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WHAT HATH SOCIOLOGY TO DO WITH CATHOLICISM?: AN ORTHODOX CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO TERTULLIAN, COMTE, AND MARX

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INTRODUCTION



ALTHOUGH FOR DIFFERENT REASONS, TERTULLIAN, COMTE, AND MARX WOULD all answer the question contained in this essay's title in the negative.¹ They would say that sociology, or anything that involves the use of reason, either cannot or should not be integrated - even in a nuanced fashion with qualifications noted - with an orthodox version of the Catholic faith. This essay intends to provide an orthodox Catholic response to these three thinkers and, correspondingly, a defense-theological and methodological -for the concept of a "Catholic sociology."

TERTULLIAN AND THE REJECTION OF REASON

Tertullian's famous query, "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" reflected the sentiments of many in the early Christian community. Influenced greatly by the eschatological hopes for an imminent return of the Lord, many early Christians basically posited a fundamental disjunction between Christianity and the world, rejecting everything of a this-worldly nature. In H. R. Niebuhr's famous classificatory scheme, such a posture represents the "Christ against culture" option, an option still accepted today by certain Protestant groups within the Anabaptist tradition.² While nothing remotely like the sociological perspective existed during Tertullian's lifetime, any contemporary Tertullian-like logic would clearly reject any positive role for sociology or the social sciences in promoting an authentic Christian apostolate.

The Catholic Church, at least since the third century A.D., has rejected the "Christ against culture" option, accepting in its place a model whose goal is to "restore all things in Christ." The Catholic model is one that affirms a central role for the exercise of reason, including the reason that operates in sociological analysis, provided that the reasoning process is sound (e.g. "right reason") and consistent with the natural law, Catholic social doctrine, and Holy Scripture, all under the guidance of Magisterial thinking. A key Catholic task, simply put, is first to transform and then to use sociological analysis in order to further the universal mission of the Church, geared as it is to the salvation of all souls and to the spiritual and material betterment of all humanity. The suggested Catholic appropriation of sociology (and the social sciences) sets itself off in sharp relief not only from Tertullian's rejection of reason but, more importantly, from two contemporary and far more powerful alternatives to the Catholic understanding of both

faith and reason and their relationship. These are the positivistic model, whose original proponent was Auguste Comte (1798-1851), and the ideological/political model, which is exemplified by Karl Marx (1818-1883).³ While Comte rejected faith in favor of "reason," Marx rejected both for politics.

COMTE AND THE POSITIVISTIC TEMPTATION

It was Auguste Comte, the French social thinker, who coined the term "sociology." Sociology, as the "study of human association," or, more simply as the "study of groups," was linguistically derived from the Latin *socius*, "being with others," and the Greek *logos*, "study of." Because he created the term, Comte is considered by many to be the founder of the discipline.

Among many other contributions, dubious or not, Comte is widely known for his unilinear evolutionary schema for historical development. History, in short, is marked by three stages: (1) the religious or mythic, (2) the theological and philosophical, and (3) the scientific or positive. A child - indeed, a principal cheerleader - of the Enlightenment, Comte was an atheist who disavowed any belief in the existence and importance of the supernatural in everyday life. Put another way, Comte was simultaneously predicting the obsolescence of the saliency of traditional religion for humanity *and* actively promoting its demise. Comte is also considered one of the key founders of the philosophy of *positivism*, the school of thought that claims that the only reality that exists is the natural world, the world that the scientist can see, feel, hear, and touch, and about which universal predictions can be made.

Moreover, Comte not only viewed traditional religious and modern scientific understandings of reality in a "zero-sum" manner (as scientific knowledge grows, religious knowledge shrinks), but posited that science itself would become the true or rational "religion of humanity." For Comte, then, science was not merely "a means to an end" (e.g. using scientific technology to help implement the Christian golden rule of loving and helping one's neighbor). Rather, science was itself the end -



"Antiochus Persecutes the Israelites,"
from Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld,
Die Bible in Bildern

the philosophy, worldview, and alleged moral order that represented the transcendent truth to which all must conform. Comte would thus have no problem with the Christian procedural claims that "the truth will set you free" and Pope John Paul II's requirement in *Veritatis Splendor* that "freedom must be linked to truth." For Comte, however, truth is to be found not in theological discourse but only in scientific endeavor.

Comte was no believer in democracy. An admirer of the inevitability and desirability of hierarchy in human relations, he believed that if science provided the rational blueprint for human existence, society must be led by those best able to decipher and implement the truths of scientific understanding. Societal decisions should be protected from the "uneducated" and therefore not be mediated through mass political participation. For Comte, there is no common natural law written into the heart, and accessible, in principle, to all. Rather, such major decisions should be decided by a relatively small group of scientists, technocrats, and intellectuals. Comte, a former Catholic, rejected the content and substance of his original faith, but appreciated the inherently hierarchical organizational structure of the Catholic Church, and wanted to substitute a magisterium of scientists for the magisterium of those who stand in apostolic succession. In many respects, Comte and Marx are the key inspirations for what sociologists like Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger refer to as the secular "new knowledge class"⁴ (what might better be termed the "gnostic" class) of intellectuals and technocrats (like Comte) and social activists and bureaucrats (like Marx).

Catholic social thought, obviously, does not find a comfortable home in the land of such a crude positivism. Any Catholic, scholar or otherwise, would view the claim that the only reality that exists is purely natural to be false, one which constitutes a profound spiritual and intellectual impoverishment - an example of what Eric Voegelin considered evidence of the "contracted existence" experienced by too many "sophisticated" inhabitants of the modern world. Furthermore, positivism, while arguing for objectivity (albeit a truncated and limited objectivity at best), depicts the human actor - and more to the point

of this essay, the individual scholar - as void of free will, creativity, and responsibility. As such, the positivistic sociologist inspired by Comte denies that the philosophical and personal values of the scholar impact the research enterprise. Sociology, in other words, is “value-free” for the positivist. The Catholic scholar, on the contrary, would argue that while the goal of sociology is to produce objective social research, one method in attaining objectivity or at least closely approximating it is through consciously discerning precisely how one’s philosophical, theological, and value commitments impact the intellectual pursuit of truth. And, even more importantly, the *nature* of the philosophical values that one incorporates into social scientific analysis matters also: values derived from natural-law thinking are going to contain much more “truth content” than those found within, for example, radical feminist thought.

For instance, it would not be hard to make an impressive, empirically-based argument that intact nuclear families produce far more salutary results - for husbands, wives, children, and for the general civilization - than do other alleged “alternatives in family living.” The starting point of such an empirically-based analysis posits, either explicitly or implicitly, a comparison of Catholic versus radical feminist philosophical values and presuppositions. For the radical feminist, the basic unit of analysis is the individual who is viewed as a complete and self-sufficient entity. For the Catholic, the basic unit of analysis is the family, composed of organically related parts that are both dependent and interdependent with each other. For the Catholic and unlike the feminist, “nature counts,” as men and women - equal in dignity but specializing in different spheres of human existence and activity - are viewed as incomplete without each other. Marriage as the core of the family unit is seen by the Catholic, literally, as a “natural” institution and not as a naked arena for class and gender warfare.

In the process of conducting his research, the Catholic sociologist is expected (1) to explicitly identify the values and assumptions chosen, (2) explain how the chosen values and assumptions have impacted the research process and (3) openly and honestly engage the findings and methodology of the competing secular al-

ternative. In such an engagement, the Catholic sociologist, who bases his investigation on a realist philosophy, can be confident that his findings will be more in accord with truth than that of his ideological counterparts.

MARX, THE DENIGRATION OF THE INTELLECTUAL, AND THE ASCENDANCY OF THE POLITICAL

Like Comte, Marx was an atheist. Like Comte, Marx embraced a totally encompassing vision of reality that was intended to provide a secular substitute for religion. For Marx, religion represented not merely ignorance and superstition but an “opiate for the masses,” a consciously designed ideology intended to keep the haves in their place and, correspondingly, to promote the class interests of those who own (and, for later Marxists, control) the wealth and the means of economic production.

Like Comte’s, Marx’s theory of social change was teleological in nature. For Comte, who stressed the changing role of ideas in history, social change of a relatively peaceful nature would inevitably lead to some kind of scientific utopia. For Marx, violent class struggle would inexorably lead to some materialistic version of the return to the Garden of Eden. Though Marx posited that the development of a Communist or socialist world order was an inevitable occurrence, it was

subject to influence by the actions of the various “handmaidens of the revolution.” Marx, in short, advocated a “unity of theory and praxis” on the part of his revolutionary leaders, a unity, moreover, in which theory is subordinate to and serves praxis. Social change must not merely be understood but, more importantly, channeled to the desired revolutionary end; the key task is not to understand the world but to change it.

Marx went even further in his denigration of intellectual activity by arguing that there are no ultimately eternal truths and universal concepts but that all thought is relative and grounded in particular moments in time and space. More specifically, ideas are mere reflections of the class interests of their proponents. A Marxist sociology, then - much like, say, a radicalized feminist


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sociology - assumes that the political cause in question is of more importance than the integrity of the scholarly process. It also acknowledges that the philosophy and personal values of the researcher affect the nature of the research process, making the goal of objectivity an impossible one. This camp argues that if all intellectual activity is ideology and the political cause is supreme, then "objectivity" as a goal must be viewed only as a clever rationalization and intellectual tool used by the guardians of the socio-economic status quo to stamp out the virtuous utopian impulse. Marx's denigration of the intellect was one of many powerful modern influences leading up to such present-day academic absurdities as "deconstructionism." It is the case, of course, that Catholicism, with its belief in an objective moral order and the power of the mind to grasp truth, rejects this ideological "post-modern" model.

Marxism was significantly incorporated into the profession of sociology during the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Marxist sociology is still an important part of contemporary sociology, although its influence is perhaps waning as the now gray-haired "tenured radicals" of that period retire or exit the scene. Conversely, the rejection of reason and rationality and the related revolt against authority that characterized that era produced a retrenchment of positivism, crude or otherwise. In sociology, this retrenchment may very well prove temporary, given the exalted role that is granted to anyone or anything that can plausibly lay claim to scientific legitimation in a materially prosperous culture of ever-escalating expectations.



ONE ALTERNATIVE: MAKING SOCIOLOGY CATHOLIC

The Catholic sociological approach fits in neither with the Marxist nor with the positivistic model of sociological research. Accepted by Marxist thought is the claim that the "cause" (in the case of Catholicism, the salvation of souls) is ultimately more important than any scholarly effort. Rejected by the Marxists, however, is the claim that objectivity in social research neither can nor should be sought after. It *can* be sought because *reason, albeit operating through culture*, has the ability to transcend ulti-

mately any ideological moorings and reach a transcendent Truth. It *should* be sought - contra Tertullian and Marx - because the pursuit of truth is a good in and of itself. Accepted by the positivist camp, on the other hand, is the claim that objectivity can and should be the goal of the sociologist, qua scholar. This group, however, denies that the scholar, with his worldview, is an active participant in the research enterprise.

When viewed properly, sociology is not a completely autonomous discipline; the empirical facts about the social world that the sociologist is concerned with discovering and gathering are influenced by values and philosophical assumptions. The scholar should approach the quest for an objective understanding of social reality by recognizing and taking into account the way in which values and philosophical assumptions impact the various stages of the research process. There are at least five such impacts. They are: (1) the *motivation*, or, in many cases, the *ideological agenda* of the individual researcher; (2) what the researcher considers (or doesn't consider) to be either a worthy *research project* or *social problem* to be alleviated; (3) the *analytical concepts, definitions, and theoretical frameworks* that the researcher either creates or decides to employ; (4) how the researcher chooses to *interpret* data or, conversely, what aspects of social reality the researcher considers irrelevant in analysis; and (5) what the researcher considers to be possible social *policy* recommendations.

For example, regarding the first issue of motivation, it should be obvious that progressivist Catholic sociologists like Rev. Andrew M. Greeley desire to substitute an idolatrous embrace of the American nation for allegiance to the historic faith of the Catholic religion. Equally obvious is the reality that many secular sociologists are motivated by a desire to destroy the very same traditional nuclear family that is assumed in *Familiaris Consortio* to be the natural form of mankind. And it is all too apparent that many neo-conservative sociologists are interested in providing rationalizations for the leaders of corporate America who, in turn, are motivated in their thinking and actions by a desire to maximize profits and are largely indifferent to the needs of workers for gainful and dignified employment. Conversely, a rightly-conceived motivation should be apparent in the case of Catholic sociologists applying their skills to the pro-life movement. These sociologists are motivated by their respect for truth and an objective moral order and love love for all of God's creation, including the most defenseless.

Regarding the second issue of what is defined as an important research project, many progressive Catholic scholars and elites do not see a crisis in the way doctrine and catechesis are taught in Catholic schools, parishes, and seminaries; more still do not accept the Church's teaching on homosexuality and birth control. Indeed, many secular sociologists do not consider widespread abortion and euthanasia to be "social problems." **How many progressive Catholic or secular sociologists would consider it worthwhile to study empirically the salutary effects of Natural Family Planning on marriage?** Or, for that matter, how many are truly open to uncovering the deleterious effects of many sex education courses?

Regarding the concepts, definitions, and theories sociologists choose to employ, it is clear that many progressive Catholic and secularist scholars select theoretical frameworks that emphasize the inevitability of conflict and exploitation in society and in social relations over those that stress order, interdependence, and complementarity. Such models often exaggerate or disproportionately focus on what goes wrong in marriages and families or hide the fact that family dysfunctions are far more likely to be produced by so-called "alternatives in family living" rather than by intact nuclear families. Progressive Catholic thinkers tend to view legitimate authority in the Church not as an expression of love and fidelity to Christ but as the crude and immoral exercise of naked power. Secular and progressive Catholic thinkers also tend to accept uncritically those theoretical frameworks (e.g. Marxism, Freudianism, feminism, deconstructionism) that marginalize any affirmation of the supernatural. Similarly, they tend to embrace models positing the human actor as *homo economicus*. How many secular and progressive Catholic sociologists, conversely, make reference to the idea of natural law and to such concepts as personalism, subsidiarity, and solidarity? Linguistic definitions, relatedly, are also very important to analyze.

Progressive Catholics tend to wrap up social justice issues in socialistic lingo and tend to accept broad (and unfair) definitions of such terms as "homophobia," "racism," and "anti-Semitism."

Regarding the fourth issue of interpretation, many progressive Catholic and secular sociologists choose to emphasize the alleged "liberating" consequences for

women of full participation in the labor force while conveniently ignoring the empirical evidence regarding the negative emotional and physical consequences for children exposed excessively to day care centers. They would also legitimize what is, in actuality, pathological "life-style alternatives in family living" while cavalierly dismissing the destruction ushered forth by an increasingly "fatherless America." Conversely, it is much more likely that orthodox Catholic sociologists would lampoon the claims that divorce, especially where children are involved, is an uncontested "natural right" and that the children of divorce do not suffer negative emotional and economic consequences.

Finally, regarding public policy, Catholic sociologists would be far less apt to suggest social reforms for the American Republic that assume either the capitalist image of "autonomous man" or the socialist claim that the State is the ultimate authority in earthly affairs. Put another way, a society informed by Catholic social policy would allow neither "assisted suicide" as an individual "right," nor a government-engineered eugenics program. Putting the issue of the impact of values and philosophical assumptions on the research process in a more positive light, it can be stated that, in principle, sociology itself can be made more Catholic through the incorporation of valid truths and philosophical assumptions that are either Catholic or are consistent with the Faith. The calling of a "Catholic sociology," then, is:

- 1) to provide objective social research;
- 2) to assist the Catholic Church in the joint tasks of a) understanding how surrounding social forces affect the Faith and b) reconstructing the social order along Christian principles;
- 3) to apply, where appropriate, Catholic principles and a Catholic sensibility to the existing body of sound social scientific theory, concepts, and methods; and
- 4) to engage in a thorough public intellectual exchange.

Regarding the first point, a Catholic sociology rejects all forms of "ideological" or "politically correct" thought, that is, thought concerned with supporting the material interests of any group by distorting a truthful depiction of social reality. It accepts the claim that there is an objective social order, the understanding of which can be closely approximated through the critical application of reason.

Regarding the second point, a Catholic sociology can assist legitimate ecclesiastical leadership in at least two ways. The first is in the understanding of how social and historical processes and events impact developments within the Church. The second is by suggesting a range of acceptable social policies and programs geared to both Church and society that are universal in import and in accord with Catholic social doctrine.

Regarding point three, Catholic sociology accepts the claim that some substantial part of the secular sociological tradition is valid and useful. Analogous to the argument that the light of the Gospel as mediated through the Church's Magisterium perfects the natural reasoning power of the pagan, a Catholic sociology believes that the incorporation of distinctive Catholic principles (e.g. subsidiarity, personalism, solidarity) and the influence of a general Catholic worldview can serve as a leaven to sociology as it presently exists.

Regarding point four, Catholic sociology rejects the notion that all that is necessary for an immediately resurrected sociology profession is the simple and mechanical substitution of the "right" Catholic values for the "wrong" secular values. If a Catholic sociology is to become a successful tool for both substantive under-

standing and evangelization, it must actively confront, through constant replication, frank comparison, and honest and open analysis, the countervailing values, theories, concepts, methodologies, findings, and social policy recommendations of secular sociology. The Church's stance vis-a-vis secular sociology must be the stance she has historically taken toward the world: reject error, search for compatibilities, co-opt when useful, and create anew when necessary.

Hopefully, such a frank and public intellectual exchange between secular and Catholic sociology will move in the direction of institutionalizing a universal theoretical framework for the sociology based on the natural law⁶ but also one consistent with Holy Scripture and a Sacred, yet evolving, Church Tradition. At the very least, the establishment of Catholic perspectives in sociology would guarantee the Church a presence both within the intellectual marketplace and those arenas in which public policy is forged. The ultimate goal, however, is for a fully developed and articulated Catholic sociology and social science to serve as an important vehicle for the social reconstruction of American society, a sociology derived from, or at least consistent with, the principles of Catholic social doctrine.⁷



NOTES

1 This paper represents a revision of my "Introduction: What Hath Social Science to do with Catholicism?: Tertullian Revisited," 1-11, in my volume *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001). It was presented at the conference, "Catholicism and the Social Sciences," co-sponsored by the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, Ave Maria College, and Ave Maria Law School, and held on March 25, 2000, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

2 H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

3 The interpretations of Comte and Marx represent my own synthesis of the commentaries on them found in Lewis A. Coser's *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, Second Edition, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1977) and in Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger's *Sociology: A Biographical Approach*, Second Edition, (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

4 See Peter L. Berger, "The Worldview of the New Class: Secularity and its Discontents" in *The New Class*, ed. B. Bruce-Briggs (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1979). See how Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger discuss and concretely apply the term in their volume, *The War Over the Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).

5 For my analysis of the significant differences that exist between secular and Catholic sociological interpretations of the family, see "Secular Sociology's War Against Familiaris Consortio and the Traditional Family: Whither Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Sociology?" in *The Church and the Universal Catechism*, ed., Rev. Anthony J. Mastroeni, (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, 1992).

6 John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 18.

7 The Society of Catholic Social Scientists, established in 1992, was created with this end in mind. For information and material on this Society, write to Dr. Joseph A. Varacalli, Department of Sociology, Nassau Community College, Garden City, NY 11530.