REVIEW ESSAY

The Not So Outrageous Idea of a Christian Sociology

by Joseph A. Scimecca

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Matthew S. Vos, Covenant College, Georgia, USA

As a Christian sociologist for some 25 years, I inhabit the liminal space between two worlds that seem to oppose each other like the negative and positive polarities of strong magnets. Teaching at a Presbyterian college with deep reformed theological commitments, I sometimes feel I am viewed with suspicion by parts of our community, and I tread lightly in my attempts to cultivate the sociological imagination in my students. Recent efforts by some to excise sociology from the curricula of Florida institutions reinforce my fears of one day being shut out, or worse, merely tolerated. In the sociological world beyond the theological community where I teach, I find myself a relative stranger. When I attend regional conferences hosted by the Southern Sociological Society (SSS) I feel like an outsider—rarely opposed, but not really part of the inner circle. I could retreat to my corner—but which corner is that? Which is sacred, and which profane? At this year's SSS meetings I managed to locate six conferees who identified as Christian among the 941 in attendance. Just six. Although the conference theme was "Disrupting Binaries," the Christian/Secular sociology binary remained resolutely intact. As a Christian sociologist I am a man in tension.

Entering this murk, Joe Scimecca's new book, *The Not So Outrageous Idea of a Christian Sociology*, offers new possibilities for conversation and common ground in this sociological version of the Greece/Athens question. At 135 pages, plus bibliography and index, the book is spot-on in terms of length and readability. A much longer tome on this subject might reinforce the very boundaries it seeks to breach. Organized into eight succinct chapters, *Not So Outrageous* is academic in tone, yet accessible to students in senior sociological theory classes. I plan to adopt it into my theory class for the upcoming fall semester.

Part of the appeal of *Not So Outrageous* is its short sketches of intellectuals who functioned as precursors to modern sociology. Scimecca deftly moves us through Plato and Aristotle, to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scholastics who laid the foundation for Western science, social science, and finally sociology. In this early section of the book, the reader encounters brief chronological highlights of notable intellectuals including Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, William Ockham, Francesco Petrarch, Desiderius

Erasmus, John Locke, and David Hume, with a view to tracing the push and pull between Christian thought and a moral philosophy divorced from the theistic. At the end of Chapter Two, Scimecca writes,

> Hume's attempt to establish a moral philosophy on an empirical foundation to replace a religious one represents the essential dilemma the founders of the nineteenth-century sociology faced. If there was to be a "science of man," the science part needed to be related to laws, and if it was to be concerned with the "man" part, it needed a moral philosophy. If one adhered to a theistic worldview this was not a problem. From the Scholastics on to Locke, this worldview accepted that God had created the world and it could be understood through natural law. Science and moral philosophy were conjoined, smoothly. However, if Hume's vision [a utilitarian one which discarded any idea of the Christian God] was followed, this represented a dilemma. (Scimecca 2024:34)

The ways in which Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber—the founders of sociology—resolved this dilemma had (and has) profound implications for the discipline of sociology in our contemporary context. Scimecca explains how the ways in which these doyens of the discipline worked to both explain human social behavior and to offer some kind of hope for humanity influenced how we understand the postmodern world, "a world that is being characterized by meaninglessness, a world that reinforces a culture that is becoming more and more defined by a pervasive shadow of nihilism" (Scimecca 2024:34).

In Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, we find attempts to fashion a science of society that understands human action and meaning without reference to theism in general, and the Christian God in particular. Comte's "Religion of Humanity," which Scimecca describes as a Catholicism without a deity, was rejected, and what was left was "a materialistic theory of society, a scientific vision without a viable moral philosophy sought by the Enlightenment Philosophes" (34). Marx wanted to eliminate alienation, but his "unwillingness to acknowledge that banning God led to a condition of meaningless and alienation, made him view the person as a self-creation through labor, someone with no chance of meaning that can last beyond their own demise" (42). Durkheim, Scimecca writes, "in all his works, particularly *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, offered a narrow materialistic view of the individual and society…. Durkheim's vision of sociology is a limited, narrow, and biased view of humans, which can be attributed to his worldview of unbelief and atheism" (46). Finally, "Weber's embracing of a scientific, value-free sociology limited him to relying solely on rationality, thereby preventing him from seeing anything but disenchantment and a world leading to an 'iron cage' of rationality" (49). Together, "Comte, Marx, and Durkheim, opened the road to an atheistic, materialistic, and positivistic sociology" (50). Though Weber offered an alternative to positivism, he did not venture beyond description. It was only as the locus of sociology shifted from Europe to America that the discipline would move beyond description. "In America,

sociology was institutionalized by American sociologists who went beyond Weber and, with few exceptions, accepted Christianity as the basis of a moral society, one that would offset the disenchantment of the world" (50).

Picking up the thread of Christian influence in the development of sociology, Chapter Four outlines the role of the Social Gospel Movement in shaping the discipline in America. Here we encounter significant thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Albion Small, both of whom advanced sociology in a decidedly Christian direction. Rauschenbusch, who began as a pastor in a Baptist church, placed the plight of the poor and amelioration of their condition at the center of his sociology. "In the *American Journal of Sociology*, Rauschenbusch wrote, 'We have Christ's word for it that the kingdom of God does not flourish among the rich.' A decade later, he added: 'It may be denied that the poor in our country are getting poorer, but it cannot well be denied that the rich are getting richer. The extremes of wealth and poverty are much farther apart than formerly, and thus the poor are at least relatively poorer'" (57). Scimecca explains that "Rauschenbusch provided the theological context for spreading the Social Gospel beyond theological and Church circles and developed a systematic theology to advance the Kingdom of God. And he expected sociology to implement this regime" (61). Later, Albion Small, the son of a Baptist minister, whose vision profoundly shaped the University of Chicago's sociology department, further grounded the discipline in Christian teaching and tradition, and offered a unified view of reality. "Throughout his tenure at the University of Chicago, Small 'argued for the essential congruence of the message of Christ with the message of sociology, as well as for a fundamentally religious foundation for sociology'" (64). Scimecca concludes that "Everything began with the morality given by Christ, and this viewpoint shaped sociology at Chicago and the perspective of the *American Journal of Sociology*" (64).

Small's vision, lamentably, would not last. His death in 1926 marked the end of a Christian influence in sociology and gave way under pressures to attain the greater respectability of other disciplines, most notably economics, "which was widely viewed seen [sic] as objective, and posed no threat to the *laissez-faire* ideology of the business community and the Conservative Christian Churches that continued to support the status quo" (67). Scimecca sees in Small's efforts to define a Christian sociology the same dilemma "haunting" sociology today, namely, "How does one justify morality and science?" (67). The following summarizes the central problem Scimecca addresses throughout the book:

> Small believed that Christianity was compatible with science, logic, and reason and would lead humankind inevitably to the Christian belief in the meaning of life. Sociology today has lost sight of what it means to be a person. *Imago dei* (that human beings are made in the image of God), is reduced to just another ideology, just another fiction. (67)

This depletion of meaning and downgrading of human being has come about as a result of sociologists' insistence on establishing sociology as a science, while neglecting and mostly eliminating the moral aspects of personhood that for much of early American sociology had been rooted in Christianity and Christian thought. Scimecca laments that "It was their dismissal of not only Christianity, but any morality that led to defining sociology as sterile and limited… Morality was replaced by scientism" (67).

Chapter Five winds the reader through the decline of American sociology into scientism. Despite, and partly because of his Christian roots, Franklin Giddings brought statistical analysis into the forefront of sociology—something that narrowed sociology by moving empiricism into the foreground and minimalizing the importance of theory. Facts were seen to speak for themselves. As a result, sociology embraced a narrower vision that was focused on increasingly specialized methodology rather than ameliorating social problems—a science without moral purpose or objectives. Eventually, Giddings' approach replaced Small's vision for the discipline. Robert Park also had significant influence in reinforcing this new "value free" modality. After Small's death in 1926 Park became Chicago's dominant figure in sociology. Scimecca notes that "Park 'distinguished himself from all those who proposed social intervention,' and was known to refer to them as 'damn do-gooders'" (77). He also cites a biographer of Park who quoted him as saying: "A moral man cannot be a sociologist" (77). Following Park, William Fielding Ogburn would do more than any other to render sociology a completely secular discipline.

> For Ogburn, religious beliefs also were to be ignored because they were difficult to quantify or explained [sic] naturalistically. Only scientifically "verifiable facts" could be incorporated into a sociologist's understanding of the world and religious beliefs did not qualify as "verifiable facts." An objective sociology had to rid itself of "religious truths." Sociology, if it were to be a true science, had to be completely value-free. Replacing the Christian God with positivism would insure sociology's academic legitimacy. (80)

Scimecca concludes the chapter with a section on Charles Ellwood, a bright light amid all this value freedom. Ellwood's Christianity was central to his life and the direction of his work. He wanted to combine Christianity with science, with the larger goal of reconstructing a society that was lacking in humanistic values and where religion was fading in importance. Ellwood, Scimecca explains, saw materialism as the great tragedy of the twentieth century, and believed that if sociology were to understand and properly address this, it needed the ethical base supplied by religion. "Ellwood saw sociology as limited and emasculated because he believed 'higher values of human society are subjective, spiritual or nonmaterial. A sociology that is dogmatically objectivist or behaviorist is, therefore, unable to take all human social factors into account'" (84). Scimecca observes that even though Ellwood was quite well known in American sociology, he has mostly disappeared from the histories of sociology. While biographers supply the expected reasons for his erasure (no significant grad students who championed his work,

etc.), Scimecca believes that Ellwood's Christianity and related moral philosophy were considered a hindrance to the scientific respectability sociology was working so hard to achieve. Anyone who threatened the objectivist/empiricist, value-free track that sociology was hurtling down was persona non grata, something Scimecca believes continues to the present day. He sees his present book as advancing Small's and Ellwood's vision of what sociology "should" be, and writes: "In the proceeding chapters, I will show how contemporary sociology by dismissing the vision of both men has led to a sociology that is not only limited and sterile but is irrelevant to the very people it seeks to understand" (85).

Chapter Six develops the relationship between sociology, secularism, and atheism. In developing these relationships, Scimecca employs the concept of shadow nihilism. Following Friedrich Nietzsche, nihilism is the assertion that there is no truth, absolute state of affairs, or "thing" in itself. For the nihilist, ultimate questions have no answers and relativism becomes the norm. Scimecca sees, or rather feels, this encroaching darkness enveloping and overtaking us. I feel it too. At my college, I teach a course called Christ and Culture where we offer a variety of faculty lectures addressing such topics as environment, prejudice and discrimination, immigration, critical race theory, and consumerism, among others. Those of us who lecture in the course frame our comments within a Christian "Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation" metanarrative, and the course theme is "Counternarrating the World." However, at the end of the course, we're acutely aware that our students, and we ourselves, have few answers for the very grave problems we all face. Climate change ravages the planet, racism rears its ugly head in new ways, and pregnant migrant women drown while people string razor wire at the southern US border, and our ability to do anything about these things is severely compromised by the relativization of truth, commitment to present consumption patterns, and a rampant individualism that feels like a god itself. What do we tell our young people when large sectors of Christianity itself takes a nationalist stance that advocates violence as a means to dubious self-over-neighbor ends? Scimecca describes the situation as "shadow nihilism," a condition where life is lived under the growing shadow cast by meaninglessness and hopelessness. Tragically, sociology, which could otherwise help, has assumed the default position of unbelief; the empiricist, positivist tradition embraced by sociology offers no real humane solutions or hope.

When sociologists reject religion and faith as illusory compensators for alienation, they excise from their analysis something that is very important to people. Peter Berger, José Casanova, and Rodney Stark, three leading contemporary sociologists of religion, have all rejected the secularization thesis that as modernity advances, religion will retreat. Nonetheless, the vast majority of sociologists accept a completely secular discourse and reject the possibility that "a theistic worldview can provide a viable description for a still large segment of the population because they consider religious belief a fantasy" (91). In so doing, Scimecca states, they participate in a "sociology of despair."

> Sociology, thus, fails to confront one of the most significant aspects of today's society: the shadow of nihilism hanging over a society in a world devoid of universal moral values where the intelligentsia accepts this situation as normal. Sociology has ignored not only Christianity but all religious beliefs. Religion is a dependent variable with its origin caused by secular events. (91)

Scimecca concludes the chapter by outlining and critiquing "The New Atheism," a term popularized by writer Gary Wolf that summarizes a trendy form of atheism that emerged at the beginning of the 21st Century. For Scimecca, this new form is significant because it "relied more on suppositions and assumptions than anything else, whereas the atheism that preceded it, at least claimed a scientific foundation" (95). He writes, "The essential premises of the 'New Atheism' are: (1) belief in God is irrational because science, not religion, is the only way to find truth and meaning in life; (2) consciousness is a natural phenomenon; (3) free will is an illusion; (4) religion is extremely dangerous; and (5) people can be good without God" (95). This popularized form of atheism, Scimecca explains, is primarily directed against Christianity, but offers little besides "unprovable assumptions, rants, and raves" (100). The problem is that it is "acted out under the 'shadow of nihilism,' which due to increasing unbelief, hovers over society and sets the United States on the road to the normalization of nihilism" (101).

The final two chapters of *Not So Outrageous* drive to the heart of the problem and let a few rays of light penetrate the smothering canopy of shadow nihilism. The heart of the problem is framed in the title of sociologist Christian Smith's book *What is a Person*? Scimecca observes that aside from symbolic interactionists, sociologists have shown relatively little interest in the self or what constitutes a person. In reading this section I was reminded of exchange theorist George Homans' December 1964 article in the *American Sociological Review* entitled "Bringing Men Back In" which was a response to the "Grand Theory" Structural Functionalism of Talcott Parsons (Homans 1964). If memory serves well, Homans and Parsons were both at Harvard, and collegial toward each other. On one occasion, Homans quipped, Parson's theory (structural functionalism) possesses every virtue except that of explaining anything! While humorous, it does offer some recognition that mainstream American sociology—represented by Parsons at the time—had left the person out of the analysis.

George Herbert Mead was the philosopher/sociologist who developed a sociological concept of the self. Mead taught that humans were born blank slates upon which society writes its rules. In effect, we are born without selves and we receive them through socialization. To possess a self is to have the ability to see oneself as both subject (I have consciousness) and object (I'm aware that I'm an object in the environment of others). We become fully human in the context of the group by internalizing the "generalized other," which includes the values, expectations, morality, and so on of the entire community. Mead divides the self into the "I" and the "Me." The "I" is the spontaneous, impulsive, dynamic part of the self, while the "Me"

represents the conformist part of the self. There is give and take between the "I" and the "Me" which allows for both stability and change. Scimecca finds much to admire in Mead's approach to the self. But it lacks satisfactory answers to two important questions: "(1) how the immaterial mind can transcend matter to engage in symbolic (non-material) thought or consciousness, and (2) how the "I" is able to integrate the roles that comprise the self" (111).

Charles Horton Cooley, a formative contributor to the symbolic interactionist tradition who developed the concept of the "Looking Glass Self," offers better answers to these two shortcomings in Mead's work. The Looking Glass Self envisions the self as reflexive. In effect, we look to others for information about ourselves, and our self develops through this process. In effect, I look to you to see what I am like, and in response I adapt and adjust to the social. In what was quite a revelatory part of the book for me, Scimecca explains that Christ is the mirror—the standard to which we work to conform ourselves—in Cooley's "Looking Glass Self." Consider:

> Thus, [Cooley's] looking-glass mirror becomes a mechanism to ensure social morality, a moral imperative. If Christ is the mirror image that people incorporate for their vision of themselves, then a model based on the love of others could be used to reduce the narcissistic emphasis on self-interest characterizing [Adam] Smith's society in the late eighteenth century." (113)

What Cooley effectively offers is a theistic answer to a fundamental weakness in Mead's theory. That is, the soul provides the means for a consciousness to emerge, allowing the supernatural "I" to combine harmoniously with the social "Me."

Scimecca laments that "because of his Christian beliefs—Cooley envisioned the 'I' as the soul, which could organize a core sense of self and a reflexive mind—he has been relegated to a relatively minor status by mainstream sociology" (111). What a loss to generations of sociologists!

> This synthesis of Mead and Cooley is obviously not readily acceptable to a secular discipline and scientific community, which predominantly acknowledges only materialistic answers to the fundamental questions of human existence. Instead, all I ask is for a theistic (a Christian) approach to be accorded the same level of respect as secular sociological paradigms and be evaluated fairly on empirical evidence and not dismissed as ideology or illusion. (113)

The concluding chapter of *Not So Outrageous* reiterates some of the themes developed in earlier chapters and offers brief sketches of contemporary sociologists who evidence the kind of thinking that holds potential to develop Christian Sociology further as a legitimate alternative to mainstream sociology. These thinkers are not all working from theological traditions, but all advance the inherent dignity of the person. Among these are:

- Dorothy Smith, who calls us to a greater understanding of the social world of women, and the humanizing potential of locating it in the experiences of women themselves.
- Roy Bhaskar, the founder of Critical Realism which is based on the premise that "a structured reality independent of human perception is real and things exist separately from experiences and knowledge" (124).
- Margaret Archer, working in the Critical Realist tradition, who asserts that the question of God's existence is an important one, and can and should be addressed in rational debate.
- Christian Smith, who writes that "we have not really come to terms with human beings… until we come to understand human persons as fundamentally moral, believing animals" (126).
- Peter Berger, who, in *A Rumor of Angels* and elsewhere, takes seriously the existence of a transcendent reality.

At the end of the day, Scimecca is not arguing for special treatment for Christian Sociology. He is simply proposing that Christian sociology receive the same treatment as other ideological perspectives in the discipline. Christianity, he states, is seen as a false ideology and rejected based on that assumption. Marxist sociology, feminist sociology, neo-liberal sociology, and conflict sociology, among others, all begin from ideological positions, and all have ambiguous data to support them. When sociologists dismiss transcendental beliefs out of hand, simply because they cannot be proven through positivist methods, they overlook something that is very important to a great number of people, and something that offers people meaning in a world riddled with meaninglessness under the shadow of nihilism. Sociologists ignore the meanings that Christianity and other religions can and do provide at the peril of their own discipline.

One story Scimecca writes near the end of the book will stay with me for a long time. When he begins a new sociological theory course for majors, he asks why they majored in sociology. A few say that they want to understand human behavior, or how things work, but the vast majority say that they want to do good, help the world, and rid it of evil. They don't just want to run regression equations. They want to help set the prisoners free, support the widow and orphan, address violence, increase respect for women and minorities, help make housing more affordable, and ensure that the pregnant migrant woman makes it across the river to safety. These are values they hold. These are values that motivate them. These are values that are awfully difficult to explain using only the positivist's tools. Dismissing as illusory the values and religious traditions and beliefs that animate them, and excising from the history of sociology those who took them seriously, is to set up sociology as a minion of shadow nihilism.

The *American Sociological Association's* five guiding principles include: (1) professional competence, (2) integrity, (3) professional and scientific responsibility, (4) respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity, and (5) social responsibility. Scimecca points out that the first three of these do not call for change. However, the last two are focused on the people at the center of sociological studies. And a Christian Sociology is—or at least can be—equipped to enter the sociological arena. It has something to contribute. In Scimecca's words:

> Contemporary sociology offers a tragically limited view of what it means to be human. Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. And sociology does not understand the importance of meaning because sociologists lack the means to see this beyond a critique of the accumulation of material resources. Missing is the need for a transcendental model of the person. What is needed is a new vision of what it means to be a person in a world where meaning is being rapidly eroded, something that a Christian Sociology can provide. (134)

Not So Outrageous is a welcome addition to any Christian sociologist's library. Although I've taught sociological theory for more than two decades, I learned a great many new things, and had more than a few of my own biases challenged. In addition to use in sociological theory classes, this book is perfect for a Christian college faculty development book study. The problems Scimecca addresses are, perhaps in different forms, ravaging other disciplines as well. Shadow nihilism affects us all. At the very least, this book should embolden Christian sociologists to join the conversation. My locating only six Christian sociologists out of almost 1000 in attendance at the Southern Sociological Society conference tells me that we've retreated into our corner. Yet we have something important—even crucial—to add to a conversation that for some time has been spiraling into irrelevance. And, we have something to learn from our secular colleagues. Let's get out there and, as singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn sings, "Kick at the darkness 'till it bleeds daylight" (Cockburn 1984). Or, to adapt it somewhat, "Kick at the shadow nihilism 'till it bleeds daylight." True to his Christian convictions, Scimecca was doing just that in person at the SSS conference!

Not such an outrageous idea? Perhaps it's precisely the outrageous idea sociology desperately needs.

References

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Direct correspondence to Matt Vos at matt.vos@covenant.edu