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CHRISTIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE AS A VOCATION - THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THEORY

Why is it that a Christian world-view has failed to have much of a powerful scholarly influence, even among Christians?

Any explanation of this can never assume neutrality with respect to the underlying religious orientation of Christian theory. It is not sufficient to state that many Christians are 'knocked sideways' when they start out on a course in biology, sociology, philosophy or jurisprudence. Nor is it satisfactory from a systematic scientific viewpoint to commence a discussion on the Christian view with the assertion "Few know how to approach the subject in a Christian way." As hard-sell slogans employed by reputedly Christian publishers such theses can never philosophically uncover why the Christian world-view has failed to catch on. Any work claiming to represent the Christian view will have to deal with this problem if it is going to claim to be a systematic presentation.

It may be argued that this problem is of such a general character that it will be dealt with implicitly and it is better that we leave it alone since such a philosophical confrontation can only lead to a fragmentation among those who explicitly hold to a Christian world-and-life view. It might be suggested that ultimately this problem can only be resolved by the Christian theorist in the confines of his own heart, and thus he should repent of his previous error in which he rejected the Christian world-and-life view. Meanwhile in the external realm the Christian theorists should join forces in their communal allegiance to the Christian world-and-life view; by so doing they help in the public promotion of a truly Christian view. However the importance of this question is exhibited by the demand that it be openly faced and answered in explicit terms. Why is the Christian view of scholarship such a problem? What philosophy has undergirded the articulation of various Christian social perspectives?

Any Christian claiming to set forth a Christian view must recognise that in his formulations he may in fact be denying the very view he purports to be setting forth notwithstanding all his good intentions. But that is not all. Notwithstanding all the good intentions that may lie beneath a Christian theoretical contribution the thrust of any particular argument in its Christian sense, may be diverted, may be circumscribed, may be blunted, if in the actual formulation of his theory the Christian theorist fails to recognize how a radically Christian theory challenges at the heart the stated policies of the many fundamentalist-evangelical-reformed scholarly ventures which have accommodated themselves in one way or another to denominational traditions and their theologies.

We come back to the original question and note that the Christian world-view has failed to have a powerful influence upon the work of those Christians who appear at times to be most committed to a Christian view of scholarship, because their method is based in a desire to show how their theoretical reflections are compatible with some denominational tradition.

The manner in which the discipline of sociology is approached by David Lyon in Christians and Sociology (IVP 1975) is an example of a work by a sensitive and sincere Christian academic whose careful and scholarly approach does not openly broach the question of the weakness of the Christian scholarly contribution. An analysis of his book can, however, help us to discern philosophically why a radically Christian approach continues to be such a problem with those who identify themselves as evangelical-reformed Christians.

In trying to make sociology fit in with the framework of relevance of Christian students, many professional evangelical-reformed academics, and this includes Lyon, come to place a very heavy emphasis upon the life and work of the former Dutch Statesman, Abraham Kuyper. (1837 - 1920) With Kuyper's teaching of sphere sovereignty it is implied that we can see the emergence, perhaps for the first time in the modern age, of a comprehensive Christian world-view. This teaching can furnish us with the necessary insight that can function as a basis for discussion of the anticipated Christian theoretical approach to modern society.¹

We return again to the question: Why has a Christian world-view failed to 'catch on' especially if, as Lyon and others state, works do exist which set forth the Christian position with such clarity? Of course it could be said that Humanists dominate the schools of learning and thus hold a monopoly in the market place of ideas. This may be so, but it does not deal with the problem by showing why the Christian view is so weak in the idea-market-place nor does it explain how the Humanistic view has come to hold such predominance. Of course it could be said that the failure is due to human sinfulness since non-Christians will by virtue of their wilful disobedience suppress the truth. But it must be acknowledged that some Humanists seem to go further towards accepting a Christian world-view than do some Christians. They at least accept that a Christian world-view exists whilst rejecting it for themselves and are even willing to admit the possibility of a Christian philosophy coinciding with that world-view.²

1. David Lyon Christians and Sociology IVP 1975 (C&S) p.90 where he refers to Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism Eerdmans 1931: "Kuyper shows clearly the relationship between the Bible, Christian Faith and one's world-view." This is at least questionable given the great conflicts of interpretation over Kuyper's works, see e.g. S.U Zuidema "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper" in Communication and Confrontation, Van Gorcum, 1971.
2. see e.g. S.S. Wolin Politics and Vision (1961) p.192. Student Marxists I come across concede this and are even willing to talk in terms of a common minority status with Christian theory. The stimulating point is that an antithetical opposition between these two minority positions is recognized in some Marxists quarters.

Some Christians explicitly reject that such a thing as a truly Christian philosophy is possible, and even given its (logical) possibility, implicitly or explicitly deny its desirability.

Lyon identifies his approach with those who on the level of world-view,⁴ epistemological assumptions, and theological insight, have articulated what he considers to be a beginning. A beginning is signalled by a provisional statement of opening orientation. Lyon explains that basically his intention is to point the way to a further articulation of a Christian world-view. Though the content of the intention is quite distinct I am reminded of the method of Max Weber at this point. When in developing his own systematic approach to the study of modern society Weber insisted that discussion of methodological matters were always to be considered as provisional. The literary form which these discussions take is a part of this incompleteness, such that the methodology employed in writing about socio-cultural phenomena coincides with the incomplete form which sociological methodology must always assume. This is not to say that provisional papers are ipso facto involved in a Weberian type methodology - in a sense all writings have a provisional character expressive of their creaturality - and it would require further information and analysis to ascertain what 'provisionality' means in the present case. The key question is: is the provisionality of writing about sociology to be explained by and incorporated into a theoretical analysis of the method employed in social science?

By getting in on this level, Lyon suggests that Christians embarked upon a course in sociological analysis and theorizing will be able to hold onto their faith whilst dealing with the real world and thus contribute to the further development of the Christian world-view.¹⁰ This is a matter of Christians being unashamed of the Biblical world-view, by standing up for their Christian presuppositions in the sociological arena.¹¹

Lyon's sociology however, is, in my view, faulty. Its fault lies not only in the way that he approaches the subject, but also in the very details of his theory which he invokes to justify his claim that his is a Christian approach.

3. see e.g. J. Kleinig "Philosophy and Faith" Interchange 14, 1973 p. 117 - 126.
M. Jeeves "Thinking: a perennial problem in Psychology" Social Research 41:3 1974
B.V. Hill Called to Teach - the Christian presence in Australian Education Angus and Robertson 1971
J.R.W. Stott Your Mind Matters: the place of the mind in the Christian life. IVP 1972.
D.M. MacKay Humanism: Positive and Negative IVP 1966
N. Woltersdorff "The Christian and Philosophy" Calvin Forum May 1955
4. Abraham Kuyper.
5. In his provisional paper Reciprocity and Responsibility in Sociology Toronto Institute of Christian Studies, 1977, Lyon refers to J. Pecker Knowing God Hodder, 1975.
6. In C&S reference is made to G.C. Berkouwer Man, The Image of God IVP 1973. This work is a severely abridged version of De Mens het Beeld Gods Kok, Kampen, 1957.

I would explain this basic criticism by first outlining what I understand concerning the Humanistic sociological perspective to which Lyon has accommodated his own theorizing. The Humanistic perspective is found in a variety of forms and Lyon is particularly interested in what he calls the 'non-determinist' perspective.¹² At the heart of this approach, with which the names of Alfred Schuetz and Peter Berger are closely associated, is the idea that the experience of everyday-life is properly to be understood as a naive theory, always imperfectly articulated, which concerns the relation between the 'I' and 'the world'.¹³ In Max Weber for example, to whom Schuetz and Berger acknowledge their debt, the relation is one of a dialectic which is construed as an ongoing problem forcing modern man to make (his own) sense of the world. For the purposes of theory 'the world' is to be considered as meaning-less until man has made it meaning-ful. A world-view is the constructive response of man, the communal individual, to this dialectical tension between 'I' and 'the world'. A truly rational world-view results when one is able to stand up and face the increasingly disenchanting nature of things.

Not everyone is able to attain to a truly rational world-view.¹⁵ What we are dealing with here is the implied assertion that not everyone experiences the world in the same way. The variety of world-view has to be taken into account and the irreconcilability between world-views openly faced. But, the process, the method by which men come to construct the world for their own purposes is considered to be essentially the same for all people. The resulting view of those who attain to a truly rational stand is subjected to the same process that other views are subject to. Theoretical reflection is involved in the same sort of process though it presumes that a special attitude has been achieved¹⁶ by the theorist - his attitude is what of the disinterested observer. In this context it is sociology's unique task that it has been destined

7. See Reciprocity and Responsibility (R&R) especially the bibliography and works mentioned therein by Goudzwaard (1975) Heddendorf (1972). Olthuis (1975) and Poythress (1976). The provisional paper I note is not to be considered as a definitive work as so in my review I have considered his 1975 publication. I believe my criticisms remain valid for the 1977 work.
8. see C&S "Preface: A Christian approach" also chapter 6 "Christian Sociology" and "Conclusion" R&R.
9. see Guy Oakes "The Verstehen Thesis and the foundations of Max Weber's methodology" History and Theory vol. 16, No.1 1977, p. 11 -29.
10. see Chapter 1 "Sociology and Christian Faith" C&S
11. C&S p. 88
12. C&S p. 68
13. see Johan vander Hoeven The Rise and the Development of the Phenomenological Movement ARSS Hamilton, Canada 1965 espec. p. 22-32. M. Farber ed. Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl Greenwood NY 1968 (PSS)
14. see Max Weber "Science as a vocation" (1918) in H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills From Max Weber - essays in sociology OUP NY 1946 p.129-156 espec. p. 155 (GM).
15. Max Weber GM p. 155 "To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, with-

by our rationalized civilization to realize more clearly the nature of these world-view conflicts¹⁷ and to uncover the underlying 'inter-subjective' process of world-view construction. Sociology then, uncovers that which is the same for everybody and uncovers the reasons why the world is not seen in the same way by everybody. What is common is not the contents of the world-view, nor the structure of the constructed world-view. Rather it is the subjective act, the outward activity by which man makes (his own) use of the world. This subjective and external activity may indeed be controlled by an inner demon, and this inner demon will presumably differ from person to person. But science, truly rational science will, Weber acknowledges, focus relentlessly and repeatedly¹⁸ upon the external and subjective act for its socio-cultural data.

In this sociological perspective, meaning for the individual in society involves the active construction of a more or less viable world-view. The inner world of conscious subjectivity and the outer world of objective activity is brought together in the constructive act, which is in itself, at one and the same time, conscious and active, subjective and objective. Thus the construction of the objective world (technology, differentiation into discrete social roles, theology and art) is inseparable from the construction¹⁹ of the subjective world-view (clarity, certainty, sense of vocation).

According to Lyon's method by which he highlights the importance of assumptions for theory as the means by which a Christian theory about human society can 'get started' we would expect that he would have

15. (cont.) out the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened wide and compassionately for him. After all they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he has to bring his 'intellectual sacrifice' - that is inevitable. If he can really do it, we shall not rebuke him."
16. see Alfred Schuetz PSS p. 194 "All science presumes a special attitude of the person carrying on science- it is the attitude of the disinterested observer."
17. GM p. 149.
18. GM p.155-156 esp. the concluding lines: "We shall set to work and meet the 'demands of the day' in human relations as well as in our vocation. This however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibres of his very life." In this it would be unfair to criticize Weber as a positivist and it would be more accurate to observe that he theorizes with a positivistic conception of factuality. It is not in the facts of contents or of structures, but in the process of 'coming to terms with the world' where his positivistic side becomes apparent.
19. GM p. 150-156 : A book which systematically discusses the nature and place of sociological thought with a prolegomenal discussion of the distinction between "society as objective reality" and "society as subjective reality" is:
Alfred Schuetz The Phenomenology of the Social World (PSW) Northwestern Univ. Press 1967 trans from the German Der sinnhafte Aufbau der Sozialen Welt Vienna 1932 by G. Walsh and F. Lehnert
Also: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann The Social Construction of Reality, Penguin 1966; deals with the subject in a comparable manner and is heavily dependent upon Schuetz.

confronted this (neo-Kantian) position on the level of its appeal to assumptions. But he does not contact the neo-Kantian position here at the very heart of its theory, and he is unable to do this because he operates too much in terms of the neo-Kantian philosophical view of what constitutes assumptions! Lyon simply asserts that the 'non-determinists' hold non-Christian assumptions about the nature of man, or fall into them because they have no objective basis for their theory. Lyon implies that the non-determinist theory has a one-sided individually oriented subjective approach to meaning. This is why, in his opinion, they do not take the objective side of God and His Revelation into account; though he is willing to admit that on the subjective side its views do have some validity and should be utilized to the full by Christians in their sociological articulations when they discuss responsibility and accountability.²⁰

The theoretical position, which Lyon tries to surmount with a Christian interpretation proposes that a theoretical synthesis between the objective side of man's life with the subjective side is the methodological way by which theory can get closer to the actual states of affairs involved in every-day life. This synthesis is brought about by the human act.²¹

In setting forth their position in these terms 'non-determinists' have however, already accounted for Lyon's theoretical construction and can validly, in their own terms, logically discount Lyon's attempt to present a distinct theoretical approach which claims to be Christian. They could well observe, and with good reason, that all Lyon is proposing is a sociology based in a supposed 'objectivity'. Lyon's appeal to an orthodox theology as his basis gives credence to such a criticism. At this point Lyon seems to imply that it is a matter of non-Christian assumptions 'entering in'. He implies that the logical discounting of his position from the other side is due to the non-determinists inability to enter into a discussion as to which assumptions can and should validly underlie the theory. Lyon does not appear to have theoretically appreciated the non-determinist position at the point where they have already accounted for his appeal to assumptions. The 'non-determinist' theory is indeed a theory about assumptions and it cannot be simply understood as based upon some (hidden) assumptions. At this point they have Lyon's appeal to the 'objective-side-of-things' well and truly nailed. Assumptions, from the neo-Kantian philosophical positions, are firm expressions of man making his own sense of the world.²² Lyon's appeal to a supposed objective basis for assumptions in God and His Revelation does not allow him to sufficiently criticize the neo-Kantian theory of assumptions. This is because he operates with

20. C&S p. 68.

21. Alfred Schuetz PSW p. 38 ff and p. 57 ff

22. Alfred Schuetz PSS p. 180

" the world has meaning and significance first of ally by me and for me."

essentially the same view of assumptions; he criticizes the 'non-determinist' position from the standpoint of his own theory of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. He has not articulated a theory of this relationship, based upon a Christian understanding of man's place in the world.

The 'non-determinist' philosophical intention is to penetrate beneath the level of assumptions to those states of affairs in which the 'structure of relevance', expressed in the assumptions, makes sense. At this point in the contact between Lyon and the 'non-determinists', Lyon diverges and tries to assert that an objective basis for his assumptions has been found, but not before he has already accepted the non-deterministic view of what constitutes assumptions. Assumptions, in Lyon's view, are expressive of man's responsibility and accountability. It is here that the neo-Kantian urge to establish philosophy as a rigorous science begins to assert itself, and Lyon tries to counter that by an alternative theological method. In so doing Lyon does not critically expose the basic thrust involved in the 'non-determinist' position. Indeed it is difficult to see how he could expose the basically Humanistic idea involved in the non-determinist posture, since he insists that from this position we have basic concepts emerging in the realm of sociological discourse which should be utilized in any Christian sociology. To insist upon the Christian 'content' of these concepts, as they are utilized in Christian sociology misses the point, since the theory of concept construction herein implied is based upon a non-Christian view of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Lyon is unable to counter the critique of those who hold consistently to a 'non-determinist' position, which radically discounts the very possibility of the distinctive view which Lyon would like to put forward. If Lyon as a sociologist holds to a non-determinist view of world-view construction will he be able to set forth a Christian world-view and make himself understood to those who whilst not claiming any objective basis for their theories nevertheless hold to a theory of the constructed nature of objectivity? To Weber it is only the truly heroic man who can stand amidst the historical turmoil and insist upon the ideal of objectivity for his theorizing. Lyon's appeal to theology for the objective basis, upon which his theorizing is to be understood, is methodologically compatible with Weber's theory of world and life views, and prompts us to ask whether a distinctively Christian theory of world-and-life views can ever be forthcoming if this method is followed. Can an appeal to Abraham Kuyper or a tradition of twentieth century reformed scholasticism do the trick?²⁴

The claim that there is a distinctive Christian sociology is, with Lyon, a claim which appears to bring together two sides of his basic orientation. He has a theoretical intention to be consistent with his claim to be a Christian social theorist, and he has a Christian intention to see sociological theory in terms of his faith. Faith is introduced into sociological theory by way of Christian presuppositions. The distinctiveness of Christian sociology is understood as established through an appeal to the distinctiveness of the Christian presuppositions guided by faith which in Lyon's view should underlie the theory. Lyon does not assert the distinctiveness of Christian sociology by way of a

23. Max Weber, in G & M, p.155

24. P.G. Schrottenboer "Is the Bible objective revelation?"
RES Theological Forum vol.v No.1 April 1977.

discussion of the distinctively Christian understanding of theory. It is rather set forth by an appeal to the limits of human activity (i.e. faith) through which man is related to the Truth.²⁵ The emphasis when we come in Lyon to a discussion of the distinctive nature of Christian sociology is an emphasis upon moral distinctiveness of the Christian who holds the theory. We can only infer that this means that the most that a Christian can hope for is an ideological distinctiveness in his theory, which coincides with a moral distinctiveness which is the more important. In theoretical endeavour the most Christians can hope for is an ideological distinctiveness, established in debate by referring outside the realm of theory to hidden assumptions which function as moral absolutes for the individual theorist. The Christian theorist has thus got to be willing to tolerate an ambiguity in his theorizing- in theory he has to argue like an ideologist by referring to a standard outside of theoretical concern, and he also has got to continually disclaim that his faith is in any way ideological. The assumption is that in the long-term the ambiguity will somehow be ironed out when Providential decree establishes once and for all the moral distinctiveness of the Christian world-view.²⁶ Why hasn't the distinctive Christian sociology emerged? Lyon looks out on the sociological domain and concludes that it hasn't emerged historically because Christians have not taken their Christian assumptions and waged battle in this domain for the King. This may be so, but why is it so? In Lyon's thinking, no matter how much he holds onto 'Christian sociology' as an ideal, it still has failed to emerge because his manner of dealing with assumptions does not in the first instance allow for a distinctly Christian philosophical concept. Lyon gives the impression that he would like to escape from relativism by an appeal to theology. The implications of secularity for theory are supposedly short-circuited by an orthodox profession of faith couched in theoretical terms. But professions of faith are also possible objects of theoretical scrutiny. When Christian thinkers who have accommodated their theorizing to a neo-Kantian view of faith, tied to an internal/external dialectic, are confronted by the creaturely status of professions of faith, they are likely to interpret it in one of two ways : theory has the potential to unmask faith by showing how it functions in terms of an underlying process of world-view construction common to all men OR the notion of a distinctively Christian theory is rendered impossible because whatever faith may be it has nothing to do with the concerns of theory. In this second alternative, which I would suggest is the view David Lyon tends to in Christians and Sociology, theory can uncover the process of faith the manner by which a world-view is constructed, but the validity of a world-view and the faith in which it is based remain immutable. This is because it is considered that the contents of the faith are a matter of objective revelation and thus beyond the grasp of theory.

What then can we conclude? How is a distinctively Christian social theory to unfold? A truly Christian social theory will require a theoretical understanding of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in the world in which we live, and this understanding must be attained in the context of a discussion which outlines the distinctively Christian understanding of theory. Just as the Christian in his

25. C&A p. 44

26. C&S p. 88 see also p. 84 and Lyons reference to A.W. Gouldner's moral sociology: "This is exactly what we should have been doing and saying."

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faith does not need theology but finds that his very existence is utterly dependent upon Christ Jesus the True Root of Humanity, so also the Christian idea of society emerges simply through its total dependence upon the Revelation God has given to mankind in His Son. There is no need to qualify or apologize for this idea. It's comprehensive explanation in a theory of society is a major task to which the Christian social scientist is inseparably joined. There should be no doubt about it.

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