

## BOOK REVIEWS

SOCIOLOGY, by Matthew S. Vos. Phillipsburg, NJ: R & R Publishing, 2014, 48 pp., \$4.99.

This paperback, so brief that both the author (p. 44) and series editor Jay D. Green (p. 46) call it a booklet, nevertheless deserves a review. The author is a professor of sociology at Covenant College and president of ACTS, the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology.

*Sociology* is the third book in a Faithful Learning Series, each providing a Christian introduction to a specific academic discipline with three major goals (p. 46): 1) To quell the anxiety of many Christian families about sending their children into “the modern secular academy,” 2) to instill “a ‘Christian worldview’ that will help us to understand and interpret what we learn in faithful ways,” and 3) to recognize that “the modern academic disciplines are good gifts from a good and gracious God ... , each packed with insights ... that can and should be used for the good of the world and the glory of God.”

Vos’s smoothly written book admirably accomplishes all three goals. Solid linkages with mainline sociology, illustrations from everyday life, sensitivity to contemporary youth subcultures with mention of topics like 9/11 and anorexia that are among their concerns, and sound connections with the Bible and Christian experience combine to make this an outstanding contribution to Christian Sociology.

Its “introductory glimpse” of sociology focuses on questions about self-identity (knowing and locating ourselves socially and spiritually), social norms and order in society (normality and deviance), social contexts of societal issues and human troubles, group ties and social bonding, and understanding social life through functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist theories. It persistently shows how Christians can use sociological tools and perspectives to bring new depth to understanding the Scriptures and how they in turn can bring fresh insights to sociologists’ ways of understanding the world.

Numerous sociological concepts are mentioned, clarified, and often linked with their Christian context in clear everyday language. Among them are culture, sociology, the dialectical relationship between individual and group, empirical and transcendent reality, scientific objectivity, society, norms, deviance, institutions, mechanical and organic solidarity, theory construction, in- and out-groups, interdependence, stratification, group boundaries, value systems, social construction, the hermeneutic task, relativism, meanings, codependency, and collective imagination.

The final section (pp. 42-44) is on seven examples of “Christian sociologists and their key works.” It is followed by thirteen thought provoking discussion questions (pp. 44-46), most of which explicitly link sociology and Christianity. The shortest is number 12, “In what ways do you see yourself in conflict with ‘the world’?”

Too often, sociology is still under suspicion. Theological and political conservatives are especially prone to misinterpret it, claiming that it undermines the Christian faith, teaches

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socialism, and inculcates other heresies. One source of that antagonism resides in its “counternarration” role of revealing what many sociologists label as “latent dysfunctional consequences.” By exposing previously unrecognized harmful results of respected customs, religious and other institutions, and behaviors usually considered essential for society’s well-being and by showing harmful and sinful results of polite behaviors alongside their desirable consequences, sociology as a tool and a messenger brings “the wrath of men” upon itself. That reproving and remedial correction, of course, can put it in good company, for sociology reinforces many Bible passages that are “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV).

Counternarration as in Romans 12:2, and idolatry are overarching themes woven into several passages. Instead of thoughtlessly blending into society, Christians are called to be different from the world around them, “to frame and interpret our lives and experiences ... within the larger redemptive story unfolded in Holy Scripture” (p. 10) and thus to live in tension with the dominant culture. The prophetic role of sociology reveals much that ordinarily is unseen and thereby helps to recognize and resist allegiance to “idols that have become an implicit part of our lives and practices” (p. 14).

Anchored in the redemption of Christ, our story of life and hope is one the world desperately needs to hear and heed.

The call to counternarrate the world around us contributes to the paradoxical tension of both supporting the

social order and remaining critical of and separate from it. “Consequently, we must live lives of peaceful opposition to the tendencies and patterns of the dominant culture while remaining open and accessible to the people of that culture” (pp.11-12). But does “the hermeneutic task of understanding how the biblical text may be applied to our lives” (p. 8) always automatically oppose cultural tendencies and patterns? Are not at least a few of them worthy of Christians’ reinforcement and support?

Like every human product, *Sociology* has weaknesses, but they are difficult to find. I wish, e.g., that at least a paragraph had been given to research methods and the ethical values that lie at the core of sociology, for they would help to explain why sociologists often stay aloof from adopting either-or positions while trying to apprehend the perspectives of people on the “other side” of culture wars and political issues.

Christian sociologists could debate Vos’s selection of topics and concepts, whether from an introductory course or all of its seventy or more important subdisciplines. Psnickety wordsmiths could quibble over occasional word choices. Yet none of those recommendations would improve his communication of the central message that sociology is an exceptionally useful tool that God can use to help people better understand themselves and their social world in order to serve Him and humanity more effectively.

I do wonder whether the black cover and its smudging of the book title and author's name imply that sociology is a shadowy or dismal subject. Does that appearance play up the way sociology often exposes the dark underside of "respectable society"? Beyond doubt, the back cover's green ink on a solid black background greatly reduces readability.

As I read this 5½ x 8½ inch paperback, I wished that one like it had been available during my 1948-1991 teaching career. As supplemental reading, it would have reinforced many of my references to the Bible and Christian ministries when I taught in Christian environments and clarified allusions to them when teaching or lecturing in "secular" institutions. Following its examples of classroom applications would have enriched my teaching methods.

Although it is primarily a contribution to Christian sociology, this book can also help convince non-Christians that Christianity is not antagonistic to good sociology and that one need not be a numbskull to have a worldview based on faith in Christ. High school sociology students and Christian graduate students alike can benefit from it. It can help undergraduates decide whether to study sociology while alleviating many fears of parents who were socialized into a poisonous stereotype of "the godless university." Counselors, pastors, and youth leaders will benefit from its enlightenment, but its main audience will be the students of Christian sociologists.

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