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Integrating Biblical Truth Into the Teaching of Sociology

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Chapter 2: Integrating Biblical Truth into the Teaching of Sociology

Robert G. Parr

In His response to a lawyer's question about which commandment is the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus answered that the greatest and foremost commandment is that "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). A proper understanding of God as revealed in the Bible and how human beings may rightly relate to Him serves as the lens through which Sociology is viewed at Cedarville University. Whether one is an atheist, an evolutionist, or a believer in Jesus Christ, each one will sift knowledge through a mental grid or worldview which gives meaning and significance to life.

All human minds begin thinking and knowing with presuppositions, assumptions, or starting points that are taken for granted. These assumptions cannot be proven but they are accepted by faith. This so-called circular reasoning is the only way humans can think. There are no neutral, value-free, objective ways for humans to begin their approach to knowledge.

The atheist "proves" the nonexistence of God by beginning with the problems of pain and suffering. The presupposition is that a good and all-powerful God would not permit the pain and suffering we see in the world. Therefore, God is either (1) all-powerful but He does not care, (2) good but impotent to do anything about pain and suffering, or (3) God does not exist. The atheist concludes that the nonexistence of God makes the most sense, more so than the other two options.

The evolutionist "proves" the fictitious nature of the first 11 chapters of the Genesis account by beginning with the presupposition of the uniformity of nature. This fundamental "unprovable" starting point assumes that the laws of nature have always operated as they function now in the physical world. If a star is located millions of miles from the earth, then that star must have existed in that location long enough for light to travel that distance under current conditions.

At Cedarville, we begin with the fully completed, created universe of the first two chapters of Genesis, a universe that God made with the

appearance of age. That is, Adam was a mature man on the first day of his existence. By contemporary time tables, Adam and his world appeared to be much older than they were at the end of the first week of creation.

Neither the atheist nor the evolutionist is thinking neutrally, objectively, or in a value-free manner. The atheist assumes a universal standard of goodness, justice, or love and insists that God must measure up to that standard. If God fails to do so, and the atheist insists that the problems of pain and suffering prove that He does not measure up, then God must not exist.

In so reasoning, the atheist “brings God down to our size” in the sense that God is held accountable to a moral standard. At this point the moral standard is the ultimate measure of reliability, a type of god or idol, expressed in the form of a foundational presupposition. Then God Himself must bow to the ultimate standard of justice, goodness, or love in order to validate His existence. The atheist posits a “straw man god” that is not the God of the Bible.

The words “accountability” and “responsibility” do not apply to the God of the Bible. God is not accountable to anyone or to anything. If He is accountable to something other than Himself, then that something is god. In any type of thinking, there is an ultimate standard or court of appeal for determining what is just, true, good, and significant. That final court of appeal is one’s ultimate measure of reality and what is determined to be true. Everyone has such an ultimate standard, and that standard is one’s starting point in thinking, one’s basic presupposition, or one’s god. It cannot be proven but must be taken for granted (by faith).

That ultimate standard is the object of one’s faith, and everyone expresses faith in order to think and to maintain a viewpoint about what is real, what is true, and how humans should behave. Even the attempt to be “nonjudgmental” assumes a world in which moral judgments are relative and nonbinding upon other people. So is one “nonjudgmental” relatively or absolutely? Everyone is a person of faith, regardless of devout religious commitment or firm atheistic allegiance.

The God of the Bible is beyond definition, which means that He defines everything else. The Bible does not attempt to define God, but it assumes His existence from the outset — “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The Bible records the activity of God

and from that activity we extrapolate the attributes that describe God's character. He creates from nothing because He is the Creator. The products of God's creation are good because God is good. He sends His Son to die for sinners because God is love. He justifies guilty sinners because He is just.

The Bible does not even record an independent or analytical definition of what it is to be a human being. Humans are created in God's image, a reflection of who God is. Humans find their meaning and significance in relation to God and in submissive obedience to His Word.

The strategy of Satan in tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden was to present the first woman with an alternative meaning for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said she would surely die if she ate of the fruit of the tree, but Satan said her eyes would be opened and she would become like God. Now Eve has two interpretations of the tree's significance and she places herself in the position of judging which interpretation is the correct one, which one she is going to accept as true.

At this point in Eve's thinking, God's word carries equal authority with Satan's word and Eve is the judge or final court of appeal for determining who is telling the truth. When we are no longer rightly related to God, we determine for ourselves if God exists and, if so, how He ought to deal with us in order to warrant our trust and confidence. The result is that God must prove Himself to us in order to earn our allegiance.

This can be illustrated by referencing Josh McDowell's book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.¹ The book is an excellent source for answering challenges to the factual accuracy of the Bible, matters related to historical, scientific, or geographical accounts in Scripture. But the title of the book leaves the reader with the wrong impression about his relationship to God. It reinforces the impression of the unbeliever that he stands in judgment of God. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* places the sinner on the judge's bench and God down in the defendant's seat where He must bring into court the evidential support for His existence and credibility. The judging sinner, in turn, determines whether God's evidence supports His claims.

Here we have the independent, self-sufficient God being subpoenaed into court and indicted as guilty until proven innocent. So again God must

¹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. T. Nelson, 1999.

give account for His claims to being God. If, in this fictitious courtroom, God were to be required to raise His right hand, swearing “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” by whom will God swear? Who or what is greater than God and will authorize that indeed God is telling the truth? The Bible says, “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). No sinner and liar is in a position to judge whether or not God is telling the truth. The God who is true and faithful stands in judgment over liars.

God is self-sufficient in the sense that He does not go outside of Himself to understand Himself. God possesses complete, exhaustive knowledge of who He is. He cannot know anything more about Himself because there is nothing more to know. Thus God cannot learn, grow, or develop, so He will never change. If one is perfect then change cannot be an improvement. If the infinite, limitless God knows all there is to know about Himself, then it follows that He knows everything there is to know about His creation and the humans He created in His image.

We as human creatures do not have total knowledge of ourselves because we are finite and sinful. What we know about ourselves we learn by going outside of ourselves. I stand 6’3”, wear size 15 shoes, and have gray hair. I know I am tall because I can look over the heads of most people in a crowd. I know my feet are big because shoe stores usually do not stock shoes my size. I know I am old because when in a classroom of college students, I am the only one with gray hair. As humans we must go outside of ourselves to find out who we are and to identify ourselves. But God does not go outside Himself to discover who He is.

God has created humans to be social creatures. We are not meant to live in isolation as hermits. The academic discipline of sociology is the study of the individual and society. But when humans cut themselves off from God and His Word, we are left to the mercy of society to provide us with our identity and meaning.

So ultimate social meaning can go in one of two directions: (1) individualism or (2) group association. Individuals will find their ultimate significance in their personal accomplishments: success, popularity, romantic attachments, or freedom to live as they choose. If group membership is the ultimate arbiter for determining significance, then collective identity is the most important feature in life. So people will take pride in their ethnic identity, gender, nationality, religious

denominationalism, social class, or sexual orientation. One's source of identity and significance is rooted socially either in individualism or the group, both of which are forms of social idolatry. Western culture tends to worship at the altar of individualism, with the accompanying collapse of community resulting in detachment and isolation. Eastern culture tends to worship at the altar of the group, with the accompanying devaluation of individuals who are expendable for the collective cause (the suicide of terrorists illustrates the point).

The resolution to the individual vs. group dilemma (the problem of the one and the many) is found in the Triune God of the Bible, the one God who is three persons. Redeemed sinners find their meaning and significance in their union with and right standing before God (the vertical relationship). Then those same individuals can give themselves in ministry to their fellow human beings (the horizontal relationship) without demanding that society provide for them their identity and significance in life. The child of God is liberated from the idolatry of individualism and group association to serve the true and living God. The redeemed do not have to worship society or secure its acceptance and approval in order to live significant, worthwhile lives. "We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

The problem of the one and the many may be rephrased in terms of the question, "Which is more important (ultimate), unity or plurality?" Which is more important, God the Father or the Trinity? Both coexist equally in the Triune God. So in human relationships, which is more important: the family or its members? the church or its members? the university or its students? the United States of America or its citizens?

Within the Trinity, value and worth are based upon essence, that is, the identity of each person of the Godhead. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each equally God with all of the same attributes and nature. But each member of the Godhead performs a different function in God's redemption of sinners. Paul informs us in Ephesians 1:3–14 that the Father planned redemption (3–6), the Son accomplished redemption (7), and the Holy Spirit applies redemption (13–14). The significance of each member of the Godhead is based upon and rooted in essence (who He is), not upon their function (what He does).

Likewise with humans, our value and worth is found in who we are as God's image bearers and as redeemed sinners. But since we are social creatures, we find that we are assigned roles in our relationships to others in government, the home, and the church. Each of these institutions has an authority structure in which the majority of members are to submit to the authority of those ultimately accountable for the functioning of government, the church, and the home. But the Bible does not present an elitist view of authority in which the president, the pastor, or the head of household is better than or superior to those under their care and supervision.

Examples of the church and the home provide opportunities to apply biblical perspectives to everyday relationships in those settings. The approach of the sociologist to religion is instructive as is the characterization of society as multicultural.

The relationship between the individual and the group can be illustrated in the church. The head of the church is Christ but the human leadership in the church is the pastor. In the body of Christ it is not the individual member nor is it the body in its corporate existence that is more important. Both are equally important. But in the United States we have placed such an emphasis upon the ultimacy of the individual in our culture and our religion that a common understanding of Christianity is "me alone in my prayer closet with my Bible and my God."

*This self-centeredness is expressed in American Christian music with the isolated individual speaking to God in the first person singular without any sense of community or social attachment to others. Examples of such music are *In the Garden*, *Christ for Me*, *I Must Tell Jesus*, and *He Knows My Name*. This correlates with a common Christian lifestyle in the United States where we have many freelance Christians who have no attachment to "the organized church."*

But the New Testament concept of the Christian life is our approach to God based upon the fact that we have been incorporated into a unity and we cannot operate independent of that body of Christ to which we belong. It is because we have been incorporated into the body of the redeemed that we pray, "Our Father." We are not instructed to pray individually *as an isolated person*. The primary stress in the New Testament is not upon the individual and God but upon the individual in his corporate relationship and God.

We celebrate the unity-plurality relationship in the church through the Lord's Table or Communion. God intends that the plurality of the church participate in a unifying ceremony in which there would be common bread and a common cup. In the contemporary world, we eat individual pieces of bread and drink from separate cups for hygienic reasons, but it tends to undermine the symbolic sense of corporate attachment.

It must be acknowledged, however, that salvation is a personal, individual event described in Scripture as being born again. Just as children are born individually into a family, so children of God are born individually into the family of God. Salvation is individual, not communal in nature.

At the point of salvation, the Holy Spirit grants spiritual gifts to each child of God. Those gifts are for the social purpose of giving or ministering to others. But in our individualistically self-absorbed culture, we have developed a private prayer language from the gift of tongues and turned a gift of the Spirit inward upon ourselves.

Likewise with marriage, we see plurality in unity when two become "one flesh." God created humans to live in a plurality-unity relationship because God *exists* in a plurality-unity relationship. In marriage a husband and wife demonstrate the kind of relationship in which the Godhead exists. Is it possible for the Son to detach Himself from the Father and the Spirit and attach Himself to another? Is it possible for a redeemed one to separate himself from the body of Christ? Marriage is established when a man leaves his father and mother to become joined with his wife in a "one flesh" union.

The order of God's creative activity is that marriage occurs first, followed by family (childbearing). In the chronology of the naturalistic evolutionist, family occurs first followed by marriage. Marriage arrives late on the evolutionary time clock after eons of reproduction. Which comes first, marriage or the family? The biblical and evolutionary views are in complete contrast to one another, and the ramifications are profound.

If marriage began in a cave with the female agreeing to settle and nourish the young while the male hunts down dinosaur meat and brings "home" the food, then what is so sacred about it? What is there to preserve? Why not experiment with multiple partners, same-sex relationships, and cohabitation? The current state of *marriage as a mating relationship* is the logical conclusion to the evolutionary starting point.

The recognition of so-called same-sex marriage illustrates where an evolutionary beginning leads. The biblical marriage is a one-flesh, life-long, faithful union between a man and a woman who raise the natural or adoptive children God gives them. Children are most likely to thrive in a home where they are in close contact with an adult man and an adult woman who are committed in a legal marriage to work together with one another until death. The plurality in unity of marriage offers children an everyday example of how two opposite-sex people can function together as a team, ultimately providing insight into the Triune nature of their Creator.

In contrast, same-sex relationships are notorious for their instability and the absence of exclusive faithfulness. Current data indicates that when legal marriage is available to same-sex partners, the overwhelming majority of them do not seek it. The loss of commitment in the culture at large contributes to acceptance of homosexual pairings so that an attraction to a person of the same sex is justified as an “orientation” that is deeply rooted within the individual. The biblical understanding of “love” is that of a commitment to give oneself to another person in spite of one’s subjective emotions, attractions, or satisfactions. We are the recipients of that kind of divine love, a love that is not the expression of an internal, subjective orientation.

God’s creative priority is for marriage to occur first, followed by childbearing. Marriage is the lifelong foundation upon which the family is built. Children are to be raised so they might leave and establish their own lifelong marriages. Marriage is permanent; parenting is temporary.

The evolutionary worldview has led to the reversal of that order so that almost half of children born in the United States are born to unmarried women. In many communities, mothers remain unmarried while men float through the neighborhood siring children. In such an arrangement, the most permanent relationship is that of a mother and her daughter who raise the next generation together with no male assistance or presence in the home. Now the family is permanent and marriage is temporary, if marriage occurs at all. There is nothing surprising about this, given an evolutionary beginning. It is the logical and natural conclusion.

Shifting from the institutional expression of religion to the very nature and existence of religion, sociologists perceive religion most often through the lens of secularization theory. French sociologist Émile Durkheim could

be referred to as the father of secularization theory.² He believed that the modernization of society would result in the disappearance of religion. Religious superstition was an adolescent phase through which culture evolved before it could mature. Secularization theory compartmentalizes religion, separating it from the rest of life, such as the family, education, government, and the economy. As such, religion is understood largely to be ritualistic behaviors that people in America perform on Sunday morning.

Disconnecting religion from the rest of life is a recent historical development of the modern era. Previously a people's religious belief system saturated every part of life. We continue to see this today in the Islamic world, but God's revelation of Himself in Scripture exalts Him as Lord of all, involved with and interested in every aspect of our lives, around the clock, seven days a week.

What follows the compartmentalization of religion is the social science definition of religion as "belief in the supernatural." This is a convenient definition for secularists and atheists who claim that religion operates by faith and faith is irrational or post-rational. The implication is that secularists are rational and operate on the basis of evidence, not faith.

As specified earlier, the biblical theist is skeptical of anyone or any system of thought that claims to operate without faith. The sacred-secular dichotomy is built upon the illusion that religion can be disconnected from the rest of life, and in doing so, any kind of faith goes with it. If God is the creator and sustainer of all that exists, then nothing could be further from the truth.

The field of cultural anthropology examines cultural variations from the perspective of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a mixed bag that can be beneficial or detrimental to one's view of cultural diversity. When multiculturalism is defined as the promotion of understanding cultural differences in society so that we might communicate more effectively across cultural barriers, we would agree. But many social scientists go beyond this definition to insist that all cultural groups are equal within society *and across societies*. The truth is that all cultures are tainted by the effects of the Fall and there is plenty of room for improvement in each one of them.

² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Free Press, 1965, 39–42, 102–107.

Beginning from a naturalistic, morally relativistic perspective, social scientists in the fields of sociology and anthropology often argue that all cultures are equally viable because people within those cultures experience their world with the same deep emotions and profound effects as we experience ours. *Other people* want peace and happiness just as much as we do. Presumably, this approach enhances tolerance of people who do not appear to be like us. That is not an unworthy goal, but to conclude that all cultures are to be accepted and no judgments are to be pronounced upon any culture is a stretch for anyone who lives in the real world. Even the United Nations makes judgments by reprimanding member countries for the brutal treatment of their minorities. No one argues that Hitler's Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, or Mao's China was equally as good as any other culture of the 20th century.

Some cultures are better than other cultures. A simple, empirical way to measure that appraisal is to trace the flow of migration around the world. Follow the footsteps of immigrants and refugees to observe how people vote with their feet and with their lives. They are fleeing the worst cultures and heading for the best ones within their reach.

But beyond the empirical data is the influence the Judeo-Christian ethic has upon society. Those societies that apply the Ten Commandments most consistently will be those societies that will be magnets for immigrants. Corruption, bribery, and court systems that disregard the law do not provide the cultural climate that people flock to join.

A cultural phenomenon that occurs particularly in the East is the prevalence of what are called face-saving or shame cultures. People in this part of the world attempt to preserve honor and dignity so one is not embarrassed or put to shame before others. To maintain a good face is to avoid exposure resulting in rejection by others.

Living in such a culture reinforces the human tendency to become more concerned about how others view us than how God views us. Guilt is the concept Scripture uses to describe how God views us concerning the problem of sin. Moral guilt is defined by the violation of God's law. Guilt calls for forgiveness while shame calls for acceptance. Guilt is due to moral sin while shame is a sense of social embarrassment.

Christians in shame cultures face the likelihood of being shamed for their Christlike character and witness. Scripture instructs believers that they will

suffer persecution for Christ (2 Tim. 1:8, 12, 16; 1 Pet. 4:12–16). In such cases of misplaced shame, believers are to be clear-minded enough to give greater weight to God’s view of them than society’s devaluation of them.

God has created human beings in His image, and that image includes attachments and relationships with others. We are social creatures by design. The study of sociology at Cedarville University examines the connection between the individual and the group in light of what Scripture says about human nature and the purpose for which God has created us.

To summarize, we begin our thinking with two foundational assumptions: (1) God exists, and (2) He has revealed Himself in the Bible. The God with which we begin is beyond definition. He defines everything else in His created world. If anything other than God is the ultimate measure of significance, then that standard is god and it is the object of faith in which its proponents believe. From a biblical point of view, we refer to those objects of faith as idols. Those idols can be the social idols of individualism or the corporate group. By virtue of being created as religious creatures in the image of God, we must worship someone or something. Wherever we begin our thinking reveals the object of our trust. Human beings created in the image of God cannot think otherwise.

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