Theological Studies
66 (2005)

A DIALECTIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

NEIL ORMEROD

[Ecclesiologists have long acknowledged a possible role for the social sciences in their discipline. The author examines the difficulties theologians face in utilizing the social sciences, given the diversity of approaches in that area, and the more profound issue that the social sciences can never be theologically neutral. It concludes that the only way of soundly utilizing the social sciences is to reorient theologically the social sciences and to include them "from the ground up" within a comprehensive theology of history. This is then the natural home for a historically conscious ecclesiology.]

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, attempts to engage with the social sciences have not been prominent among ecclesiologists. At the methodological level, Joseph Komonchak has consistently argued that the social sciences have a foundational role in the study of the Church.[1] A number of his essays have both urged and illustrated this foundational role. Still it is not a call that has been widely accepted, at least in practice. Patrick Granfield has attempted a rather adventurous use of cybernetic theory in his work *Ecclesial Cybernetics*.[2] Carl Starkloff has used notions of structure and *communitas* drawn from the works of Victor Turner to analyze elements in

NEIL ORMEROD holds a Ph.D. in pure mathematics from the University of New South Wales, and a D.theol. from the Melbourne College of Divinity. At present, he is professor of theology and head of the sub-faculty of philosophy and theology at the Australian Catholic University, Mount St. Mary Campus, Strathfield, NSW. His recent publications include *Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition* (Marquette University, 2005); "Faith and Reason: Perspectives from MacIntyre and Lonergan," *Heythrop Journal* (2005); and "Power and Authority: A Response to Bishop Cullinane," *Australasian Catholic Record* (2005).

[1] An example of his foundational concern is his collection of essays, Joseph A. Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence, vol. 11, *Lonergan Workshop Journal, Supplementary Issue* (Boston: Boston College, 1995); also illustrative of the use of the social sciences in ecclesiology is his essay, "Authority and Magisterium," in *Vatican Authority and American Catholic Dissent*, ed. William May (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 103–14.

[2] Patrick Granfield, *Ecclesial Cybernetics: A Study of Democracy in the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

the Church.[3] Schillebeeckx has used conflict-based critical theory in his analysis of the emergence of ministerial offices in the early Church.[4] But strikingly the methodological article written by Pedro Rodriguez in the collection of essays edited by Peter Phan, *The Gift of the Church*, makes no mention of the role of the social sciences in ecclesiology, despite the citation of the seminal work by Komonchak in his bibliography.[5] In general, the engagement with social sciences by ecclesiologists has been eclectic, sporadic, intermittent, and secondary to what they view as their primary task.[6]

One could posit three major reasons for this. The first is the understandable reluctance of theologians to enter into another major field of discourse such as sociology. It is a vast discipline that requires persistence and determination on the part of the theologian to gain some mastery of it. Who are the substantial authors and schools of thought? Does one need to master the whole before one can advance the ecclesiological task? As a result, most ecclesiologists either focus on one particular approach, such as Granfield's use of cybernetic theory, or Starkloff's application of Turner's insights, or they appeal to sociology "in general" as a source of insights that can be drawn upon eclectically.[7]

A second reason is the difficulty identified by Gregory Baum, namely that sociology is a methodologically divided discipline. Thus the first question one should ask is which sociology should one use? Baum identifies four distinct approaches: positivist, functionalist, conflictualist, and symbolic interactionist.[8] To these might be added the structurationist approach of Anthony Giddens[9] and the critical realist approach of Roy Bhaskar.[10]

[3] Carl Starkloff, "Church as Structure and Communitas: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 643–68.

[4] Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

[5] Pedro Rodriguez, "Theological Method for Ecclesiology," in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000) 129–56.

[6] A good example of eclecticism is Wayne A. Meeks, who, while acknowledging the importance of using a social theory, finds none "so commanding that we would be prudent to commit our method to its care" (*The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* [2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University, 2003] 5).

[7] One should also note the hostility to religion of many of the founding figures in sociology, often reducing it to its social role or marginalizing it altogether.

[8] Gregory Baum, "Sociology and Theology," The Church as Institution, ed. Gregory Baum and Andrew Greeley, *Concilium* vol. 91 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974) 22–31. Gibson Winter proposes a similar scheme in *Element for a Social Ethic* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). Many introductory texts in sociology follow basically the same classification.

[9] Anthony Giddens, *In Defence of Sociology: Essays, Interpretations, and Rejoinders* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1996).

[10] Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary*

Along with liberation theologians, Baum tends to opt for conflictualist readings but the theological grounds given for this option raise serious issues about the interrelationship between theology and the social sciences.

The third and most serious issue facing the potential engagement with the social sciences after one has "opted" for a form of the social sciences—if that is what one must do—is to decide how one relates these two disciplines? Clodovis Boff has identified five different strategies for their interrelationship:

(1) *Empiricism or absence of mediation.* This approach assumes some direct access to social reality unmediated by social theory. It simply lets the social facts "speak for themselves." In place of a critical reading that social theory might provide, it substitutes its own naïve and uncritical stance which is adopted as normative.

(2) *Methodological purism or exclusion of mediation.* This position holds to the self-sufficiency of faith and revelation for all theorizing. It has no need to use other disciplines. Boff notes that such purism does not work in classical areas such as Christology and Trinity. One adopts either critical philosophical assumptions or uncritical ones. The same is true in theologies that engage social and historical realities. Perhaps the clearest exponent of methodological purism is Karl Barth.[11]

(3) *Theologize or substitution for mediation.* This strategy pushes purism further by arguing that theology is itself mediation, so that "theology pretends to find everything it needs to express the political in its own walls" (26). The outcome from this is a "religio-political rhetoric." Boff refers to it as "supernaturalism"; it is present in the ideologies of "Christendom," apoliticism, and "faith without ideology." Later I shall present an understanding of the work of John Milbank in these terms.

(4) *Semantic mix or faulty articulation of mediation.* This position makes use of the language of the social sciences, but results in a mixed discourse, drawing on the resources of two distinct realms of knowledge. The social

---

Philosophy (New York: Verso, 1989); Roy Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: B. Blackwell, 1991); also his contributions to the collection of readings: *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, ed. Margaret Archer et al. (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[11] For example, Barth refuses to allow "any general or special anthropology to intervene with its supposedly normative suggestions. We cannot be helped to our goal by any definition of man projected from the sphere occupied by a biological, sociological, psychological or ethical conception. Common to all such anthropologies is the fact that their pictures of man are all products of the same human self-understanding . . . no help is to be found even in the most penetrating analyses of what in any given age . . . is called 'modern' man." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) IV/3–2.803.

mediation is generally uncritical and not properly assimilated. Boff argues that one side of the mix tends to dominate: "the mixture is always organized under the domination of the logic of one of the languages in question" (28). Boff claims that social teaching documents of the Church tend toward this mix.

(5) *Bilingualism or unarticulated mediation.* This position consists of "practicing two readings of the real," juxtaposing "socio-analytic discourse and theological discourse." This type is perhaps exemplified in an essay by Haight on systematic ecclesiology that I consider later in what follows.

Yet each of these Boff finds inadequate and so develops his own proposals for such an engagement.[12]

The methodological divisions in the social sciences point to a profound theological issue at the heart of the social sciences of which most social scientists are oblivious. Only when one realizes that not only must theology attend to the work of the social sciences, but the social sciences must also engage with theologians, can one begin not only to overcome the methodological divisions within the social sciences, but also to solve the equally difficult problem of how the two should interact. Underlying these difficulties lies one of the most profound theological mysteries, that of the interrelationship of grace and nature. Here, the Scholastic dictum that grace completes and perfects nature comes to the fore. It reminds one of the intimate connection, indeed inseparability between the two, in practice if not in thought. This is not the first time theology has grappled with this problem, as it has frequently to deal with the interrelationship of faith and reason, typically in terms of the relationship between philosophy and theology.[13]

THE SHIFT FROM PHILOSOPHY TO SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THEOLOGY

Theology has had, from the beginning, a close, if troubled, relationship with philosophy. Plato was the first to use the term "theology." And while Paul contrasted the so-called "wisdom" of the Greeks with the folly of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:22–25), it did not take the early Christian writers long to employ philosophical terms in their attempts to make the Christian gospel intelligible to an audience more accustomed to Greek philosophical categories than Hebrew biblical narratives. Jesus was described by the early Apologists as a teacher of wisdom; the seeds of the Logos Incarnate

[12] Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987).

[13] The encyclical *Fides et ratio* conceives of the problem of faith and reason entirely in terms of the relationship between philosophy and theology. One could argue that the more difficult and pressing problems of the present situation are the relationship between historical and social scientific reason and theology.

in Jesus could also be found in the writings of philosophers as well as the Hebrew Scriptures. Tertullian implicitly drew on the resources of Stoic philosophy, while Origen and later Augustine of Hippo found neo-Platonic thought a more congenial partner for their theological syntheses. Still the powerful theological edifice left to the West by Augustine contained flaws that required a shift from the idealism of Plato to the realism of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas to correct these flaws.[14] Aquinas left the Christian tradition a lasting patrimony, but few could scale the heights he achieved, and his achievement was dissipated in conceptualism and nominalism.[15] The Reformers revolted at the parody that Scholasticism had become, the so-called *via moderna*, and the link between theology and philosophy was sundered, at least by many of the Reformers. Catholicism bumbled along with an uneasy mix of Aquinas and Augustine, Aristotle and Plato, while the Enlightenment turned away from religion and metaphysics and discovered subjectivity, history, modern science, economics, depth psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology—a world of discoveries and disciplines unknown to the ancient world. Philosophies multiplied—Kant, Hegel, Marx, Whitehead, Husserl—a dazzling array of philosophical options that shattered the attempted unity of the Catholic Scholastics. A new world was dawning and theology had a great deal of catching up to do.

The success of the natural science, of Newtonian physics in particular, led to speculation about the possibility of a new science, a science of humanity. Such a science, it was hoped, would be as powerful in predicting the actions of human societies as Newton's science had been in predicting the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. This science would not take its stand on metaphysical speculation about human nature, but would be an empirical science, built upon the data of human lives, of human societies and cultures.[16] Once achieved such a science of humanity could be employed, as had the natural sciences, to build a better world, a world free of the besetting problems of economic cycles of "boom and bust," of political up-

[14] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988) 164–82; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990) 105–48.

[15] Note, for example, the analysis of Pope John Paul II in *Fides et ratio*: "From the late medieval period onwards, however, the legitimate distinction between [faith and reason] became more and more a separation [i.e. conceptualism] ... Another of the many consequences of this separation was an ever deepening mistrust with regard to reason itself [i.e. nominalism]" (no. 45).

[16] Note, for example, the position of Emile Durkheim: "Sociology does not need to choose between the great hypotheses which divide metaphysicians. It needs to embrace free will no more than determinism" (*The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. George E. G. Catlin, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller [8th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1938] 141).

heaval and violence. However, such a vision was always haunted by the paradox that those who would build such a world put themselves above the very scientific laws they would use to control the rest of humanity.

There emerged new "scientific" disciplines—political science, sociology, economics, psychology—with Enlightenment founders, Machiavelli, Augustus Comte, Adam Smith, and Sigmund Freud. Comte dreamed of creating a new rational society built on the scientific foundations of his new "sociology." But the theological implications of such a vision included the abolition of traditional religion and its replacement by a religion of humanity. Smith dreamed of a science of the economy, with its own iron laws, like Newton's law of gravitation, universal and immutable. Hundreds of thousands died of starvation in Ireland partly as a result of Smith's iron laws. But again the theological component of Smith's thought was the "hidden hand" of the market, an immanent form of divine providence that controlled the market to ensure its proper operation. This mix of theological/philosophical speculation and empirical method is most evident in the monumental work of Karl Marx. Was Marx a new social philosopher who turns Hegel's speculative dialectic of the spirit on its head in order to produce dialectic materialism, or an economist who has discovered immutable laws of economic development in the data of history moving toward the final Communist state of peace and prosperity? The two poles of Marxism, one "scientific," confidently predicting the end of capitalism, the other, demanding engagement and commitment to class struggle, were always in unresolved tension.

As has been thoroughly shown by John Milbank, the origins of the social sciences lie in an uncomfortable place between the natural sciences and philosophical and theological thought.[17] Inevitably a claim to produce a science of humanity will impinge upon ethical and theological issues, yet claim for itself the status of science, thus hoping to eliminate through empirical means the interminable debates of the philosophers and theologians. Theologians cannot remain neutral to these emerging disciplines but they need to understand and evaluate them. Eventually they will have to decide whether or not they can utilize these new findings in their own theological work. The first major move in this direction was undertaken by liberation theology which emerged especially from lands marked by huge divisions between rich and poor, by political upheavals and violence, where the Church often stood for the maintenance of the status quo.

Still, this explicit movement toward the social sciences created problems for these theologians: which social sciences should they use? For the realm

[17] John Milbank goes so far as to characterize all sociologies as either heterodox Christian or simply pagan (*Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* [Cambridge, Mass.: B. Blackwell, 1991]).

of the social sciences is not a unified realm of discourse. Theologians found that there were in the social sciences, just as in philosophy and theology, different schools of thought, different ways of structuring the data under investigation. In moving toward the social sciences, liberation theology had to make a decision as to which approach they would adopt.[18] They largely adopted a Marxist approach, seeking to disengage those elements of Marxism that are "scientific" from those "ideological" elements, such as atheistic materialism that is contrary to Christian belief. But why Marxism? What other options might have been available? Was such a disengagement of ideological and scientific elements possible?

TYPOLOGIES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Concretely, what were the options that faced liberation theologians? Apart from Marxism what could they have chosen as a preferred approach in their social analyses? As already noted, it is common to distinguish in sociology four approaches: the physicalist or positivist, the functionalist, the voluntarist or conflictualist and the intentionalist or symbolic interactionist. I shall now briefly address outline each of these.

Physicalism

The physicalist most closely models itself on the physical sciences. Struck by the success of the physical sciences, it concerns itself with the measurable, the empirical, collecting data so as to "let the facts speak for themselves." This approach is interested in providing mathematical models as much as possible, and as Gibson Winter notes that it has achieved its greatest use, if not actual success, within the social science of economics.[19] The physicalist tends to view society on the analogy of a machine or as the outcome of various forces that push and pull society in various directions.

As this approach neglects from its horizon that which is most specifically human, namely meanings and values, I shall not focus on it much in further

[18] See for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) 74–75; and the essay "Theology and the Social Sciences" in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 53–84; also Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), which is an extended defence of a conflictualist approach (ideologies) over alternative "scientific" approaches in the social sciences. More systematic is the work of Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*. For a recent account of this issue, see Peter C. Phan, "Method in Liberation Theologies," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 40–63.

[19] Winter, *Element for a Social Ethic* 236–38.

discussion.[20] From a theological perspective it has little to offer, though it remains a temptation for those who seek to mimic the success of the physical sciences. This approach is reductionist in the extreme.

Functionalism

Generally speaking functionalists direct their attention on the order inherent in societies. Their position is based on the assumption that "societies can be seen as persistent, cohesive, stable, generally integrated wholes, differentiated by their cultural and social-structural arrangements."[21] Leading figures often identified with this approach are Herbert Spencer,[22] Emile Durkheim,[23] and Talcott Parsons.[24] The common features of functionalism may be summarized in these three ways:

(a) While society may be composed of different spheres and elements, these are integrated into a harmonious whole that operates to ensure the continuance of the society. While there may be tensions within it, society develops ways of managing these tensions to ensure stability.

(b) Society is commonly viewed using the analogy of an organism or body. Like a living thing, societies are made up of distinct parts integrated into a whole. Like a living thing societies grow, adapt, evolve (perhaps), develop further specialized parts that are then integrated into the whole. Durkheim, for example, refers to an "organic solidarity" within society and, in his investigations of society, looked to "the 'general needs' of the social organism."

(c) In seeking to explain particular social facts, the functionalist approach is to "look for the functions the facts fulfil in the maintenance of the social system in which they are found."[25] These social facts concern the social arrangements and relationships that exist within a society. One example of what constitutes a social fact is the crime rate.

[20] In dismissing the fixation on measurement present in the positivist approach, Roy Bhaskar notes, "meanings cannot be measured, only understood." See his essay, "Societies," in *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, ed. Margaret Archer, 226.

[21] E. C. Cuff, W. W. Sharrock, and D. W. Francis, *Perspectives in Sociology* (3rd ed., Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 27.

[22] See Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State: With Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981). Spencer was one of the founding figures of modern sociology.

[23] See Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1952); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free, 1965).

[24] See Talcott Parsons, *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (New York: Free, 1978).

[25] Cuff et al., *Perspectives in Sociology* 39.

Parsons provides an elaborate approach to the analysis of social systems. He identifies four "functional imperatives"—adaptation, goal attainment, pattern maintenance, and integration—which are necessary for the survival of the social organism. Each of these imperatives finds its expression on one of four interlocking subsystems within society, the economy, the polity, the cultural/socialization and the societal.

One can see from this that key values for a functionalist sociology are harmony, cooperation, unity, and integration. In identifying these key values one can see that functionalism is not "value-free." While it may work empirically to gather data, its heuristic anticipation in ordering the data is to search for harmony, cooperation, and integration. Where these are not present, the implicit evaluation is that they should be present and that they should be promoted for sake of the survival of the society.

Conflictualist Sociology

Whereas functionalism tends to view societies as ordered, stable, and integrated wholes maintained by consensus of its members, conflictual sociologies focus not on order but on conflict, not on stability but on change, not on forces of integration but on forces of social disintegration. The best-known exponent of a conflict-based sociology is Karl Marx and his notion of class conflict. For Marx, the engine room of social change is the conflict between the economic interests of different social classes, between those who own the means of productions, and the workers who produce goods. Others approaches, such as those of Max Weber, understand conflict in broader terms, claiming that other factors such as status can also be the source of social conflicts. Ralf Dahrendorf summarizes these conflictual approaches as follows: (a) every society is at every point subject to the process of changes; social change is ubiquitous; (b) every society displays at every point descensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous; (c) every element in a society renders a contribution to its disintegration and change; and (d) every society is based on the coercion of some of its members by others.[26]

Here one can see here a substantial difference between the approaches of functionalism and conflictual sociologies. For the conflictual approaches, the claims of functionalism are to be viewed with suspicion, for their stress on harmony and unity is little more than an ideological mask that conceals the real divisions and conflicts of interests present in society. Conflictualist approaches stress the importance of suspicion and of ideology critique. The first question to ask of a particular social, political, or economic assertion

[26] Quoted in C. H. Brown, *Understanding Society: An Introduction to Sociological Theory* (London: J. Murray, 1979) 91.

is "whose interests does it serve?" The purpose of an ideology critique is to uncover hidden and concealed commitments and interests that distort debate and mask power relations. This pattern of suspicion marks the heuristic anticipation that dominates conflictual methods. The data is expected to fit into patterns of power, domination, and conflict.

Symbolic Interactionist

The symbolic interactionist approach understands the social world to be constituted by human acts of meaning and value. This social world is both the product of these human acts, while at the same time human beings are themselves the product of this social world. These acts of meaning and value are symbolically constructed and mediated and can only be appreciated "from the inside." Hence it tends to adopt a phenomenological methodology. Lonergan describes this approach to the social world in the following terms: "Its subjective dimensions are the constituting intentionalities of embodied consciousness; its objective dimensions are the form in which the world appears for this consciousness."[27] Key theorists are George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, and Gibson Winter.[28]

It is difficult to provide a more precise account of the symbolic interactionist position because it tends to adopt a phenomenological approach. Hence it does not have as clear an anticipation of the structure of the data, as found in functionalism and conflictualism. The work of Gibson Winter, particularly in his work *Liberating Creation*, begins to develop such anticipation through his method of root metaphors.

In conclusion, Winter understands these four typologies in terms of their degree of abstraction from the concrete social world, with the physicalist being most removed, while the symbolic interactions is the most concrete. His own research shows a preference for this approach.[29] Gregory Baum, on the other hand, casts doubt on the claim of this approach to being value-neutral, and therefore he restricts his discussion to the functionalist and conflictualist approaches.[30]

[27] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "The Example of Gibson Winter," in *Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 190.

[28] In particular, Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[29] See Winter, *Liberating Creation*, where Winter's preference for an artistic root metaphor correlates with his symbolic interactionist approach.

[30] Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994) 151.

The Body of Christ: An Ecclesiological Illustration

At this stage it might be apposite to give an ecclesiological example to illustrate some ways in which sociology might impact on our understanding of the Church. Consider then the classical theme of the Church as the body of Christ.

Functionalist perspective: The organic imagery of the "body" is a classical functionalist account of a social "body." It stresses the values of interrelatedness, interdependence, and social harmony. This is exactly how Paul uses the imagery of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. He speaks of how the different parts of the body, ears, eyes, etc., need the other members for the whole to function. This interdependence means "there may be no dissension within the body" (v. 25). A functionalist will value this theological metaphor highly.

Conflictualist perspective: A conflictualist perspective on 1 Corinthians 12 would look very different from the above. For a conflictualist would ask: "In whose interest does this harmony operate?" It would raise the possibility that Paul uses the symbol of the body of Christ to suppress legitimate dissent from his authority. Paul thus evokes a powerful religious symbol, the body of Christ, to reassert, in the face of widespread dissent and division, his own apostolic authority: "God has appointed in the church *first apostles*" (v. 27). A conflictualist will view this symbol with deep suspicion.

Symbolic interactionist: This is more difficult to specify, but might look something like the following. The Corinthian community was experiencing serious division over a variety of matters (see the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians) and was perhaps on the point of dissolution. In this context, Paul evokes a powerful religious symbol, the body of Christ, in order to achieve a level of social cohesion and integration to ensure the survival of the group. The value of the symbol is relative to the context that Paul and the community are facing. A community that is already stable might require a different symbol to meet its needs. A symbolic interactionist will relativize the symbol to the present needs of the social group.[31]

The point of this example is to illustrate the fact that the various sociological approaches lead to quite diverse readings of this one theological symbol. The sociological approaches are not theologically neutral as they determine different, even opposed, evaluations. What grounds might one have for opting for one approach over another? Or does one conclude that such sociological readings are simply of no theological interest? Perhaps, at

[31] One could provide a similar analysis of the more contemporary ecclesiological symbol, *communio*. This too has functionalist overtones. The question that needs to be asked is why has this symbol arisen now?

the very least, one might conclude that it is no longer theologically responsible to attempt a systematic ecclesiology without paying some attention to the social sciences.

TOWARD A RESOLUTION: REORIENTING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

So the problem remains. Which form of social science does one choose? The promise held out at the birth of the social sciences, that they would provide an empirical means for overcoming the multiplicity of philosophical and theological stances, has proven false. In fact, the multiple approaches within the social sciences have simply reduplicated the very divisions they sought to overcome. The reason for this is that, unlike the physical sciences, the practice of the social sciences is much more attuned to its philosophical and methodological assumptions. While one can be a good physicist and hold naïve opinions on the philosophy and methodology of science, the same cannot be said in the social sciences. The reason why this is so will become more evident in the course of this article. In fact the possibility arises that none of the variants of social sciences, as they are presently constituted, may serve our theological needs without a significant reorientation.[32] One goal of my present article is to take initial steps toward such a reorientation.

I begin with what is perhaps an unexceptional question. What is the goal of the social sciences? Social theorist Carl Hempel spells it out when he identifies the goal of the social sciences as providing "insight into factual connections" between social events, as cause and effect.[33] Similarly, Peter Manicas, "The aim of social science is an understanding of society and social process."[34] What is the basic assumption behind such a goal? One could argue that such understanding can only occur if the factual connections/society/social processes are intelligible. Now one can note that the assumption of the intrinsic intelligibility of physical reality is the a priori condition for the possibility of the physical sciences. Such is the position of

[32] Lonergan has consistently argued for such a reorientation of the human sciences, see his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 767. The most thorough achievement toward this has been the work of Robert Doran and his reorientation of depth psychology. See Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990).

[33] Carl Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," from *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, ed. Martin and McIntyre (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996) 45. Hempel's own position is in fact marred by positivism and the search for testable laws allowing for prediction and control.

[34] Peter Manicas, "A Realist Social Science" in *Critical Realism*, ed. Margaret Archer et al. 323.

Lonergan and Bhaskar.[35] But can one assume that all social and historical situations are intelligible in the same way? For if there are unintelligible elements in the social situation then the only insight available into those elements is what Lonergan calls an "inverse insight," that is, the insight that there is nothing here that can be understood.[36] The possibility that Hempel seems to overlook is that there may be social situations that are in some sense objectively unintelligible. For example, Lonergan speaks of a "social surd,"[37] while Bhaskar acknowledges the possibility that "the *phenomena* themselves may be false."[38] Alasdair MacIntyre concisely argues: "Unintelligible actions are failed candidates for the status of intelligible action; and to lump unintelligible actions and intelligible actions together in a single class of actions and then characterise actions in terms of what items of both sets have in common is to make the mistake of ignoring this."[39]

Now what links the positions of Bhaskar, MacIntyre, and Lonergan is a commitment to epistemological realism in some form or other, that is, reality is knowable precisely because it is intelligible. They stand in contrast to approaches that neglect understanding altogether, such as positivist approaches that let "the facts speak for themselves," or Kantian idealist approaches that tend to view understanding as a construct projected onto an otherwise unintelligible noumena, as in conflictualist accounts. In both cases the distinction between intelligible and unintelligible actions cannot be recognized.

The shift to a focus on understanding also relieves the social sciences of the expectations, derived from the natural sciences, that the goal of their discipline is prediction and control. The natural sciences have proven masterful in their abilities to manipulate the physical world through technological means built upon their scientific theories. And it was clear that the possibility of such social manipulation was on the agenda of many social scientists. However, in dealing with social reality, one must deal with events that may be quite intelligible, but completely unpredictable, such as new practical insights and decisions that may constitute new emerging social realities.

The question that arises is: "What are the conditions that render a social or historical situation intelligible or unintelligible?" Now social and his-

[35] See Lonergan, *Insight*; and Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1978).

[36] See Lonergan, *Insight* 43–50. [37] See ibid. 254–57.

[38] Roy Bhaskar, "Societies," in Margaret Archer et al., *Critical Realism* 231. For example, the data for consideration includes the beliefs of social actors that may be false.

[39] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd ed., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984) 209.

torical situations are, among other things, the cumulative product of human beliefs, decisions, and intentions. Harold Kincaid recognizes this when he notes, concerning his arguments against the possibility of there being social laws, "there can be no laws relating belief, desire and action."[40] Bhaskar, on the other hand, "wants to distinguish sharply, then between the genesis of human actions, lying in reasons and plans of human beings, on the one hand; and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other; and hence between the domains of the psychological and social sciences."[41] Here one can grasp the intimate connection between social sciences and ethics, obscured somewhat by Bhaskar's reference to psychology. For what renders human decisions and intentions intelligible is their relationship to values or ends (terminal values). To argue that there can be "no laws" in relation to such ends is to adopt an inherently relativist ethic of ends such as one finds in Western liberal societies. On the other hand, to seek such laws, in terms of "insights into factual connections," presumes a human teleology or account of human flourishing toward which human society moves, or fails to move, as a consequence of the free decisions of its members. Theologically such a teleology, or account of human flourishing, is captured heuristically in the symbol, expounded by Jesus Christ, of the kingdom of God.

I have raised the question of teleology as playing a role in the social sciences. This causes some problems for those who feel that one of the achievements of the physical science was the elimination of "final causes." In the natural sciences, one cannot explain a situation by an appeal to the outcome. This is to introduce "metaphysics" into empirical science. But in the human sciences one can ask whether outcomes of events can be causes, or can they in fact be their own cause? The answer is clearly yes. Outcomes can be causes because human beings can envisage them, plan for them, and implement decisions that seek to achieve them. In this sense an outcome can be a cause, because human beings are intelligent and free. This is the essence of "intentional" activity. However, the form of causation is not mechanistic or automatic. It is personal in the deepest sense of the word. It is also social because it presumes a field of cooperative behaviors, common meanings, and decisions, and social preconditions that enable the achievement of the sought after goal. Where it is unscientific to appeal to final causes in the physical sciences, because purely physical beings are not intentional, in the social sciences it would be unscientific to eliminate them

[40] Harold Kincaid, "Defending Laws in the Social Science," from Martin and McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996) 112.

[41] Bhaskar, "Societies" 369.

precisely because human beings live in a world mediated by meaning and motivated by value.

A further clarification concerning the notion of teleology is required. One must distinguish between teleology as static goal and teleology as dynamic process. To evoke teleology in the social sciences is not necessarily to posit some utopia, some Marxist classless society toward which we are inevitably moving. Teleology might in fact be completely open-ended, a matter of flourishing as perfect intrinsic process rather than static goal, and so always open to new possibilities consistent with flourishing.[42]

Social Science and the Problem of Evil

Let us step back from our more theoretical considerations and turn to the more concrete situation of South Africa prior to Black majority rule. Central to the concrete social reality was the system of apartheid, based on the notion of the racial superiority of the Whites. People were segregated into three groups: White, Colored, and Black, each enjoying different social and economic privileges. In practice this meant arbitrary decisions being made about the categorization of various people—sometimes siblings in the same family would be categorized differently because of natural variations in skin color. What this highlights is that the whole South African state was based on a lack of intelligibility, the unintelligible distinction between peoples, based on an empirical rather than an intelligible distinction, leading to arbitrary and hence irresponsible decision-making. The social structure was based on a mistaken judgment. It would be relatively easy to multiply such examples. What they illustrate is that a social world can contain features not present in the physical world. They can possess the feature of a radical lack of intelligibility, a meaninglessness that results from human sinfulness—in this case, racism. This is an example of what Lonergan calls the "social surd." It is a consequence of the basic sin of the human misuse of freedom that has had consequences on human society. The decisions of human freedom are unintelligible inasmuch as they do not stand in some intelligible relationship to terminal values, in the case of apartheid, among other things the value of truthfulness.[43] The surd moves from unintelligent, unreasonable, and irresponsible decisions of individuals to social structures in which they live, to the very meanings and values by which one seeks to make sense of the world. These in turn become the very air one breathes and so impact upon and distort one's decisions, further contributing to the social surd.

[42] Lonergan, *Insight* 476.

[43] Bhaskar, for example, identifies truth as value in the social science. "But that truth *is* a good . . . is not only a condition of moral discourse, it is a condition of any discourse at all" ("Societies" 242).

This places the human sciences in a different situation from the physical sciences in terms of the relationship between fact and theory. In the physical sciences, if the facts do not fit the theory then the theory is eventually ruled out as wrong or inadequate. The theory must be changed. In the social sciences, if the facts do not fit the theory, this may be because the theory is wrong or inadequate, or it may reveal a high degree of social surd distorting the data.[44] In such a situation, to change the theory to fit the facts is to accommodate oneself to the social surd, to normalize and rationalize it, so that it becomes the expected outcome, the predicted result. Lonergan would refer to this has the capitulation of intelligence in the face of the social surd.[45]

Two conclusions emerge. The first is that the connection between theology and the social sciences is more intimate than one might previously have expected. Both theology and the social sciences must "deal" in some sense with the problem of evil.[46] Moreover, from the theological perspective, the only solution to the problem of evil is divine grace. Thus there are limits to what the social sciences can propose in terms of social policy, because the ultimate solution is not a social reality alone, but is tied into the larger question of the problem of evil. On the other hand, what they must avoid are social policies that normalize the social surd that builds it in as an assumption about the nature of social reality. Inasmuch as they do this they simply contribute to the social surd. Theology can assist the social sciences in recognizing their own methodological limitations.

The second conclusion that emerges is that our current perspective sheds light on the limitations of the different approaches in social sciences. Clearly the positivist approach fails to come to grips in any way with the problem of the social surd. This approach falls completely into the trap that MacIntyre identified. It makes no distinction between data that is intelligible and that which is not. It forces all data into the same category leading inevitably to the normalization of the social surd.

Functionalism, on the other hand, does implicitly incorporate values of harmony and interdependence into its analysis of society. However, when it deals with the problem of evil, one can find two possible resolutions. The

[44] This difference is identified by Bhaskar: "The phenomena themselves may be *false* or in an important sense inadequate (for example, superficial or systematically misleading)." One consequence of this is that the Popperian account of science progressing through the falsification of theory is inadequate in dealing with the social sciences ("Societies" 231).

[45] Lonergan, *Insight* 255–57.

[46] The critical realist school of Bhaskar explicitly moves in this direction, to the point of adopting a classically Christian notion of evil as privation. See Roy Bhaskar and Andrew Collier, "Introduction: Explanatory Critiques," in *Critical Realism*, ed. Margaret Archer et al. 389.

first may be the identification of evil as "that which disrupts social harmony." Is this an adequate account of the social surd? There are many things which may disrupt social harmony which are not evil, for example, the call for social justice for repressed minorities. Such a "disruption" may lead to social change toward a more just and equitable society, which may be judged to be a good thing. The other possible resolution is the forcing of intelligibility onto what is not. For example, Durkheim's analysis of crime tends to normalize crime by identifying its "functional" attributes.[47] This is where functionalism falls into the trap that MacIntyre identified. In this situation it attempts to force the data to fit the theory, that is, the heuristic anticipation of harmony and interdependence.

The situation with conflictualism is more complex. It raises questions of value by its identification of social interests. But it can find no resolution to the question of ultimate norms for these social interests. Every position is thus ideological, that is, representative of particular interests. The only social "sin" is the failure to commit oneself correctly to one's class interests. Such a relativist account does not do justice to the problem of evil and the social surd. At worst, a conflictualist approach normalizes conflict and social dissension, as is evident in the description cited earlier by Dahrendorf of its key features. This can justify and lead to violence which may simply worsen the social situation.

The symbolic interactionist position, is as always more difficult to identify. Its phenomenological methodology defies easy description or analysis. Even as sophisticated an ethical account as that of Gibson Winter in *Liberating Creation,* can be identified as relativist. Winter uses a method of identifying what he calls "root metaphors" for analyzing cultural systems. These metaphors are basic organizing principles for a cluster of meanings and values expressive of particular worldviews. Winter identifies three such root metaphors, viz., the organic, the mechanistic and the artistic root metaphors. The organic views the world (and society) as an organic whole with rhythms and cycles reflecting those of the order of nature. It is cosmological in the sense that the human world models itself on the cosmic order of things. It is commonly found in premodern, hunter-gatherer, and agrarian societies. The more mechanistic view dates from the Enlightenment, which, with the success of the physical sciences, sought to explain the

[47] Durkheim argues that society must have some way if distinguishing between good and bad. The fact of crime, he claims, helps society distinguish between what is seriously bad and what is good. He suggests that if serious crimes were eliminated, say by better policing, then less serious crimes would be taken more seriously, or new "serious crimes" would emerge. In this way crime establishes the boundary between approved and rejected behaviors. If crime did not fulfil this role, society as a whole could not function. For a summary, see *Perspectives in Sociology*, Cuff et al. 34; see also C. H. Brown, *Understanding Society* 44.

world and human society on the analogy of a machine. The artistic model views the world and human society in terms of artistic process, creating new orders out of preexisting materials, maintaining certain tensions between competing demands. However, the question remains, why is the artistic metaphor morally superior to the organic and mechanistic metaphors? What moral imperatives would lead to one rather than the others? What this approach lacks is an account of "pure social process," the basic intelligibility of that process from which to "read" social norms. Without such an account it must import values from an extrinsic source, leading inevitably to the claims of ideology.[48]

BREAKDOWN OF THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

What one can conclude from my analysis is that any attempted method of correlation that seeks in some way to correlate the results of the social sciences with the theological tradition, will inevitably break down.[49] The starting point for the method of correlation is some form of analysis of the human situation, drawing on a theoretical perspective, either philosophical or social scientific. Inasmuch as some have used the social sciences to provide a "scientific" account of the human social reality one can immediately identify four problems.

The first is, as already noted, that the social sciences do not provide a unified field of knowledge on the current situation. Which social science approach does one use: positivist? functionalist? conflictualist? interactionist? The correlationist methodology does not of itself specify, and so from the methodological stance the choice is arbitrary. In fact, it will generally be governed by other considerations that remain implicit, though some, such as liberation theology, make their choice explicit, through a theological principle such as "the preferential option for the poor." The second point is that the present situation that the social science is seeking to analyze is not theologically neutral. The social situation is already constituted in part by the theological realities of sin and grace. If that is the case then it is not possible to separate out present situation and Christian tradition so neatly. The third problem lies in the assumption that the social sciences present us with a relatively self-enclosed body of knowledge or theory which one can accept as given. What I have argued is that, in fact, the social science can know their proper limits only in relationship to

[48] I would argue that what Winter's position needs is a more thorough grounding in interiority, which could make his claims more normative, as found in Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*.

[49] See also my article, "Quarrels with the Method of Correlation," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 707–19.

theology. The social sciences as they are presently constituted would not begin to recognize this problem. The final problem is that the method of correlation absolves the theologian from serious engagement with the social sciences. Their results are simply taken over at face value. On the contrary, I argue that theologians must actively engage with and reorient the social sciences so that they can begin to reflect more fully on the problem of evil, and the solution to that problem in divine grace.

A good example of the failure of a method of correlation can be found in the ecclesiological suggestions made by Roger Haight, in his essay, "Systematic Ecclesiology."[50] As with my present article, Haight's remote goal is the development of a historical yet still systematic ecclesiology. To achieve this he envisages the utilization of historical, sociological, and philosophical insights. However, his method is explicitly one of correlation. This method sharply distinguishes between the realm of religious discourse and that of secular discourse. As a consequence, Haight concludes that the "church, as an historical movement, must be understood simultaneously in two languages," in a secular language that enables "the analysis of any historical institution" and a theological language "which deals with the relationship that the church bears to God and God to it."[51]

Based on what I have argued, such a stance is not satisfactory. It splits into two what should be one project. The Church is one reality, not two distinct realities. The project is to understand the Church and it is theological through and through. There has never been a distinct theological language that does not use categories from other sources such as philosophy or even common language. Ecclesiology cannot retreat alone into some supposedly pure theological language in order to deal with the relationship between the Church and God. The sociological stance is no less theologically necessary because it is also secular. It only ceases to be theological if the sociological is thought of as giving a complete understanding of Church, reducing it to a secular reality. Similarly, theological categories may be necessary in order to understand historical institutions, for example when one wants to speak of social sin.

The Suggestions of Clodovis Boff

Perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to bring the social sciences into dialogue with theology can be found in the work of Clodovis Boff. I have already considered his classification of various failed attempts at such dialogue. In terms of his own contribution, Boff wants to argue that the social sciences enter into theology of the political as a constitutive part, at the

[50] Haight, "Systematic Ecclesiology," *Science et Esprit* 45 (1993) 254–81.
[51] Ibid. 279. Boff would identify Haight's project as one of "bilingualism."

level of its material object, i.e., the social and political. This object is knowable only through the social sciences. He summarizes his position thus: "The text of a theological reading with respect to the political is prepared and furnished by the sciences of the social. Theology receives its text from these sciences, and practices upon it a reading in conformity with its own proper code, in such a way as to extract from it a characteristically, properly theological meaning."[52] It is not that the "political *turns* theological, *becomes* theological by absorption, but by enrichment."[53] One might say the theological sublates the political.

Problems arise, however, when Boff seeks to become more concrete in terms of the socio-analytic mediation. He appeals to the relative autonomy of earthly values, of the social order to claim an autonomy of the social sciences. He writes: "theology would be incompetent to pronounce upon the internal regime of the sciences"—which is guided by an "ethic of objectivity.... Theology possesses no supplementary illumination of a scientific order that might qualify it to invalidate scientific hypothesis."[54] My analysis has uncovered how problematic these claims may be. Boff's claims that "the theologian has no competency to tell the sociologist how to do sociology" may require revision. Boff does accept an "antidogmatist critique" as one of his basic principles that allows theologians to prevent the social sciences from being too "dogmatic" or overstepping their bounds, but this is a far cry from the recognition of the intrinsic concern of the social sciences with the problem of evil. This antidogmatist critique is simply the demand that the social sciences not present themselves as "closed, finished and absolute," though this also applies to theology as well.

Boff examines the claims of historical materialism, or Marxism, and seeks to distinguish between its philosophical aspects that are unacceptable "by reason of its reductionist or dictatorial character," and its scientific aspect "which as a method for the analysis of society and history is, in principle legitimate." For Boff, Marxism is a "science of history," to be verified through historical practice. As such, Marxism can serve the needs of theology for a social mediation only on the level of scientific theory. Theology "cannot allow itself to be measured by the yardstick of Marxism."[55]

Boff then raises the question about which approach the theologian should adopt. His position is that theology is "forced to make a choice among the socio-analytic systems that are de facto at its disposal in the current phase of cultural development."[56] And in the current phase, he could identify only two basic choices, functionalism and those of a "dia-

[52] Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 31.
[53] Ibid. 33.
[54] Ibid. 51–52.
[55] Ibid. 55–56.
[56] Ibid. 56.

lectic tendency," that is, conflictualism. How does one choose? Boff offers two criteria, one scientific, and the other ethical. The scientific criteria is, which best explains society? On this level, functionalism is best for explaining societies that one "judges good and to be maintained" whereas Marxism "take into account the problems of a people that suffers as a result of conflicts and seeks to resolve them, even at the price of revolution."[57] Boff then expands:

> At this point then we must move on to the second type of criteria—ethical criteria. The question of "scientificness" raises an antecedent question, one concerned with ideological options and determinate political undertakings, and finally leading to ethics. Before a judgment can be made on the explicative value of a theory, one must determine the concrete problems this theory claims to explain. The actual determination of these problems implies a decision of an ethical sort.[58]

The choice of social mediation is then determined by a prior ethical option that for liberation theology will be identified in terms of the preferential option for the poor.

The major flaw in Boff's analysis lies in his understanding of the scientific character of the social sciences. Their "objectivity" and "autonomy" imply that theology is left simply to adopt one of the prevailing options in the "current phase of cultural development." Here the analogy Boff draws with Aristotle and Aquinas is illuminating. He argues that just as Aquinas adopted Aristotle, so theology may adopt Marxism. But Aquinas made significant contributions to and transformation of the realist philosophy of Aristotle. So too, theologians may need to take a more active role in the transformation of the social sciences, and not simply accept the options that happen to be available.

Furthermore, Boff brings ethical criteria into the choice of social science, but in a manner extrinsic to the nature of the science itself. Ethical criteria are imported from outside, in this case, the preferential option for the poor. The "why" of this criterion, over and against other possibilities, is found in a reading of the Scriptures. In this way, liberation theology uses "revelation" to save the normativity needed for its engagement with the social sciences. Boff makes this extrinsic character of the choice explicit:

> If I wished to formulate all this in terms of my distinction between the two regimes of a science, I would say that the question of the "scientificness" and its criteria is a matter of the *internal regime* of a science, whereas the criterion of the ethical choice—or better the ethico-political choice—is located on the side of the *external regime*.[59]

The analysis I have conducted, on the other hand, would indicate that

[57] Ibid. 58.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid. 58–59.

the ethical dimension is intrinsic to the whole nature of the social sciences precisely as "science." If this is so, it might also raise doubts as to whether Boff's project of distinguishing between the philosophical and scientific aspects of Marxism withstands critical investigation. Certainly it is not as simple a proposition as Boff would like to think.[60]

This criticism of liberation theology goes beyond the question of its adoption of a conflictualist approach, and whether it identifies conflict as intrinsic (and normative), or as empirical. It is more fundamental and methodological, dealing with the ways in which one understands the relationship between theology and the social sciences in general. In the end, Boff's position is just another variant on the correlationist method.

THE CRITIQUE OF MILBANK

Before I can proceed to a more constructive task in my theological engagement with the social sciences I must attend to the critique of any such engagement as found in the writings of John Milbank. Milbank's writing is complex, dense, and controversial. Nonetheless he makes some serious theological points and deserves a response. His position comes out of a postmodern idiom that rejects master-narratives and rejoices in the concrete particularity of multiple histories. Reason is held in suspicion and persuasive rhetoric is the favored form of argumentation. Claims to the use of reason are treated as a display of the "will to power" and are subjected to a genealogical analysis. The strategy that unfolds is roughly as follows.

Firstly, the historical origins of the social sciences during the Enlightenment were an attempt to curtail and contain religion within the private sphere, a process which he refers to as "policing the sublime" (a reference to Peter Berger's work). This policing ensured the separation of the secular and the sacred each into their own sphere, leading to the eventual irrelevance of religion to the public sphere. This is in essence a genealogical critique. By tracing the origins of the social sciences to these tainted sources he seeks to discredit them as useful tools in theological work. They are from their very origins interested in the elimination of religion.

Secondly, Milbank considers only two of the major approaches, namely, functionalist and conflictualist schools of thought. The first is dismissed as "metaphysical": "functionalist sociology adds nothing that is not metaphysical to historiography."[61] And the metaphysical is simply a master

[60] In this regard I think the criticism of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its document, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation," makes some valid points about the difficulty in separating out the "scientific" from the "ideological" elements in Marxism.

[61] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 111.

narrative, cloaked in reason, but really an instance of the will to power. The latter, conflictualism, he condemns as promoting an ontology of primordial violence. Such a conflictual view is basically pagan, not Christian, one that promotes the ontological priority of peace. Milbank is suspicious of any "dialectic method" since it represents the constant temptation to violence in the name of dialectic "benefits" that only encourage further violence.[62]

Thirdly, Milbank raises an explicitly theological argument against the social sciences. His opening claim of the book is "once there was no secular."[63] For Milbank the very existence of the "secular sphere" is a social construction that would not have been recognized, for example, during Christendom. Within Christendom the whole of society was subsumed within the sacred. According to Milbank what allows for the creation of the secular is the grace-nature distinction introduced by the Scholastics and exemplified in Aquinas. Prior to this an Augustinian theology operated on the basis of the grace-sin dialectic that allowed for no clear "middle ground" such as the category of nature. By creating the grace-nature distinction Aquinas opened up the possibility of a (relatively) autonomous realm of activity distinct from the sacred. This autonomous realm becomes the secular. The social model of an Augustinian theology of grace is Christendom, whereas Aquinas paves the way for the modern secular state. Further, in relation to modern theology and its present flirtations with the social sciences, Milbank identifies two options—"naturalizing the supernatural" or "supernaturalizing the natural."[64] The first of these charges he lays at the feet of Karl Rahner and in particular liberation theology. Their supposed leveling out of the supernatural concedes too much autonomy to the secular and social sciences, basically eliminating grace from human history. Milbank prefers the latter option, supernaturalizing the natural, leaving no space for the secular or the social sciences.[65]

Does this mean that Christian theology has nothing to say about societies? From Milbank's postmodern perspective, there are no "societies" in general, only concrete communities and their histories, so there can be no general "theory" of society. On the other hand, Christianity is itself an embodied social reality with its own history, the history of the Church, not as a hypostatized idea, but in the concrete lives of Christian communities. Milbank contends that Christianity is a distinctive ethical practice that requires its own distinctive social theory.

> The theory [i.e. the Christian theory of society], therefore, is first and foremost an *ecclesiology*, and only an account of other human societies to the extent that the Church defines itself, in its practice, as in continuity and discontinuity with these

[62] Ibid. 422.
[63] Ibid. 9.
[64] Ibid. 207.
[65] Ibid. 211.

societies. As the Church is *already*, necessarily, by virtue of its institution, a 'reading' of other human societies, it becomes possible to consider ecclesiology as also a 'sociology'.[66]

Talk of a "Christian sociology" makes sense precisely because there is no universal sociology, only the narratives of particular societies such as the Church. It should not be that theology adds to itself a new competence to make "social pronouncements," rather, "all theology has to reconceive itself as a kind of 'Christian sociology'."[67]

There are two main advances that come from Milbank's analysis of the relationship between theology and the social sciences. The first is that it focuses our attention on the key theological issue underlying the relationship, that is, the question of the grace-nature debate. Whatever the accuracy or the lack of accuracy in his readings of various theologians,[68] Milbank's work makes it clear that the "solution" to the grace-nature issues impinges directly on the outcome of our studies. Milbank opts for a grace-sin dialectic, as with Augustine, rather than the grace-nature distinction adopted by Aquinas. The consequence is what Boff calls "theologism," with the political consequence of Christendom.

The second advance is the way Milbank's discussion focuses our attention onto ecclesiology. Milbank conceives ecclesiology concretely and historically. His position is (perhaps paradoxically) opposed to an ecclesial idealism. What one sees here is a close connection between the social sciences and ecclesiology, even in Milbank's rejection of the connection. One might compare his position with that of Lonergan. Lonergan maintains the relative autonomy of the social sciences on the basis of the grace-nature distinction. This then has implications for ecclesiology. For the Church, he writes, must become:

not only a process of self-constitution but also a fully conscious process of self-constitution. But to do so it will have to recognize that theology is not the full science of man, that theology illuminates only certain aspects of human reality, that the church can become a fully conscious process of self-constitution only when theology unites itself with all other relevant branches of human studies.[69]

For Lonergan:

Grace perfects nature, both in the sense that it adds a perfection beyond nature and in the sense that it confers on nature the effective freedom to attain its own per-

[66] Ibid. 380. [67] Ibid. 381.

[68] See for example, my essay, "It is easy to see—the footnotes of John Milbank," *Philosophy and Theology* 11 (1999) 257–64 for a criticism of Milbank's account of the work of Lonergan.

[69] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1972) 364.

fection. But grace is not a substitute for nature, and theology is not a substitute for empirical human science.[70]

The irony in all this is that Milbank's own position can be identified as a form of functionalism, as suits his own idealistic tendencies.[71] Though Milbank is critical of the social sciences in general, and of functionalism in particular, there is a precise sense in which his own stance can be understood as functionalist. In general, Milbank considers ecclesiology to be a Christian "alternative" or "substitute" for sociology, so if one wants to understand his "sociological" approach one should consider the details of his ecclesiology. The Church for Milbank is a sphere of "socially aesthetic harmony," a society of friends "sharing goals, where each new product and social role as it emerges is nonetheless given its 'position' and relative weight in the community."[72] This approach is captured in Milbank's fascinating discussion of the symbols of the circle and the arrow. "Peace is circular, like a ritual dance or else the laurel crown adorning the brow of the victor."[73] Justice "secures the circular repetition of harmony"[74] whereas the arrow represents the constant temptation to violence in the name of dialectic "benefits" that only encourage further violence.[75] Again one sees that the values of functionalism are in the ascendant.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions may one draw from this analysis of the relationship between theology and the social sciences? Perhaps the first is that while the social sciences enjoy an autonomy from theology, it is only a relative autonomy. Theology has the right and responsibility to draw two matters to the attention of social scientists. Firstly, social science must never neglect the problem of evil, that radical lack of intelligibility that inevitably distorts the field of data for the social sciences. Inasmuch as the social sciences neglect the problem of evil they become less than scientific. Secondly, theology has the right and responsibility to remind the social sciences that they can never give a complete account of the human data. For the reality of human living is also touched by God's grace, a product of divine sovereign freedom. While such data may be evident to the social sciences, from their perspective it can never be more than a coincidental manifold of events whose true meaning can only be discerned from the higher perspec-

[70] Lonergan, *Insight* 767.

[71] Milbank describes his own position as one of "linguistic idealism," *Theology and Social Theory* 343.

[72] Ibid. 422.

[73] Ibid. 332.

[74] Ibid. 334.

[75] Ibid. 422.

tive of faith. A failure in this regard results in the sociological reduction of a theological reality such as the Church.

The second observation concerns the way in which theology can incorporate the work of the social sciences. Here the conclusion is equally radical. Theological work that deals with social realities, such as ecclesiology, cannot seek to develop a "theological account" and then hope to tack on some social sciences as an afterthought. The perspective of a reoriented social science must be integrated within the theology from the beginning. What is required is a theological gestalt, a framework that is at once theological and social scientific. It requires nothing less than the development of a theology of history itself. To my mind, the only successful position that achieves this, at least as a starting point, is the work of Robert Doran in *Theology and the Dialectics of History*. Building on Lonergan's notion of the scale of values, of healing and creating in history (a modern transposition of the grace-nature scheme), and of the analogy of dialectic, Doran has developed a theological construct that can incorporate a reoriented social science into its very heart. It goes beyond the scope of my article to establish this claim, but at the least it gives some indication of the magnitude of the task to be undertaken.

ATLAS Serials

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.