

FAITHFUL LEARNING

SERIES

SOCIOLOGY

MATTHEW S. VOS



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THE FAITHFUL LEARNING SERIES

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The two Bruce Cockburn song quotations are from

CHILD OF THE WIND and
TROUBLE WITH NORMAL

Written by Bruce Cockburn

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The quotation on the back cover is from H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1956), 253.

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It depends on what you look at, obviously, but even more it depends on the way that you see.

—BRUCE COCKBURN¹

Because this [biblical] story is true, it is capable of exercising a critical function with regard to the other narratives that have formed our imaginations throughout history but need not have. A church that lacks the ability to counter other narratives is a church adrift, a church that is hopelessly civil, a church that can never be the eschatological people of God for the world.

—BRYAN STONE²

When I teach introductory sociology to freshman students, I begin with a short and very simple in-class exercise. I ask for two volunteers and instruct them to introduce themselves to the class. Simple, but for one basic rule: in their introductions, they may make no reference to any groups in which they hold membership. We want to know only about *you*. When the first volunteer begins, he or she is quickly reduced to idiosyncratic quirks of personhood no deeper than “I like pizza”—which I, of course, quickly point out is a food common to the *groups* from which they hail. Had they grown up in the Philippines, they would more likely have offered *balut* (steam-cooked duck embryo) as their cuisine of

1. Bruce Cockburn, “Child of the Wind,” from *Nothing but a Burning Light* (New York: Columbia Records, 1991), compact disc.

2. Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007).

choice. The second volunteer fares about the same. Then I turn the exercise around, instructing them to reintroduce themselves, but this time referencing any groups they like. This opens things up considerably. Now they can tell us about their families, someone they're in love with, their home churches, basketball teams they play on, college football teams holding a place of special reverence in their families, and whether they're Mac or PC people.

The point? We cannot know who we are solely on the basis of things internal to us. To know ourselves, we must locate ourselves in the company of others. Who we are—our identity—is related more to things outside us (like people) than to things inside us. And since I write from such a highly individualistic culture (I am a Westerner), it is surprising to realize just how little of “me” there is when I cut myself off from the groups that influence and form me. Why is this so? In a nutshell, we are made for fellowship—with God and with others—and, apart from these relationships, “who I am” deteriorates or fails to develop at all.

In the Genesis narrative, how did Adam know who he was? He walked with God in the cool of the day. He was not alone. Yet God still said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), and the company of Eve further extended his identity. If our identities—our *selves*—have origins in the group and are maintained in “fellowship,” then the fall of humankind—the break with God and others—has significant implications for who we are and how we understand ourselves. It is no surprise that our fallenness frequently manifests itself in the pathologies related to identity—depression, loneliness, eating disorders, and the like. In these difficulties, and in the best of times, we ask, “Who am I, and where do I fit with these others—what do they mean to me and I to them?” Christ’s death and resurrection represents a recoupling of self with God and others and offers the possibility again of knowing who

we are. In a profound way, the whole of Scripture is a story of identity—getting one, losing one, regaining one, sharing one.

Sociology is a liberal arts discipline that prioritizes the group in its quest to understand, explain, predict, and sometimes direct human behavior. Sociologists are interested in the dialectical relationship between individual and group and in the intergroup context in which we live. The presence of groups is pervasive in our lives—we are influenced by large groups like nations as well as small groups like dyads (groups of two) and triads (groups of three). Many of the groups in which we exist overlap with one another. Group interactions produce patterns—large patterns, seen in bureaucracies or postindustrial capitalism, and small patterns, like the rhythms and routines shared by a couple married for twenty years. In their examination of groups, sociologists emphasize the empirical (collecting data accessible to our senses) and work to maintain a scientific objectivity while striving to control their biases. Sociologists collect data in an effort to determine “what is” rather than “what should be.” This is not to say that sociologists don’t have values or that values don’t enter into their work. Rather, sociologists are primarily concerned with describing how things work and are careful about when their values enter into the research process.

A Christian approach to sociology recognizes that reality is not only empirical (accessible to our senses and our methods of scientific testing). A proper understanding of reality acknowledges a transcendent context in addition to the context that is available to our senses and testing instruments. The Christian sociologist recognizes the need to be in agreement with this transcendent context too. Many of our problems resist sociological solutions, for transcendent problems require transcendent approaches. For example, some of our efforts to address moral problems with technology (e.g., teen pregnancy with birth control programs) fall short because they fail to

account for the ways in which spiritual forces influence our social world, and because they fail to consider the interrelated nature of institutions (e.g., how the family is affected by the economy). The Christian sociologist hopes to better understand how God’s work and human work fit together in order to gain a more complete picture of reality than the empirical tradition alone can offer.

This booklet offers the reader an introductory glimpse into the academic discipline of sociology. But more than just reiterating the content of many freshman sociology texts, it emphasizes various ways in which a Christian—a person of faith—can use the tools provided by sociology to help bring new depth to his or her understanding of the Scriptures and, conversely, how a student of the Scriptures can bring fresh insights to the ways in which sociologists understand the world.

At first this may seem odd—what could a very secular academic discipline like sociology offer to the person of faith? Can’t we just use the Bible to interpret the world around us? Sure. But some of the ideas developed by sociologists can be very helpful in the hermeneutic task of understanding how the biblical text may be applied to our lives. Sometimes sociologists have remarkable insights into the character and workings of the social world around us. Sometimes these insights challenge us to see the familiar in new, unfamiliar ways. In fact, sociologists can be quite helpful in revealing unseen idols and in calling us to account for some of the ways we live that run counter to the message of Scripture. When they are properly approached, we might say that the Scriptures and sociology can be good for each other. The Scriptures emphasize the transcendent dimension of reality and remind us that the solutions to the world’s problems are not ultimately sociological but spiritual; sociology reminds us that what we take as “normal” might, in fact, be conventional, idolatrous, and in need of change. If we

take them together and use a little imagination, we can use a Christian sociological integration to better understand what it means to live in, but not of, a world that largely ignores spiritual reality, forgets the importance of loving one's neighbor, and engages in practices of violence, avarice, and self-interest.

Years ago, when I was interviewed at the Christian college where I presently teach, one of my interviewers, understandably concerned that the Scriptures hold a privileged place in my life and scholarship, asked, "If it came down to it, and sociology conflicted with the Scriptures, which would you side with—sociology or the Bible?" Well, being young and in need of a job, I dutifully replied, "The Bible, of course." I've reflected on that question for many years and have come to the tentative and hopefully respectful conclusion that it's simply the wrong question to ask. The question implies that we come to the Bible without prejudice, ideological bias, or self-interest. The question intimates that sociology will, for the most part, try to privilege "human understandings" over the "ways of God." I now recognize that there can be a kind of resonance between the Scriptures and what sociologists, when they do good, careful work, discover. The problem is not with one *trumping* the other. The question might be rephrased, "How can sociology help us to discern problems in how we understand the Scriptures and live them out in a world of culture?" and "How can the Scriptures be used to help correct and bring new depths of understanding to sociological perspectives on the world around us?"

All this may sound like I'm trying to promote sociology as the equivalent of Scripture. That is not my intent. Rather, my fascination with the promise of sociology emanates from my belief that the Scriptures call people of faith to live differently in the worlds we inhabit. We are called to tell—to embody—a different story from that told by the dominant culture as we live our lives, do our jobs, raise our kids, and go to school. Our story

is animated by, and wedded to, the ongoing story recounted in the Scriptures. Accordingly, our allegiances should be different. Many times they are not. Sociology can be a powerful tool in helping us to identify and step back from our frequently hidden and unrecognized secular allegiances. In fact, some of my most convicting experiences have involved the sociological realization that, in so many ways, we Christians aren't all that different from the so-called world we claim to resist and to which we bear witness.

As this booklet explains, we are called to counternarrate the world around us—to frame and interpret our lives and experiences (and those of others) within the larger redemptive story unfolded in Holy Scripture. To counternarrate is to offer an alternative to the story told by the dominant and secular culture. And to credibly tell our (Christian) story we must live in tension with our society, remaining in conflict with some of its practices. Our story is, and must be, different because it is anchored in the redemption narrative of Christ's death, resurrection, and promise to return. It is a story of life and a story of hope—a story that this world desperately needs to hear. And so, with this idea of counternarration in mind, I invite you to join me in a dash through just a few content areas in sociology, with sensitivity to how they might be used by a person of Christian faith.

WHAT'S *NORMAL*, ANYWAY?: HOW SOCIOLOGISTS QUESTION THE WORLD AROUND US

Imagine you awoke one morning, showered, dressed, ate your breakfast, and drove off to work or school. Normal routine. Now imagine that the people in your town had decided that the rules requiring them to drive on the right-hand side of the road were outrageously restrictive, intolerable, and downright dehumanizing. Fed up with such insensitivity to human rights, the good people of your town rebelled by driving

“My confidence in the power of truth is not separable . . . from trust in all my companions who are bound to its cause. Faith is a dual bond of loyalty and trust that is woven around the members of such a community.”

—H. RICHARD NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture*

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN SOCIOLOGY

Does human behavior intrigue you? Are you interested in what’s going on in the world and society? Do you like to sit and watch a busy street? If so, you have the potential to see the world and even yourself like no one else can. God designed us to understand ourselves in the context of relationships, so as a “people watcher,” you may have the marks of a rising sociologist. Interested in finding out?

Matthew Vos introduces you to the field of sociology, where people, problems, and politics find their way under the microscope. Find out how you can bring new depth to your understanding of your relationship with God and the world through people studying people.

The Faithful Learning series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a deeper love for God and neighbor.

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