

EDITORIAL

I've had the privilege of protracted involvement with all three fraternal organizations represented in this journal—Oxford Graduate School, the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology, and the Christian Sociological Society. My longest association has been with ACTS, an association that began under the mentorship of Russ Heddendorf in the late 1990s. Involvement in ACTS led to contact with CSS members, their long-standing newsletter, and at least one of their gatherings at the Southern Sociological Society meetings. My tenure with OGS has been somewhat shorter, but is, I believe, approaching the ten year mark. All three organizations have wielded significant and helpful influence over my intellectual and spiritual development, albeit in different ways.

I came out of a Christian School background, one in which both of my parents were teachers. I also graduated from a Christian college before going on to graduate school. All in all, I have fond memories of these organizations which so profoundly shaped my person. One of the limiting factors inherent in such complete immersion in “Christian” schools is that it's easy to lose perspective on the so-called outside world. We're sacred, they're profane; we're holy, they're sinners; we're serious, they're flippant; we're ascending, they're descending, we're unified, they're unintelligible. A wide array of sociological frameworks can be employed to understand these polarities. Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction, and social identity theory's contention that we anchor our identities in the contrast between in-groups and relevant out-groups, come easily to mind. Years after his Christian school teaching had drawn to a close, I remember my father lamenting that he had never connected academically with local public school colleagues who also taught history. The assumption, he said, was that we Christians already had it right, and had little need for perspectives from the outside “profane” world.

In this editorial I wish to briefly examine and contest the idea that uniformity of mind should characterize a “Christian” community. Anchoring identity in “our” group, and positioning and mobilizing against out-groups (“Christian” and otherwise) may, in fact, run counter to the aims of our God who calls into fellowship a diverse people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. Attending to God's love of diversity, theologian Letty Russell (2009) writes,

God's response to the [Babel] tower builders' pride and lust for power is, once more, to create the gift of *difference*! Differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, language, or culture are not problems to be resolved and controlled by a dominant group. Rather they are important ways of assuring that God's gift of riotous diversity in all creation will continue. In fact, these differences are gifts in themselves. God's gift lets new voices be heard and languages and cultures flourish. (p. 55)

Elsewhere Russell writes, “Through hospitality community is built out of difference, not sameness; there is no ‘either/or,’ ‘right/wrong,’ ‘win/lose.’ Instead, there are numerous options for ways to faithfully express our unity in Christ and unity among religions and nations” (p. 65).

The three groups referenced at the beginning of this essay have helped me in the ongoing task to understand and embrace this “riotous diversity” of God. When I first attended ACTS meetings in the late 1990s I was surprised to find people of Christian faith expressing such varied perspectives—perspectives which ran the gamut from fundamentalist to charismatic to conservative to liberal, just to name a few. I’ve attended ACTS meetings featuring presentations from Roman Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Baptists, Conservative Presbyterians, Liberal Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Methodists, sometimes all on the same day. Do we agree? Sometimes! But despite the odd squabble, I’ve sensed a “unity in diversity” —something I’ve come to treasure.

At OGS I came into contact with a diverse body of students from Africa, South America, the Philippines, India, China, and a host of other places I scarcely remember. To teach at OGS has been to encounter diversity in myriad forms. To approach scholarship and teaching from a unitary “Christian” position, at Oxford, simply misses the beauty and challenge of the diversity there, and fails to remember that teachers are learners too. During OGS chapel services students, staff, and faculty take communion by intinction, a practice that predates American denominationalism, and which respects a variety of Christian traditions and celebrates unity within diversity.

The Christian Sociological Society has, for me, served as a reminder that much of what we call “Christian Sociology” is practiced outside of the confines of Christian institutions. CSS has helped me better perceive and understand the challenges faced by my colleagues who teach at institutions of higher learning without manifest Christian agendas.

In her masterful volume *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, theologian Kathryn Tanner (1997) offers the following response to the problem of differences of opinion within Christianity:

One possible response to such a threat of divisiveness—a very common response in the history of Christianity—is to try to prevent disagreement and enforce a uniformity of conception by setting up a hierarchy of interpretive experts and consolidating their power to transmit a preferred sense. ...Another way of avoiding divisiveness—one proposed most commonly in the early church—does not, however, involve such an attempt to discourage diversity of interpretation. Instead, it seeks to avoid divisiveness by encouraging Christian social practices to become *a genuine community of argument*, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good

discipleship, proper faithfulness, and purity of witness. This is the sort of unity of mutual admonition and concern that one finds in the letters of Paul. It is something like what Augustine talked about as the new Christian virtue of sociability: a solidarity of love and common hope, which eschews compulsion by allowing all decision to be free, a community ruled by humility and not by way of the advantage of superior power. (p. 123, 124)

This issue of *JSIRS* features a number of articles and reviews that we hope, communicate this same unity in diversity and community of argument of which I've been writing. Carolyn Stauffer's article *The Sexual Politics of Gender-based Violence in South Africa: Linking Public and Private Worlds* explores the paradox between South Africa's "inclusive and representative constitution" concerning women's rights and protections and its tragically high levels of sexual and gender-based violence. Next we present research by Savvas Daniel Georgiades titled, *The Nexus of Greek Orthodox Christian Faith and Religiosity with Immigration and Unemployment*. This study examines the relationship between GOCF and religiosity, and a number of independent psychosocial variables.

Kenneth Schmidt and Charlene West's *Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy and Alienation Induced Suicide: A Christian Personalism Perspective* examines some of the ways that group memberships affect the individual identities of athletes and military personnel and explains the implications for therapeutic interventions and suicide prevention. Finally, an essay by sociologist David Moberg traces the roots and examines the development of Christian Sociology focusing on the *Christian Sociological Society* and the *Association of Christians Teaching Sociology*, raising important questions about the future of these organizations and the flourishing of Christian perspectives in sociology.

It is in the spirit of unity in diversity that we offer this issue for your knowledge, enjoyment, and edification.

Matthew S. Vos
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WORKS CITED

- Russell, L. M. (2009). *Just hospitality: God's welcome in a world of difference*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Tanner, K. (1997). *Theories of culture: A new agenda for theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.