

REVIEW ESSAY

***Strangers and Scapegoats:
Extending God's Welcome to Those on the Margins***

by Matthew S. Vos

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022, 288 pages

The following book review and author's response by two members of the Editorial Board of this *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* occurred on the *Christian Scholar's Review Blog*, October 10 and 11, 2022. Jenell Paris first reviews a book authored by Matthew S. Vos, and he then responds.

Book Review

For months now, the governors of Texas, Arizona, and Florida have been [bussing immigrants](#) east and north, depositing them at Union Station in Washington, D.C. and also in New York City and Chicago. These actions raise questions about scapegoating, heaping political acrimony on the backs of migrants and the methods of transporting them out of certain states. Social problems emerge and morph so quickly, it's hard to take a pause to reflect or to learn from them. When a moment emerges, I recommend having *Strangers and Scapegoats* close at hand. Authored by Christian sociologist Matthew Vos, this new book makes robust and fascinating connections between basic sociological concepts and biblical themes about social groups and identity. I'm delighted to see this book in publication (full disclosure, my endorsement is on the book's back cover). It is a sociological exploration of Ephesians 2:13, "We who were once far away have been brought near...we who were strangers have been declared sons and daughters" (p. 11). Vos invites Christians to learn more and to commit more deeply to the notion that "we are the people of God, not for ourselves but for the world – a world that we must know, love, and nurture" (p. 12).

The book is organized in three parts. Part one explicates the major concepts of strangers and scapegoats, richly grounded in classical sociological theory and in Christian theology. Part two looks at various categories of "stranger" such as prisoners, legal and illegal immigrants, and intersex persons. Two chapters are written by other Christian sociologists with expertise in particular areas. Part three offers advice and challenges Christians not to engage the "pattern of this world" in ways that elevate one's own group at the expense of others. Throughout, Vos's personal stories support readability and case studies provide material for comparison and contrast.

Individual readers will be both supported and challenged in their Christian living as they reflect on their own social location and how their groups relate with others in society. Professors in any discipline can glean insight, case studies, concepts, and themes to apply in integrating diversity and inclusion in a wide variety of courses. For professors from other fields assigned to teach a sociology course, *Strangers and Scapegoats* pairs with any Introduction to Sociology textbook as a supplemental reading. This book may serve a vital purpose at Christian colleges and universities that are wary or even hostile toward critical race theory or “wokeism.” Vos does not encourage readers to vote or take sides in certain ways; in fact, readers of all viewpoints will be challenged to reflect on their sociopolitical alliances and behaviors in light of biblical themes regarding reconciliation. Solidly grounded in Scripture, not in partisan political perspectives, those who work in diversity areas at Christian colleges and universities may rely on this book to spark difficult and important dialogue that is genuinely grounded in the Christian faith.

I am tempted to praise the book’s strengths, but the urgency and timeliness of the issues it raises prods me to engage its substance, probing two critical areas that may support Christians toward the critically important task of living out the book’s subtitle, “extending God’s welcome to those on the margins.” First, the privilege of white heterosexual non-disabled financially American men warrants critical and nuanced acknowledgement. Vos identifies himself with this group, describing the dynamics of scapegoating and exclusion experienced by women, people of color, and others who do not fit this list of privileged characteristics. This framing of privilege may not be a complete fit for today’s social reality, as men, with all permutations of the list of privileged traits, are suffering alongside everyone else in America with respect to pandemic deaths, mental health challenges associated with the digital age, economic dislocations, and self-harm, suicide, and addiction.

I wonder about sociological assertions of group privilege that may minimize or even create shame around Christian unity, sharing our lives honestly and truly with one another. I recall a recent discussion with a diverse group of professionals in which a white man said, “I don’t plan out what I might say in diversity discussions. That’s a place for me to listen, not talk.” There certainly is value in his listening, but there is loss to the whole when efforts to include result in new forms of exclusion. Members of privileged groups certainly should reach outward toward out-groups whose exclusion has boosted in-group privilege, but they should also be seen and known in their individuality. Christian perspectives on diversity and inclusion need insight from social science, but basic Christian practices of fellowship, mutual love, and worship invite us to radical inclusion that honors the belovedness of every person, even the privileged. My second area of inquiry is about social groups. Vos explains that in-groups require out-groups, and he contrasts this earthly reality with “Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice [that] means that the people of God no longer need to define themselves in opposition to strangers...No more scapegoats. No more strangers. Instead, living water and a new identity. No

need for out-groups” (p. 66). Implementation of this extreme ideal seems both impossible and harmful. I recall a Christian man who worked in global humanitarian service. He was also a husband and a father, and his family could not weather his long absences in dangerous locales. He knew from experience that families in the developing world love their children just as much as he loves his, yet he prioritized his family’s needs and shifted his career so he could be safe and at home more. I recall another man with a similar sense of calling whose marriage collapsed after he simply could not or would not put the needs of a few (his wife and children) ahead of the many (the poor of the world).

In a globalized world, this is a wrenching concern. We pay for our children’s orthodontics with full awareness that other children have no food. We buy bicycle helmets to ensure safety with full awareness that other families have bombs dropping on their houses. It is appropriate and responsible to care for those in our spheres of responsibility, yet these inequalities gnaw at the conscience. In anthropology, the parallel concept is ethnocentrism. Without a culture (*ethno*) at one’s center (*centrism*), a person could not be human. In addition to humanity in general, a person needs specific other persons in order to be raised and socialized, and even to be conceived. There is treasure in the specificity of our human bonds to spouse, family, culture, and even nation, that requires very careful tending, because the tendency is toward in-group valorization and out-group denigration. In-group bonds are a home base from which to extend out into the broader world with duty and care for others. In this critique, I diverge from Vos’s application of Romans 12:1-2: “we people of God are exhorted to avoid the ‘patterns of this world’” (p.12). *Avoiding* is too strict a verb. We cannot avoid language, socialization, stratification, or social norms, all patterns of this world. We can test them, however, seeking to know God’s will as we live in the midst of them.

We can and should read good books such as this one. We can and should offer critical thoughts and engage in discussion over them. And still, immigrant families are dumped at Union Station, just one horror among dozens that will unfold by the hour in our world today and then again tomorrow. A friend in Washington, D.C. tells me about Christians serving with broader groups who alert volunteers of bus arrivals. Churches rotate responsibility for sheltering, feeding, and helping people find their way to destinations. Structural and political processes would be strengthened with inspiration from such common ground ministry that cuts a path through rancor and inhumanity by extending God’s welcome to those on the margins. It’s a beautiful expression of “hospitality as a normative Christian practice” in a stratified society. “The one truly ‘set apart’ is the one ‘a part’ of the lives of strangers” (p. 238-239).

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[Strangers and Scapegoats: Extending God’s Welcome to Those on the Margins \(Review\) - Christian Scholar’s Review \(christianscholars.com\)](https://christianscholars.com/review/strangers-and-scapegoats-extending-gods-welcome-to-those-on-the-margins/)

Author's Response

Strangers and Scapegoats is the culmination of some 20 years of my learning to think sociologically while teaching undergraduate students to cultivate their own sociological imaginations. The concept of imagination—of perceiving old things in new ways—plays a central role in the book, and is, for me, key to addressing the perennial problem of the stranger. My colleague in our sociology department at Covenant College explains that while we're all looking straight ahead down familiar paths, sociology invites us to adjust our gaze to catch a glimpse of things a little to the right and a little to the left of center. What do things look like when we move, even if slightly, away from the lens of our normal? When we bracket the familiar and wipe a bit of smog off the glass through which we see dimly, we can sometimes perceive things from the perspective of the other.

Through repeated practice, our new way of seeing may help us edge in the stranger's direction, and over time recast them as neighbor or friend. Decentering in this way, is a crucial part of what it means to be the people of God "for the world," or in more sociological language, for the strangers. As God has done for us, so we should do for others. The alternative is to be the people of God for ourselves—election as an in-group possession that reaches consummation in Jesus whisking us away to enjoy heavenly paradise in a members-only mansion. But if we exist as a people for ourselves, the good news of Jesus Christ becomes a hoarded commodity, and evangelism, as the embodied life ethic of God's people, offers little good news for those on our margins. Outside of genuine care for the stranger, our mantras of "Come share in what's ours; this world is not our home," dissolve to a fetishized, "hands off our stuff," "our land," "our security," and so on. "You with no coat . . . get your own coat." But for the people of God, who believe the good news of Jesus Christ, open-handed evangelism—not the technique, but the encompassing life-ethic of a distinctive people—is the required and appropriate response. And evangelism is all about strangers. Our embrace of strangers is a big part of what should give us distinction from "the world."

But looking for, and caring for strangers is difficult, and it takes a lot more than most of us have to give. If you're like me, you have difficulty adequately meeting all the needs present in your own family. Dr. Paris' critique of *Strangers and Scapegoats* is, I think, rooted in the overwhelming enormity of what it means to love the stranger. And her critique is a valid one.

After some praise for the book (for which I'm grateful), Paris points out that I tend to place White, heterosexual, non-disabled, financially stable American men in an isolated group who, as people of privilege, should orient themselves toward helping strangers, but hang back when it comes to voicing their own needs. She comments that such men suffer alongside others in contemporary society, dying in pandemics, facing mental health challenges, addictions, and suicide like everyone else. No one is exempt from suffering, nor from the feelings of estrangement and identity threat that are our shared lot in this world. Her concern, I believe, is

that a community divided by type, where one privileged group is categorically isolated from the others may in itself constitute a form of we/they stranger-making that produces a response of shame, and by so doing, exacerbates the social fragmentation at issue in the first place. It's a fair point. I'm reluctant to abandon completely the idea that much is required of those to whom much has been given. I feel the tension she raises within my own person. I'm a member of the privileged group, and even while I feel acutely the weighty responsibility of extending to those on the margins, I'm frequently overwhelmed by my own needs and the needs of my family. Paris offers the example of a White man who, in a professional setting, divulged his plan to "listen, not talk" during diversity discussions. On the one hand there's a loss when any voice is silenced. On the other, there's something I like about members of privileged groups just listening for a while. I've always had voice; there are those who have not. For example, I'm 54 years old, and until recently have never been under the authority of a woman or racial minority in a formal organization. The normative structures of both my church and my workplace have routinely encouraged me to speak publicly about various issues. I have, however, heard plenty of testimonies from women who have found it difficult to carve out space amidst people in my social location who have much to say and the social standing to say it. I wonder if the man Dr. Paris identified who withheld his voice had opportunity to speak into the issues raised during his silence at a later time? Listening is itself an important component of communication, but one that is sometimes foreign to those used to inhabiting the powerful positions in a structure.

A second observation Paris offers about *Strangers and Scapegoats* is as follows: "Vos explains that in-groups require out-groups, and he contrasts this earthly reality with 'Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice [that] means that the people of God no longer need to define themselves in opposition to strangers... No more scapegoats. No more strangers. Instead, living water and a new identity. No need for out-groups'" (p. 66). Implementation of this extreme ideal seems both impossible and harmful." As an example, she writes about a Christian man who worked for a global humanitarian agency, and who recognized that he needed to back away from some of the crushing need he worked to address for the sake of his personal safety and to increase his availability to the needs of his own family. I applaud the choice he made. In *Strangers and Scapegoats*, I do not intend to suggest that there are no longer any group distinctions in a society. That is, as Dr. Paris points out, impossible. However, I do envision learning to see other groups less in terms of downward social comparison, simply because an identity that is "in-Christ" no longer requires the identity props of those to whom we compare favorably.

At the end of Chapter Eight, where I examine the relationship between North Americans and the poor strangers who make our Nike shoes for a couple dollars a day in factories in Southeast Asia, I offer a postscript. In this addendum to the chapter, I acknowledge how overwhelming it is to even try to make a difference when the unanticipated consequences of even our most selfless acts can create serious problems in other social arenas of a complex

global society. Contemplating the significant needs of the many unseen strangers who press in on us, in the face of our own inadequacy and finitude, I ask: “What do we do with such unsettling information, when disentangling ourselves from one corrosive capitalist enterprise usually necessitates turning to another that is likely as bad?” (p. 194). I conclude:

. . . a Christian approach to addressing such complex matters as labor abuses in supply-chain global capitalism is found not in a moral list of dos and don’ts but rather in the distinctive life ethic of a people of imaginative faith, who by doing justice loving kindness, and walking humbly with God question the things of this world and, by example, offer society an alternative to the dominant reality. (p. 195)

Caring for, loving as fellow image-bearers, and drawing strangers into “our” resources is, I believe, the heart of a Christian alternative to the dominant reality. Pushing away strangers to guard resources for ourselves is the dominant reality we are called to uproot.

I close the chapter with a practical suggestion that the reader choose something modest from which they can abstain. For me, it’s Nike products, for them perhaps something else. I am under no illusion that what I do makes any appreciable dent in the Nike machinery that I argue is exploitive to strangers I see as the “least of these.” But, I offer my small act of fasting to God.

As I do so, I try, every so often, to pause, remember, and mourn for the young people of color who in faraway, hidden places make my shoes for less money a day than I spend on coffee. And just maybe, as I—as the people of God—do this sort of thing, a distinctive life ethic will settle over us. Who knows, maybe together we will accomplish a profound undoing. (p. 195)

Maybe your work on behalf of strangers is simply to mourn.

In a number of places in the book, I advocate for an “edging” toward strangers. My Nike abstention is one such edging. People in various social locations have different limitations. A father may not be able to do what a college graduate with a newly minted degree in community development can do. But he may be able to teach English as a Second Language for immigrants at his church or a community college, or visit someone in prison that others may simply dehumanize. We cannot change the world. But we can edge toward strangers. We can adjust our gaze a bit to the left and a bit to the right. We can bring fresh imagination to a world of strangers that desperately needs it.

Paris has one final observation, that I found most interesting, and which I will briefly address. She notes that I write, “We people of God are exhorted to avoid the ‘patterns of this world’” (p. 12), and she comments, “Avoiding is too strict a verb. We cannot avoid language, socialization, stratification, or social norms, all patterns of this world. We can test them, however, seeking to know God’s will as we live in the midst of them.” Good catch. I think I inadvertently substituted “avoid” for “do not be conformed” to the patterns of this world. Had I

transcribed the reference more carefully, and written, “Do not be conformed,” I would likely encounter the same problem. Do not be conformed to language? Do not be conformed to social norms? Intrigued, I explored how different translations handled Romans 12:2. I found quite an impressive array including:

Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world. (New Living Translation)

Do not be shaped by this world. (New Century Version)

And be not fashioned according to this world. (American Standard Version)

Don’t become like the people of this world. (God’s Word Translation)

Don’t live any longer the way this world lives. (New International Reader’s Version)

Most of these exhort the person of faith to do that which seemingly cannot be done. And so, I find Dr. Paris’ idea resolves the problem in a most satisfactory way. We can test the patterns of this world, seeking to know God’s will as we live in the midst of them. And what better way to test these patterns than by edging toward strangers?

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[Author’s Response to Jenell Paris’ Review of *Strangers and Scapegoats*, Extending God’s Welcome to Those on the Margins - Christian Scholar’s Review \(christianscholars.com\)](#)