that what stirred their efforts was the belief that they could reform society according to the norms of godliness, and thereby bring about the kingdom of God here on earth — and, more particularly, here in America. In other words, there has often been a macro-morality as well as a micro-morality religion. Even Jesus was as concerned about the injustices of the religious, political, and economic institutions of his time as about the personal transformation of the people he met.

Today, there is an emerging movement among many Christians that challenges some of the basic assumptions that Barr and many traditional Christians have long held. As Catholic theologian Richard Rohr points out, many "emerging" Christians are more concerned about Jesus as a model for living than an object of worship. They believe that inviting questions is more valuable than supplying answers. They argue that affirming people's potential is more important than reminding them of their brokenness, and the work of reconciliation should be valued over making judgments (Rohr 2019). Many of these Christians want to see more involvement with the secular world, not less, by following the life of Jesus. Understanding how to do this requires, or at least is benefitted by, a sociological imagination.

Beatrice Bruteau points out that we all have inside of us the propensity to care for one another, to love one another. One might even argue that this is how we were created by God. But we are discouraged from feeling empathy or practicing compassion because of the expectations or demands of the social and cultural systems that envelope us. Often when faced with injustice, we simply look the other way. Knowing that the injustice exists, and why (a basic contribution of sociology), can give us a better understanding of the issue, but it does not necessarily motivate us to action. This is where the Church comes in. Bruteau argues that the program that Jesus advocated was based on "communion, friendship, distribution, and partnership." This contrasts with the organization of society which is generally based on domination, exploitation, accumulation, and force. Jesus' central principle, she says, is equality, just as the contrasting paradigm's principle is inequality (Bruteau 2020).

## **Applying a Socially and Culturally Informed Faith**

Although sociology and Christianity have for many years had an antagonistic relationship, this was not always the case. David Fraser and Tony Campolo point out that

Christianity fostered and encouraged sociology in its North American origins (Fraser and Campolo 1992). Many of the early American sociologists were people of faith, committed to social reforms, and often had theological training. One of the earliest to bring the application of Christianity and the discipline of sociology together was not widely recognized by the profession during his life—W.E.B. Du Bois. He was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. at Harvard University (1895), but he was not generally recognized by the field of sociology until the 1980s.

Historian Edward J. Blum points out that contemporary sociologists have paid even less attention to his religious views, especially how his work was deeply influenced by his spiritual ideas and values. Blum argues that religion was at the core of Du Bois' sociological imagination. Decades before Martin Luther King (who also had a degree in sociology) brought America's attention to the relationship between religion and injustice, Du Bois criticized Christian churches and Whites who claimed to be Christians, primarily because they dishonored what he deemed "true Christianity." As Blum notes, DuBois "contrasted the core beliefs of the Christian—peace, goodwill, the golden rule, liberty and poverty—with those of the White Man—war, hate, suspicion, exploitation, and empire" (Blum 2005). This position was perhaps one of the reasons Du Bois was not widely accepted or recognized in his day. Du Bois, however, did not remain on the individual micro-level to explain what caused the White Church and its members to be led astray. Like Karl Marx before him and many progressive Christians today, he blamed the unequal material conditions in society that led religious believers to alter their egalitarian religious faith to a position that legitimized those exploitative conditions.

The White Church has historically often become aligned with and supportive of those systems that take advantage of the most vulnerable people in society, whether it be Native Americans during the early years of America, African Americans during the era of chattel slavery, the civil rights movement, Jewish people in World War II, workers during the early stages of capitalism, or the poor at many points in history. At the same time, the Church has also played a crucial role in many movements for constructive social change. Over 75% of African American adults say that the Black Church has helped them move toward equality in the United States (Diamont 2021). Du Bois did not reject the potential power of religion to make social change. He expressed the conviction that "only religious faith and institutions had the influence to right the social wrongs of America and the world" (Blum 2005). Also, theologian Joerg Rieger points out that down through history, there has continually been a Christianity "at the margins," a Christianity whose voice can be heard from the people who have known the underside of empire (referenced in Crossan and Rieger n.d.).

A major aid in doing this is what sociologist Michael Schwalbe calls being "sociologically mindful," which means to see the larger contexts in which people act and cultural habits arise. Although he was not necessarily referring to religion or faith, he argues that sociological mindfulness also gives us reasons for caring for others.

The more we pay attention to and understand connections, interdependencies, and contingences, the better we can see how our ways of thinking and acting affect others' chances for good lives. We can see, too, that what others think and do affects us as well. Being sociologically mindful helps us to see how this is true in a way that goes beyond what is obvious in everyday life as we interact with others who are close to us. (Schwalbe 2018:279)

Sociological mindfulness also encourages us not only to care about our immediate neighbors, but people who live across the globe, because their lives are also intertwined with ours. Both sociology and Christianity share this concern. I would suggest that we must go beyond just empathy, which is a feeling, to the compassion which is acting in solidarity with marginalized and oppressed people. Working for solidarity helps us to close the space that economic, cultural, and even religious systems have put between us. It also helps us to see and build on the contributions that all can make to a more just society. Some call it relational justice—to not just do for, but to do with. Or as Gandhi put it, “Whatever you do for me but without me you do against me.”

Before the industrial revolution, most people's lives centered on their family and the small communities in which they resided. Residents shared a sense of togetherness and intimacy where everyone knew everyone else. Today, our lives are linked economically, politically, socially, and even religiously to a much wider series of connections and systems. The spread of the coronavirus and its health and economic destruction are evidence of this. The relationships we have with others at the local, national and international level are the glue that holds society together, or tears it apart.

Understanding those relationships gives us optimism for the future, and our faith gives us hope. But it is an empty hope unless a vision for how to get there is provided. The problems continue to exist because we perpetuate the same belief systems and the same social structures that create, or at least reinforce, what people experience and think. As Schwalbe says, if we are sociologically mindful of all this, we can see that they do not need to exist forever. They are all within our power to overcome (Schwalbe 2018). Sociologist Scott Monsma suggests that we might imagine sociology and faith as participants in an ongoing dialogue. In what he sees as a continuing association, faith and sociology have an opportunity to share from their relative perspectives and to learn from the insights of the other (Monsma 2020). I could not agree more.

## References

- Amadeo, Kimberly. 2020. "Unemployment Rate by Year Since 1929: Compared to Inflation and GDP." *The Balance*. Accessed July 13, 2019 <https://www.thebalance.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506..>
- Baker, Joseph O. and Gerardo Martí. 2020. "Is the Religious Left Resurgent?" *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 81(2):131–41.
- Balmer, Randall. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories, Apocalyptic Rhetoric, and the Evangelical Embrace of Premillennialism." *Sojourners*, April 17. Accessed April 20, 2020 <https://sojo.net/articles/how-did-we-get-here/conspiracy-theories-apocalyptic-rhetoric-and-evangelical-embrace>.
- Barr, William P. 2019. Remarks to the Law School and the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, October 11. Accessed November 11, 2019 <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-law-school-and-de-nicola-center-ethics-11/11/2019>.
- Blum, Edward J. 2005. "Religion and the Sociological Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois." *Sociation Today*, Vol. 3, 1, Spring. Accessed April 28, 2020 <http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v31/blum.htm>.
- Borg, Marcus, 2012. *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Bruteau, Beatrice. 2020. "Jesus' Social Program." Quoted in *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*, May 7. Accessed May 7, 2020 <https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/BAB828482D12CDD42540EF23F30FEDED/5485BAFCB95D0FC963B21DE8DA818551>.
- Cannon, Mae Elise. 2009. *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Carmichael, Stokely and Charles Hamilton. 1967. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Vintage.
- Cartagena, Nathan Luis. 2020. "What Christians Get Wrong About Critical Race Theory." *Faithfully*, February 27. Accessed February 29, 2020 <https://faithfullymagazine.com/critical-race-theory-christians/>.
- Coates, Ta- Nehisi. 2015. Quoted in Kasia Cieplak-Mayr von Baldegg, Sam Price-Waldman, and Daniel Lombroso "What is the Biggest Misconception about Racism?" *The Atlantic*, Oct 28. Accessed February 29, 2020. [https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/412783/what-is-the-biggest-misconception-about-racism/?utm\\_term=2020-02-26T23%3A32%3A41&utm\\_content=edit-promo&utm\\_campaign=the-atlantic&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2WeFwscrOCnYRWKH\\_HHm4fj3s0VdusTDgUjNQdN4SRN\\_Lx8gnNK5WOcw](https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/412783/what-is-the-biggest-misconception-about-racism/?utm_term=2020-02-26T23%3A32%3A41&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2WeFwscrOCnYRWKH_HHm4fj3s0VdusTDgUjNQdN4SRN_Lx8gnNK5WOcw).

- Crossan, John Dominic and Joerg Rieger. N.D. "God & Imperial Power: Jesus & Economic Injustice," *Faith and Reason Seminar Series*. Accessed April 30, 2020 <https://www.faithandreason.org/product/god-imperial-power-jesus-economic-injustice/>
- Diamont, Jeff. 2021. "Three-quarters of Black Americans say Black Churches have helped Promote Racial Equality." *Pew Research Center*, February 21. Accessed February 20, 2021 [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/02/19/three-quarters-of-black-americans-say-black-churches-have-helped-promote-racial-equality/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=7e5d769390-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2021\\_02\\_18\\_09\\_30&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-7e5d769390-400892929](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/02/19/three-quarters-of-black-americans-say-black-churches-have-helped-promote-racial-equality/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=7e5d769390-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_02_18_09_30&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-7e5d769390-400892929).
- Durkheim, Emile. 1952. *A Study of Suicide*. Abingdon-on-Thames, England: Routledge.
- "Discrimination and Racial Inequality." 2016. *PEW Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends*. Accessed February 4, 2020 <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/3-discrimination-and-racial-inequality/>.
- Evans, John H. 2012. "Sociology and Christianity." Chapter 12 of *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*. Edited by J. B. Stump Alan G. Padgett. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing. Accessed January 24, 2020 <https://michaelsevans.com/sociology-and-christianity/>.
- Feagin, Joe . 2001. "Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-first Century: Presidential Address." *American Sociological Review* 66(1):1–20.
- Finger, Reta Halteman. 2020. "Go Tell John." *Sojourners*, February 50(2):28-31.
- Fraser, David and Tony Campolo. 1992. *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Gjeltén, Tom. 2020. "Evangelical Christians Grapple with Racism as Sin," *NPR*, June 6. Accessed January 17, 2021 [https://www.npr.org/2020/06/06/871014393/evangelical-christians-grapple-with-racism-as-sin?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=303abc3c5b-RELIGION\\_WEEKLY\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_06\\_17&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-303abc3c5b-400892929](https://www.npr.org/2020/06/06/871014393/evangelical-christians-grapple-with-racism-as-sin?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=303abc3c5b-RELIGION_WEEKLY_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_17&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-303abc3c5b-400892929).
- Hand, Carl. 2020. Email communication, February 1.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1992. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- "It's Time to Lead With Racial Equity During COVID-19." 2020. *Race Forward*, April 17. Accessed April 17, 2020 <https://act.colorlines.com/acton/rif/1069/s-047f-2004/-/sf-contact-12a6e:1e11/q-12a79/showPreparedMessage?sid=TV2:HmipiALv1>.
- Johnson, Akilah and Nina Martin, 2020. "How COVID-19 Hollowed Out a Generation of Young Black Men." *ProPublica*, Dec. 22. Accessed January 1, 2021

- <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-covid-19-hollowed-out-a-generation-of-young-black-men>.
- Jones, Robert P., 2020. "Racism among White Christians is Higher than among the Nonreligious. That's No Coincidence," *Think: Opinion, Analysis, Essays*, July 27. Accessed July 29, 2020 [https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045?fbclid=IwAR3Q5l11R01mBUUpYcGgblCwD1hH4K\\_sSEPsZzDj9NUTK14mlmv2hHdnbc](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045?fbclid=IwAR3Q5l11R01mBUUpYcGgblCwD1hH4K_sSEPsZzDj9NUTK14mlmv2hHdnbc).
- Kerby, Lauren R. 2021. "White Christian Nationalists Want More Than Just Political Power." *The Atlantic*, January 15, 2021. Accessed January 16, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/white-evangelicals-fixation-on-washington-dc/617690/>.
- Kerson, Thomas. 2016. "Insider/Outsider: The Unique Nature of the Sociological Perspective and Practice." *Journal of Applied Social Science*. Accessed February 29, 2020. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1936724415626961>.
- King, Martin Luther. 2017. *The Trumpet of Conscience*, quoted in Kim Benston, "A MLK Day Reflection." Haverford College. Accessed January 19, 2021 <https://www.haverford.edu/college-communications-president/news/mlk-day-reflection-kim-benston>.
- Martí, Gerardo. 2020. *American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Massey, Wyatt. 2021. "Chattanooga Megachurch Pastor Looks Inward after Religion, Violence Mix at U.S. Capitol." *The Times Free Press*, January 16. Accessed January 17, 2021 <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/life/faith/story/2021/jan/16/riot-reckoning-pastor/539822/>.
- Mattson, Stephen. 2015. "Social Justice Is a Christian Tradition — Not a Liberal Agenda," *Sojourners*, Aug. 11. Accessed January 19, 2020 <https://sojo.net/articles/social-justice-christian-tradition-not-liberal-agenda>
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Marx, Karl, 1994. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Chapter 1, p. 1. New York: International Publishers Co. Accessed February 17, 2021 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.
- McLaren, Brian. 2020. "Diverse Discipleship." *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*, January 2-3. Accessed May 4, 2020 <https://cac.org/diverse-discipleship-2020-01-02/>..
- Mohamed, Besheer and Kiana Cox. 2020. "Before Protests, Black Americans Said Religious Sermons Should Address Race Relations." *Pew Research Center*, June 15. Accessed June 17, 2020 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/15/before-protests-black-americans-said-sermons-should-address-race->

[relations/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=303abc3c5b-RELIGION WEEKLY CAMPAIGN 2020 06 17&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-303abc3c5b-400892929](https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=303abc3c5b-RELIGION_WEEKLY_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_17&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-303abc3c5b-400892929).

Mohamed, Besheer, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamant and Claire Gecewicz. 2021. "Faith among Black Americans." *PEW Research Center*, February 16. Accessed February 18, 2021

[https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=1eaa2cded5-RELIGION WEEKLY CAMPAIGN 2021 02 17&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-1eaa2cded5-400892929](https://www.pewforum.org/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=1eaa2cded5-RELIGION_WEEKLY_CAMPAIGN_2021_02_17&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-1eaa2cded5-400892929).

Monsma, Scott. 2020. "On the Journey: Reflecting on the Intersections of Faith and Sociology." *The Journal of Christianity and Sociology* 10(1) Accessed April 11, 2020

<https://sociologyandchristianity.org/index.php/jsc/issue/view/21>.

Offutt, Stephen. 2016. *Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic.

Oppel Jr, Richard A., Dionne Searcey and John Eligon. 2020. "Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States." *New York Times*, April 7. Accessed April 17, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirusrace.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR3CN071gbP5Aq1MGTRjX1x5fgGPdWeg-0ooRdrKNhkHJH3XgRNCx5tgOh-8>.

Potter, Lexi. 2019. "Reflecting on MLK's Approach to Social Change." *The Seattle Globalist*, January 21. Accessed January 19, 2021

<https://seattleglobalist.com/2019/01/21/reflecting-on-mlks-approach-to-social-change/80794>.

Patterson, Jim. 2020. "Bishops Pledge More Effective Anti-Racism Campaign." *United Methodist News*, June 19. Accessed June 26, 2020

[https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-pledge-more-effective-anti-racismcampaign?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiT0dNMk5ETmpaamd4TldFNClInQiOiJOTno4TjJ5c0tHaXpoRDI2QzdITXQxTnlvUStrbGJyVGE3UnVFS1B1OTZtYUpUalVoOFZhc3NhchlvbEdzVUc1bUptU3lzenJRNnVwRFFIXC96Mkr3d21sckxHUVZxWTFhNFUrVFNPVDE2YzlwGRNVGNPdg10dlFseElxYkVZZnoifQ%3D%3D](https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-pledge-more-effective-anti-racismcampaign?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT0dNMk5ETmpaamd4TldFNClInQiOiJOTno4TjJ5c0tHaXpoRDI2QzdITXQxTnlvUStrbGJyVGE3UnVFS1B1OTZtYUpUalVoOFZhc3NhchlvbEdzVUc1bUptU3lzenJRNnVwRFFIXC96Mkr3d21sckxHUVZxWTFhNFUrVFNPVDE2YzlwGRNVGNPdg10dlFseElxYkVZZnoifQ%3D%3D).

"Race Forward's Statement on Disproportionate COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Black and Latinx Communities." 2020. *Race Forward*, June 2. Accessed June 24, 2020

<https://www.raceforward.org/press/statements/race-forward%E2%80%99s-statement-disproportionate-covid-19-cases-and-deaths-black-and>.

Rohr, Richard. 2019. "Church: Old and New." *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*. The Center for Action and Contemplation. February 27. Accessed June 24, 2020

<https://cac.org/themes/Church-old-and-new/>.

- Rohr, Richard. 2020. "Solidarity." *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*. The Center for Action and Contemplation, May 24. Accessed May 24, 2020  
<https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/BFAD6C3777DBAD122540EF23F30FEDED/5485BAFCB95D0FC963B21DE8DA818551>.
- Schwalbe, Michael. 2018. *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scheiber, Noam, Nelson D. Schwartz and Tiffany Hsu. 2020. "'White-Collar Quarantine' Over Virus Spotlights Class Divide." *New York Times*, March 30. Accessed April 17, 2020  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/business/economy/coronavirus-inequality.html?campaign\\_id=57&emc=edit\\_ne\\_20200327&instance\\_id=17153&nl=event-briefing&regi\\_id=54211218&segment\\_id=23144&te=1&user\\_id=bb482f78c2252d27ce5edec89cb138d2](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/business/economy/coronavirus-inequality.html?campaign_id=57&emc=edit_ne_20200327&instance_id=17153&nl=event-briefing&regi_id=54211218&segment_id=23144&te=1&user_id=bb482f78c2252d27ce5edec89cb138d2).
- Simmel, George. 1921. "The Sociological Significance of the 'Stranger'," in Robert E. Park and E. W. Burgess. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 322–7.
- Walton, Jonathan P. 2019. *Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive and the Truth That Sets Us Free*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. Referenced in "Racism is a Gospel Issue," *Evangelicals for Social Action*, January 21. Accessed February 4, 2020  
<https://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/book-excerpt/racism-gospel-issue/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=d663aa92-4d39-4d0f-bc7e-f2aaa9083429>.
- Watts, Galen. 2018. "Pioneering Sociologist Foresaw our Current Chaos 100 Years Ago." *The Conversation*, November 17. Accessed June 24, 2020  
[https://www.salon.com/2018/11/17/pioneering-sociologist-foresaw-our-current-chaos-100-years-ago\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2018/11/17/pioneering-sociologist-foresaw-our-current-chaos-100-years-ago_partner/).
- Williams, David. 2016. "Why Social Justice is not Christian." *The Christian Century*, April 10. Accessed January 21, 2021 <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-04/why-social-justice-not-christian>.

Some parts of this paper were included in a previous paper "Loving Our Neighbor in the 21st Century," *UNBOUND: An Interactive Journal on Christian Social Justice*, August 31, 2020.  
<https://justiceunbound.org/loving-our-neighbor-in-the-21st-century/>.

**Direct correspondence** to Bennett M. Judkins at [bjudkins@leeuniversity.edu](mailto:bjudkins@leeuniversity.edu)