

# **Conflict and Complementarity Between Sociological and Theological Approaches to Religion**

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## **Introduction**

For many centuries scientists and theologians have debated over the relationship that should exist between their seemingly divergent fields of endeavor. Some propose that the subject matter and general methods of study utilized by scientists and theologians are in fact so divergent that they constitute “two worlds” of examination that cannot be reconciled with one another. Others, however, question both the logic and the utility of such a division, and propose that a more unified, complementary, and mutually beneficial relationship is possible between science and theology. Pope John Paul II (1988) poses this question/proposition in the following manner:

Is the community of world religions, including the Church, ready to enter into a more thorough-going dialogue with the scientific community, a dialogue in which the integrity of both religion and science is supported and the advance of each is fostered? Is the scientific community now prepared to open itself to Christianity, and indeed to all the great world religions, working with us all to build a culture that is more humane and in that way more divine? Do we dare to risk the honesty and courage that this task demands? We must ask ourselves whether both science and religion will contribute to the integration of human culture or to its fragmentation. (pp. 7-8)

An important factor that complicates this debate is that, while theology represents but one field of academic endeavor, “science” is a very broad concept that encompasses a wide range of natural, physical, and behavioral fields of study. Each distinct field of scientific examination therefore has a unique relationship to theology, and each poses its own unique set of challenges and opportunities if we are to pursue the kind of reconciliation described by the Pope. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the unique challenges and opportunities that characterize the particularly complicated relationship that exists between theology and sociology, and to discuss the potential, or lack thereof, for complementarity that exists between these two disciplines.

I propose that the relationship between sociology and theology is complicated for two basic reasons. The first is that the foci of these two disciplines in some ways overlap and conflict. Since religion (sociologically defined as “a unified system of beliefs and practices that focuses on sacred things and serves to create a community of worshipers” — Durkheim 1975) is an important component of the social world, and since the purpose of sociology is to scientifically examine the social world and its various components, sociologists have a substantial interest in examining the nature and workings of religion in all its varied forms. This interest therefore creates the opportunity for the sociologist

to, in a way, venture into the academic domain of the theologian, and vice versa. The second reason for potential interdisciplinary complications is that sociologists are often inclined to view phenomena such as “faith,” “divinity,” and even “God,” as the products of collective, subjective social perceptions, and nothing more. This stands in sharp contrast to the perspective of the theologian, who would most likely view such concepts/phenomena as being much more than simple manifestations or by-products of social interaction. The high level of secularization within the social sciences thus serves to create considerable opportunity for tension between social scientists and theologians (Milbank 1990).

In essence then, a strong tension — both epistemological and ontological in nature — is built into the relationship between sociology and theology. In order to fully understand this tension, it is useful to examine in more depth the nature of sociology, and how the three dominant paradigms within this “multiple-paradigm” discipline (conflict, structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism) differ and concur in their approaches to the question of religious faith. For while these paradigms offer radically differing perspectives on religious faith and its role in society, they also tend to share many of the foundational characteristics that serve to create tension between the two disciplines.

### **The Conflict Paradigm**

The conflict paradigm serves as the best example of how the sociological and theological perspectives on religious faith, and its role in society, may differ sharply. The conflict perspective is based largely upon the ideas of Karl Marx, whose works are well-known for their extensive critique of religion and its impact on society. Marx’s fundamental proposition regarding religion is that it is a “man-made” social construct, the origins of which lie in the primitive superstitions of pre-historic peoples. In his *Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrecht* (1842-3/1956: p. 26), he states:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man’s self-consciousness and self-awareness as long as he has not found his feet in the universe. But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the State, and society. This State, this society, produce religion which is an inverted world consciousness, because they are an inverted world ... . The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Marx therefore proposed that, in more simple or undeveloped societies (whose class divisions tend to either be minimal or non-existent), religion represents nothing more than an attempt by social inhabitants to construct meanings and achieve understandings that are beyond the grasp of the primitive intellect.

However, he argued that religion assumes a far more active and detrimental role in modern society. It becomes a tool of the upper class, by which the members of that class may come to achieve and maintain control over the lower classes. This control is achieved by creating aspirations to false hopes (such as Heaven and the afterlife) and aversions to false fears (such as Hell and sin). Indeed, Marx came to conclude that the

extent of religious faith in a given society was in truth a measure of the extent of class oppression that exists within that society (1842-3/1956: p. 27):

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Since it was therefore proposed that religion had come to have substantially detrimental impacts on the majority of society's members in this manner, Marx called on his followers to do away with that which had allowed class exploitation to occur in this disguised form (1842-3/1956: p. 27):

The abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions ... . The immediate task is to unmask human alienation in its secular form, now that it has been unmasked in its sacred form. Thus the criticism of heaven transforms itself into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

Marx's views have been influential for over a century within the discipline of sociology, but came to preeminence — and possibly dominance — during the social upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s. This period gave rise to what is now commonly referred to as the “conflict” paradigm, which was based upon the works of many theorists who sought to adapt and/or revise the works of Marx so that they might find more applicability, relevance, and meaning in the latter half of the 20th century (e.g. C. Wright Mills 1956, Ralph Dahrendorf 1959, Randall Collins 1975, to name but a few).

While the efforts of such contemporary theorists have focused primarily on examining the influence of more modern methods of class exploitation (e.g. Marcuse's examination of the influence of television and other vehicles for the conveyance of popular culture — 1964), few conflict theorists would disagree with Marx's original analysis on the negative effect religion has on its followers and on society in general. In essence, for that segment of the population that still adheres to a given religious faith, Marx's original critique of religion continues to form the foundation for the sociological utilization of concepts such as alienation (the displacement of a person from their own life activities) and false consciousness (an incorrect or absent sense of one's own placement in the socio-economic structure — Lukacs, 1922/1968). Modern Marxian theorists simply attempt to update and revise these concepts so that they may find a broader and more current application in today's society, and thereby continue to retain their relevance.

It is also important to note that, while the conflict perspective was at its peak of popularity during the late 1960s and 1970s, it remains a very powerful paradigmatic force within the discipline of sociology today. Many (and possibly most) sociologists still consider themselves to be proponents of the conflict perspective, and even those who do not may continue to accept the relevance of substantial portions of Marxian thought, and/or devote a substantial share of classroom attention to debating the perspective of

Marx (including his ideas on religion). A review of the most popular introductory texts in the discipline (Giddens 1996; Henslin 1996; Macionis 1993; and many, many others) demonstrates the considerable emphasis that mainstream sociology still places on Marx's ideas. Thus, while Marx may have been soundly discredited in political and economic terms over the last decade, his sociological discreditation has yet to materialize, and appears highly unlikely.

The continuing popularity of the conflict paradigm therefore creates a great potential for conflict between the disciplines of sociology and theology. Such is the case because an orthodox interpretation and utilization of the Marxian perspective renders all that which lies at the very heart of theology (God, divinity, religious faith, etc.) as not only false, but a social detriment, and even the product of capitalistic conspiracy. However, even if the popularity of the conflict perspective were to wane in the future, the two other popular sociological paradigms in some ways advocate a view of religion that is surprisingly similar to that advocated within this paradigm, though they tend to cast religion and its influence in a much more positive (or at least neutral) light. The Functionalist Paradigm

The radical difference between the conflict and functionalist perspectives on religion is that functionalists propose that religion is in many ways crucial to the operation of society, due to the wide range of positive social outcomes it produces.

One of the primary pioneers of the functionalist perspective was French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Durkheim observed that religion is a universal phenomenon (since it occurs in all human societies), and set out to achieve an understanding as to why this was and is the case. In his classic work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965), Durkheim concluded that society benefits in a variety of ways from the existence and operation of religion: it promotes a strong sense of community for its adherents; values and norms tend to be reinforced through their incorporation into religious doctrine; deviance and disorder are deterred as a result of this incorporation; and religious faith may serve as a strong source of emotional support and comfort during times of personal distress. He also proposed that religion is "functional" for society in that it serves as a repository for cultural and historical knowledge, and it is a means by which that knowledge may be transmitted to future generations. In ways such as these, Durkheim felt that religion plays an important role in maintaining the order of modern society. In fact, it is Durkheim's conclusion that much of the disorder of modern society is attributable to the declining influence of religion. Many modern functionalists tend to echo this sentiment, and also propose that the disorder of modern times may indeed provide fertile cultural ground for the social resurgence of religion (Wuthnow 1995).

Evidence of this proposition was documented in Durkheim's earlier work, *Suicide* (1897/1951). In this work, he credited much of the increase in personal distress (as manifested by the phenomenon of suicide) in modern society to the increase in feelings of anomie, or normlessness. The importance of religion was underscored in this study by the fact that members of religions that promoted strict adherence to doctrine, and which tended to place a strong emphasis on communal values and common morality (such as Catholicism and Judaism), tended to experience less anomie, and were therefore less

likely to commit suicide. Higher suicide rates were found within those Protestant denominations that were more loosely structured and less demanding in standards of compliance for their members. Based upon these findings, Durkheim concluded that religion was (and to current functionalists, still is) an important source of both personal and social stability, so much so that its apparent decline has been a major source of personal and social disruption.

However, in spite of the fact that functionalists place a heavy emphasis on the positive social aspects and outcomes of religious practice, like conflict theorists they tend to cast doubt on the underlying validity of religious belief in all of its various forms. In the following passage, Durkheim (1887/1972: p. 221) describes how he reconciles his views on the social need for religion with a recognition of its secular (not sacred) origins:

[I]n order to validate religion, the theologian has recourse to reasoning which is as estimable as that which the free thinker advances to refute it. We might perhaps admit that, among highly cultivated minds, beliefs have become flexible enough in order to surrender to a single proof; but it will still be recognised that this is not the case with the vast majority. Since faith results from practical causes, it necessarily continues in existence for as long as these do, whatever is the state of science and philosophy. In order to show that religion has no future, it must be shown that the reasons which made its existence necessary have disappeared; and since these reasons are of a sociological order, we must discover what change has occurred in the nature of society which from now on makes religion futile and impossible.

Religion should therefore not be disparaged (as it is from a conflict perspective), for its existence is a reflection and a product of practical social needs. However, Durkheim and many modern functionalists might well argue that this recognition of the practical social grounding of religion should in no way be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the theological validity of any religious faith. Ironically, like most Marxists, strict functionalists would view religion as a mere social construct, produced by human beings. The crucial divergence between the two stems from the fact that, where Marxists view this construct as a tool of exploitation and oppression, functionalists are far more likely to view it as a phenomenon that promotes social order and solidarity.

### **The Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm**

Unlike the conflict and functionalist perspectives, which tend to be focused on broad issues related to the structure of society (e.g. religion, the economy, the state, etc.), the interactionist perspective is more focused on the examination of so-called “micro-level” interactions in society. In other words, interactionists are more inclined to focus on interpersonal interactions, the manner by which individuals define the social situations in which they find themselves, and how such definitions may alter the nature and behavior of individuals or groups. Individual and small group perceptions and interactions thereby lie at the core of symbolic interactionism.

With this in mind, an important pioneer in the interactionist interpretation of religion and theology is Max Weber. While he is somewhat difficult to theoretically categorize, many acknowledge the strong interactionist undercurrent that runs throughout his work. Unlike Marxists or functionalists, Weber's ground-breaking research on religion was not concerned with the social benefits or detriments of religion, but with the impact of religious faith on individual thought. His research, as described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1996), demonstrates that, when individuals hold true to a given faith and incorporate the doctrines of that faith into their psychological make-up, it can dramatically shape the "life-view" of such individuals.

An important demonstration of this process occurred among the members of the Calvinist faith and some other, closely related Puritanical denominations. Weber found that a unique set of doctrinal beliefs arose among these groups. Hard work and deferred gratification were seen as strong virtues. The Calvinists also believed in predestination, and felt that economic success was an important sign from God that one was predestined for eternal salvation. The result for individuals holding these views was that their belief systems became structured so that hard work and economic success were central to their lives.

When the followers of these doctrines put their faith in such principles into practice, and did so in large numbers, the characters of the societies they inhabited changed dramatically. The nations of Northern Europe (i.e. — those most strongly influenced by Protestantism and this accompanying "work ethic") achieved much higher levels of economic achievement and success than those of Southern Europe, where the influence of Catholicism remained more powerful. In this manner, Weber displayed how the macro-level structures of society, such as religion, can have profound effects on micro-level individual processes (such as individual definitions of situations). These effects may then have a reciprocal influence back upon the macro-level composition or structure of society (resulting, in this case, in divergent economic structures between Protestant and non-Protestant nations).

The foundation for a more generalized interactionist approach towards religion is advocated by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. According to Berger and Luckmann, all of social reality is "phenomenologically" constructed through three basic social processes: 1) externalization, in which members of a social grouping share or express their subjective perspectives of some shared phenomenon with one another; 2) objectivation, in which social consensus produces an objective social reality (such as a given religious faith or belief), and; 3) internalization, in which the objectivated reality created by those having direct experience with a phenomenon is passed on to future generations through the socialization process. Since, it is argued, all of our social reality is a product of this process, it is concluded that, "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (p. 61).

This process is then specifically applied to the concept of religion by Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967). Berger asserts

that religion, like all other aspects of the social world, is a product of human construction through the process described above. All religious rituals, doctrines, symbols, etc., are the result of the externalizations and objectivations of previous generations, and become sacred through their internalization into new generations. However, while Berger feels it is important to recognize and analyze the phenomenological construction of religion by society's members, he also proposes that sociologists must be open to the possibility that such processes have been put into motion by "divine forces." He states (p. 180):

[S]ociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection, and by the same logic can have nothing to say about the possibility that this projection may refer to something other than the being of its projector. In other words, to say that religion is a human projection does not logically preclude the possibility that the projected meanings may have an ultimate status independent of man. Indeed, if a religious view of the world is posited, the anthropological ground of these projections may itself be the reflection of a reality that includes both world and man, so that man's ejaculations of meaning into the universe ultimately point to an all-embracing meaning in which he himself is grounded.

The interactionist perspective thus appears to be the most "value-neutral" in its view of religion. Rather than approaching religion as a social detriment (as was the case with the conflict paradigm) or a social protector (as was the case with the functionalist paradigm), interactionists are more content to simply examine the social processes that lie behind the structures of religion and religious faith (i.e. what processes lead people to have faith and believe in the divine, and what potential social outcomes may result from such beliefs). And, while skepticism towards the foundations of these structures still exists, some prominent interactionists (such as Peter Berger) appear to be willing to acknowledge at least the possibility that some form of "divine" inspiration may lie behind the creation of such structures.

### **Opportunities for Complementarity**

As was stated in the introduction, the purpose of this examination is to explore the relationship that exists between sociology and theology, in terms of the commonalities, conflicts, and opportunities for complementarity that exist between the two disciplines.

With regard to the issue of finding a common theme or themes between sociology and theology, it has been demonstrated that both disciplines share a common interest in matters of religion and religious faith. While this interest is the exclusive focus of the theologian, and one among many foci for the sociologist, it remains a common interest nonetheless. This shared interest represents a positive aspect in the relationship between sociologists and theologians to the extent that many sociologists acknowledge the positive influence of religion on society, and the power that religious faith can have in determining the life experiences of individuals, and even the general direction and character of society.

However, it is also clear that the potential for strain or tension arises as a result of the divergent approaches that sociologists and theologians often have with regard to religion.

For example, a theological approach to religion would likely view many/most aspects of this subject matter (God, divinity, scripture, etc.) as based on fact, and therefore deserving of a high level of respect and even reverence. For many sociologists, the notion that there is a factual foundation for religious faith is a possibility at best, and a conspiracy at worst. Religion is thus frequently regarded as being but one among many subjects requiring scientific study and examination, and should therefore be treated with the same dispassionate skepticism that all subjects of scientific examination should be treated. A common interest thus exists between the two disciplines, but the different approaches to that commonality also serve as the source of the tension that exists between them.

A major question that arises as a result of this conclusion is, is this conflict one that truly requires some form of rectification? In the introduction to this paper, it was stated that some propose that science and theology should exist as “two worlds” of academic endeavor due to their differences in method and subject matter, and that this separateness can in fact minimize the potential for conflict that exists between the two. It could be argued that the relationship between sociology and theology lends considerable credence to this principle. If a common focus coupled with perceptual divergence creates the potential for serious interdisciplinary tension, then it seems logical that this tension would be minimized by the kind of academic mutual-exclusivity and non-interference promoted by the “two worlds” approach.

However, as was also stated in the introduction, Pope John Paul II has raised concerns over the possible “fragmentation” (both academic and cultural) that could result from this “two worlds” approach. For just as it may seem logical that some degree of separation may minimize interdisciplinary conflict, it is also logical that a lack of interdisciplinary communication and dialogue may create conflict, distrust, and at least some heightening of cross-disciplinary ignorance. The tensions created as a result of such separation could result in a variety of organizational conflicts, and have profoundly detrimental effects on the quality of education received by students. This possibility is of particular concern for universities or colleges with religious affiliations, in which theological matters may be central to the mission of the institution, and to the type of education sought by the students enrolled there. The two worlds perspective also runs contrary to the ever-growing consensus in academia that there is much to be gained for students and faculty from interdisciplinary teaching and research efforts. More and more in academic life, there is a realization as to the fact that all disciplines can learn from each other, and this realization applies as much to the relationship between sociology and theology as it does to the relationship between any other two disciplines. Thus, the two worlds approach may not only be very detrimental, but also highly impractical in today’s prevailing academic culture.

With these issues in mind, a second question arises. If in fact a “two worlds” approach leads to the kinds of problems just discussed, what alternative model for interdisciplinary co-existence and cooperation may result in the minimization/rectification of this conflict? Many propose that adherence to a so-called “one world” model of interdisciplinary

interaction would result in a preferable state of academic affairs. Pope John Paul II describes the “one world” concept in the following manner:

[B]oth religion and science must preserve their autonomy and their distinctiveness. Religion is not founded on science nor is science an extension of religion. Each should possess its own principles, its pattern of procedures, its diversities of interpretation and its own conclusions. Christianity possesses the source of its justification within itself and does not expect science to constitute its primary apologetic. Science must bear witness to its own worth. While each can and should support the other as distinct dimensions of a common human culture, neither ought to assume that it forms a necessary premise for the other. The unprecedented opportunity we have today is for a common interactive relationship in which each discipline retains its integrity and yet is radically open to the discoveries and insights of the other. (pp. 8-9)

It is therefore proposed that academic disciplines must operate independently of, but interactively with, one another. In this manner, sociology and theology, or any scientific discipline and theology, may come to achieve a higher level of interdisciplinary respect and harmony, and as a result offer students a more complete educational experience.

Such an approach would have profound ramifications both for theologians and sociologists. For the theologian, this type of “interactive” relationship with sociology holds the potential to create, or enhance an openness to, sociological insights on: the social processes that have helped to shape and construct their faith; various aspects related to social structure and social psychology that lie behind the acceptance or rejection of particular faiths, or components of given faiths (for their own faith, as well as the faiths of others); the varying social outcomes — both positive and negative — that adherence to their faith produces; and many others. The examination of such issues would be highly beneficial to theologians (of any faith), in that such examination results in the expansion of knowledge about faith beyond the confines of the faith itself. The result is thus an enlightenment not only as to the nature and foundations of faith, but also to the reciprocal interaction of faith with the entire social order. Berger (1987: p. 100) describes the manner in which sociological insight could indeed form an essential foundation upon which theological insight may come to be based:

Only after the theologian has confronted the historical relativity of religion can he genuinely ask where in this history it may, perhaps, be possible to speak of discoveries — discoveries, that is, that transcend the relative character of their infrastructures. And only after he has really grasped what it means to say that religion is a human product or projection can he begin to search, within this array of projections, for what may turn out to be signals of transcendence. I strongly suspect that such an inquiry will turn increasingly from the projections to the projector, that is, will become an enterprise in anthropology. An “empirical theology” is, of course, methodologically impossible. But a theology that proceeds in a step-by-step correlation with what can be said about man empirically is well worth a serious try.

From a sociological perspective, there are several important ramifications that could result from the application of a “one world” approach to the relationship between sociology and theology. For example, all sociologists would acknowledge the importance of the on-going process of cultural construction and change (including the creation and alteration of norms, values, beliefs, etc.), and almost all sociologists would acknowledge the important direct and indirect effects that religious and theological debate has had on this process. Thus, regardless of whatever personal views an individual sociologist may have on the supernatural groundings of such debate, he/she will be far better informed as to the nature and possible outcomes of such debate if he/she is informed as to the theological processes that lie behind it. The classic works of Weber and Durkheim cited earlier attest to the utility and profound sociological insight that can be gained from such knowledge.

Beyond this issue however, a more profound challenge for sociologists would be that such a dialogue may necessitate some degree of openness to metaphysical insight and examination. While many sociologists experience a degree of discomfort with even the basic notion of metaphysical reality, others, such as Peter Berger (1969: p. 75), proclaim the fundamental worth of examining such matters:

[M]odern society has not only sealed up the old metaphysical questions in practice, but (especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries) has generated philosophical positions that deny the meaningfulness of these questions. “What is the purpose of my life?” “Why must I die?” “Where do I come from and where will I go?” “Who am I?” — all such questions are not only suppressed in practice, but are theoretically liquidated by relegating them to meaninglessness ... . The denial of metaphysics may here be identified with the triumph of triviality.

Berger concludes that human experience may expose us to a variety of “signals of transcendence” that not only point to the existence of the metaphysical, but that also provide information as to the nature or character of this realm of existence (1969, p. 52). While such signals warrant empirical, sociological examination (e.g. what cultural factors may influence the form of a given signal, what factors inhibit or promote the receptivity of a given culture to a particular signal, etc.), they also indicate a realm of examination that is beyond the scope of the sociologist, and within the realm of the theologian. A challenge within a challenge is thus presented to the sociologist, in that an openness to, or acceptance of, the possibility of metaphysical reality, would likely result in an awareness of the limited scope and/or relevance of sociological endeavor. While such an awareness may be difficult for some to accept, it may well be beneficial for the discipline of sociology if it directs us away from the kind of “triumph of triviality” described by Berger.

Finally, apart from challenges such as these, some propose that sociology and theology could work together, and benefit from one another, due to the fact that both disciplines generally share a common goal of bringing about the betterment of society (even though that betterment may be pursued differently by each discipline). Roderick Martin (1987: pp. 115-116) describes the nature of this commonality in the following manner:

Sociology and theology both share a common concern in understanding and explaining human behavior, and especially contemporary social problems. They both provide “models” for the explanation of such behavior ... the human experience which sociologists explain in terms of social forces the theologian explains in terms of parable. Both modes of explanation are valid in their own terms, and in terms of a common usefulness in providing guidelines for the future.

It is therefore proposed that, while profound differences exist between sociology and theology, this shared interest (the provision of guidelines for the resolution of a range of social problems) could serve to minimize conflict and enhance cooperation between them.

However, when examining any of these various challenges and possibilities, it must be remembered that the degree to which “one world” can ever be achieved between the disciplines of theology and sociology depends largely upon from which paradigmatic perspective a given sociologist views this debate. For an orthodox conflict theorist, it is unlikely that the need for complementarity would even be recognized — let alone achieved. For functionalists and symbolic interactionists, whose perspectives on religion are generally of a much less antagonistic nature, an openness to a “one world” approach would seem much more likely, and enhance the likelihood of its attainment.

It is also worth noting that an important irony about the sociological perspective on religious faith and its accompanying theological foundations is that sociologists tend to be very attuned to the highly subjective, and thus potentially flawed, nature of the social realities that are constructed from human interaction. However, while we are quick to see such potential flaws or weaknesses in the various belief systems of given societies (for example, in their religious faiths), it would seem that we are slow to apply such scrutiny and skepticism to the parochial set of interests that embody our own, scientific, sociological interpretation of the world. If the very fact that a social entity is a social construct calls its foundations and validity into question (a critique that many sociologists apply to religion), then sociology, and all scientific fields of endeavor, should stand equally subject to question, for science itself is unquestionably a social construct. While a recognition of this fact certainly does not necessitate the correctness of any given theological perspective, and should not deter sociologists from observing the potential flaws or shortcomings of a given faith, it should serve to heighten awareness as to our own potential for error and thus temper the assuredness with which conclusions about such observations are drawn. The growth of this kind of temperance, and the awareness of one’s own individual and disciplinary capacity for error — among sociologists and theologians — would hopefully enhance the tolerance and openness that is needed for constructive interdisciplinary dialogue to occur, and open us to the insights that each discipline may bring to the other.

Pope John Paul II (1988) stated in simple terms the benefits that can be gained from such dialogue: “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes” (p. 13). Through the utilization of sociological research and concepts and a general openness to scientific examination and insight, the

theologian can achieve this end. By being open to the possibility that there is more to life, and to society, than that which is observable and measurable (and even allowing oneself the freedom to embrace the revelations that give insights into this realm), the sociologist may be able to overcome some of the false absolutes that may have come to characterize some strains of thought within the discipline, and gain from the insights of those with expertise in such matters. If sociologists and theologians both do this, perhaps the call issued by John Paul II may be achieved, and result in the betterment of both disciplines.

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