

Theology as a Challenge to Social Science

Clive Beed and Cara Beed

Abstract: The domains of modern theology and social science are often regarded as autonomous from each other. Social science frequently ignores theology, and most practising Christians in social science regard this as an acceptable situation. These conventional contemporary views are contested. Case studies are cited to show that theology is capable of considering the social implications of its belief framework. These examples of theologically-based social investigation generate their own unique readings and explanations of socio-economic behaviour on the basis of their interpretations of Christian thought. The argument holds further that theologically-based social investigation is a requirement of the Judeo-Christian belief system. Finally, it suggests that secular social science has yet to demonstrate that it can generate more valid descriptions or explanations of human socio-economic behaviour than theologically-based social investigation.

Introduction

The contemporary relation between Christian theology and social science is ambivalent. One propensity in Christian theology is happy to accept mutual accommodation between the two areas, each feeding and enriching the other. An alternative current also exists, more sceptical that social science theory has much to offer theology. It accepts that social science data can be utilised by theology. But it doubts that social science can provide additional useful conceptual or theoretical input where theology seeks to explore the social implications of its belief system. Barnes¹ has classified this division among Christian theologians/social science practitioners as Rahnerian (social science as a co-operating servant to be used by theology) versus Balthasarian (social science as “an animal to be domesticated”). This paper takes a point of view, and argues for the relevance of the Balthasarian position — that theology takes primacy over social science theory in the process of social investigation. Through the case, a critique is developed of the Christian disposition that accommodates theology to

¹ Michael Barnes, “Introduction,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), xi-xviii.

social science or that endeavours to use social science perspectives in theological disciplines. The advocacy is developed only in relation to contemporary theology and social science. It does not enter, for instance, into the value of social science theory for Biblical interpretation. In so far as Biblical interpretation is relevant to contemporary theology, the assumption on which the discussion below rests is that the jury is still out on the value of social scientific approaches to Scripture compared with alternative modes of Biblical interpretation.

Both the Rahnerian and Balthasarian sides to the debate concede the relevance of theology to social life. This paper is not the place to labour a meaning of theology, but just three sources underlie use of the term here.² Their consensus is that theology's purview embraces the work of the triune God, and the redemptive purposes He employs in relation to humanity. Such a theology should be based on Scripture, endeavouring to develop systemic, coherent and timeless statements of Christian doctrine that nonetheless need to be related to contemporary practical life. In regarding theology as the study of God, this is taken to include God's relations with people individually and socially, and people's relations with each other. Accordingly, the interrelations between God and people can encompass the study of social life, of groups within societies, and specific functions of groups and societies. These can range from how people meet their material needs, as in economics, to how people influence others as in political science and social psychology. Both sides of the discussion regard theology as having a legitimate mandate for studying such aspects of human social life. They differ in the weight they are prepared to give in this enterprise to secular social science.

The case here is that theology, or more strictly, a sub-set of it with examples discussed below, does not require for its development the input of concepts, theories or policies from social science. This sub-set might be labelled variously as theologically-based social investigation, public or social theology, or Christian social theory.³ Its purpose is to take theological concepts and consider how they might

² Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 117-123; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 26; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 2, 4.

relate to contemporary socio-economic processes. With this aim, social theology believes itself capable of generating its own descriptions, interpretations, explanations and prescriptions of and for social life. Liberation theology, Catholic Social Thought, and environmental theology possess these orientations.

However, the orientations have not been uppermost throughout the history of theology, partly explaining the current popularity of social science input in theology. Social theology does employ techniques and data also used by the social sciences in the course of formulating descriptions of social life. The methods can be those involved in the collection of social data and its analysis. These are procedures not necessarily discovered in or by social science, but can be those that have been developed via statistical method that have then been employed for specific social purposes. That is, both social science and social theology may use common techniques imported from outside their disciplines that, nonetheless, may be refined on use in the respective disciplines. Using such methods both generates and manipulates social data. This information might not appear to stem from social science theorizing, but in so far as most social science data embodies theoretical pre-conceptions, social science theory is so used. For instance, "demographics relevant for evangelization efforts or economic data important for promoting social justice"⁴ embody theoretical conceptualisations. However, social theology could generate its own theoretically pre-determined sets of data (assuming adequate resources) if social science input was not used. If social theology (and the church) needs to be critical of society and of itself, data about social reality is a necessary pre-requisite for these undertakings. But it is not intrinsic to the collection of social information that "only the [social] sciences can provide" this data (unlike the claim of Merkle⁵).

³ So called by Francis McHugh, "Christian Social Theory," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, eds. W. Outhwaite and T. Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 70-73.

⁴ Barnes, "Introduction," xi.

⁵ J. Merkle, "From Catholic Social Teaching to Catholic Social Tradition," in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 254.

Theological Rationale for the Priority of Theology over Social Science

Data and techniques aside, further strains of social theology can be cited that embody within their own frameworks modes of normative social analysis different from the systems of social science. Seventeen cases related to economic matters in the last two decades illustrate the proposition⁶, a diverse collection of Catholic and Protestant economists and theologians, outside the fold of liberation theology (and of fundamentalism). These studies apply their theological frameworks directly to contextual socio-economic life, and do not depend on existing social science theory or assign an important role to it. Even so, such exercises are often responses to prevailing social science theories given the dominance of these theories for analysing social phenomena. Nonetheless, Christian beliefs and theological concepts are the underpinning for the cited exercises in which conventional economic concepts have a secondary role. Against the claim of Gill,⁷ the “techniques and theories” of economics or sociology are not used “to arbitrate on the validity of differing theological notions” contained in these studies. But like Gill’s “praxis theology,” the studies “attempt systematically to unpack the social implications of particular theological positions and notions.”

⁶ Anthony Cramp, *Economics in Christian Perspective* (Cambridge: Emmanuel College, 1981); Alan Storkey, *Transforming Economics* (London, SPCK, 1986); Arnold McKee, *Economics and the Christian Mind*. (New York: Vantage Press, 1987); Donald Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989); Wayne Meeks, *God the Economist* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); John Tiemstra, Fred Graham, George Monsma, Carl. Sinke, and Alan Storkey, *Reforming Economics*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990); Mary Hobgood, *Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Gordon Preece, *Changing Work Values: A Christian Response* (Melbourne: Acorn, 1995); Robert Simons, *Competing Gospels: Public Theology and Economic Theory* (Alexandria: Dwyer, 1995); Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. 4th edn. (Dallas: Word, 1997); Thomas Massaro, *Catholic Social Teaching and United States Welfare Reform* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998); Edward O’Boyle, *Personalist Economics*. (Boston: Kluwer, 1998); Stephen Long, *Divine Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000); Helen Alford and Michael Naughton, *Managing as if Faith Mattered* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); Duncan Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM, 2001); Helen. Alford, Charles Clark, S. Cortright, and Michael Naughton, eds., *Rediscovering Abundance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).; Clive Beed and Cara Beed , *Alternatives to Economics: Christian Socio-Economic Perspectives* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2006).

⁷ R. Gill, “Sociology Assessing Theology,” in *Theology and Sociology*, ed. R. Gill (London: Cassell, 1996). 146.

Comparable author lists to the above could be attempted for other theologically-based areas of social investigation. Such exercises are not common, and are invariably ignored in the social science literature. The scarcity of these undertakings is partly because theology remains in the thrall of social science for reasons that are neither justified theologically nor in terms of social science's achievements. The theological rationale is discussed below first, followed in the next section by the issue of the achievements of social science.

Among the above-cited seventeen Christian studies, an implicit theological assumption is a rejection that frameworks seeking to interpret or explain aspects of human behaviour outside the normative system established by the triune God can provide compelling outcomes (at least to believers). The authors commonly take Scriptural interpretation, some theological derivation from it, and/or natural law, as with Catholic Social Thought (CST), to be the primary source of their analytical structure. Those who rely on Scripture, for instance, such as Tiemstra et al., do not believe that persuasive interpretations or explanations of human action can be developed in terms of viewpoints that eschew the normative work and teachings of God. They regard this idea as contradicting the prevailing pattern of thought reflected among the various Biblical writers (irrespective of any given approach to Biblical interpretation). They hold the spiritual to be intimately interrelated with the temporal, as reflected in Scripture. In the cited works, interpretation and explanation for the human condition are usually made in terms of the normative requirements to which the triune God is taken to call people individually and socially. Another aspect of this is that where explanations for human action are portrayed, they are in terms of final causes contained within the metaphysical worldview exhibited via God's dealings with humankind.

In the cited works, the normative framework established by the triune God for human personal and social behaviour receives primary attention. This may be discerned via the authors' direct interpretation of Scripture, as in Hay, or via their use of secondary theological interpretation, as per Preece, or via CST, e.g., Massaro. Unanimity does not exist among the authors in their renditions of the content of the normative frameworks, or in how they regard their source materials

(e.g., what they interpret CST to be). Nevertheless, descriptions, meanings and causes of social phenomena are portrayed in relation to these diverse portrayals of the designs, intentions, and principles God is viewed as having for human life. Unlike the worry raised by the Christian sociologist, Martin⁸, they do not in their explanatory schemas attempt to “delimit and identify some variable in the ensemble of variables which represent divine action,” if this means trying to isolate individual divine variables in explanation. They *do* attempt to understand and explain human action against and in relation to the overarching canopy of God’s intentions for human beings. So, if fair and just wages (a standard CST idea) are not being paid in some specific context, why is this not so. This assumes that just wages or return to labour represent one of God’s eternal precepts by which human life should be governed (and that just wages can be defined for the context in question). The “why is this not so” in the specific context can then be explored in terms of other requirements God is taken to have for social life. An interconnected explanatory matrix is built up in terms of human deviation from these norms. A policy implication of this approach is that “a just wage cannot be given apart from the transformation of the system that produced the wage.”⁹

A different view is inherent to the meanings social science ascribes to human action, and to the explanations it proposes for this action. Social science rests on the assumption that God does not exist, has no interrelationships with people, and no requirements for them in personal or social life. An alternative way of expressing this statement is to say that social science rather assumes that it has no way of answering whether God exists or not, and so has to refrain from addressing the question. However this assumption is expressed, it seems likely that social science long ago rejected the dichotomy of reality between the material and the spiritual or supernatural. Therefore, the meanings its ascribes to human behaviour, or the causes it poses to explain behaviour, exclude and preclude any influence from God, either in terms of God’s actual action or His normative designs for humanity. Thus, only causes that purportedly meet standards for empirical

⁸ D. Martin, “Theology and Sociology: the Irish Flaneur’s Account,” *New Blackfriars*, (March, 1997), 107.

⁹ J. Merkle, “From Catholic Social Teaching ...,” 251.

scientific verification are admitted into its explanatory matrix. The causal schemas of social science and social theology do not deal with the same planes of reality. Social theology constructs its explanations in terms of the material and the spiritual/supernatural dimensions of reality. Social science's explanatory framework includes only the material dimension. A similar consideration applies to the interpretation of meaning in secular social science. For instance, any meaning ascribed to social protest against oppression cannot be interpreted in terms of structural or social sin, because this risks admitting the possibility that (a) God exists and (b) He might have intentions for humanity – both conditions ruled out *a priori*. Therefore, from the theological perspective of the works cited above, social science's descriptions, meanings, explanations and prescriptions are incomplete. Social science theory can do no more than provide inadequate and potentially misleading reports of the meanings and causes humans use to account for their social life, in the sense that they divert attention away from God. This does not deny that some social science could reflect the operation of natural wisdom or natural law. However, with the high degree of fragility of social science concepts, their uncertain applicability, their continually contested nature, and the extent to which they divert explicit knowledge from God, discussed in Section 3, this likelihood may not be high.

The differential operation of the analytical systems of social theology and social science is reflected by Barnes¹⁰:

Are secular human life and thought simply natural, unconnected to the supernatural, or are they already responding in varying ways and degrees to the divine Self-gift? If ordinary life is unconnected to the supernatural, then when social scientists study ordinary life, they are not studying anything with theological content.

Social science in general does not acknowledge the possibility of the two alternatives in the first sentence of the quote. It has decided that human life is not connected to the spiritual/supernatural, that whatever causes individual and social action is not related to any notion of "divine Self-gift." Whatever meanings people ascribe to their actions cannot have any relation to the divine Self-gift either,

¹⁰ Barnes, "Introduction," xiii.

whether people are conscious of this relation or not. Social science's naturalistic conception of individuals and society requires it to ignore these possibilities. The theology inherent to the cited authors above, on the contrary, poses human life as fundamentally a conscious and/or a non-conscious response to God's creation. This can be to the triune God directly and to His intentions for humans, encompassing a vast range of attributes such as to the physical environment God has created, and to human organisational structures that have developed over time. Therefore, the theology of these authors cannot avoid being concerned with the material condition of human life, including the interrelation between the material and immaterial, as, say, with CST. Certainly, people have some measure of free will in their material decision making, but this will is never exercised outside the interrelated natural/supernatural domain in which God has placed people to live on earth. Social science accepts only the content of the second sentence of the quote above; it does not think it is studying anything with a relation to the supernatural realm, because, in its view, this realm is fictitious. The content of the second sentence is not accepted by those who posit the subordinacy of social science to theology. Ordinary life cannot be disconnected from the supernatural.

Strengthening the Theology of Social Theology

Just as ordinary life cannot be disconnected from the supernatural, neither can the supernatural be disconnected from ordinary life. That is, in the view of social theology, theology can and should not be disconnected from the social. This is not to imply that theology has fulfilled this task throughout its history, any more than has use of the Bible, the primary input for the development of theology. On this latter point, for instance, those who today propose the sovereignty of theology over social science are likely to regard the Bible as a worldview text providing a guide but not a blueprint to how the triune God intends humanity to organise itself, including its necessary relations with God. Nevertheless, they recognise that Biblical interpretation requires constant re-assessment and re-appraisal in the light of developments in linguistics, archaeology, history and theology. These inputs have been shown throughout the history of Biblical interpretation to be able to ascertain more accurately the nature of true and justified knowledge in Scripture.

This is not the same thing as saying that social science theory also has to become influential in determining contemporary Biblical interpretation or theology, or because past Scriptural interpretation produced theologies that current Biblical interpretation and theologies might question. No case has yet been resolved that social science theory necessarily reveals more accurately the nature of Biblical thought, or that materially change its central tenets, than alternative forms of Biblical interpretation. Critical stances can be taken toward Scriptural interpretation and theology without requiring the tools of social science.

This contention can be illustrated for diverse aspects of human life. Take the example of democracy in the Church. In the past, ecclesiologies might have been developed to justify oppressive structures and behaviour. Thus, Barnes¹¹ suggests that the authoritarian organization of the Catholic Church needs to take account of the "great deal of social theorizing about community structures of power and responsibility" in social science so as to build into the Church "some of the checks and balances that characterize democracies". What is more at issue is to re-evaluate past theologies that justified authoritarian structures, to compare them with theologies that promote democracy, and to expose Biblical themes that might point to forms of democratic organisation. These types of exercises have occurred periodically throughout the twentieth century, an early case being Carnegie¹². If Maritain¹³, for example, could claim "that the democratic impulse has arisen in human history as a temporal manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel," this requires assessment. Deductions along comparable lines are Mott, Mason and Schaefer, and Bianchi and Ruether¹⁴. If valid, these claims encourage the development of a political ecclesiology emphasizing democratic structures. In contradistinction, theologies past and present have been formulated to justify all manner of oppressions. If "many German theologians embraced an interpretation

¹¹ Ibid., xiv.

¹² W. Carnegie, *Democracy and Christian Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1914).

¹³ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 11.

¹⁴ Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); John Mason and Kurt Schaefer, "The Bible, the State and the Economy: A Framework for Analysis," *Journal of the Association of Christian Economists* 13 (1990): 3-47; E. Bianchi and R. Ruether eds. *A Democratic Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

of Christian faith that endorsed Nazi ideology"¹⁵, this exposes the dangers of absorbing secular ideas into theology, a process that has occurred throughout the history of theology.

None of this is to deny that much secular social theorizing has concerned democratic versus authoritarian structures. But social science input via organizational theory as with, say, a cybernetic analysis of ecclesiology and the church, is not a prerequisite for democratic reform of the Catholic Church. In Phan's¹⁶ advocacy of the relevance of Granfield's ecclesial cybernetics, for instance, it is unclear how social science terms such as "non-linear, multiple-loop-feedback system with variable elements" assist in making a case for the democratization of the Church. Similar ideas can be expressed in non-technical language, as with say, Bianchi and Ruether, and McCann¹⁷, who nevertheless uses an organizational theory basis. If Scripture, the early history of the church, "common sense" analysis as per Coates¹⁸, and theological reflection, unencumbered by the importation of social science terminology can give pointers to democratic structures, these are the guides that can be related by believers to the Church (and to contemporary society, as in Witte, and de Gruchy¹⁹). In this enterprise, parallels can be drawn with secular social science thinkers. But there is a propensity for social scientists to exaggerate the innovative character of their observations. For instance, if there is an "iron law of oligarchy", as a "tendency to mass apathy in all human organizations", this is not a discovery by "social-science research"²⁰. It has been an experiential observation acknowledged by those with a history of participation in mass organizations; a common sense, common knowledge deduction, that then

¹⁵ Merkle, "From Catholic Social Teaching ...," 249.

¹⁶ Peter Phan, "Social Science and Ecclesiology: Cybernetics in Patrick Granfield's Theology of the Church," in M. Barnes (ed.) *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 74.

¹⁷ Bianchi and Ruether, *A Democratic Catholic Church*; J. McCann, *Church and Organization* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1993).

¹⁸ John Coates, *The Claims of Common Sense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ J. Witte Jr., ed. *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context* (Boulder: Westview, 1993); J. De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰ C. Watkins, *Theological Studies*, 52: 1991; 689-711.

became formalized by social scientists. The observation could just as well have been made by social theologians, had they put their minds to the issue. The other side of the coin is to assess the theological input compared with the social science input that has been used in analyses such as Granfield's. This opens up a contested area, with Phan disputing Watkins²¹ that the theological side is dwarfed compared with the social scientific. Certainly, in McCann²², organizational theory input seems to greatly exceed theological input.

Another example of theology making insufficient connection to social life is the allegation put by Coleman²³ that "most theological accounts ... might find it difficult to speak in any meaningful terms of social sin". If this is the case, the way forward for theology is not necessarily to import sociological ideas into the allegedly deficient theology. Social theology is capable of analysing social structures via its own theological framework as is sociology through its own, but, as discussed earlier, the bases for their respective analyses differ widely. The solution for theology is to press it to re-examine its source materials and concepts to sharpen and develop its analysis of social sin. For instance, there are many precedents from Old Testament Israel where "structural sources of alienation" and "deformation or cultural bias" were manifest, examined, for example, by Wright²⁴. Another theological concept that has received some airing concerning social sin is that of principalities and powers²⁵. If a middle road, introductory, widely-used, Protestant systematic theology text can devote an entire chapter to the social structure of sin without mentioning social science²⁶, there is plenty of scope for more advanced theology to take the analysis of social sin further. Again, parallels and correlations can be made with social science thought.

²¹ Phan, "Social Science and Ecclesiology ...," 76; Watkins, 708.

²² McCann, *Church and Organization*.

²³ J. Coleman, "Every Theology Implies a Sociology and Vice Versa," in *Theology and the Social Sciences* ed. Michael Barnes (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 21.

²⁴ Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

²⁵ H. Berkof *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1962); Walter Wink *Naming the Powers* 1984; *Unmasking the Powers* 1986; *Engaging the Powers*, 1992 all ; John Yoder *The Politics of Jesus* 2nd edn. Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994).

²⁶ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

Many instances have occurred where theology has stalled in its efforts to consider adequately the social implications of its ideas. Coleman²⁷ notes two: The Catholic Church's oblivion to "differential power arrangements that ignore diverse 'social' interests" in its teaching on the common good, and theology's overlooking of opportunity costs in contemplating views of the ideal polity. The solution to both these problems is to have theology more critically develop its own analyses from the bases of its own primary sources and set of metaphysical assumptions. Some ideas in parallel or correlative to those of social science may be helpful in this undertaking, such as "opportunity costs." But opportunity costs, for instance, merely mean the costs inherent in alternative arrangements. They are not a discovery by economics of a concept previously unknown. The concept is inherent to common sense, and has been so used for aeons in considering the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives. All the discipline of economics has done is to formalise the term, but in so doing has not provided solutions to the quantification of opportunity costs in alternative social arrangements.

In the same way, if "scholastic theology was not capable of" criticizing and meeting "the problems of modern secular and democratic social reality"²⁸, the solution is to assess that theology to ascertain why it was not so capable, and to compare it with theologies that are more capable. Undoubtedly, all social theologies can be shown to be deficient. For instance, Lakeland²⁹ discusses limitations in the analysis of work in the 1981 Papal encyclical, *On Human Work*. But, if Lakeland (p. 90) is correct that Catholic Social Thought (CST) is weakened by its disinclination to be open to critical evaluation and alternative interpretations within the Church, to a "lack of a healthy theory-praxis relationship", and to "insufficiently critical recourse to religious language and theological concepts," CST does not need Habermasian critical social theory to "help overcome these weaknesses." A more open, critical, less-authoritarian attitude, and more encouragement to debate CST in the Catholic Church is required, just as this exists toward CST in ex-Church Christian reaction.

²⁷ Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 21.

²⁸ Merkle, "From Catholic Social Teaching ...," 249.

²⁹ Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 80-83.

The potential intellectual content of CST should not be confused with the political structures of the institution that so far have produced it. (Incidentally, Lakeland does not show that critical theory makes more adequate analyses of work than CST.)

To suggest the primacy of theology in the social analytical endeavour as drawing on its own intellectual sources is not to ignore the social, economic, political and psychological implications of whatever theological intentions or principles might be revealed as relevant to aspects of social life. Clearly, these implications need to be examined. Neither is it to overlook the social contexts that shape theological interpretation, nor to disregard the social milieu to which the theological proposition(s) might relate. Liberation theology, for instance, has attempted to relate its analysis to the social, cultural and historical context in which it developed, and to acknowledge that context as an influence on its interpretations. This is a theology that has tried to “assume responsibility for its socio-political impact,” as Coleman³⁰ puts it. Other theologically-based examples pursuing analogous purposes are Browning’s (1991) practical theology³¹, and the seventeen economics-related works cited above. The first step these exercises undertake is to flesh out theological concepts, and relate them to concrete social situations. Inevitably, they differ in the importance they attach to social science ideas, and Christians will disagree among themselves about the success of their achievements.

In the ideal social theological endeavour, theology takes precedence over, and comes before social science. Pace Barnes³², theology sitting “alone in its tent” is able to take cognisance of its wider God-ordained purpose to relate God’s intentions to social life, if it so chose to do. Sitting “alone in its tent” could mean maintaining the primacy of theological propositions, and analysing their social implications. This is what theology *should* do, to redress the imbalance in theology’s history in which it has downplayed its relevance to social life (evidenced

³⁰ Coleman, “Every Theology ...,” 22.

³¹ Donald Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³² Barnes, “Introduction,,” xv.

by, say, CST's formal origins as dating only from the end of the nineteenth century). Changing "theology's life style to accommodate" ideas from social science, as Barnes³³ advocates it, runs the risk of losing sight of theology's unique purpose in the social world. Social theology could become indistinguishable from secular social science, particularly as theology does share some common and parallel purposes with social science, a risk noted even by (the non-Christian) Habermas³⁴. Social science could become the dog wagging the tail of theology, a tendency noted in Protestant evangelical missiology³⁵. Contrary to Merkle³⁶, the reason for the social relevance hiatus in theology and the church has not been primarily their lack of resources. Historically, these resources have dwarfed those available to social science, and even now can still provide their own form of social analysis — but one largely ignored by secular social science.

Unlike Nichols' worry³⁷, any "hermeticism" or "enclosure of Christian discourse and practice" in the social theological enterprise need not occur within a "wholly separate universe of thought and action", as it has not in the examples cited above. It should occur with the "prior 'mythos' of Christianity" determining the questions to be asked and analysed in relation to concrete socio-economic-cultural-historical conditions of any given time and place. This is a pro-active exercise in which this type of theology would proffer its own explanations on the basis of its own unique set of beliefs. Nevertheless, social theology in its practice cannot ignore secular social science. Some of its work involves responding to secular ideas, just as theology and the church has always responded to them, and the possibility exists for social theology to borrow ideas from social science. This does

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jurgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, eds. D. Browning and F. Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 231.

³⁵ Paul Hiebert, "The Social Sciences and Missions: Applying the Message," in *Missiology and the Social Sciences*, eds. E. Rommen and G. Corwin (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1996), 184-213; R. McQuilkin, "Use and Misuse of the Social Sciences: Interpreting the Biblical Text," in *Missiology and the Social Sciences*, 165-183.

³⁶ Merkle, :From Catholic Social Teaching ..., " 255.

³⁷ A. Nichols, "An Ecclesial Critique of Milbank," in *Theology and Sociology*, ed. R. Gill (London: Cassell, 1996), 445.

not mean that the chief task of social theology becomes one of refuting social science, unlike Coleman's misgiving.³⁸ Nor does it suppose that this type of social theology be insulated from external critique by non-believers. Any critique can be salutary. But if the experience to date is any indication, there is every likelihood that non-believers — for which read the bulk of social science— will continue to ignore social theology's analyses.

Some values and aspirations can be common to the fields of social theology and social science. For instance, various social science schools and authors also express with social theology a preferential option and uplift for the poor. The difference is that social theology is capable of developing its own analyses from its source materials (such as the Bible) for pursuing these strategies. Social theology does not need the theories of social science to establish that these are strategies requiring pursuit, or its theories to determine why the poor exist, or how strategies to improve the lot of the poor might be pursued. The rich sources of Scripture, tradition and theology itself are capable of generating the necessary formulations in the light of prevailing socio-economic conditions. Contra Merkle³⁹, the church does not need social science to remind it that in "its effort to transform society", the church or theology "cannot simply apply principles ahistorically to contemporary situations." Even the Fathers of the Church did not do this, but applied their Scriptural principles contextually, relevant to the situations in which they lived⁴⁰. Theologically-centred social investigation in which theology is the leading force can do this type of job today (reflected, for example, in the above cited works, that do not depend on social science theories). This is especially so as social science is divided among itself concerning acceptable theories and policies to achieve the poor's improvement (as it is with most of its theories and policies).

Undoubtedly, theologians have used social science ideas to bolster their theological analyses. Thus, liberation theologians have used Marxist ideas to consolidate their

³⁸ Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 28.

³⁹ Merkle, "From Catholic Social Teaching ...," 253.

⁴⁰ Peter Phan, *Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1984).

arguments (as with their acceptance of dependency theory). But the preferential option for the poor expressed by liberation theologians did not need to depend on Marxist conceptualisations. It could just as well have been developed by their own theorizing from the source materials of Judeo-Christianity. Thus, the Fathers of the Church promoted:

... the essential requirements of a social doctrine: an ideal of justice and equality in the economic and social promotion of the oppressed and destitute classes; a critique of the exploitations and injustices perpetrated by the ruling and wealthy classes; and a proposal of concrete actions to remove this unjust situation.⁴¹

According to Phan, the Fathers did this in “the light of Scripture, and more specifically, the teachings of Jesus and apostolic church, rather than in the light of ancient philosophy.” The latter might have been the nearest thing to social science theorizing in the Fathers’ days. Policies for overcoming poverty are well covered in the source Scriptural literature. Gutierrez,⁴² for instance, on the basis of extensive Biblical citations, shows that “the Bible speaks of positive and concrete measures to prevent poverty from becoming established among the People of God.” This type of analysis has been extended by contemporary social theologians, such as Wright, and Forrester.⁴³ It is the Scriptural measures for preventing poverty and enhancing equality that can be developed and related to contemporary socio-cultural contexts. Although Christians may disagree among themselves on these issues, this is no reason to throw in the towel, and imagine that social theory unencumbered by Christian input can do better. Contra Boff⁴⁴, “socio-analytical mediation” does not require social theory. There is no persuasive evidence that social and economic theory has developed more effective policies for preventing poverty than those found in Scripture. Similarly, if liberation theologians believe that socio-political and economic structures cause economic poverty, they did not need to turn to social science to provide the necessary explanatory theories. As Gill

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 1974), 293-294.

⁴³ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics...*; Forrester, *On Human Worth...*

⁴⁴ C. Boff, *Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), xxi.

points out⁴⁵, "a Marxist critique of society is by no means essential to this approach to theology." Causes of the oppression of the materially poor were already staring theologians in the face from the Judeo-Christian source materials. It is these explanations that can be related to socio-economic conditions today, and made analytically more precise. The content of an "economics of liberation theology," as Fitzgerald⁴⁶ explains it, can equally well be developed from Judeo-Christian source materials related to specific social contexts. Of course, there will be intra-Christian disagreement about the analyses of social theology, but social science and economics do not have frameworks more compelling or more universally agreed. All they have done is to capture the intellectual/academic stage, and push Christian ideas off the platform.

Some contemporary Christians outside liberation theology do not accept the propositions advocated here, holding that theology and social science need each other. These critics point to theologians and lay Christians who have undertaken social science-type analysis, as though this shows the necessity for theologians to incorporate social science insights into their analytical work. Thus, Coleman⁴⁷ cites Martin's work discussing the relation between religious affiliation and cultural/historical factors in certain European countries, and the rise of Pentecostals in Latin America, and Stark and Bainbridge's on the probabilities of cult-type formations in the United States. On inspection, it turns out that the injection of ideas from theoretical social science as distinct from social data in their work is marginal. The findings of these works can equally well be explained in terms of "common sense" ideas,⁴⁸ and historical factors unrelated to any theoretical program in social science. Certainly, some well-known sociologists, like Weber, are named in these works, but their ideas and concepts are not crucial to the arguments developed by the authors. Martin⁴⁹, for instance, is as much a work in contemporary history, containing, like all good history, a mixture of incisive

⁴⁵ Gill, "Sociology Assessing Theology," 158.

⁴⁶ V. Fitzgerald, "The Economics of Liberation Theology," in *Liberation Theology*, ed. C. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 15-17.

⁴⁸ Coates, *The Claims of Common Sense*.

comment about the social, political, cultural, economic and religious situations in the countries he examines. No theoretical social science configuration underlies his book, and few sociological theories or concepts are analysed throughout it (or listed in the subject index).

There is a second feature of Martin-type social analyses by Christians. No theologically- or scripturally-based starting point for the analyses is stated or runs through such work. The exercises are not theologically-based social analyses. They do not begin by examining some theme, intention, principle, belief, tenet, doctrine, ideal, design, plan, proposition, purpose, aim or trajectory from a given theological system or Scripture, and then try to establish how, if and why that principle has been or is applied in a particular society. The works take existing aspects of social behaviour, like religious affiliation, and try to explain why they exist. This need have little to do with a theological starting point. At the most, occasional theological terms are mentioned in the works, but the analyses are not predicated around the relevance of these concepts to a given social milieu. Martin (1990), for instance, sits firmly in the fold of the sociology of religion, but, as Flanagan, and Howes have noted⁵⁰, the sociology of religion in general does not have a great deal to do with theology or with mainstream sociology. Other social analytical work by Christians occupies a more intermediate position, such as Gill (1999). Coleman describes Gill (1999) as an exemplar for combining sociology and theology, whereas Baxter classifies it as "not deeply shaped by theological terms and categories."⁵¹ Gill (1999) analyses much empirical data on churchgoing, but this methodology, as distinct from subject matter, is not unique to sociology. Gill uses techniques that sociologists use, but so do statisticians and marketers, and all kinds of manipulators of social data. One could argue about the validity of the theology in Gill and its relation to ethical positions, as Baxter does, but at least

⁴⁹ D. Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁵⁰ K. Flanagan, *The Enchantment of Sociology* (Houndmills: Macmillan 1997), 114; G. Howes, "Surprised by Grace: The Sociologists Dilemma," *New Blackfriars* March (1997), 136.

⁵¹ R. Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 28; Michael Baxter, "Whose Theology? Which Sociology? A Response to John Coleman," in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 39.

Gill's initial hypotheses concern the relationship between ethical positions and churchgoing. Nevertheless, Gill is firmly in the sociology of religion tradition, one preoccupied with religious affiliation and secularisation than with the application of sociology to social implications of theology outside religious association.

There is no implication in the entire advocacy above that theology should become wholly concerned with exploring the social effects of its system of thought. "The well-being of the world" is not the "*primary*" problem of theology – the glorification of the triune God is. But as Blundell⁵² points out, the well-being of the world is invariably involved "in living for Christ." On the other hand, social theology is unlikely to accept that sound strategies can be developed to "ensure the indefinite continuation of a stable 'civilization'," as Blundell poses the possibility, that entails "sacrificing Christian identity." Given the theological base of social theology, such an aspiration is an oxymoron. No indefinite stability in the world can be achieved without explicit recognition by humankind of the role of the triune God. If the gospel were lived faithfully as the body of Christ, the state of the world would gradually improve.

The Scientific Basis of Social Science and its Success

The views of the likes of Coleman, Gill, and Lakeland above, advocating the importance of social science in the theology/social science mix, rest partly on the assumption that social science has been successful in formulating interpretations and explanations of human behaviour outside of theological systems. Certainly, the social sciences have been promoting interpretation and explanations exterior to Christian frameworks for around the last three hundred years. They have steadily usurped in the secular academy any intellectual legitimacy theology once might have had to formulate its own competing renditions. Today, secular social science ignores theology, so that theology talks largely to itself. 'Ignores' is a mild word. Howes (1997) suggests that sociologists rarely read theology and do not take it into intellectual account. It might be more accurate to say that secular social science eschews and is unfriendly to theology. Theology is probably regarded

⁵² Blundell in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 51-52; original emphasis.

currently by most social scientists as offensive superstition and speculative metaphysics, "arcane and archaic."⁵³ That Coleman,⁵⁴ knows of "almost no sociologist who is in agreement with Milbank," for instance, is likely to stem from sociologists' unfamiliarity with Milbank and/or their antagonism that a theologian should dare cast aspersions on secular social science. It probably does not stem from any analysis they have made of Milbank's thesis in so far as few of these have appeared in the secular social science (or philosophy) literature.

In contrast, part of the self-confidence social science enjoys stems from its earliest and continuing belief to be practising science. Yet, the meaning of "science" and what it means to practise science have unravelled in the last forty years with the collapse of the received view of science, sometimes called the "Legend"⁵⁵. Under the influence of the likes of Bachelard, Popper, Hanson, Quine, Polanyi, Toulmin, Lakatos, Kuhn, and Feyerabend,, as well as numerous sociologists and historians of science, the former normative epistemological guides of positivism have been discarded from the 1960s without leaving anything widely acceptable in their place. Dependent on aspirations of an idealistic scientific method, the Legend could never be sustained in practice, let alone in principle. For the latter, philosophy has not been able to provide the solution. According to one social scientist who has studied the relation of scientific method to economics⁵⁶, philosophers of science who formerly sought to adjudicate on the rules for practising science do not agree nowadays "about the constitution of the scientific method" or whether it ever existed. Even in its heyday, philosophers "differed radically" about what the "proper method actually" was. Today the situation is no better, for philosophers of science "are currently in disarray on almost every substantive issue."

The disintegration of the received view of science opened the floodgates for alternative and competing methods of social analysis in various forms of

⁵³ Howes, "Surprised by Grace ...," *New Blackfriars* March (1997), 136.

⁵⁴ Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 26; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁵⁵ Phillip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ D. Wade Hands, *Reflection without Rules* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4, 6.

postmodernism like critical theory, pragmatism, constructivism, relativism, realism etc., some of which drew on long pre-existing modes of social investigation, such as interpretivism, hermeneutics, and the influence of rhetoric. These modes do not seek a science of society ascertained by empirical methods, as containing universalistic, objective, value-free precepts by which society is supposed to function, or by which society "as it really is" can be discovered. They uphold the influence of value-laden concepts and worldviews in shaping all theoretical and methodological commitments, including those in physical science. The long tradition in social investigation is continued seeking to ascertain the meaning humans ascribe to their actions. Naturalistic social scientists have reacted sharply against these developments, such as Kincaid, McIntyre, and Cho-Yee To,⁵⁷ for they undermine the "scientific" authority with which social science seeks to speak. The rearguard naturalistic assault shows little sign of fading away, and still dominates thinking in economics. The influence of postmodernist thinking is stronger in sociology, but whether it has come to dominate is problematic. Flanagan⁵⁸, for instance, thinks that "with a collapse of belief in science, the sociologist has had to rejoin the humanities." An alternative view is that a naturalistic, positivistic ethos or mood continues to maintain a strong presence in sociology and political science. For example, according to Baum⁵⁹, sociologists are often characterized by "the wish to assimilate the social sciences as much as possible to the natural sciences, or, better, to what the natural sciences used to be." Similarly, Coleman⁶⁰ notes that "much sociology still operates from a model of the social sciences as positivistic, mirroring the natural sciences." These judgements are not blind to the variety of competing methodological frameworks in sociology. Nevertheless, many of the competing modes in social science, including those that embrace postmodernist elements, seek to retain the appellation of "science." Despite the disappearance of "correct" definitions and practice of science, it is still probably true that social

⁵⁷ Harold Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Lee McIntyre, *Laws and Explanation in the Social Sciences* (Boulder: Westview, 1996); Cho-Yee To, *The Scientific Merit of the Social Sciences* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham, 2000).

⁵⁸ Flanagan, *The Enchantment of Sociology ...*, 19.

⁵⁹ Gregory Baum, "Remarks of a Theologian in Dialogue with Sociology," in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll, Orbis 2001), 5-6.

⁶⁰ Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 15.

science tries as far as possible to emulate the scientific method thought to characterize the physical sciences up to forty years ago. As part of this enterprise, the search for secular laws governing human behaviour persists, despite the trenchant critique that has been directed at this process, such as by MacIntyre, and Little.⁶¹

If the naturalistic scientific paradigm is the prevailing trend in social science, it does not emphasise social science as moral science or that by which the meaning of human action can be understood, but seeks to function as a variant of physical science. Social science as moral science would have more sympathy with theology, and Browning (1991), for instance, has used this form of thought to develop his practical (social) theology. Although Christians who are social scientists might express a preference that sociology should be a moral science (e.g., Coleman⁶²) with postmodernist qualities, this might not be how most secular sociologists see their discipline, despite the views of the leading historical sociological lights, and the strength of interpretive modes in sociology today. Even if this mode did come to dominate sociology in the future, there is no guarantee of greater interest in theology.⁶³

In so far as the natural science model prevails in the social sciences, naturalised epistemology is its methodological vogue. This means that social science's "theory of knowledge should employ the same scientific tools we use to investigate any other aspect of nature."⁶⁴ Unfortunately, with the disintegration of the received view of science, there is less certainty what these scientific tools are. Hands, for instance, does not explain them. According to him, there are only "rough ideas – conduct empirical tests, be objective, control variables" (p. 8), but these specifications are consistent with diverse interpretation. No hard and fast rules can spell out nowadays in physical or social science, for instance, how falsificationism

⁶¹ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981); Daniel Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Casuation* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998).

⁶² Coleman, "Every Theology ...," 24.

⁶³ Howes, "Surprised by Grace ...," 138, 142.

⁶⁴ Hands, *Reflection ...*, 129.

should be practiced, or come up with an undisputable definition of objectivity. What is clear from Hands earlier above is that he does not think the aforementioned scientific tools are devices or rules of the received view of science making up the so-called scientific method. As well, social science does not deal with natural kinds as its objects of interest, but with socially conditioned kinds.⁶⁵ Any suggestion⁶⁶ that sociology's autonomy is legitimate because it deals "in scientific evaluation of social connections, in verifiable and falsifiable statements," betrays an innocence about the continuing unresolved controversy concerning "scientific evaluation", and the nature of "verifiable and falsifiable statements." To talk about "the laws of sociology" as though they are an accepted matter of course begs similar questions. This type of language — that social science gives a "scientific account of societies"— is common in social science, including that practiced by Christians. Contrary to Gill's expectations,⁶⁷ the net result of the indeterminacy concerning the character of scientific tools, and the nature of social kinds, means that social science possesses no greater "incisive and rigorous tools" for analysing social data than the statistical methods on which they are based. These are methods that can just as well be employed by statisticians, or theologians wanting to relate their theology to social life.

To claim that liberation theology needed social theory because it is "scientific", as Gutierrez⁶⁸ advocates, begs the question of what "scientific" means. To maintain with Gutierrez that the social "sciences allow us to gain a more accurate knowledge of society as it really is" assumes that competing and conflicting schools of social science, all practising dissimilar methodologies, are nevertheless adhering to an unproblematic process of value-free "science" that can reveal some objective picture of reality "as it really is." To depict sociology as "the science of collective behaviours" utilising "concrete scientific instruments"⁶⁹ ignores similar issues. All the social sciences reveal is prior theory-laden and worldview-based

⁶⁵ Daniel Little, "On the Scope and Limits of Generalizations in the Social Sciences," *Synthese* 97.2 (1993), 183-207.

⁶⁶ Flanagan, *The Enchantment of Sociology ...*, 60, 80.

⁶⁷ Gill, "Sociology Assessing Theology," 147.

⁶⁸ G. Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Set You Free* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 58, 55.

conceptualisations of aspects of reality, riddled with reflexivity. There is no *a priori* reason to believe these conceptualisations are more valid than theologically-based ones. Therefore, no reason exists why such findings *have* to enter the work of social theology. The sorts of claims by Gutierrez and Boff above betray a naivety about the nature of science, its relation to social investigation, and about the validity of the achievements of social science. They totally ignore the post 1960s secular debate on these issues.

It is not surprising that the image of natural and social science as producing categorical, dependable, reliable, true and justified knowledge has tarnished in the last four decades, given the unravelling of the former received view of science. In relation to physical science, "science wars" persist, evidenced by Ross, and Gross and Levitt.⁷⁰ Any worry, for instance, that "neurological theory could correct traditional theology on the operations of the soul"⁷¹ is to accord to this naturalistic scientific theory a certainty it does not possess. Naturalism has become confused with valid knowledge because of the dominance of naturalised epistemology. For human behaviour, the naturalistic version of science is elevated to the explanatory epitome. Christian realist and non-realist philosophers dispute the claims of these forms of science imperialism. The realist, Trigg⁷² questions the "enormous metaphysical assumption that the reality to which science has access is the whole of reality." To the non-realist, Rescher,⁷³ "science is no longer a sector of the cognitive enterprise but an all-inclusive world-view" that does not celebrate but distorts science. These views are echoed by secular philosophers, such as Putnam,⁷⁴ to whom rationality is not identical with the scientific, and science does not exhaust the domain of facts. Their concerns are akin to those of Balthasar, as

⁶⁹ C. Boff, *Signs of the Times* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 8.

⁷⁰ A. Ross, ed., *Science Wars* (Durham, NC: Durham University Press, 1996); P. Gross and N. Levitt, *Higher Superstition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994).

⁷¹ Barnes, "Introduction," xiii.

⁷² Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 60.

⁷³ Nicholas Rescher, *The Limits of Science* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 213.

⁷⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

interpreted by Voiss⁷⁵, in which “human critical reason” has become “the measure of all truth.”

Social science is probably the more injured victim of the “science wars” than physical science. Social science was never able to model itself satisfactorily on the Legend view of science, and is now even more up in the air methodologically and philosophically (witnessed by the plethora of competing frameworks in contemporary social science). One symptom of this uncertainty is that enduring theoretical successes, achievements and discoveries of social science have come to be recognised as few and far between (in so far as theory implies valid or uncontested explanation and/or reliable prediction). There is little evidence that social science has achieved progress in any comparable sense with physical science, namely, that its theories are providing increasingly reliable explanations or predictions of and for social life – even for any one social/cultural/historical context (Rule can be compared with Bryant and Becker⁷⁶ on this matter). Social science’s theories and findings are disputed between different schools, both within the one social science itself, and between different social sciences, and even from within physical science.⁷⁷ Even where the naturalistic scientific paradigm is not utilized in social science, certainty is no greater. Concepts and theories are formulated without critics being sure what they are. For instance, “what, precisely, structuration is and is not, becomes the object of endless debate.⁷⁸” There is no one agreed, even widely accepted, social or economic theory, or particular theories, interpreting/explaining/predicting/prescribing for aspects of social reality. Neither any commonly embraced “theory of modernity” or “science of wage

⁷⁵ J. Voiss, “Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Use of Social Sciences in Ecclesial Reflection: Exposition, Analysis, and Critique,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Barnes (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 113.

⁷⁶ J. Rule, *Theory and Progress in Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); C. Bryant and H. Becker, *What Has Sociology Achieved?* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990).

⁷⁷ A. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London: Profile, 1998); B. Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷⁸ S. Clegg, “Review Article: How To Become an Internationally Famous British Social Theorist,” *The Sociological Review* 40. 2(1992), 584.

creation" exists.⁷⁹ Contra Lakeland, the church need not feel embarrassed because it does not have such theories either. The church might offer an "unsystematic" critique of social reality, and propose "ad hoc" solutions, as Lakeland⁸⁰ puts it, but so does every social science school and author within it.

There is no reason in principle why social theology cannot develop theories consistent with its framework, and of comparable intellectual stature to those prevailing in social science. This is especially so as the concepts or theories of social science never have had the certainty of theoretical discoveries in physical science, and more so today, social science theories are little used for social policy formation. This contention can admit that data collected by social scientists *is* used for social policy formation. But, as argued above, this data is not intrinsic to social science – it could just have well been collected and manipulated by statisticians and other collectors/users of social data, or by theologically-based social investigation. As well, social data (as in Census collections) may be collected independently from any intention to test predictions of any given social science theory or to construct explanatory theory pertaining to the data in question. At the least, "theology has the right and responsibility to remind the social sciences that they can never give a complete account of the human data."⁸¹

Conclusion

Most Christians who work as professional social scientists probably keep their Christian convictions overtly out of their work. They are party to the perpetuation of the autonomy of the social sciences from Christian thought, and *vice versa*. Partly, they do this because the milieu of professional social science is not conducive to the reception of Christian ideas. These ideas are, at the least, ignored, and may even be rejected and treated with hostility by the powers to be in secular social science. Thus, secular social science journals rarely publish theologically-based social analyses or articles on Christian social theory, and

⁷⁹ Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory*, 96-98; Merkle, "From Catholic Social Teaching ...," 251-252.

⁸⁰ Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory*, 79.

⁸¹ N. Ormerod, "A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context," *Theological Studies* 66. 4(2005), 839.

editors decline to have such submissions refereed. Books on these lines are scarcely reviewed by the secular journals, university libraries often do not hold the books, and few university lecture courses examine the relevant literature. Christian social scientists are enculturated to accept this professional environment as the only acceptable status quo. Unfortunately, they may also accept it as right and proper. Christian ideas and theology are something to be confined to their private lives as “religious belief,” and in their university to its theological or religious studies department. The social sciences retain their “autonomy,” just as theology retains its own. Thus, Baum⁸² cites the not uncommon case of a Catholic political science colleague who “made no attempt to relate [the] presuppositions of his scientific work to his Catholic theological understanding of the human vocation.” Baum complains that this type of social analysis does not “generate an adequate critique of present-day society.” In fact, it may not generate any critique at all in so far as this type of social scientist-Christian imagines himself to be doing value-free “science,” more akin to physical science than to moral science. This mode of social science as a variant of natural science removed from the needs of the world, does not criticise or change society. It is social analysis without a concern to change human beings or society. From a Christian perspective this process is deficient, for as Merkle points out, “without the Spirit the most convincing social theory has no power over the heart.” Or, as Pope John Paul 11⁸³ put it, “there can be *no genuine solution of the ‘social question’ apart from the Gospel.*”

Theologians like Milbank and Baxter complain that theology has swallowed the social science bait, hook, line and sinker. Baxter⁸⁴, for instance, objects that Catholic theology has surrendered its “genuine theological conception of the social” to “a totalizing secular conception.” Yet, the social sciences cannot avoid utilizing metaphysical presuppositions about the nature of humankind (all of which exclude anything to do with God). Browning⁸⁵ expresses it that “all the human sciences are,

⁸² Baum, “Remarks ...,” 6.

⁸³ Merkle, “From Catholic Social Teaching ...,” 247; Pope John Paul 11, *Centesimus Annus Encyclical Letter* (Boston, Mass.: St. Paul, 1991), 12, original emphasis.

⁸⁴ Baxter, “Whose Theology? ...,” 38

⁸⁵ Browning, *A Fundamental...*, 89.

at least in their horizons, a kind of descriptive theology" — albeit a Godless one. Similar thoughts are expressed by Ormerod, that "the social sciences themselves have an implicitly theological dimension, though this is not something those sciences themselves are near to accepting."⁸⁶ The self-importance of social science can be challenged by theology, partly because social theology shares at least three basic objectives with social science. These are their joint commitments to describing and explaining aspects of social life, and for some sections of social science, to exposing problems in social life, and, third, to proposing policies for overcoming these problems. The entire undertaking of secular social science eschews any recognition that these common objectives exist. Deliberately or inadvertently, social science directs intellectual attention in the academy away from any recognition that theology shares particular aims with it. As a result, social science also directs attention away from ideas intrinsic to theology, such as the normative requirements the triune God has for human life. Since these are the prime movers of Christian social theory, social science diverts knowledge away from the ultimate causes of human behaviour as far as theology sees them. In effect, social science is directing an unspoken war against theology, of which social science is the more cognisant, and in which social science currently calls the tune. If Flanagan is correct that "sociology was founded to supplant Catholicism,"⁸⁷ so the adversarial process towards Christian thought in social science continues today (a few exceptions aside). Enormous scope exists for theology to show how its system of thought relates to all aspects of human life. In this process, of which social theology is part, theology can rightfully reassert itself as queen of the social sciences.

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⁸⁶ N. Ormerod, "Ecclesiology and the Social Sciences," in *Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, eds. G. Mannion and L. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2008), 651.

⁸⁷ Flanagan, *The Enchantment...*, 104.

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Authors: Cara Beed is former lecturer in Sociology, Australian Catholic University. Clive Beed is former senior lecturer in Economics, University of Melbourne. Among their many joint publications is *Alternatives to Economics: Christian Socio-economic Perspectives* (University Press of America, 2006).

Email: cncbeed@netspace.net.au
