

Creation, Redemption and Sociological Theory.

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Abstract

The present essay is an attempt to compare four sociological theories with three evangelical doctrines: creation, the fall and redemption. Where sociological theories and Christianity converge, theoretical concepts are retained, and where they diverge, theory is rejected in favor of Christian values. Biblical theology thus becomes a critical reference point for integrating sociology into a Christian worldview.

Four theories are predominant in modern sociology: conflict theory, functionalism, exchange theory, and symbolic interactionism. Conflict theory is an outgrowth of Marxist economics, emphasizing the inequalities and resulting disruption which can be produced by class differences. Functionalism can be understood as a social form of biological adaptation theory, society adapts to disruption and thus has an essentially stabilizing function. Exchange theory is a combination of behavioral psychology, emphasizing rewards and punishments, and the concept of profits in human relationships, a notion borrowed from classic economic theory. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the person's interpretation of events, as do certain cognitive theories in psychology, and holds that social reality is a human construction.

Conflict Theory

Gaede (1980) has summarized conflict theory for the purpose of contrasting it with functionalist theory. Essentially he describes society as a cluster of units, units which include upper, middle and lower classes. Because of differing interests, these units are in conflict, conflict only temporarily suppressed through the dominance of an elite, exploitive group of people. Change in society, according to this viewpoint, is the result of conflict and tends to take place suddenly.

Conflict theory has an essentially negative view of social systems (e.g. the family, education, the political system, etc.), most often perceiving them as perpetuating injustice and sometimes cruelty upon the "have-nots" of society. This is the case because social systems tend to be tools of the elite who use those systems to foster their views and protect their wealth; the advantaged exert force over the disadvantaged (Bridges, 1986). Ultimately the solution is a redistribution of power and wealth, either through revolution (e.g. a communist state) or reform (e.g. a socialist state).

To illustrate, a sociologist who holds to conflict theory might analyze racial relations in terms of wealthy whites exploiting poor blacks. His analysis would likely emphasize that the present educational and family systems work to foster racial inequality, and thus call for not only more economic assistance for blacks but also for changes in the educational and family systems (e.g. cross-district busing and integrated neighborhoods). Most

importantly, he would emphasize that improvement is possible only if these social structures are changed by coercion.

Conflict theory has been rejected by many Christians due to its association with leftist politics. Yet a number of Christian sociologists agree with its emphasis upon correcting injustice and maltreatment of the disadvantaged. They have emphasized that some of Christ's statements, as well as those of Old Testament prophets, underscore concern for the poor and unfortunate who are unable to help themselves. Yet others point to the oppression of leftist governments who have articulated Marxist thought; is left-wing cruelty any better than right wing cruelty? And has the welfare state eliminated poverty?

Functionalist Theory

Gaede (1980) contrasts conflict theory with van den Berghe's summary of functionalism. Here society is described as a system of interrelated parts, which are generally in balance. Periodically disruption and conflict occurs, but these tend to resolve themselves. Change in society comes from the adjustment of social systems to difficulties and through innovations. Change is usually gradual, not sudden as conflict theorists suggest.

Each part of society (the systems, e.g. education, politics, and so on) contributes in some way to the smooth functioning of society, or in other words is "functional." When a system is not useful it either changes or disappears, thus maintaining a balance in society (Bridges, 1986).

Functionalist theory has much in common with biological adaptation theories. Systems of society emerge, change and disappear to maintain balance, much as biology describes the maintenance of equilibrium in nature or in the human body.

A sociologist who holds to functionalism is likely to believe that gradual improvement in racial problems is more likely than rapid change. He would be more likely to emphasize the positive changes that have taken place over the last several decades, and point out that social structures have worked to help bring this about. He might articulate how inequality was at one time functional to society, but that now it is not and thus change has occurred. He would not necessarily be more racist than a conflict theorist, he would only have a different perspective of the role of social structures.

Functionalist theory, surprisingly, has received a rather negative response from Christians (Scaer, 1984, Hancock, 1983). Like both conflict and exchange theory, it is a deterministic theory which tends to exclude human freedom. In addition some Christian sociologists indicate that functionalism would lack an emphasis upon change, which is perceived as central to the Christian message. Are we not to be the "salt and light" to our society, rather than assuming that social structures will balance and correct themselves?

Exchange Theory

Exchange theory is derived from behavioral psychology, which concentrates its attention upon the behavior of people and the influence of reinforcement and punishment. Social exchange theory states that any relationship has both positive and negative aspects. When

rewards outweigh costs, the relationship tends to continue, but when costs outweigh rewards the relationship usually ends.

In an extensive overview of exchange theory, Swenson (1973) emphasizes the importance of a "payoff" in interaction, profit motivates interactions. Yet rewards are relative to frequency; the value of a particular reward declines if it occurs a great deal, while with deprivation it becomes more valuable. He also describes a number of costs in a relationship, including alternatives that one must forego to interact, fatigue, and conflicts. Relationships are sought which maximize profits (profits = rewards - costs). Research cited by Swenson indicates that leaders tend to be those who are able to perceive and meet others' needs (give rewards), while minimizing costs. Thus exchange theory would state that validating the attitudes and perspectives of group members, while avoiding disagreements, is a means to popularity.

The sociologist who holds to this theory is likely to perceive racial segregation as due to the greater rewards and fewer costs that come from interacting within racial boundaries; e.g. different norms do not have to be understood and one does not risk rejection by interacting with same race peers. He might conclude that the solution to race problems is to decrease costs and/or increase rewards for integration through tax incentives or higher paying jobs.

Exchange theory is subject to most of the criticism leveled at behavioral psychology, including charges that it is mechanistic and an oversimplified perspective of human interaction. As Swenson (1973) notes, ultimately the most degrading and most noble behavior are equally described in crass terminology of rewards and punishments. Yet a number of Christians have written in favor of behavioral technology, if not its philosophy, as being consistent with Christian ideals [see Bufford, 1981; Cosgrove, 1982; Ellison, 1977]. While certainly of value in analyzing relationships at one level, exchange theory certainly does not explain all of the complexity of human interaction.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Karp and Yoels (1986) have produced one of the most complete summaries of symbolic interactionism, with applications to nearly every area of sociology. Like Piaget's cognitive theory, symbolic interactionism states that people make social constructions of reality. These social constructions are interpretations of what occurs (similar to the "self-talk" that some cognitive psychologists speak of).

With symbolic interactionism, however, interaction requires shared definitions of social situations. As people interpret events and contexts, they confer meaning to their situations, and then react according to that interpretation. Interpretation is based upon the verbal and non-verbal symbols, which constitute the components of communication within interactions.

The sociologist who holds to symbolic interaction theory would describe racial distinctions as being the result of social definition. He might point out, for example, that some people defined as "white" are darker than some who are defined as "black."

Likewise every other characteristic that supposedly distinguishes blacks and whites has its exceptions, and thus the concept of "race" is more the result of social definition than it is biology.

The Christian would have certain reservations about symbolic interaction theory as well. Some would charge that since human interpretation and construction are central, human autonomy is overemphasized. Yet it must be recognized that God has endowed us with choice, and thus to an extent he has granted us a degree of autonomy. Symbolic interaction theory does not deny an objectively real world, but rather that our construction of the world is what we act upon in daily life. When meanings are shared, interaction is possible.

Christian Doctrines and Sociology

Three pivotal events are recorded in the Christian scriptures which are foundational to a Christian worldview, and thus should interface with any theory that adequately reflects the real world. These biblical events are the origin of humanity, the fall of mankind and the redemption of the human race. Creation and the fall resulted in human nature as it now exists, while present and future redemption, produces "a new creation."

Creation

If one is to accept the Bible as authoritative, the creation account must be held as the basis not only for human origins, but also human personality and social interaction. As stated in the first chapter of Genesis, "God created" and he made humanity in his image. To what extent are the four sociology theories consistent with Genesis 1 ?

God's constructing through creation is reflected in the social constructing of humans, as stated by symbolic interactionism. We construct our sometimes faulty views of reality, an imperfect image of God's original construction of the real world and its inhabitants. As the Apostle Paul stated much later in history, "We see as through a glass darkly," while God sees perfectly.

Certain aspects of functionalism are congruent with creation. Social structures have the potential for the betterment of humanity if they function within God's intended plan "from the beginning of the age." Indeed God instituted some social structures (e.g. the family). And while the evolutionary form of adaptation theory is not acceptable, biological adaptation is a mechanism that God placed within his creation. As species can adapt to environmental changes, likewise human social structures have this same capability due to God's creation. It should also be noted that because God created us, and the rest of creation, he knows what principles need to be followed. His owner's manual for life is the Bible, thus Christianity is "functional" — it works.

Exchange theory relates to creation, as was noted in an ancient creed which states that the purpose of mankind is to "glorify God and serve him forever." Is our service to God the social exchange for God's creating us? Likewise, God seems to have programmed into humans the propensity toward seeking rewards and avoiding pain. Even a brief survey of the book of Proverbs indicates that rewards and punishments motivate human behavior,

and the writer of that book emphasizes the importance of perceiving and seeking the long term rewards of a godly life.

Conflict theory is not compatible with the account of creation; conflict was introduced through the Presence of evil and temptation. This will be considered in the next section.

The Fall

The temptation of Satan and resulting sin that alienated the human race from God is crucial to an adequate understanding of human personality and social behavior. Humanity is not as it was intended, we are fundamentally abnormal in an abnormal world. Sin is the only adequate explanation for cruelty, pain, and other problems.

The fall is perhaps most consistent with conflict theory, since it accounts for the presence of both active exploitation and more passive ignoring or even acceptance of injustice. Social conflicts do occur, including class conflicts and oppression by the elite, although this is certainly not the whole picture, as is indicated by the functional nature of some social structures. Whether oppression is more or less common under rightist or leftist regimes is debatable; certainly Marxism has not produced the utopian state it promises. It should also be noted that while conflict theory articulates the presence of the collective sin of mankind, it overlooks the personal sin nature of the individuals involved, the ultimate source of all sin.

The Genesis account of the fall indicates that that the other three sociological theories must be delimited as well. The social constructions of symbolic interactionism are often faulty and inaccurate due to the effects of the fall, resulting in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Even when the social constructions of two people concur, the result can be less than ethical conduct because both participants are victims of the fall.

Likewise the individual is corrupted in the valuing of certain rewards and punishments because of the fall. Thus short term rewards ("sin for a season") are opted for to the disregard of long term rewards (eternity). Likewise materialism and love for what is abominable to God take the place of what is actually for our better good, which God prescribes in the scriptures.

Functionalism must likewise be delimited; the dysfunctional nature of social structures is clearly accounted for by the fall. While some of these difficulties are articulated by conflict theory, sometimes those structures are not clearly "oppressive" but rather just fall short of what was intended. The fall has not only corrupted humanity, it has also distorted us in other ways as well.

Redemption

God has not left us in the fallen state without hope. He has provided a means for redemption, both now (through salvation) and in the future (ultimate redemption in heaven). Our goal in the present life is not only to accept Christ and his provision for sin, but also to work toward his second coming and the eventual end to the work of Satan.

The doctrine of salvation through Christ has a number of interesting parallels with exchange theory. Christ offers us eternal life in exchange for giving ourselves to him. Likewise the entire concept of a substitute sacrifice (Christ dying instead of us for our sins) carries the notion of exchange—an exchange that is grossly unfair to God, but certainly a profitable exchange from our perspective.

Consistent with symbolic interactionism, many of our old social constructions stay with us after salvation. Even our concept of God is a construction, but fortunately it is a construction that can be modified as we interact with him through prayer and reading the Bible. Our construction of reality should likewise be changed as we develop a relationship with our creator; a process sometimes described as Christ being "Lord" of our lives, or theologically the process of sanctification. As our social (and personal) constructions change, our behavior will also change. The Christian life requires rebuilding sociologically; the church is a source of "resocialization" (Grunlan, 1982).

While conflict theory describes the reality of social disruption and evil, it provides little in terms of answers and solutions.

Fundamentally it is at odds with Christian doctrine because it assumes that apart from the work of Christ people can save themselves. Much of the conflict perspective rings true because it is a Christian heresy; Marx added much to the biblical analysis that is incompatible with biblical solutions. Conflict theory is thus an oversimplification of reality in its analysis, and completely contrary to the Bible in its call for forced redistribution of wealth and power; the Christian concept of freedom in Christ is incompatible with the control advocated by most conflict theorists. The ultimate source of sin is overlooked, as noted before, thus the theory lacks the ultimate solution for sin.

Finally, functionalism is closely related to redemption. Our goal as Christians is to help make social structures more functional through redeeming the people within them. The groups in society are more likely to be functional in reaching God's intended goals if they are populated by Christians who are actively seeking God's will, both personally and in terms of the structures within which they work.

Conclusion

In the author's opinion, symbolic interaction theory is perhaps the most compatible of the four theories, followed by exchange theory, and finally functionalist and conflict theories. Christian doctrines provide an exciting interface with sociological theories. This interface deserves further exploration.

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