

Theology as Sociology, Sociology as Theology

Jeff Wheeldon

Abstract

The value of cross-disciplinary interaction between sociology and theology has long been acknowledged, but is rarely pursued or examined. While sociological insights have contributed much to many important discussions in the field of theology, influence in the other direction is rare. This work seeks to examine the possibilities for deeper interdisciplinary dialogue between these two fields, and in particular to provide examples of theologians making use of, and potentially contributions to, the social sciences. First, a brief discussion of the work of German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer will describe his formal academic approach to such interdisciplinary work, particularly in *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Second, the work of Walter Wink on the theological notion of "principalities and powers" will be discussed, with special attention to the way he provided theological language and frameworks for social scientific concepts. Finally, the language of "consultation" is suggested as a path to greater interdisciplinary cooperation, and a short list of theological concepts that would benefit from sociological investigation and elaboration is offered. The ultimate aim is to explore the interconnectedness of these two fields for the purpose of furthering interdisciplinary discussion and inquiry. As will be demonstrated, consultation can enliven both fields by providing new perspectives and language with which to address issues and develop theory.

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Contemporary sociology has delivered excellent insights into the nature of the Christian church, including the North American evangelical variety. Scholars such as Christian Smith and Robert Wuthnow in the United States and Reginald Bibby in Canada have helped Christians, pastors, and theologians understand our churches better and differently, including the difference between God and our response to God, how sacredness shapes our response to particular texts, the functions of ritual in those responses, and so on. In the process, sociologists have helped to clarify theological methodology and insights, church practices, and the social role of the church (usually unintentionally, as popular sociology often triggers pastoral or

theological responses applying or critiquing sociological insights). Theologians in the subfields of ethics and political theology, and perhaps especially pastors attempting to understand the context and effects of their ministry, are indebted to the contributions of sociologists, who rarely acknowledge the ways that theology contributes to sociology, or examine the interplay between the two fields. As will be shown, sociology and theology are deeply interrelated fields of inquiry that have much to benefit from each other. This article will a) outline examples of how in some cases theologians act as social theorists merely by carrying out their theological research, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unintentionally, b) show that systematic theology is profoundly sociological in the sense that it is deeply grounded in and makes normative statements and ethical demands about human behaviour and relations, and c) suggest that Christian sociology therefore has much to gain from many fields of study in systematic theology.

The Nature of Theology

Systematic theology, by its nature, is a second-order discipline; it has few original thoughts, consisting instead of arranging and connecting other thoughts. Its primary source material is the Bible and Christian tradition, but given that its overarching aim is to provide an accurate understanding of reality, it draws heavily from other disciplines. If a theological theory or doctrine is found to be in clear contradiction to an established fact from another discipline (for example, the orbit of the earth), a good theologian will not only question the other field, but will also re-examine their theological position. In this way, many theological traditions that were thought to be highly important at some point in time have been revealed to be unimportant to theology in general, and in hindsight such notions as heliocentricity are found to enrich our understanding of the universe, and therefore of its Creator, not threaten it. It is not necessarily the role of the theologian to establish the orbit of the earth around the sun, but a theologian respects such knowledge and incorporates it into the doctrine of creation where it is relevant. In a similar way, some Christian traditions have made much of supposed differences between men and women, and to this day churches are split about questions of whether being female disqualifies one from Christian ministry, or leadership and authority in general. While the issue is still debated in some circles, a significant portion of Christians have acknowledged the scientific and social scientific research establishing that sex and gender are not synonymous, nor are they necessarily binary, and that women are not inherently different from men in any way that would undermine their ability to serve God and their communities in Christian ministry. This new understanding of gender and sex has given some theologians reason to question science, but has also caused others to question the traditional interpretation of certain passages that suggest a strict gender hierarchy. In the absence of an assumed gender hierarchy, it is difficult to interpret those texts as establishing or enforcing a normative gender

hierarchy. Furthermore, those texts may actually be much more contextual, and hence possibly even more valuable, than traditional interpretation acknowledged.

While theologians do not, as a rule, set out to generate knowledge related to other fields, their research and thought inevitably crosses over into many other disciplinary territories. After all, the study of a creator God ultimately connects to everything in existence. Additionally, many of the disciplines that exist today arose out of deeply Christian worldviews and theological perspectives, with scholars of the High Middle Ages holding theology to be the “Queen of the Sciences” due to its central position in the academy. Its influence coloured virtually all Western thought at least until the beginning of the Enlightenment. While modern scientific and hermeneutical methods require that assumptions be stated, the core unspoken assumption in all of the sciences of the historic Western world was the existence of God. For example, Sir Isaac Newton revolutionized physics and mathematics, but was driven at least partially by his desire to find a mathematical code in the Bible that predicted the end of the world (his prediction: 2060). When he described the incredible order of planetary systems, he insisted that their motion was maintained by God (1706). Simply put, those who sought knowledge of the universe were seeking knowledge of God’s created universe, and their theology was always implicit, if not explicit, in their thinking.

The interrelationship between theology and other disciplines is complex, and has changed over time. Today, every effort is made to separate theological implications from most other disciplines, which have replaced the core assumption of theism with one of functional secularism, if not outright atheism. This is mostly good and fitting, given the nature of other fields of inquiry. The flow of ideas from theology to other disciplines has therefore been drastically reduced, while the flow of ideas from other disciplines to theology has increased. Theology is no longer a monolithic or autonomous discipline, as the findings of other fields are increasingly taken as relevant to theological thinking. Put differently, the role of theology is becoming less about “what” and more about “why,” less about describing reality and more about interpreting it, a task that many other disciplines, especially in the hard sciences, are inadequate to perform. Even the depth of understanding we can derive about human motivation and interaction from the social sciences often falls short of attributing meaning to them in any ultimate sense, even when it describes the human process of meaning-making in detail. But the quest for ultimate, universal meaning leads theologians through all existing knowledge, and continues to reveal gaps in knowledge in other fields. The “why” often implies the “what,” driving theologians to flesh out an idea to the point where their work has important insights that address questions from other fields. Two twentieth century theologians whose work has spilled over into the fields of the social sciences in this way are the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the American theologian and activist Walter Wink.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theology as Sociology

From his earliest writings on, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology overlapped extensively with sociology. His first doctoral dissertation, accepted in 1927 when he was just twenty-one years of age, was entitled *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. The first chapter is entitled "On the Definition of Social Philosophy and Sociology," and begins by stressing the necessity of differentiating between the two, with the failure to do so being just part of the general confusion among sociologists about the aim of the discipline. He also criticizes Weber's approach to the sociology of religion as merely historical. Bonhoeffer further opines that "earlier sociology of religion had of course almost never done anything but the history of religion, either from a broad historical perspective or by means of a more specific political and economic approach" (1998: 32, n.4). Sociology, he insists, must be a systematic discipline rather than merely historical.¹

While it may seem presumptuous for a young theologian to instruct sociologists about the very definition of their field of study, this is an excellent demonstration of the way that theologians are often forced to delve into other subjects in order to find — or form — the clarity needed to develop their theological theses. Writing on the social institution of the church, Bonhoeffer knew that the relatively new discipline of sociology would play a major role in his work, and yet to be able to draw from it he needed to engage in it more directly than would be allowed by the typical academic preference for a sharp distinction between fields. In order to draw from the riches of sociology to aid in his project, he had to in some sense become a sociologist.² When he wrote to his parents to tell them that his thesis proposal had been

¹ Theology has drawn a distinction between systematic and historical work as distinct sub-disciplines. The sub-discipline of systematic theology employs systematic, often philosophical (or sociological) frameworks within which to develop theory. Historical theology, on the other hand, is a primarily descriptive discipline which tracks the development of theological thought and practice through history. A third sub-discipline, biblical theology, is primarily concerned with the relevant texts, their contexts, and principles of interpretation and transmission. There is, of course, significant overlap between the three sub-disciplines, and they were not yet clearly distinguished when Bonhoeffer wrote, but nevertheless their distinct categorization is helpful in focussing the work of each, and here illustrates what Bonhoeffer likely meant by "systematic" as opposed to "historical."

² For criticism of Bonhoeffer's sociological work, see Peter Berger's essay "Sociology and Ecclesiology" in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Essays on The Problems and Possibilities of His Thought* ([1962] 2009:53-79). Note also that "while many of Berger's criticisms are pertinent, his exposition is marred by misinterpretations on several major points" (Green 1999:27). Green provides additional critique: "Virtually no empirical data on the actual, social role of the church appears in his ecclesiology. Nor does he seriously raise the question of how his *theological description* of the Christian community relates to the *actual religious institution* existing around him. Again, even if we willingly grant the necessity for sophisticated academic works in theology, we may still ask how the major intellectual contributions of theorists like Marx, Weber, and Troeltsch can be left out of Bonhoeffer's discussion" (Green 1999:27).

accepted by the department of theology, he also requested money for books by Weber and several other sociologists. Indeed, the bibliography of his dissertation included a cross-section of contemporary sociology, and it is from there that he developed and even drew his critiques of the discipline and one of its star theorists.³

That said, Bonhoeffer does not dwell on criticizing sociology, and makes little attempt to further it beyond his own goals. His work is obviously interdisciplinary, but above all it is in the service of the church and is theological in tone, no matter how sociological in content. In his own words, from the preface of the published version of *Sanctorum Communio*:

In this study, social philosophy and sociology are employed in the service of theology. Only through such an approach, it appears, can we gain a systematic understanding of the community-structure of the Christian church. This work belongs not to the discipline of sociology of religion, but to theology. The issue of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one, because it can be answered only on the basis of an understanding of the church. The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. 'Person', 'primal state', 'sin', and 'revelation' can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality. If genuinely theological concepts can only be recognized as established and fulfilled in a special social context, then it becomes evident that a sociological study of the church has a specifically theological character. (1998:21)

And perhaps more directly stated, from the preface of his original dissertation:

The dogmatic character of the work prevails; both disciplines of social science [social philosophy and sociology] are to be made fruitful for theology....Since many disciplines are currently focusing on sociological issues, this study will provide the opportunity to think about the fruitfulness of the result of this sociological research for our discipline of theology -- and also to demonstrate its limits. Thus this study clearly is meant to address contemporary issues and to contribute to the debate about them. (1998:22-23, n.5)

Bonhoeffer was clearly aware of Weber, but chose not to engage him here. But to what extent can a theologian be judged as a sociologist?

³ Specifically, Bonhoeffer's critique of Weber echoes those of German sociologists Alfred Vierkandt and Friedrich Karl Schumann, both of whom are found in Bonhoeffer's bibliography. Bonhoeffer is not wading into another field to pick fights, so to speak, but rather attempting to critically adopt educated views to develop his own project.

Even though he emphasizes the theological priority, he does not understate the contribution of the social sciences to his theological aim:

The essence and structure of the new humanity 'in Christ' can only be understood in contrast to humanity 'in Adam' [a theological concept]; one must know of the general and specific social relations of humanity in order to understand the empirical phenomenon of the church sociologically in its dual character as *sanctorum communio* [theological] and 'religious community' [sociological]. (1998:22-23, n.5)

And finally, the reference to the "limits" of sociology from his preface is clarified at the end of his first chapter:

But the nature of the church can only be understood from within, *cum ira et studio* [with passionate zeal], never by nonparticipants. Only those who take the claim of the church seriously -- not relativizing it in relation to other similar claims or their own rationality, but viewing it from the standpoint of the gospel -- can possibly glimpse something of its true nature. (1998:33, italics original)

In short, Bonhoeffer saw that the church cannot be adequately understood by theology or sociology alone. And while he seeks sociological understanding to help formulate his theology, he also seeks to make a direct contribution to sociology through this theological program, in particular by laying out a theoretical foundation for distinctively Christian sociology.

That theoretical foundation laid by *Sanctorum Communio* is both too broad and too deep to outline here, but one notable contribution was an alternate formulation of I and Thou terminology most commonly associated with Martin Buber. While Buber's I-Thou is a way of overcoming the objectified I-It relationship with the world, and thereby creating intimacy between I and Thou, Bonhoeffer's formulation instead stresses the boundary between I and Thou, which he refers to as the "ethical encounter" in which the other transcends the self, and in so doing becomes a form and analogy of the divine Thou. Defining humanity as social, Bonhoeffer posits the existence of the I only in relation to the Thou who transcends the I, with the boundary of the I created by the presence of the will of the Thou and therefore implying that human beings only exist in an encounter with the Other. Because of the incarnate existence of God in Jesus Christ, who is himself in perfect solidarity with and representative of all humanity, the Thou the I encounters is always analogous of the Divine Thou. Further, and because of that analogous nature, the encounter between I and Thou is always ethical, as the boundary of personal will between I and Thou can be pressed or transgressed by either party in every encounter. This approach not only gives a new perspective on notions of the self and the other (e.g., while we may thoughtlessly transgress the will and boundary of the human Other,

we might be more careful about thereby diminishing the Divine Other), it also provides a distinctly theological framework for sociality which plays out in his later works, giving all of them a notable social and ethical bent that is made all the more evident by his social/political context.

Bonhoeffer is known at least as much for being a martyr as he is for his theology. He was an active member in the Confessing Church, which protested Nazi control over the German Lutheran church, and was eventually a double-agent and part of a group of conspirators that planned several unsuccessful assassination attempts against Adolph Hitler. Some of his most potent and intriguing theological and sociological thoughts came in fragments and speculations in the form of letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge, smuggled out of Tegel prison during his incarceration. Many of the essays in his powerful collection *Ethics* end abruptly, with an editor's note indicating that the unfinished manuscript was found on his desk after his execution. Indeed, the content of *Ethics* was probably enough on its own to ensure his eventual arrest; while the content remains distinctly theological, the subtext is highly critical of Hitler and the Nazi regime, who created the problems addressed (in only slightly guarded language) in most of the essays. In *Ethics*, then, Bonhoeffer wrote theology to answer social or even sociological problems.

One particular essay is worth mentioning here, not only because it provides distinct and systematic categories for social institutions, but also because it is part of an older tradition in political theology dating back at least to Martin Luther. Bonhoeffer uses the term "divine Mandates" to refer to the social categories of work (used interchangeably with, or in addition to, culture), state, family, and church, categories referred to by Luther as "divine estates." Both Bonhoeffer and Luther refer to these Mandates or Estates without thorough explanation, and Bonhoeffer's essay on the subject is one of those that ends too soon. While these appear to be analogous to the sociological categories of social institutions, without sufficient elaboration from Bonhoeffer or Luther, a speculative understanding will have to suffice as summary here.

Each of these Divine Mandates, so called because they are ordained or mandated by God, balance and limit the other Divine Mandates in our lives. Work draws us away from our families, but work is limited by government so that we might return to our families. Culture and work are given meaning and purpose by church and family. Government is mandated to protect the other Mandates, and church is mandated to ensure that none of the Mandates exceed their bounds and subordinate the others beneath them. When one or another of these spheres of human life exceeds their God-given domain or level of influence, social issues arise which the church is called to address, whether through good works or prophetic critique, serving as a sort of stand-in or support for the Mandates that are subdued and weakened, while calling the idolatrous Mandate back to the ordained order. Bonhoeffer's emphasis, from the very beginning of the essay, is on authorization:

God's commandment is not to be found anywhere and everywhere, not in theoretical speculation or private enlightenment, not in historical forces or compelling ideals, but only where it gives itself to us. God's commandment can only be spoken with God's own authorization; and only insofar as God authorizes it can the commandment be legitimately declared. God's commandment is to be found not wherever there are historical forces, strong ideals, or convincing insights, but only where there are divine mandates which are grounded in the revelation of Christ. We are dealing with such mandates in the church, in marriage and family, in culture, and in government. (2005:388)

The concept of "God's commandment" is complex and ethereal, and saturates Bonhoeffer's thought in *Ethics*. But the critique of illegitimate authority derived from "compelling ideals" and "historical forces" is a clear and potent critique of the Nazi regime and its efforts to co-opt the authority of the church as well as the state in service of Aryanism and triumphalist nationalism. Bonhoeffer's resistance began with the struggle of the Confessing Church, a group of Lutherans who broke from the national church in protest against this kind of co-opting, resulting in their being censured and, in some cases, eventually arrested.⁴ When the Nazis took on the language of the church to claim authority for a government that, in its totalitarian nature, subordinated all of the other Mandates, Bonhoeffer answered with a Christian sociological argument that undermined their legitimacy. Of course, this essay was only published years later, unfinished, so he was not able to oppose Nazi ideology concurrently on this point. Even if he had, he was fighting a losing battle. From his prison cell he wrote about one of his most radical ideas, that of "religionless Christianity," an expression of faith that is purely ethical because all of the verbal and symbolic expressions of faith had been so completely co-opted as to become meaningless.⁵ Had he been able to follow that line of thought further, he would have made a significant contribution not only to Christian ethics, but also to the sociology of religion, the sociology of language, and sociolinguistics.⁶

Bonhoeffer's entire theological career was deeply influenced by sociology, from his first doctoral dissertation through to his ethical writings, and his social activism was thoroughly and

⁴ It was not until later that Bonhoeffer gave more concentrated attention to the Nazi treatment of Jews, and while his lack of immediate attention to their plight was sadly typical in that context, it troubled him. While the Confessing Church's fight for their own autonomy and authenticity first inspired Bonhoeffer to resist, it was his duty to love his neighbour, the Jew, that compelled him to take more drastic steps.

⁵ In letters to Eberhard Bethge, from April and July of 1944. He was executed in 1945, just months before the end of the war. See *DBWE vol. 8*, 2010.

⁶ Similar ideas have recently been published by Diana Butler Bass (2012) in *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*.

distinctively theological from his early international work for pacifism through to his participation in assassination plots and culminating in his martyrdom. But while Bonhoeffer started with a very academic and methodical approach to integrating theology with the social sciences, other theologians have taken a less direct and perhaps more intuitive approach to the overlap between these two disciplines.

Walter Wink: Social Science as Theology

The Holocaust and World War Two cast a long shadow over the twentieth century, not least in the social sciences and theology. As more and more information emerged about the extent of the evil perpetrated by the Nazis, scholars from a number of fields looked for or invented language to describe it in the hopes of understanding how it happened, often borrowing language from other disciplines. Carl Jung, among others, described Nazi Germany in terms of an “epidemic of insanity” (borrowing medical language infused with psychology), and mass “possession” (Jung 1970). But while Jung undoubtedly used religious language to refer to Hitler as a “god” who “possessed” the German people as analogy or hyperbole, the incredible phenomenon of the Holocaust was enough to convince even modernist theologians to take another look at Christian traditions concerning Satan and demons.

Several theologians, including British theologian G. B. Caird (1956) and Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof (1962), examined Paul’s passages regarding the “powers and principalities,” thrones, dominions, authorities, and elements of the universe. After Berkhof’s work was translated into English, the theme was picked up by lawyer, lay theologian, and activist William Stringfellow (1973), and then more thoroughly and definitively in the 1980’s by theologian and activist Walter Wink. Each of these theologians was looking for answers to the problem of evil, and saw quite clearly the social structural dimension of evil at work in society, but lacked a thorough biblical language to describe it. Christian tradition has long focused on personal manifestations of evil—demons and Satan are personal spiritual entities opposed to God who have the ability to harm humans and must be driven out through Christian exorcism—rather than, or even at the expense of, structural understandings of evil.

Exorcism has largely faded into the background of Christian vocabulary, now seen as a vestige of an earlier worldview. This has in large part been due to the major theological project of the modernist era, the demythologization of Scripture. The writers of the Bible, it was held, described in their own terms the phenomena they experienced. Lacking the vocabulary of the social sciences, they used the language of the spiritual. What was understood by the writers of the Bible as demonic possession was therefore understood by moderns as psychopathology, and exorcism was replaced by therapy and medication, most often rightly so. But even social scientific terminology and understanding could not satisfactorily describe the horror of the

Holocaust, causing psychotherapists to revert to religious language and theologians to question the validity and extent of the demythologization project.

Drawing on biblical exegesis, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the noted theologians before him, Walter Wink developed a systematic and integrated theory of evil that bridges the spiritual-scientific divide. Seeing faults in the extent of demythologizing Scripture, Wink's approach both demythologizes and remythologizes, recognizing that the biblical authors were indeed commenting on both the sociopathologies of structural evil and the psychopathologies of personal evil, but also insisting on the existence of the spiritual, and examining its role in systemic and personal evil. He begins with the Bible, asking a deeply theological question, and finds answers by giving theological language to social scientific categories, reconciling sociological and psychological theorists at the same time:

I will attempt to reconcile two contradictory views of the origin of the demonic. One is held by liberation theologians, Marxists, and a wide spectrum of social theorists, who contend that personal pathology, distress, and alienation are not due to a flawed personal psyche but are instead caused by the capitulation by the person to oppressive structures of power. The other view, held by the vast majority of people in the United States, is that while structures and systems may contribute to personal breakdown, psychopathology is primarily the consequence of personal developmental malfunctions....The one attempts exorcism, without acknowledging as much, through social struggle, reform, or revolution. The other, also without acknowledgement, endeavours to exorcise through personal analysis, behavioural modification, or life style changes. The one sees demons as outer, the other as inner. (1986:41-42)

Wink brings together social oppression and psychopathology under a single theological framework (the demonic) that allows for fluid interplay between them while providing a theological basis on which to critique those who would force a strict separation. "From the perspective of the in-breaking new order of God declared by Jesus, each position is correct, but only in tension with the other" (42). Social oppression contributes heavily to psychopathology, which cannot be properly addressed only on an individualistic basis without recognizing social causes. Meanwhile, struggles for social justice and systemic change require attention to the wholeness of individuals within society, or else they will crumble. Social systems embed themselves in the minds and actions of individuals, and psychotic behaviour in a few can quickly become contagious, whipping up a riot or a war.⁷ "Like the thousands of smaller sewer pipes

⁷ "Feelings of inferiority can be played upon by demagogues to produce monsters compensating for their low self-esteem and raining revenge on those whom they blame for having caused it. A

draining from every house in a city into the central main, our inner demons feed the outer. Neither could exist without the other. Each mutually creates and perpetuates the other. Neither has pride of place. Together they form a united front of hostility to the humanizing purposes of God" (43).

Wink gives three categories within his overarching framework of the demonic: a) outer personal possession, as in something foreign to the self that causes pathologies such as social alienation and oppression, which he describes with the story of the Gerasene demoniac; b) collective possession, which he describes as "the abdication of human answerability to God and the investment of final judgment in a divinized mortal," such as Adolph Hitler or Charles Manson;⁸ and c) the inner personal demonic, which he describes as the internal disorder of things intrinsic to the self rather than the intrusion of something extrinsic. This latter category is not a matter of possession, because casting out something intrinsic to the self, were it even possible, would only create further pathology. Instead, these "inner demons" should be reconciled through treatments such as psychotherapy.

While earlier theologians such as Caird and Berkhof used theological language to describe social institutions, and read Paul as doing the same, Wink takes it a step further by giving theological language to a complex and integrated system of social and psychic pathologies to such an extent that he has been criticized for saying more about Jung than about Jesus (though in all fairness, he begins his trilogy with a biblical-theological volume before progressing to the social-scientific in the second volume). Whether his theories about systemic and personal evil are correct is largely for social scientists to decide. For example, he seems to rely on systems theory for much of his social analysis and his understanding of the social/spiritual nature of demons, and other than Niklas Luhmann, systems theory has not had a strong presence in sociological theory since Wink wrote *Unmasking the Powers* in 1986. But for the purposes of this analysis, his work is important because it serves as an example of the theological value of the social sciences. Not only are sociological theories and psychological insights helpful in fleshing out theological views, in some cases they drive entire lines of theological questioning. Wink's contribution was not to further a particular theological or

megalomaniac like Hitler would get nowhere if he were not riding the cresting wave of resentment from millions of would-be megalomaniacs longing to be released from the restraints of truth and civility" (Wink, 1986:43). This quotation eerily bridges the almost mythical horrors of the 1940s with the commonly cynical and blasé attitude toward the demagoguery issuing from politicians in America and Europe today, even while we tremble when very similar language comes from the Islamic State. Hence Wink's emphasis on complicity is even more prophetic today than it was when he wrote in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁸ This is very reminiscent of the philosopher Hannah Arendt's evaluation of Nazi officer Adolph Eichmann (2006), specifically the notion that his evil was banal, consisting primarily of giving up his ability to think and thereby leaving him with only the ability to "follow orders" uncritically and carry out the Holocaust.

sociological theory, but rather to read them together and highlight the places in which their overlap might strengthen both.

The third part of Wink's Powers trilogy, *Engaging the Powers* (1992), is part social ethics, part theological manifesto, and part activist handbook. Drawing on liberation theology, Rene Girard's theory of mimesis, and his own experiences of nonviolent social change with the Sandinistas in Central America and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, Wink develops a powerful theory of violence that employs social theories (e.g., the "myth of redemptive violence") before looking to Christ for a "third way" to resolve conflict (that is, neither winning nor losing, but nonviolent reconciliation—see Wink, 2003). For any Christian student of social ethics, such a text that combines Christian theological traditions with insights from social psychology in a way that respects both is particularly valuable as a model for interdisciplinary engagement.

Made For Each Other?

The social sciences had a significant impact on the development of both Dietrich Bonhoeffer's and Walter Wink's theology. As discussed above, the nature of theology as a second-order discipline, due to its method, allows for this. However, such deep integration is not always appreciated among theologians or social scientists.

When Walter Wink died in 2012, his obituary in the *New York Times* described him as "an influential liberal theologian whose views on homosexuality, nonviolence and the nature of Jesus challenged orthodox interpretations" (Martin 2012). While some of his stances were indeed controversial in the United States at the time, and heavily criticized by American conservatives, he was a far cry from unorthodox. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's strict academic approach toward the sociology of the church was much better received in his liberal German academic context, but the Confessing Church's insistence on theological orthodoxy in the form of resisting Nazi influence on the church resulted in virtual excommunication and even arrest. Furthermore, his appreciation for the Black church he attended in Harlem while studying at Union Theological Seminary (incidentally, the same seminary from which Walter Wink graduated) was controversial in churches on both sides of the Atlantic at that time. In both contexts, pursuing social awareness and practicing social ethics added a radical and controversial note to theological and ethical studies, making Bonhoeffer too conservative for his church and Wink too liberal, even as it enlivened and empowered their theology and Christian witness.

From the perspective of the social sciences, resistance to integration or engagement with theology is even stronger. Bonhoeffer's comments about the sociology of religion amounting to historical work is a case in point. By seeking natural causes, or at least sources, for all human phenomena, as all science does, the sociology of religion writes a narrative for the

origin and development of religion as being a socially constructed phenomenon. Clearly not all religions were spoken into existence and nurtured by the Christian God. Yet the sociological enterprise is viewed by many (inside the field and certainly inside the church) as undermining the notion that a God exists who actually spoke to anyone. In philosophical terms, sociology, whether intentionally or unintentionally, provides a competing metanarrative to that offered by religion. And as Christian Smith points out in *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (2014), American sociology is not only ostensibly secular, but is in fact quite often religious in its own way—a type of “secular salvation story” (20). This leads some Christians to see sociology as an anti-Christian usurpation and secularization of the gospel, increasing tension between conservative fundamentalists and presumably liberal sociologists. As Smith points out, not all sociologists participate in the so-called “sacred project of American sociology,” but enough do to give the discipline a distinct character which involves the propagation of certain liberal values. “If we had to characterize American sociology’s sacred project in brief, therefore, we might say that it stands in the *modern liberal-Enlightenment-Marxist-social-reformist-pragmatist-therapeutic-sexually liberated-civil rights-feminist-GLBTQ-social constructionist-poststructuralist/postmodernist* ‘tradition’” (11, italics original). Most of those words, even in isolation, are sometimes used almost as slurs in fundamentalist circles. Smith’s observation of their combination in American sociology does much to clarify the reason for deep antipathy toward sociology in conservative sectors of the North American church, which upholds directly opposing values with equally religious zeal. They therefore insist that the liberal view that religion is a socially constructed institution should be minimized or subverted. As Peter Berger described the situation, “For old-line liberals ‘sociology’ (sometimes with the qualifying adjective ‘Christian’ before it) was, so to speak, the secular arm of the Social Gospel. For the neo-orthodox it frequently became an intellectual whipping post to which were to be tied all the things supposed to be wrong with liberal theology” (2009:54). In light of all of this, it is easy to surmise that applying theological theories to sociological analysis would be considered unprofessional, bizarre, or even suspect.

In a certain respect, this is good. For example, the nature of the Trinity is not necessarily relevant, much less useful, to the formation of most sociological theories, despite the deeply social nature of the Trinity. Developing a theory of sociality based on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity fits better within theology anyway. But in other cases it can amount to a genetic fallacy, in which scholars might distrust a valuable and relevant insight that comes from outside their field. For example, if a theologian were to construct a theory of human sociality based on the doctrine of the Trinity, and this hypothetical theory corresponded to or filled a gap in sociological data or theories, or otherwise provided a new perspective relevant to the field, it should be worthy of investigation and analysis regardless of its source. Identifying and pursuing ideas of sociological importance that originate in or are augmented by the field of theology is a

valuable contribution of distinctly Christian sociology, for the sake of both sociology as well as, and perhaps especially, theology.

There have been many efforts to integrate sociology and theology, a project that, as Hiebert (2008) points out, becomes problematic when it assumes that one academic discipline takes precedence over the other in a subject-object relationship. Language of “engagement” is preferable, but it too can easily incorporate models and metaphors of militaristic or conflict-based engagement, such as the “enemies,” “spies,” and “colonialists” in Entwistle’s (2015) terminology. While Bonhoeffer and Wink did not identify, much less detail the model of interdisciplinary engagement they employed, they are best understood as the spies “who scope out the territory of the other camp, selectively plundering that which might prove useful for their own cause, but never engaging in actual open hostilities” (Hiebert 2008:211). Especially given that both Bonhoeffer and Wink were pacifists, it is important to remove the militaristic language and reflect on their actual regard for sociology. Both found sociology immensely valuable to the advancement of their theologies, yet did not actively partner with sociologists in their work, and were therefore forced to engage with sociology as a supplemental discipline, making do with their own limited knowledge in the field. Is this because of hostility between these disciplines, lack of awareness about ongoing interdisciplinary work, or a conscious choice by these theologians to wade into another discipline on their own? In Bonhoeffer’s case at least, it may have simply been that the “camps” were not yet so clearly defined, even though theologians were expected to be fluent and conversant with philosophy in its various forms and disciplines. Regardless, it seems clear that both theologians and sociologists can benefit from both Bonhoeffer and Wink’s interdisciplinary work, that more active engagement with other scholars who specialize in the respective subjects may have strengthened their work, and that existing concepts of interdisciplinary “integration” or “engagement” have yet to offer an environment or mind-set that encourages interdisciplinary work based on a relationship of equality between the fields.

For that reason, use of the term “consultation” to describe interdisciplinary engagement, at least between theology and the social sciences, seems most appropriate and constructive. The language of consultation provides several important benefits: a) it implies equality between two practitioners, each qualified in their own field; b) each qualified practitioner also recognizes the limitations of their own field’s theory and methodology, a stance that places limits on professional pride and academic tribalism; and c) it implies that qualified professionals in both fields are working toward the same ends, establishing a general unity of purpose (in this case, greater understanding of reality) that transcends the limited aims and abilities of each field separately.

In the spirit of such consultation, theology would benefit from seeking the perspective and insights of social theorists on the following theological questions and issues which seem to require a social perspective in order to be developed to the fullest extent possible.

Examining the Social God

First, God is social in several ways within the Godhead and with humans, as described by the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the Church.

- The doctrine of the Trinity describes a complex sociality within God's very self, with the three persons of God not only living in an eternal loving community but also acting in concert in all things; what one person of the Trinity does, they all do. Theologians almost inevitably resort to mystery when attempting to describe the Trinity, but social theorists could probably demystify some aspects of the doctrine and further the implications of others.
- God became human in a distinct and concrete social context. Biblical exegesis that incorporates the political context of first century Roman Palestine, such as John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (1972), a big influence on Walter Wink, has been invaluable for understanding the text and the doctrines that emerge from it. Continued application of sociological analysis of the cultural context and social relations Jesus experienced is invaluable to theology.
- God not only manifested as a human being in Jesus Christ, but God also manifests in human beings; the Holy Spirit indwells us. A stronger pneumatology in Walter Wink's work would have taken it much further, and the application of his work to pneumatology would be an excellent avenue for further study. Similarly, the type of sociality that exists between humans and the Spirit, and between humans indwelt by the Spirit, needs to be better defined and would benefit from the insights of the social sciences.
- God is manifested in the church. Ecclesiology holds that the church is the "body of Christ," and therefore the way that Christ engages with the world as a social institution is worthy of reflection and development. A sociologist's take on Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, ninety years on, would be valuable.

Second, God engages with human social institutions and calls us to an alternate sociality in the Kingdom of God.

- There is a strong tradition of social critique in the Bible, particularly by the prophets, and it is deeply entangled with notions of idolatry. This connection deserves further attention, and would benefit from a sociologist's view.
- Bonhoeffer's notion of the Divine Mandates deserves further study and explanation, and could be complemented by modern sociological theories of social institutions.
- Wink's work on Paul's language of the "powers and principalities" and the notion of the demonic as the spiritual aspect of social institutions needs thorough evaluation and

updating from sociologists and psychologists, particularly because it relies so heavily on the social sciences for its content.

- Social theorists have long imagined Utopia, and some like Smith (2014) argue that they attempt to enact it. The Kingdom of God is the Christian notion of a healthy and godly sociality, and as such is worthy of greater sociological study.
 - The Kingdom of God is distinct from the church, but is manifested by or within the church. The interplay between the church and the Kingdom as different types of socialities has long been a sticking point that could be further clarified by a theologically-informed sociological perspective.
 - The Kingdom of God is not just an alternate sociality, it is an eschatological sociality. This means that it exists in a balance of already-not-yet, existing alongside human socialities and social institutions even while eclipsing them or being usurped by them or transforming them. Analysis of how that occurs, how the future social reality of God breaks into the present, is only possible in a limited sense, but would be extremely valuable nonetheless.

The church needs theologically informed social scientists to apply their skills and knowledge to the field of theology, and the benefits of the cross-pollination that could occur would extend beyond those working in the respective disciplines. Much work in this regard has already been done, for example by scholars such as Kieran Flanagan (2007) and John Millbank (2006), but there is much more to do. The methodical work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a model for how theology can contribute to sociology, if there are sociologists willing to read it. And the systematic integrative work of Walter Wink provides an example of the value of the social sciences for driving theological inquiry. The work of both would likely have been strengthened by more extensive interdisciplinary “consultation,” an approach to engagement between disciplines that avoids conflict mentalities, reduces the need for theologians to become armchair sociologists (and vice versa), and provides a basis on which to further interdisciplinary connections and work. The list of topics that would benefit from such a shared examination is much larger than the wish list presented here, and the increasing prevalence of social sciences in Christian colleges and universities (and the existence of journals such as this one) provide ample opportunity for consultation and cooperative study.

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Direct correspondence to Jeff Wheeldon at jeff.wheeldon@gmail.com