Revealing Unseen Idols: The Prophetic Calling of the Christian Sociologist

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Revealing Unseen Idols: The Prophetic Calling of the Christian Sociologist

This paper explores some of the contributions that the Christian sociologist may make to the evangelical college searching for identity in a postmodern world. Although the forces of postmodernism induce many evangelical colleges to neglect that which historically defines them (i.e. the privileging of the Old and New Testament scriptures), I do not believe that the trend toward secularization, manifest in many historically Christian colleges, is inevitable. The Christian sociologist plays a key role in the struggle against secularization – helping identify social forces that influence our thinking and contribute to, often unrecognized, forms of idolatry implicit in secularization.

One of the key contributions the teaching sociologist may make is that of helping students begin to understand the extent to which the decisions they make, the ways in which they think, and the values that they hold, emanate from the collective. We are influenced by the world around us; we embrace ways of thinking which find support in a culture that largely regards God as irrelevant. Consequently, we must think seriously about how to live as separate and holy people, without separating ourselves from the world and withdrawing from scholarly debate. In a postmodern world the Christian must, now more than ever, grapple with what it means to live in, but not of, the world.

Christian colleges play an important role in enabling students to think seriously about culture. However, even in Christian colleges like Covenant where we emphasize that “all truth is God’s truth,” and attempt to advance a unified worldview wherein the cosmos is not divided into sacred and secular spheres, students (and we who teach), fall into dualistic thinking laden with contradiction and paradox. For example (and I flesh this out more fully in later portions of the paper), in my Principles of Sociology class, when I introduce students to the secularizing effects
of formal rationality – explaining how the drive for efficiency produces an emphasis on means over ends, and results in patterns characterized by treating others as objects, rather than as fellow image bearers – students frequently make statements to the effect of “That’s just good business…” Such statements proclaim that the principles driving laissez-faire economics function as unchangeable “natural law” which we are not responsible to critique, nor must we restrict or modify our behavior as we interact in the economic institutions of society.

The chief source of many of these dualisms comes from our division of the world into the “natural” and the “social.” The sociologist is quick to point out that there is very little in our experience that is “natural.” We reify (assigning to social relations a fixed and immutable quality) social arrangements, and these conceptions of the world shape our concept of God and consequently our faith. This results in a distorted view of reality because we often mistake man’s creation for God’s creation. As a college standing in the reformed tradition, Covenant College should be seeking continual reform, discerning which aspects of our society and culture are distortions, and working to bring them back to where they should be.

The paper is organized in the following way: First, I provide an overview of some of the challenges postmodernism poses for many historically evangelical colleges. Second, I explain how the sociologist functions as a prophet and offer several ways in which the Christian sociologist differs from his or her secular counterparts. In this section I define sociology and provide a brief overview of its development as a discipline. While this may appear to digress from the central thesis of the paper, it provides an important basis for understanding what the sociologist does, and what sort of contributions he or she can make to the Christian college. Third, I explore some of the problems that cultural engagement poses for the Christian, and suggest contributions that the Christian sociologist may make in the struggle to live in, yet not of,
the world. The focus in this section falls on the unanticipated and secularizing consequences of some of our attempts to engage with culture. Fourth, drawing heavily on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, I outline several ways in which Christians have understood the relationship of Christ to culture. My interest centers on how the different perspectives conceptualize Christian interaction within the dominant institutions of society – Where do they position themselves on the question of being “in but not of the world?”

Finally, using literature from the sociology of knowledge, I discuss Peter Berger’s concept of “ecstasy,” the process by which we step outside of the comfortable caves of the taken-for-granted social world – rejecting its conventions and challenging its assumptions. This concept emphasizes the need for Christians to engage in “de-reification,” the act of questioning and possibly rejecting reality as it is accepted by the majority of people in a culture. Throughout the paper I offer a few concrete examples from my classroom, illustrating my efforts to help students critique the culture in which they live as they pursue their various callings and work through the paradoxical situation of living by grace in a world fashioned by men.

**The Search for Identity: Christian Evangelical Colleges and Postmodernism**

Charlotte Allen’s article “The Postmodern Mission,” appearing in the December/January 2000 issue of *Lingua Franca*, offers a reasonably balanced treatment of some of the central issues concerning contemporary evangelical colleges in America. Allen (2000) observes that many historically evangelical colleges have begun to embrace postmodernist theology. At a glance, postmodernism seems almost antithetical to the idea of evangelical Christianity itself. One of the defining features of evangelicalism is the belief in an absolute – namely that there is a God, and that this God is revealed in the Old and New Testament scriptures. Postmodernism, Allen observes, generally holds suspect both master narratives and claims to universal truth.
According to Allen, many evangelicals are increasingly aware of the fact that only a small percentage of Americans believe in “absolute truth,” and consequently are questioning how such a fact fits into their “ministry.” With postmodernism’s rejection of absolute truth, and evangelicalism’s traditional alignment with it, are the two at all compatible?

Evangelical colleges are changing. Allen (2000) observes that many of the norms traditionally associated with evangelical colleges are a thing of the past. She notes that Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which once prohibited movies and dancing, now allows openly gay students to enroll, permits dancing, and does not object to faculty members and students consuming alcohol. Apparently, one can walk through many of the nation’s evangelical campuses today, and find rock music, trendy clothing, and other manifestations of mainstream popular culture. Daily chapel services appear to be a thing of the past. All of these developments are taking place at the same time as Christian colleges are enjoying an “unprecedented boom.” Christian colleges are attracting large numbers of tuition-paying students. Allen mentions that Bethel College in St. Paul Minnesota has surged from nineteen hundred to twenty-four hundred students since 1994 – a sizeable increase. The point is that all of these changes, coupled with an increasing embrace of postmodern theology, have led many to fear that that evangelical colleges are on what is known as the “slippery slope” – a downward trend toward and into secularism. Schools like Harvard, and the University of Chicago, which were once known for their ties to Protestant denominations, provide evidence that Christian colleges do stray from their roots given the right circumstances. Allen summarizes:

Fears that Calvin, Wheaton, and Bethel may be the next century’s Harvard, Yale, and Princeton have turned postmodernist scholarship and controversial class assignments into
causes célèbres for those who worry about secularization at Christian schools. If Derrida is in the classroom, can the devil be far behind? (p. 50)

Allen (2000) observes that postmodernist evangelicals do not see their work as a contribution to secularization. Rather, they see their work as reflecting the reality of the contemporary world – the postmodern world has simply arrived, like it or not. Allen cites Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, editors of “Christian Apologetics,” who say that “If Christians ignore this new circumstance, they risk obsolescence in a world where the belief in universal norms of rationality is no longer persuasive” (p. 50). Allen next cites Stanley Hauerwas, a Protestant theologian at Duke Divinity School, whom she describes as “no postmodernist.” Hauerwas suggests that in a world where there is no widely accepted notion of truth, we must work to make the Christian story compelling. This is nothing new. Evangelicals have always struggled to present their narrative as relevant to the larger culture in which they are embedded. However, in postmodern times, one gets the sense that the rules by which that narrative can be made relevant have radically changed. How can evangelicals, historically defined by their adherence to the conception of an objective truth, present themselves in ways faithful to their heritage, but that also “makes sense” and is helpful to a world where competing versions of “truth” are afforded equal weight?

Ironically, the evangelical colleges embracing a postmodernist theology do so from within a decidedly modernist context. As Allen (2000) observes, evangelical colleges are doing well – they are attracting students and the tuition that accompanies them. Evangelical postmodernist writers are attracting attention, and (although Allen doesn’t say so) are likely profiting from this postmodern “niche” market. Douglas Wilson, a critic of postmodernist evangelicalism identified by Allen, suggests that at some Christian colleges like Bethel and
Wheaton, the education students receive is both anti-intellectual and anti-faith. At a state (as opposed to a Christian) school, Wilson says, one at least knows when one’s faith is being attacked.

Allen (2000) concludes her article with several questions. She asks whether critics like Douglas Wilson are simply alarmists, “Or are they onto a disturbing and inexorable trend at those evangelical campuses currently basking in cash and high enrollments” (p. 59)? Questions such as these are at the heart of the evangelical’s search for identity. The world has changed and colleges are changing with it – Christian colleges are not exempt from this process. If traditional evangelicalism finds its basis in the conception of an objective truth – a master narrative by which one lives – then we must deal with the incongruity between that view and the postmodern view which holds sacred the conception of equally plausible multiple truths. Is the defining feature of evangelicalism bound up in the concept of modernity, or is there a space for a Christian postmodernism? How should evangelical colleges respond to these new problems of meaning posed by a postmodern world?

In the midst of murky postmodern definitions of truth, evangelical colleges must ask how they can maintain plausible identities. What is it that makes them distinctive? In an empirical study deriving data from nine “distinctly evangelical colleges and universities” Hammond and Hunter (1984) concluded that “… Evangelical higher education may be counterproductive to its own agenda” (Hammond & Hunter, p. 234). Included in the study were Wheaton College, Gordon College, Westmont College, Bethel College, Houghton College, Seattle-Pacific University, Taylor University, Messiah College, and George Fox College. Evangelical students at the University of California at Santa Barbara were surveyed for comparative purposes.
Hammond and Hunter (1984) were interested in the extent to which a college setting that insulates students from the “outside world” (i.e. provides a setting which reinforces an evangelical worldview) guards against the deterioration of their evangelical beliefs. They surveyed students in three different types of educational environments – characterized in terms of high, medium, or low insularity on the basis of whether they required a signed profession of faith from students. For example, all nine colleges and universities (excluding the University of California) required signed statements of faith from faculty, but only six required similar affirmations from their students. The remaining three institutions permitted non-evangelicals to enroll, and even recruited students who might be classified as “seekers” rather than confirmed believers.

Hammond and Hunter (1984) found that the evangelical beliefs of students on highly insular campuses did decay (became more “secular”) to a statistically significant extent (i.e. from freshman to senior year). By contrast, students attending institutions that did not guard against non-evangelical worldviews manifested change in the opposite direction – their self-reported adherence to key features of an evangelical worldview actually increased. Hammond and Hunter concluded that insulating campuses provide widespread support for an evangelical worldview, and these “plausibility structures,” coupled with the liberalizing tendencies of education in general, tend to diminish the extent to which students are “intentional” about their faith. In other words, students on more “protective” campuses can take their faith for granted – the entire environment surrounding them affirms the “rightness” of the evangelical worldview. This casual attitude toward faith tends to provide little resistance against secularizing influences. On the other hand, for evangelical students attending institutions which did not protect them from non-evangelical worldviews:
Adherents are continually reminded by the very nature of the setting of the vulnerability of their beliefs. It is important to note that the threat to the sustained plausibility of this worldview is no just fancied in the minds of the adherents but is, in fact, external and communicated. Thus, mere recognition of the minority status of one’s convictions relative to competing perspectives may (and in our data appear to) foster a “fortress mentality” among those determined to maintain the integrity of their worldview.

(Hammond & Hunter, 1984, p. 232)

What can we learn from this? If nothing else, Hammond and Hunter’s (1984) study suggests that insulating students from the secular world – being “not in and not of” the world – may have unanticipated consequences which run counter to an evangelical agenda. For instance, Hammond and Hunter found that students on campuses characterized by high and medium insularity manifested a decline in “piety” from freshman to senior year. Indicators of Evangelical piety included questions asking students how often they read or studied the Bible on their own, how often they attended Church, and whether or not they “said grace” before meals. They found similar patterns of decline among these same students in terms of their attitudes toward Traditional Familism, Legislation of Morality, and Moral Absolutism. However, “On the secular campus, the evangelical worldview of evangelical students seems to gain solidity. Rather than a disintegration of evangelical; worldview, there is a consolidation of beliefs and practices by those highly evangelical in theological doctrine” (Hammond & Hunter, p. 230).

Thus, if we are to guard against secularization, it seems we must create environments where students cannot simply rest comfortably beneath familiar plausibility structures. As evangelical colleges search for identity in a postmodern world, the solution is neither to encourage students to withdraw from the culture around them, nor is it to uncritically embrace
that culture. Students must be involved in educational experiences which challenge their faith, and which require them to present their Christian worldviews in arenas where Christianity is not seen as the only paradigm. An overly defensive strategy may produce effects in contradiction to those we desire. Our task requires a difficult balance; we must hold our students close, yet not too closely lest they fail to thrive outside the protective umbrella. A sociology which acknowledges the Lordship and relevance of Christ to culture, has an important role to play in helping students navigate the dangerous and deceptive waters of a postmodern society. Sociology, has tools uniquely suited to help students evaluate the world in which they live – tools which reveal unseen idols and issue a call to repentance. I now turn to an explanation of what those tools consist of, and how they may be used by the Christian sociologist.

**The Prophetic Role of the Sociologist**

**Sociology Defined**

Most people, when asked to define the subject matter of history, psychology, or economics, can readily supply a reasonably sufficient layman’s definition of those disciplines. However, when asked to define sociology, many people have difficulty “putting their finger” on just what it is that the sociologist is interested in. Many associate sociology with counseling, or with vague notions of comparing different primitive societies. While such responses are certainly not unrelated to sociology as a discipline, they fail to supply a comprehensive definition which helps us understand the problems with which sociology is concerned.

To understand the subject matter of sociology, it is helpful to examine how it came about. Sociology is a “problem oriented” discipline – it came about in response to social problems, to threats to the social order. Not surprisingly, the sociologist’s primary focus falls on disorder rather than order. The science of sociology developed in response to the widespread disorder
produced by the French Revolution and the industrial revolution at the beginning of the 18th century. The French Revolution represented a move away from feudal, aristocratic structures of government and toward national governments characterized by varying degrees of democracy (Levin, 1994). The industrial revolution represented a move away from ways of life and modes of thinking (most notably in the world of work) which had been in place for centuries.

Sociology looks at problems in society, and seeks to understand the forces responsible for them. A basic definition explains sociology as the scientific study of social behavior (Nisbet & Perrin, 1977), or to use Max Weber’s definition “Sociology… is a science, concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (Weber, 1968). From Weber’s definition we see that sociology goes beyond mere objective description of social phenomena; it is concerned with the interpretive understanding of such phenomena – a quality that distinguishes sociology from the natural sciences.

An example illustrating the sociological perspective is seen C. Wright Mills’ (1959) well-known book *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills distinguishes between “troubles” and “issues,” observing that my divorce or your divorce is a “trouble” – you or I feel responsible for it, hurt by it, feel like a failure, etc. The divorce rate, on the other hand, is an “issue.” When we see that the divorce rate is higher than 50%, it helps us understand something about your or my divorce – it hints at the fact that the larger society, its structure, its culture, and its various other elements, contribute to a pattern of divorces. Consequently, we can seek to identify causal agents related to divorce, and begin to understand how personal biography and history intersect.

When we see that the divorce rate for Christians rivals that of the general population, we begin to understand how sociology is useful for the Christian. As mentioned earlier,
postmodernism produces feelings of autonomy, a sense of being master’s of our own destinies, a
sense that we make our decisions freely, unencumbered by the influence of others – we appear to
live in a world of choice. When sociological research draws attention to the similarities between
Christian patterns of living and patterns of living characteristic of the general population, it calls
us to question the extent to which our religion molds our lifestyles or whether our lifestyles lead
us to fashion gods compatible with secular existence. In this way, the Christian sociologist can
issue calls to repentance.

I find that my students tend to have a very individualistic orientation. They view sin
(manifest in such things as divorce) as largely a matter of individual responsibility. However,
they are generally receptive to the sociological idea that the larger society tends to furnish a
climate which encourages or discourages certain types of sin. Society determines the norm, and
we, believers or unbelievers, tend to follow such norms. When they begin to see how individual
biography intersects with history and culture, they can learn to better discriminate among the
various parts of culture they consume. Thus, the Christian sociologist can help students begin to
understand that many of the secularizing influences which they must combat, lie in the normative
practices that Western culture encourages. Secularization is not found only in the religious
spheres of life. The sociological perspective can be an invaluable tool in helping students
recognize certain collective sins, and acknowledge the rule of Jesus Christ over all of culture –
not just the “religious” parts.

The Prophetic Mode

In A Sociology of Sociology, Robert Friedrichs (1972) develops the concept of the
sociologist as prophet. He begins his argument observing that sociology has a curious public
image. Sociologists, he contends, are the professional muckrakers of society “… dredging deep
for the day’s cultural contradictions” (Friedrichs, p. 57). The image of the sociologist as prophet is particularly relevant for contemporary sociologists grappling with the postmodern world. Where early sociologists dealt with problems that emerged in the transition from the premodern to modern world, contemporary sociologists deal with the problems generated in the move from modernity to postmodernity. The postmodern world is characterized by contradiction and paradox, and many respond to this confusing world by simply incorporating contradictory systems of meaning into their worldview. Contemporary sociologists assume the role of prophet when they uncover and then reveal to others the contradictions they maintain. The task facing the Christian sociologist is to communicate to people the disparity between the radical message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the compromise which so frequently dominates the postmodern worldview.

Friedrichs offers four different images which dominate the publics’ view of how sociologists depict them. The first image emerges through sociological studies in “conformity.” For example, David Riesman’s (1961) *The Lonely Crowd*, Robert and Helen Lynd’s (1929) *Middletown* and numerous other community level studies emphasize the human condition as one of conformity. The second image is one of “manipulation,” and C. Wright Mills’ (1956) *The Power Elite* provides a good example. This vision portrays average citizens as blindly following a powerful elite who cunningly manipulates them for profit and power. A third image pictures people as existing within systems containing contradictory elements. Robert Merton’s conception of “anomie” specifies the effects of contradiction found in societies or cultures whose goals and means for attaining those goals are in conflict. Illustrating this theme, Friedrichs observes, “Within the larger American cultural scene, a belief in God and the sacrificial love ethic of the Biblical religions is counterposed by the norms of a competitive, materialistic,
laissez-faire economic ideology” (Friedrichs, p. 61). The point here is that the American public found itself depicted by sociologists as the product of contradiction – a nation produced by the “contending polarities of equality and achievement” (Friedrichs, p. 62). The fourth image is one of “alienation” – an image strongly reinforced by Marx. Of this characterization Friedrichs says, “Alienation becomes the link between contemporary character and culture, the key to the diagnosis of an insane society” (Friedrichs, p. 63). Thus, modern man is seen as “… blocked by a dehumanized social structure from satisfying his true needs and realizing his humane nature” (Friedrichs, p. 63).

It is not difficult to make the case that all four of these images – conformity, manipulation, contradiction, and alienation – are highly representative of the contemporary society in which students live and from which they derive normative patterns for living. Furthermore, scripture addresses these focal points as characteristic of the post-fall experience of humankind. All four terms describe values which run contrary to scripture, and are basic to a world which denies God. The prophetic task of the sociologist at Covenant College centers on helping students learn to discern the mostly unseen social sources of conformity, manipulation, and alienation which influence their lives. When students learn to recognize, and by God’s grace reject, society’s claims on them, they can better embrace the task of being “salt and light” in a world which conforms to secular ideals, sees others as objects to be manipulated for personal gain, and alienates itself from the one true God.

These images leave no doubt why the sociological perspective is seen as harshly critical. According to Friedrichs (1972), the lay public perceives sociology as radically distrusting the inherited order of society. If indeed the social order is deserving of this distrust, where do we find alternatives to such a flawed order? Erich Fromm notes that the opposite of the narcissism
and conformity of an irrational society is found in the norms of the “great spiritual leaders of the human race” (Fromm, 1955 as cited in Friedrichs, p. 65). Peter Berger (1961) alludes to the same thing in The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, and Friedrichs informs us that Berger’s Biblically versed friends were led to refer to him as an angry, young prophet.

Such observations lead Friedrichs (1972) to draw the comparison between the Old Testament Biblical prophets and the contemporary sociologist. Where the prophet Amos testified to alienation in terms of the estrangement of the Israelites from the Lord God…

… The alienation of which the sociologist appears to the layman to speak is an alienation from one’s untapped creative resources and an estrangement from the bonds of community with one’s fellows. Although the product of differing frames of commitment, the diagnoses have similar empirical references. Neither is simply descriptive; both are acts of judgment that project consequences while offering hope to the responsive “remnant.” (Friedrichs, 1972, p. 65)

One of the primary tasks facing both the Old Testament prophets and the contemporary sociological prophet is that of confronting human indifference. Friedrichs (1972) informs us that a difference exists between the Hebrew “roeh” (seers and foretellers) and the “nabi” which were prophets who “… sought, through their projections of past behavior into the future, to alter that future” (Friedrichs, p. 65). The latter variety of prophecy finds expression in the contemporary sociologist who works to communicate to others a future vision, hoping that they will work diligently toward this new, sociologically conceived design. Friedrichs suggests that central to both modes of prophecy (Hebrew and Sociological) is opposition to the evil of indifference.
Commitment is imperative to both prophetic modes, commitment that shakes man loose from a position of neutrality as he faces the choice of treating his fellow as an end in himself or as but a means to one’s own ends. (Friedrichs, 1972, p. 66)

Although prophets are better equipped to call people to repentance than to communicate a vision of how they should then live, the prophetic (and sociological) task goes beyond the merely descriptive. Friedrichs (1972) observes, “The seventh- and eighth-century B. C. prophets of Israel were the antithesis of cool cataloguers of social norms. They were engaged – and in public” (Friedrichs, p. 66). Given a choice between “prophet,” “priest,” and “king,” the role of “prophet” comes closest to the layman’s perception of the sociologist. A priest is more concerned with orthodoxy, bringing man into touch with an image of the real through symbolism and ritual. A king “… speaks to the responsibility for day-to-day leadership in the city of man” (Friedrichs, p. 67).

Thus, the prophetic role of the sociologist is one of calling into question those structures and cultural practices which contribute to the alienation of humankind, and which we largely take for granted. For sociology this is conceived as alienation from our true “human nature.” For the Christian sociologist the task holds much greater consequence, for he recognizes that the alienation we face in contemporary society is the same alienation which concerned the Old Testament prophets – it is an estrangement from the Lord God of Israel produced by allegiance to the ways of men over the ways of God.

Friedrichs tells us “Prophecy in the Hebraic tradition was paired with iconoclasm – the breaking of icons” (Friedrichs, 1972, p. 75). Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the sociological prophet also seeks to destroy false images, and, as previously noted, his strength lies more in destruction than in articulating new ways of living. In the face of idolatry, the Old
Testament prophets issued calls to repentance, but the building of new civilizations fell largely under priestly jurisdiction. And so it is with the sociologist whose calling is to reveal unseen idols and call for their destruction.

If we accept this image of the sociologist as prophet, what are some of the false images that students embrace which must be revealed and destroyed? What unseen allegiances do they maintain which contribute to their alienation from God and solidify their conformity to the world? One allegiance, which I emphasize in the “Principles of Sociology” course that I teach, relates to our tendency to treat people as objects, rather than as fellow image bearers. In The McDonaldization of Society, George Ritzer (1996) explains how McDonald’s restaurant constitutes the archetype of a new form of idolatry. Ritzer says that in the modern world, new problems of meaning are emerging – problems for which the old forms of religion have unsatisfactory answers. Consequently, new forms of religion are arising. Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis illustrates the changing focus in modern culture (and by extension religion) – away from orthodox forms, and toward new, rationalized, global god-like forms. In a highly rationalized modern society, religion becomes an implicit part of culture – no longer held in a separated “privileged” category. These new forms of religion require new idols and images on which to focus their attention. McDonald’s restaurant constitutes the archetype of a new form of idolatry and illustrates how people are seeking control over their lives through the power of formal rationality. In advanced modernity (and postmodernity), new forms of religion stand in contrast to older forms of ever-fading orthodox religion, traditionally identified by their distinction from other parts of culture. Far from disappearing from modern society (as many sociologists of religion predicted), religion has emerged in new, less orthodox cultural expressions.
The point is that people (students) embrace worldviews that regard the principles of formal rationality – efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control – as a form of righteousness. In our drive to bring all of life under our control, we gradually learn to treat the people around us as means to an end. We prize speed and efficiency in our relationships. Consequently, as Weber warned, our world becomes disenchanted, and we lose that which makes us truly human. We end up in a situation which might be described in terms of the “displacement of ends” – focusing on the means by which we achieve desired ends, but forgetting what ends we should really be working toward. McDonald’s restaurant is characterized by these features of control and efficiency. To McDonald’s a person is a commodity, and the whole restaurant is designed to minimize the “humanness” of a person in the interest of greater and greater profits. Thus, in McDonald’s we see hard chairs and jarring colors (designed to encourage people to eat and leave quickly), an emphasis on quantity over quality (would you like that supersized?), a predictable and bland menu, employees with no real control over what happens at the restaurant, and relatively expensive food with little nutritional value. Seen in one light, this is simply a good formula for making money. Seen in another, it represents an idol in that it worships control through technology and has the effect of minimizing human contact. We grow easily upset if the McDonald’s employee serving us food fails to perform in a machine-like manner – and we frequently fail to see that person as a fellow image bearer. Given the choice of person or machine, we will choose to interact with the machine (witness the popularity of “do-it-yourself” checkout scanners at places like K-Mart).

This sort of thinking spills over into many different areas of our lives. The wealthy businessman who has plenty of money continues working hard at the expense of spending time with his children. Divorce becomes more efficient and easily obtained. Many churches embrace
a consumer mentality – offering programs which are tailor made for people used to ordering a “#2” meal-deal from the menu board at McDonald’s. Contrast these features of our lives with the almost disregard for efficiency manifested by Jesus Christ when he took time to be with little children in Mark 10:13-16. His disciples were caught up in running an efficient ministry, but Jesus reminded them that the kingdom is about people, not programs. Time and again scripture testifies to Jesus’ concern with individual people, and shows his willingness to give them his time. Christ never treated people as objects. Given our obsession with efficiency is it any wonder that many have forgotten the Christian practice of taking a Sabbath rest? Resting on the Sabbath is inefficient – and embracing a worldview which so highly prizes efficiency, we frequently eliminate such practices from our lives.

Students need to understand how culture infuses their lives and fosters the sort of thinking which regards other human beings as objects. The sociologist as prophet can help students learn to see beyond the obvious, revealing those parts of culture and society which conform us to society’s ways, encourage us to manipulate fellow image bearers for personal gain, and increase our alienation from the one true God.

A fundamental way in which the Christian sociologist differs from his secular counterparts is in how he conceptualizes reality. The Christian sociologist recognizes that we live in two worlds – the empirical or “objective” world available to our senses and explored through science, and another equally important world which to us appears more “subjective.” This second world is where we would locate our Christian faith, the inner working of the Holy Spirit, the grace of God in our lives, and our “callings.” While our human tendency is to emphasize one or the other “extreme,” both manifestations of reality are “of a piece,” and both must be accounted for if we are to live as God would have us to live. An improper emphasis on
either form of reality results in error. For example, refusing medical treatment for a critically injured child, opting instead to pray, ignores the means God has provided for us to deal with life in the physical world. On the other hand, when we ignore the subjective reality created by God, the consequences are just as (if not more) devastating. An example of this would be seen in the application of science to problems of a moral nature – trying to solve problems related to teen pregnancy by making birth control available to high school students. The scientific solution will not dissolve the moral consequences.

Thus, the Christian sociologist understands that we live in a world created by and upheld by God. Just as God created the law of gravity, which we must observe in the physical world, he also created laws for relationships, which must be observed. Richard Bube (1973) offers a Christian perspective on science and sociology. He speaks of science as the “revealer of reality,” and says that an appreciation of reality is essential for an understanding of Jesus Christ.

The Christian basis for the existence of objective reality is the Biblical doctrine of Creation. Creation informs us of the existence of a structure of the world, a created structure, a structure which is independent of us, a structure which is whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not. This created structure gives content to what we mean when we speak of “reality” and “truth.” It is this created structure of the universe that we mean by created reality, an objective reality not at the disposal of our subjective intentions. (Bube, 1973, p. 4)

Bube continues, saying that the search for truth is the search for knowledge of reality, for knowledge of this created structure. “Such truth is not only abstract, but also personal; therefore, Jesus could say, “I am the Truth,” since the created structure of the world was made by, designed for, and directed toward Him” (Bube, 1973, p. 5). To discover truth, man must take the created
structure of reality seriously and believe that the creation is a consistent, reliable witness of this reality.

**Contradictions and Unanticipated Consequences: Cultural Engagement in a Postmodern World**

**Worshipping a Way of Life**

Earlier this spring as I drove to Atlanta to teach a class, a particular church building, not far off the road caught my attention. As I slowed to inspect it more closely, I became aware that the object of my curiosity was a rather large American flag. As this is fairly common in the southern United States, it would not normally warrant close scrutiny. However, the unusual thing about this flag was its placement over an ornate stone portal encircling a large, built-in cross, in the side of the church. The flag was positioned so that no part of the cross was visible, save the tip of each of the four ends. The ordering of these, I believe, is very significant – the cross was in the background, the flag in the foreground.

Since the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Organization “Twin Towers” in New York City, we have witnessed a surge in civil religion. The flag over the cross functions as a symbol of this worldview. People appear to be turning to God as never before – but it is a God wrapped in an American flag. We place our American flag bumper stickers right next to the outline of the fish on our cars. In some ways this is good – people do sincerely turn to God in these anxiety-filled times. But, there is also a negative side to this. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the fathers of modern sociology, suggested that the true object of worship is society itself (Durkheim, 1965 as cited in Roberts, 1995, p. 380). Society, he argued, is held together, partly by the harmony and unity generated by this sense of sacredness. In a pluralistic society, traditional forms of religion are not sufficient to serve as a basis for social consensus. Civil religion, on the other hand, provides “…the set of beliefs, rites, and symbols that sacralize the
values of the society and *place the nation in the context of an ultimate system of meaning* [italics added]… it offers a nondenominational theodicy for the nation” (Roberts, p. 381).

Contemporary civil religion provides a good illustration of the problem of Christ and culture in a postmodern world. On the one hand civil religion provides for a form of Christianity in the public square. On the other, it begs the question of whether Christianity is compatible with the Western materialism and humanism with which it is coupled. A number of scholars believe that although many Americans attend church and participate in other manifestly religious activities, their “true” religion is Americanism. H. Richard Niebuhr (who wrote *Christ and Culture*), for example, wrote that nationalism posed a greater threat to Christianity than did atheism (Roberts, 1995). The operative point here is that although serious conflict exists between true Christianity and American culture, we sometimes fail to notice the contradictions and incorporate these two inconsistent systems of faith into our worldview. This willingness to live contentedly with contradictory systems of meaning is representative of the postmodern ethos. The sociologist as prophet is uniquely equipped to reveal these contradictions and challenge such idolatry.

Since the September 2001 attacks on New York City we have witnessed a kind of spiritual awakening in America. At times like these, Christians must decide how they will participate in this new heightened “religious consciousness.” Religious revival is a good thing, but Christians must be careful to act with discernment as they seek to bear witness to God in the face of disaster. We must avoid confusing the ways of God with the ways of Western culture – for it contains much that is apostate. The New York attacks should serve as a call for Christians to carefully examine their allegiances. We should renew our faith in God – not our faith in America. It is much too easy to believe the culture myth that Americans are God’s chosen
people, and that an attack on American financial institutions is an attack on God himself. I find that we often uncritically endorse American ideals without really asking ourselves whether those ideals conform to the demands of a holy God. If we are to deal with the problem of Christ and culture, we must begin to disentangle ourselves from the culture myths we in America (and I do not exempt myself) have long embraced. We must challenge ourselves to engage in more radical readings of the New Testament, and be willing to call our own nation and ways of life to account. The sociologist as prophet can help us identify and understand some of the contradiction and conformity which hinder us in our calling to be true to the ways of God.

The postmodern world raises new challenges in our attempt to understand the relationship between Christ and culture. We must take care to be open to different perspectives on the relationship (i.e. Christ and culture in paradox; Christ the transformer of culture, etc.), but avoid the relativism characteristic of postmodern thinking. Discussing postmodern Christianity, Gene Edward Veith, Jr. (1994) observes that “Christianity has not only survived the modern era, contrary to the expectations of modernist intellectuals, it seems to be thriving in the postmodern era” (Veith, Jr., p. 209).

Despite this apparent vigor, Veith (1994) questions the character of the contemporary evangelical Church. He notes that while 70 percent of all Americans believe in the inerrancy of scripture, Christianity is all but invisible in contemporary culture. He continues, saying that conservative and evangelical Christians did reasonably well at resisting the temptations raised by modernism. However, this vigilance has not carried into the postmodern age. “… instead of squarely facing the postmodern condition, many Christians succumb to the postmodernism plaguing the rest of the culture” (Veith, Jr., p. 209). The solution is rather simple, according to Veith, “To be relevant to the postmodern era, the church must simply proclaim the truth of God’s
Word, the validity of God’s law, and the sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Veith, Jr., p. 210). This is an important message for contemporary Western culture. The sufficiency of the gospel is the dominant theme in the prophetic message proclaimed by the Christian sociologist. The challenge he faces is to clearly communicate the unseen consequences of many of the trappings of postmodern society, reorienting people to the primacy of the gospel so that in all things Christ’s preeminence may be acknowledged.

The influence of postmodern culture on the evangelical church manifests itself in an overemphasis on the experiential component of belief. This approach includes the rejection (or at least suspicion) of objectivity. “The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching” (Anderson, 1992 as cited in Veith, Jr., 1994, p. 211). This privileging of subjective experience as a source of truth tends to result in contentment with systems of meaning that contain contradictory elements. Consequently, we will increasingly deal with:

… people such as the young man we discussed earlier who says that he believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, Reformed theology, and reincarnation. The new generation… simply does not think in systematic terms. The young man likes the Bible, John Calvin, and Shirley MacLaine. Each is meaningful to him. He can live with the contradictions. (Anderson, 1992 as cited in Veith Jr., 1994, p. 211)

Given this emphasis on subjective experience, the prophetic task must include a call back to a life of faith – to a belief in the unseen. Christianity that relies on experience and emotion alone omits faith, and builds its foundation on social experiences. This frequently leads to the incorporation of contradictory systems of meaning – some sacred, some secular – as Christians strive to understand the relationship between Christ and culture. Thus, we may bind ourselves to
a “Christ against culture” position with respect to particular cultural practices such as, say, studying evolutionary theory, uncritically adopt a “Christ of culture” position with respect to embracing technology, and view Christ as the “transformer of culture” in our efforts at vacation Bible school evangelism.

The postmodern evangelical mind frequently lacks a coherent articulation of the relationship between Christ and culture. Postmodern thinking functions as a barrier to our attempts to understand how to live in – yet not of – the world. While sociology cannot provide easy solutions to these problems, it can, I believe, help people recognize and understand some of the contradictions we maintain in our daily lives. Sociology provides tools which can help people begin to undertake more objective analyses of their interactions with culture. Hopefully the effect on evangelicals will be not on “‘How can I be happy?’ but ‘How can I be saved’” (Horton, 1993 as cited in Veith, Jr., 1994, p. 216).

The Unanticipated Consequences of Cultural Engagement

Henry Van Til (2001) offers a number of very helpful insights into the nature of culture itself, and the interface between the Christian and culture. One summary insight proclaims:

Culture then, is not the criterion of our humanity, and cultural achievements do not restore man to his true end…. Men must become new creatures through Christ (II Cor. 5:21) in order to regain the true human perspective of that which is true, good, and beautiful. Culture, then, may be either godless or godly, depending on the spirit which animates it…. Culture, then, is a must for God’s image-bearers, but it will be either a demonstration of faith or of apostasy, either a God-glorifying or a God-defying culture…. we cannot have true communion with the godless, apostatizing culture of our day,
although we must associate with the men of the world. Indeed, we are in the world but not of the world. (Van Til, 2001, p. 23)

Van Til argues that the Genesis command to fill the earth does not primarily pertain to reproduction. To fill the earth, the “cultural mandate,” means to fill the earth with culture – we are called to produce culture (2001). As image bearers of God we are commanded to have dominion over the earth, and to subdue it. Richard Mouw, in a foreword to Van Til’s book comments “The Calvinistic thinkers whom Henry Van Til discusses at length…. see the business of cultural formation as central to God’s purpose in creating human beings. The importance of cultural activity does not diminish under fallen conditions” (Van Til, p. ix).

While this responsibility still falls on God’s elect, Mouw observes that in contemporary society we face different challenges brought on by new technologies. Where Calvinists of Van Til’s era were questioning the extent to which they should involve themselves with the larger society, today the technologies of social saturation produce new problems of identity and community – to be “in the world” is a different matter than it was 50 years ago. Advances in the technologies of communication – radio, television, computers, satellite transmissions – expose us to enormous amounts of social stimulation (Gergen, 1991). Conventional notions of community, and even time and space have been considerably altered. “Small and enduring communities, with a limited cast of significant others, are being replaced by a vast and ever-expanding array of relationships” (Gergen, p. xi). Large-scale socio-cultural changes such as these suggest that sociology can perform a useful service to theology. The objective of a Christian sociology is not to supplant theology, but to provide a service to it, aiding it in understanding some of the implications of social change and the impact of new technologies.
In contemporary society, not only must we struggle to understand what it means to be “in the world, not of the world,” we must also work to understand just what our “world” consists of in light of these new and expanded social borders. In this “new” world, the sociological prophet can help draw people’s attention to the unexpected idols which creep unnoticed into their lives and claim their allegiances. Despite a new and very different “postmodern” world, our essential task remains the same – Christians are called to perform “good works” by God’s grace. Van Til (2001) rightly draws attention to the fact that it makes little sense to speak of doing good works outside of culture. Holiness and purity must be practiced within the world of culture. To withdraw from culture necessarily divides the cosmos into two spheres – the secular and the sacred, God’s realm and the realm of the unregenerate. Calvinistic schemes of culture stand in opposition to such dualistic views – God is sovereign over all the earth; there is no division. Withdrawal from culture neglects the cultural mandate to subdue the earth, and often proceeds from an improper emphasis on personal salvation.

The main point Van Til (2001) appears to make is that under non-Calvinistic schemes of culture, the world is divided into different spheres, only some of which appear to fall under God’s sovereign control. It is easy to see the danger in such dualisms. The corrective, Van Til advises, is acceptance of the Calvinistic theme that God’s sovereignty extends to all of life wherein there is no division between the secular and the sacred. However, it is easy to underestimate our own sinfulness when it comes to actually living out Calvinistic ideals. In our attempts to apply the ways of God to all of life, we build up social structures which, though not intended, come to function as idols and actually stand in opposition to the religious ethic which inspired them. Here sociology makes an important contribution to our understanding of secularization in its concept of “the unanticipated consequences of purposive action.” The basic
idea is that in the social world we cannot anticipate all of the latent consequences of our actions – we see in part.

Ironically, Calvinism and the application of religious principles to all of life (the realm of culture) played a role in advancing the secularization we currently see in society. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1996) articulates how ascetic Protestantism played a key role in the development of industrial capitalism. The 17th Century Puritan Calvinists worked diligently and lived frugally – as a calling – in order to “make their calling and election sure.” They were in the world, but not of the world. Their diligence and frugality generated a great deal of material wealth for them. This new approach to life can be seen as a rational approach. Rather then relying on tradition, the Puritans sought to discover the best and most efficient means to reach desired ends. Eventually, this ethic became institutionalized as “industrial capitalism,” and no longer required support from religious institutions for its identity. Consequently, the descendents of the Puritans came to embrace capitalism while rejecting the very ethic that inspired it. The idea of the “calling” (a religious idea) became the “career” (a secular idea), and religion came to play only a very minor role in the economic sphere.

Robert K. Merton (sometimes called the Father of the Sociology of Science) describes a similar process when he specifies the connection between the 17th Century Puritans and the rise of modern science. The Puritans differed from their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in their rejection of the notion that believers should refrain from involvement in the world. Consequently, the Puritans led the way in exploring God’s creation. Their scientific inquiries allowed them to make manifest the glories of God, and provided them with knowledge to better serve their fellow man (through medicine, etc.). Practicing science enabled them to better fulfill
their callings. However, similar to the effects of the Protestant ethic, this well meant engagement with the creation had the unanticipated consequence of producing (generations later) one of the most thoroughly secularized institutions in contemporary society. At present, the world sees modern science as standing primarily opposed to religion – religion is seen as communicating dogma; science is seen as the purveyor of truth or at least fact.

Specifying the process by which this secularization occurred, Casanova (1994) explains that in medieval Europe the church classified reality into religious and secular realms. Basically, from the church’s perspective (the perspective of the religious), everything within the secular realm stood as an undifferentiated whole – outside of the religious. Not until this dichotomous way of thinking disintegrated could the secular realm view itself as something more than simply “that which was not religious.” The fall of the religious “walls” enabled the secular spheres to “… come fully into their own, become differentiated from each other, and follow what Weber called their ‘internal and lawful autonomy’” (Casanova, p. 20).

Casanova (1994) describes this new reality as structured around two axes (rather than only one “religious” axis). Thus, where reality once rotated (in an undifferentiated mass) around “the religious,” with the fall of the religious walls, each of the various secular spheres was able to “come into its own” and become differentiated from each other. In such a system, religion became simply one of the spheres. Casanova suggests that two of these “secular” spheres, the states and the markets, gained a measure of ascendancy over the other spheres. These two spheres, in large measure, structured the whole. Religion, under such a system, retains a measure of autonomy, but falls under the “gravitational force of the two main axes.” The result is that the religious sphere becomes:
... a less central and spatially diminished sphere within the new secular system.

Moreover, from the new hegemonic perspective of modern differentiation one may add that for the first time, the religious sphere came fully into its own, specializing in “its own religious” function and either dropping or losing many other “nonreligious” functions it had accumulated and could no longer meet efficiently.

So we are left with this problem. Withdrawal from culture fails to fulfill the mandate to subdue the earth, but engagement with culture has some very serious undesirable and unanticipated consequences. The problem for Christians wishing to live in, yet not of, the world, is that in a complex postmodern world we may participate, unknowingly at times, in activities which result in our being “in” and “of” the world. Because we both produce culture and are products of culture, we frequently reify the social structures familiar to us, failing to critically evaluate what our involvement with various institutions may mean. While the manifest purpose of our cultural activity may, at first glance appear “good,” the latent effects of our actions may lead to undesirable consequences such as the exploitation of others and the progression of secularization. Furthermore, as previously noted, we apply the Calvinistic approach to culture selectively. Content to live with contradictory systems of meaning, we allow culture to dictate our view of scripture, rather than the other way around. In all of this, as we engage in culture, the chief danger we face is that we find our delight in our own creations – that we fall in love with the creation and not the creator (Van Til, 2001).

**Understanding the Relationship of Christ to Culture**

To properly understand the relation of Christ and culture we must decide what is meant by “Christ” and what is meant by “culture.” H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) identifies some of the ways people have struggled with the relationship of Christ to culture. He observes that Jesus
confronted Jewish culture with a very difficult challenge and that since then people have had
great difficulty determining what that challenge means for contemporary society – or whether the
challenge Christ offered is now irrelevant. Arguments against Christ’s continued relevance for
culture include observations of an apparent Christian contempt for present existence due to a
focus on immortality.

Christianity seems to threaten culture at this point not because it prophesies that of all
human achievements not one stone will be left on another but because Christ enables men
to regard this disaster with a certain equanimity, directs their hopes toward another world,
and so seems to deprive them of motivation to engage in the ceaseless labor of
conserving a massive but insecure social heritage. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 6)

Despite the variety of arguments against the continued relevance of Christ to culture,
Niebuhr (1951) suggests that the essential problem does not concern the relationship between
“Christianity and civilization” – because Christianity (in its many manifestations) spans the
entire breadth of those relations. Rather, the central conflict is between two authorities – the
revelation of Christ, and the reason prevailing in culture. In short, the struggle is between
notions of right and wrong developed in culture, and teachings on good and evil proclaimed by
Christ and recorded in the scriptures.

Returning to the previously stated question “Who is Christ?”, Niebuhr (1951) points to
the difficulty in such a debate. Our tendency is to magnify particular qualities of Christ’s
attributes. For example, some emphasize the “love” of Christ, others the “humility” of Christ.
However, Niebuhr is quick to point out that Jesus never commanded love as an end to itself – it
was always directed toward God and neighbor. Of Christ’s love Niebuhr says, “It was not love
but God that filled his soul” (Niebuhr, p. 19). If we look closely at what Niebuhr is saying, we
can see that he is drawing our attention to the “object” of Christ’s attributes or “excellences.” He rightly concludes, “Not eschatology but sonship to God is the key to Jesus’ ethics” (Niebuhr, p. 22).

Thus any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to the understanding of his character and teaching; but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God…. Hence belief in Jesus Christ by men in their various cultures always means belief in God. No one can know the Son without acknowledging the Father…. As Son of God he points away from the many values of man’s social life to the One who alone is good…. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 27-28)

The second part of the relationship, “culture,” has come to contain a variety of meanings. Some define culture very narrowly – in the sense that certain art forms (the symphony for example) are illustrative of culture, while other manifestations of human behavior are seen as lacking in culture. A good basic sociological definition of culture explains it as “shared meaning.” Viewed in this way culture includes all symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society. Furthermore, no one is without culture; all of our habits of thinking are manifestations of culture. Niebuhr (1951) defines culture as “… the ‘artificial, secondary environment’ which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values” (Niebuhr, p. 32). Niebuhr points out that when the New Testament writers spoke of “the world,” it is this “social heritage” to which they were referring. His reference to this social heritage as a “reality sui generis,” (reality in itself) underscores one of the central ideas on which early
sociological theory rests. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the founders of modern sociology, suggested that social reality comes to take on a life of its own. Durkheim explains that although it is people who act in the world, and through their actions produce culture, the products of this action assume a reality that comes to constrain the thoughts and actions of its producers. These constraining forces, which take both material and nonmaterial forms, Durkheim called “social facts.” The task of sociology was to identify and understand social facts. Furthermore, for the Christian sociologist, some social facts may be seen as idols and consequently must be prophesied against.

Thus, if we define culture as “shared meaning,” we can make the case that a large part of the difficulty in understanding the relationship between Christ and culture derives from the fact that we view the problem from within a cultural perspective. We do not think as individuals; we think as members of a collective. It is very difficult to see things as they are – we see only in part. The task of a Christian sociology is to help people to see the influence of the social where they tend to see only the natural.

Niebuhr (1951) suggests five ways in which men have answered the problem of Christ and culture. While some of these answers have more serious shortcomings than others, all fall short in some way. What is common to all of the five perspectives is that they are all couched in particular cultural understandings of the world. Some of these perspectives very pointedly advance the adoption of certain modes of culture. Others appear sound in their philosophy, but sometimes fail to account for the “unanticipated social consequences” discussed earlier.

The dialectical relationship between Christ and culture is a curious one. On the one hand, the message of the gospel is to live by grace, through faith. We frequently misplace that faith, locating it in human systems (culture) which, though well meant, encourage self-reliance and
have the goal of preserving themselves. On the other hand, as Niebuhr (1951) points out, “… the Son of God is himself child of a religious culture, and sent his disciples to tend his lambs and sheep, who cannot be guarded without cultural work” (Niebuhr, p. 39). Thus, there is an ongoing dialogue, which, short of Christ’s coming again, will never come to a satisfactory conclusion. Any attempt at a final answer to the Christ and culture problem will always be met with new questions. However, Niebuhr suggests we can discern several reasonably coherent “schools of thought” which capture the variety of ways in which Christians have joined in the dialogue. A brief account of each of these positions follows.

**Radical Christians and Cultural Christians: In Defense of a Culture**

Two approaches to the problem of Christ and culture can be seen as different sides of the same coin. The position which emphasizes the opposition of Christ to culture and the stance which views Christ as the hero of culture both enjoin Christ with culture – albeit in different ways. Proponents of the “Christ against culture” position advocate a clear separation between believers and the world; culture has no claims on a believer’s loyalty. The difficulty inherent in this perspective is that it proceeds from an oversimplistic definition of culture. While separationists may see themselves as rejecting culture – of living outside and in judgment of culture – they are in fact doing little more than advocating particular forms of culture. It is not possible to escape culture. The mere fact that separationist Christians speak in a language shared with the broader society illustrates the permeating character of culture. Underlying the Christ against culture position is the notion that it is possible to separate culture from nature. Nature is seen as “good,” while culture is seen existing under the rule of evil. A serious shortcoming of this perspective is that it fails to recognize that all of creation was affected by the fall. Simple separation from culture (were that even possible) will not eliminate sin (Niebuhr, 1951).
The Christ against culture position and the Christ of culture position contain striking similarities. According to Niebuhr (1951) people in the Christ against culture camp share the very attitude they purport to reject.

Not all though many of these antiliberal show a greater concern for conserving the cosmological and biological notions of older cultures than for the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The test of loyalty to him is found in the acceptance of old cultural ideas about the manner of creation and the earth’s destruction. More significant is the fact that the mores they associate with Christ have at least as little relation to the New Testament and as much connection with social custom as have those of their opponents. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 102)

Niebuhr goes on to describe how critics of cultural Protestantism who “urge return to Biblical ways of thought” tend to forget that the Bible represents many different cultures. In other words, cultural Christians and separationist Christians are in essential agreement that Christ is the Christ of culture – they simply differ with respect to what the character of that culture should be.

Despite these similarities, it should be stressed that “withdrawal and renunciation” are necessary elements in the lives of all Christians. Christ does command us to take up our cross. However, it is equally necessary for Christians to follow such withdrawal with “responsible engagement in cultural tasks” (Niebuhr, 1951). Thus, when we contrast the culture and anti-culture positions we find that a chief shortcoming of each is commitment to only half of the task. We are called to be separate – but not to separate ourselves. The Old Testament prophets withdrew from the world – from culture – but only for a time. After withdrawal they invariably returned to it to critique culture and issue a call to repentance.
Christ Above Culture: The Synthesists

The third way of understanding the relationship of Christ to culture can be called the “Christ above culture” position (Niebuhr, 1951). This view attempts to synthesize the two extreme positions represented by the “anticultural radicals” and the “accommodators of Christ to culture.” Niebuhr tells us that for proponents of this position, “… the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man” (Niebuhr, p. 117). Thus, attention is focused, not simply on Christ, but on the God to whom Christ is obedient. The synthetic view begins with the idea that culture is founded on nature, and nature itself is “good” as it was founded by and is sustained by God himself. Since God sustains nature, and since God is inseparably united to Christ, Christ and the world cannot be simply opposed to each other. Consequently, the Christian cannot reject the world on the basis that it constitutes the “realm of godlessness.”

These “Christians of the center” see humans as unable to find holiness within themselves. Consequently, they place a greater emphasis on the grace of God than do legalist Christians. This emphasis produces the conviction that the products of human culture are only possible because of that grace. “But neither can they separate the experience of grace from cultural activity; for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 119)?

Niebuhr (1951) suggests that a central feature distinguishing the synthesist’s epistemology from that of the accommodation Christians and the separationist Christians is the recognition of a “gap” between Christ and culture. Both of the extreme positions fail to deal with this duality – cultural Christians do away with “other-worldliness;” separationist Christians
do away with “this-worldliness.” Christians of the center see both of these approaches as failing to take both Christ and culture seriously.

In summary, Niebuhr (1951) finds that the synthesist position denies the reality of a fundamental problem between Christ and culture. The attempt to combine God’s work and man’s work in one seamless system will inevitably lead to:

... the reduction of the infinite to a fine form, and the materialization of the dynamic. It is one thing to assert that there is a law of God inscribed in the very structure of the creature, who must seek to know this law by the use of his reason and govern himself accordingly; it is another thing to formulate the law in the language and concepts of a reason that is always culturally conditioned. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 145)

Niebuhr’s final word on this position is that despite the extent to which the synthesists claim awareness of human sinfulness, and of the necessity for Christ’s saving grace, “… they do not in fact face up to the radical evil present in all human work” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 148). In the context of the present discussion, in their attempt to be in the world, yet not of the world, Christians of the center place too great an emphasis on the worldly part of the equation.

Christ and Culture in Paradox: The Dualists

The fourth answer to the Christ and culture question, Niebuhr (1951) calls the “dualist” position. Proponents of this perspective see paradox as the defining characteristic of temporal life. Perhaps the most striking difference between this approach and the three approaches discussed thus far is that the dualists attach far greater consequence to the forces of sin and evil. Where the cultural Christians all but do away with the notion of sin, the separationist Christians see sin as controllable by strict observance of cultural boundaries, and the synthesist Christians
see interaction in the great institutions of society as the way to transcend the grip of sin, the dualist Christians reject any human action as part of the solution. Dualist Christians see all human activity – even our best efforts – as “sordid and depraved.”

For the dualists, men are not up against nature; they are up against God himself. Neither nature nor culture provides any route of escape from God’s wrath. “All human action, all culture, is infected with godlessness, which is the essence of sin” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 154). Niebuhr makes an observation reminiscent of the aforementioned “prophetic mode of sociology.” He says:

Where the synthesist rejoices in the rational content of law and social institutions, the dualist, with the skepticism of the Sophist and positivist, calls attention to the lust for power and the will of the strong which rationalizes itself in all these social arrangements. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 156)

Sociologists, whom Friedrichs (1972) calls the “professional muckrakers of society,” share common ground with the dualists, in the sense that they are quick to point out the contradictions and self-serving power arrangements underlying many of our “greatest” institutions. Both, for example, would take issue with American civil religion, drawing attention to the self-serving rationalizations on which it is constructed. According to the dualists, “… reason in human affairs is never separable from its egoistic, godless, perversion” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 156).

The paradoxical view has profound implications for the Christian’s activity in the realm of culture. Motivation for cultural activity cannot be based on the hope that moral living will help one’s situation before God. Niebuhr (1951) insightfully observes that the synthesists move from culture to Christ while the dualists move from Christ to culture. The distinction is
enormous. Viewed from the synthesist’s perspective, our participation in culture and institutions moves us closer to Christ. The dualists, on the other hand, understand that our involvement in institutions functions only to restrain evil. It does not move us closer to Christ.

In summarizing the dualist position, Niebuhr (1951) observes that more than the radicals, cultural Christians, or synthesists, the dualists “… take into account the dynamic character of God, man, grace, and sin” (Niebuhr, p. 185). Under the dualistic scheme, God is the sole actor of consequence and cultural activity is directed away from the service of self.

To culture they have brought the spirit of a disinterestedness that does not ask what cultural or gospel law requires directly, or what profit for the self may be gained; but rather what the service of the neighbor in the given conditions demands, and what these given conditions really are. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 186)

There are several well-placed criticisms leveled at this position. One is that proponents may cite Luther or Paul as evidence that it matters not whether they are obedient or disobedient. Paul, of course, anticipated this, writing: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2).

The second criticism is more serious. Niebuhr (1951) observes that both Luther and Paul appear primarily concerned with bringing change to the religious institutions of society. “For the rest they seemed content to let state and economic life – with slavery in the one case and social stratification in the other – continue relatively unchanged” (Niebuhr, p. 188). Calvin, perhaps, provides a better answer to the problem of whether or not Christians should work to change institutions. It is to that perspective that we now turn.
Christ the Transformer of Culture

The “conversionist” approach has a decidedly more optimistic tone than any of the previous views outlined in this paper. With the exception of the cultural Christians (who more or less deny the reality of sin altogether), the radicals, synthesists, and dualists view the permeating effects of sin in ways that result in a “biding of their time,” as they wait for a transhistorical redemption.

To a far greater extent, the conversionists emphasize the “kingship” dimension of Christ’s involvement in human affairs. For them, Christ is the “ruler” of this world, and the effects of sin in no way diminish that rule. Niebuhr (1951) tells us that the conversionist tendency is to “… hold together in one movement the various themes of creation and redemption, of incarnation and atonement” (Niebuhr, p. 193). Consequently, these Christians do not understand human history in linear terms – envisioning the intensity of Christ’s influence waxing and waning through different epochs. Rather, creation has never been (and cannot even exist) without the (present) ordering action of Christ.

The conversionists have a different view of the fall of mankind than do Christians holding the other perspectives. In their view, though the fall has radical consequences for all creation, its effects are not such that the very substance of creation becomes something evil. The effects of the fall are primarily moral and personal, rather than physical and metaphysical (Niebuhr, 1951). In other words, “Man’s good nature has become corrupted; it is not bad, as something that ought not to exist, but warped, twisted, and misdirected” (Niebuhr, p. 194). Consequently, the conversionists see culture as “perverted good” rather than “evil.” We might say that evil enters into something good and deforms it – much like breaking one’s leg has a distorting effect on the leg, but does not change the ontological status of that leg. We would deal
Idols

with the broken leg, not by getting rid of it, but by transforming it into what it once was. “The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation; though the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth” (Niebuhr, p. 194). Thus, continuing with the “broken leg” analogy, we see that while the solution to dealing with a broken leg is not to “get rid of it,” neither is the solution to replace it.

An important consequence of this view is that its adherents are consumed with the idea that Christ is king of creation (and that includes culture) as much in the present as in the future. The problem of culture is not solved by rejecting it (as the radicals maintain), embracing it (as the cultural Christians advocate), achieving a rational fit between God’s work and man’s work (as the synthesist Christians attempt) or actively “waiting it out” (as in the dualist approach). Rather the problem of culture is resolved in its transformation. The promise is for “now” and for the “age to come.” The power of the risen Lord transforms Christians in the present, and enables them to work toward the renewal of all things. Our work is therefore neither futile, as though all things will simply pass away, nor is it based on human effort, and therefore destined to failure. Niebuhr summarizes:

The eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present. Eternity means for him less the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a quality of existence in the here and now.

(Niebuhr, 1951, p. 195)

Human history, then, rather than comprising a simple chain of events, involves a dramatic interaction between the creator and the created. Culture is transformed only when the individual is submissive to Christ. But, the result is not the elimination of social problems. The transformation of culture begins with Christ’s transforming work in the individual and ultimately
finds resolution in God’s purpose (Heddendorf, 1989). “This is what human culture can be – a transformed life in and to the glory of God” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 196).

A key to the transformational perspective lies in the idea that the new beginning that Christ brings to the world is not dependent on a break in temporal history (Niebuhr, 1951). Rather, the kingdom is both now, and in the age to come. This new beginning is not simply realized transhistorically – “… it is realized through the concrete events of Jesus’ life and the concrete responses to him of men in the church” (Niebuhr, p. 201).

Niebuhr takes issue with some of the paradox found in the gospel of John. He seems to react to John’s non-universalistic tendencies. While John sees Christ as the transformer of human action, he also distinguishes between the Church and that which is hostile to the Church. While the Church is clearly to be “in the world,” John still emphasizes its discontinuity with secular culture. The implication is that John does not envision the transformation of “all” culture. In John we find the idea that Christ transforms the elect – not the whole of humanity.

In the work of John Calvin we find the fullest development of the transformational approach. For Calvin the boundaries of sacred and profane fall away and the whole world becomes a place where men may work out their callings. Under this conceptualization the whole world becomes an arena where men respond to God in either faith or in unbelief. Nothing is done for its own sake; all of life (like it or not) is a response to God. Seen in this way, vocations become callings – expressions of faith performed for the sake of God. Does work performed as a calling look different from that performed as a career? Often not – Calvinist chemistry looks remarkably similar to chemistry worked out in unbelief. However, the motivation for work performed as a calling is very different. A calling is worked out in thankful response to Christ’s transforming work on the cross, and in full recognition of God’s sovereignty.
Calvin’s approach to cultural engagement has a decidedly positive stance. For example, … his insistence that the state is God’s minister not only in a negative fashion as restrainer of evil but positively in the promotion of welfare… all these lead to the thought that what the gospel promises and makes possible, as divine (not human) possibility, is the transformation of mankind in all its nature and culture into a kingdom of God in which the laws of the kingdom have been written upon the inward parts. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 217)

Thus, in Calvin we see a more profound recognition of the sovereignty of God than is evident in other approaches to the relationship of Christ to culture. However, Niebuhr criticizes Calvin on the basis that his eschatology contains dualistic elements. “To the over-againstness of God and man, Calvin adds the dualism of temporal and eternal existence, and the other dualism of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 218). To Niebuhr this appears separtist and repressive.

Kuyper on Calvin: A sociological critique.

Abraham Kuyper delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in 1898. All six of his lectures dealt with the application of Calvinism to various facets of cultural life (religion, politics, science, art, etc.). Transcriptions of those lectures reveal a kind of naked admiration for Calvin’s work. Kuyper explains how every general life system is based on a particular conceptualization of man’s relationship to God. Calvin, he says, was the first to draw a line directly between God and man. This relationship, unmediated by the Church or any other institution, provides a basis for understanding the relationship of God to man; man to man; and man to the world (or to culture).
Kuyper’s concerns center around the rapid advancement of Modernism. For him, Modernism represents the construction of a world based wholly on “nature” – on “the data of the natural man” (Kuyper, 2000, p. 11). “… on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God himself, are bent upon saving the ‘Christian Heritage’” (Kuyper, p. 11). Kuyper passionately argues that Calvinism is best suited for the battle with Modernism because it comprises an all-embracing “life-system.” This approach does not restrict the activity of God, or the response of man to God to any particular sphere or spheres, but rather proclaims the relationship of God to the totality of existence.

The Calvinist approach to life has a threefold focus. It honors God, honors man made in the image of God, and honors the world that God has made. In outlining the relationship between God and the world, Kuyper (2000) explains the distinction between particular grace and common grace. Particular grace is the special grace by which salvation is wrought. Common grace is that grace “… by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammeled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator” (Kuyper, p. 30). Common grace opens the way for the believer to pursue his or her calling in a world Christ is working to transform. Kuyper reminds his listeners that in the Calvinistic conception, the curse is not on the world itself, but on that which is sinful in the world. Because the believer is to avoid sin and not the world, “… instead of monastic flight from the world, the duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life” (Kuyper, p. 30).

Summarizing his argument for the sufficiency of Calvinism as an all-embracing life system, Kuyper says,
And for our relation to the world: the recognition that in the whole world the curse is restrained by grace, that the life of the world is to be honored in its independence, and that we must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life. (Kuyper, 2000, p. 31)

This recognition of the presence of the grace of God in “all areas of life,” opens the way for the believer to pursue his calling in society’s institutions. Common grace allows us to be “in the world;” particular grace enables us to be “not of the world.”

In earlier parts of this paper I introduced the idea that Calvinism produced some unanticipated, secular consequences, which are of great concern for the sociological prophet. When we look now at the all but complete secularization of the Netherlands, where Kuyper labored “… spending all my energy for nearly forty years” (Kuyper, 2000, p. 11), and when we see the materialism and humanism rampant in European and American society, we must ask why Calvinism has not brought about the profound changes Kuyper envisioned. The answer to that question, I believe, is a sociological one. As a philosophical and doctrinal system, Calvinism is sound. However, Calvin was unable to anticipate some forms of social change which resulted from the application of Calvinistic principles to life.

Kuyper presents Calvinism as an all-embracing life system – and indeed it is. Ironically, this all-encompassing character had the unanticipated consequence of advancing Modernism – the very worldview Kuyper hoped it would combat. The problem with Calvinism as it relates to secularization is that it contains the seeds of formal rationality. Calvinism changed the way people thought, moving them away from traditional ways of thinking about the world, and toward rational ways of thinking about the world. Weber’s well known “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” depicts the process by which the 17th century Puritans sought ever more
efficient ways of completing tasks as they worked out their callings. In their concern to make their calling and election sure, they developed ways of more efficiently meeting their goals. This was not a problem as long as they applied the Calvinistic ethic faithfully and completely.

Over time, religious traditions lose meaning and need reaffirmation. Descendants of the Calvinists began to forget the ethic which had inspired them, but they retained the rational mindset which had developed. The problem with rationality is that it seeks the elimination of mystery – it seeks to get rid of that which cannot be controlled. Since we cannot control God, we gradually seek his elimination. As people more and more embraced formal rationality, they developed technology for dealing with their problems. Consequently, a problem-solving mentality began dominating their decision-making. The result is that people increasingly turn to technology rather than God as they seek resolution to their problems.

As society develops and changes, it offers us new goals or “ends.” Rational knowledge is needed to choose between these new ends. Heddendorf (1989) provides an example of a man trying to decide which style of car to buy. He will weigh the alternatives and make the most rational choice based on his perceived needs – faith need not enter into the decision (other than, perhaps a cursory “God bless my choice” followed by the application of the same rational thinking). In itself this is not a problem. However, this sort of thinking finds its way into the majority of our decisions and this process influences all of life. The result is that faith is weakened and means are linked to ends in a rational way (Heddendorf).

Thus, the problem with Calvinism lies in our failure to apply it consistently. Calvin introduced an all-embracing life-system, a system with no division between the sacred and the secular. Generations later, through a slow process of secularization, the God who gave meaning to all of life was pushed aside to make room for human rationality. Ultimately, trust in
rationality is trust in ourselves. We could say that our confidence lies in our technique – in our ability to correctly choose between competing means. In the end, our values are determined by our technique. Weber speaks of the displacement of ends. This happens when we forget what it is we are working for (our end), and focus on the means by which we do that work. The Calvinist conception of the calling puts the proper emphasis on Christ as our “end.” The distorted notion of career, by contrast, is man-centered, and forgets that God is our end.

What can we do to reverse this situation? We must do several things. First, we must resist placing our faith in systems. Systems are fallible and they bring unanticipated and undesirable consequences. Second, and more importantly, we must humbly place our faith in Christ who works in the hearts of men and so transforms culture and society. The sociological prophet plays a role in God’s transforming plan in that his calling is to help people begin to see some of the latent consequences of their involvement in culture and society’s institutions. This is at times a painful and lonely calling – but so it was for the prophets of old. I conclude this paper with a few examples of how the sociology of knowledge can help Christians recognize and reject the unseen idols to which we all to frequently cling.

**Stepping Outside Society’s Caves: Secularization and De-reification**

**Modernity and Religion**

Central to the Christian sociologist’s message is the idea that society contains hidden dangers that people must understand and then challenge if they are to really live as followers of Christ. We often fail to understand the extent to which society influences us. We accept the social world around us as a given, forgetting that it is a world constructed by men and women. When we fail to critically evaluate this world in the light of scripture, society becomes an idol and we replace the true God with gods compatible with our cherished lifestyles. These idols are
subtle – they are often not the parts of culture manifestly opposed to Christianity. Rather, as we have seen, such phenomena as civil religion and formal rationality are far more sinister forces in turning our hearts away from God.

It is often easy to see the idols in cultures other than our own. When we look at primitive societies and observe particular heathen rituals, we shake our heads and thank God that we are not idol worshippers. The problem is that we tend to view the norms of the society in which we live as natural – as created and “self-evident” rather than constructed. When we fail to recognize our own idol worship, the effect is that our society and culture control us, rather than us controlling them.

Our inability to recognize our own idolatry is sustained through what Peter Berger (1967) calls “plausibility structures.” Berger suggests that every “world” requires a plausibility structure for its continued existence as a world that is meaningful to the human beings who inhabit it. For example, Christianity requires a social base composed of various “reality buttressing” social structures within which individuals are socialized, thus enabling that world to carry on. If these social structures are destroyed, the plausibility of that reality begins to topple. It is for this reason, for example, that Christian communities start Christian schools. Those schools function as part of the plausibility structure – enabling the community to continue to perceive the reality under which they live as self-evident truth. Berger is careful to remind his readers that this does not mean that a religious system is nothing more than the reflection of social processes. Rather, there exists a dialectical relationship between the human product “society” and the human product “religion.”

In modern society the plausibility structures supporting religion have come under considerable strain. When the entire society functions as the plausibility structure for a belief
system (i.e. Judaism in Old Testament times), everything within that society confirms the reality of that world. In such a situation, the religious system can use the entire society as its plausibility structure – everything in the society affirms the reality posited by that religion. In a pluralistic society, however, there are multiple, competing realities which claim people’s allegiances. For the majority of people in contemporary Western society, secular ways of understanding the world have become dominant over Christian paradigms.

Os Guinness (1983) discusses the problem in a book titled The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church. Writing from the perspective of one secret operative teaching another how to topple the Church (much like C. S. Lewis’ Screwtape Letters), Guinness tells us that the undermining of the Church will come at the level of plausibility, rather than at the level of truth. Guinness is drawing attention to the fact that Christians neglect the social dimension of belief, and that this “cultural blindness” has very serious consequences. In other words, we may accept theological doctrines as “true,” but when the entire society acts as though such doctrines or truths are irrelevant, the lack of plausibility for Christianity produces a gradual conversion to secular ways of thinking and living. Culture influences us so subtly and slowly that we fail to notice it. (This is a good argument for having Christian colleges – their purpose is partly to provide support for the plausibility of Christianity.)

Guinness is concerned that our teaching of theology and philosophy will remain highly theoretical – controlled by experts, and failing to impact people at the level of culture. “After all, how do Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard really influence the nine-to-five world of the exuberant Pentecostal in Buenos Aires or the staid Baptist in Brighton” (Guinness, 1983, p. 38)? His point is that people are actually more influenced by their ordinary experiences than by theoretical ideas. A good way to keep Christians from developing a strong cultural critique is to tie them up
in abstract thought, but keep them away from the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge, Guinness tells us, “… deals with the modern world and insists on seeing it from the perspective of ordinary experience” (Guinness, p. 38). Guinness’ “senior agent” advises his protégé:

Once Christians see it as a simple tool and begin to use it, our position is at risk. When people can trace a line from a thought to the thinker and then to the world in which the thought arose, they are halfway to seeing how ideas are influenced by their social contexts. (Guinness, 1983, p. 39)

We tend to identify secularization more with theology than with sociology. Guinness (1983) explains that this tendency is partly due to our confusing secularism (a philosophy) with secularization (a process). Secularization is carried along by modernity. Guinness tells us it “rubs off on folks,” affecting the religious and nonreligious alike. It undermines Christianity at the level of plausibility and provides a plausibility structure for secularism. How does modernity accomplish this? It does so by dividing life into sacred and profane realms – it quarantines Christianity from some sectors of social life.

For example, compare the state of Christianity in twentieth-century Europe or America with that in the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth or sixteenth centuries. The numbers of Christians in these earlier times might have varied, spiritual vitality might have ebbed or flowed, and compromise and hypocrisy might at times have been more evident than fidelity. But where there was faith, however small numerically, it had a characteristic social and cultural influence because it mulishly insisted on applying the Adversary’s rule to all of life… Modern faith, however large it is in numbers (as in America), almost never
has this total view. It is secularization which has made the difference. (Guinness, 1983, p. 55)

In short, secularization gradually produces in people the conviction that the ordinary reality, which they experience in their day-to-day lives, is the only reality. While we may not acknowledge this shift theologically, our lives reflect such temporal convictions. Guinness (1983) suggests, and I agree, that the cathedrals of modern America are its financial institutions. Seen in this way, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, represented an attack on the very core of our national faith. Since much postmodern faith relies on subjective experience, the recent surge of civil religion is not surprising. Although the consumerism and outright greed of our major financial institutions pose far greater threats to the Christian faith than do terrorists, our outrage toward these carriers of secularization pales in comparison to that which we direct toward terrorists. Although terrorists pose a very real threat – worthy of our attention – the main threat we face is from within, not without. The sociology of knowledge can help us identify and understand the bigger threat.

There are two causal agents contributing to the spread of secularization. One is diversification; the other is rationalization. Diversification is seen in the explosion of the modern world into a variety of separate spheres, each with its own autonomy. Rationalization is seen in the emphasis placed on means over ends, and the increasing disenchantment of the world resulting from our attempts to exert control over it. The result is that religion becomes functionally irrelevant in many of the spheres in which we live our lives.

Look first at the central sectors of modern society: the worlds of science, technology, bureaucracy, most business, most politics, most education and so on – the “real world” as they put it. Here is where you will find faith most irrelevant and secularization closest to
being universal and uniform, even though thousands of religious people may service this area. Here is the heartland of the modern world, the quarter where the changes are most complete and where it is most obvious that diversification has led to the displacement of religion and rationalization to the disenchantment of religion. (Guinness, 1983, p. 64)

We must resist the modern (and postmodern) world, and work to reverse the trend of secularization. Only when we recognize the trap of modernity, throwing off its “false consciousness” will we begin to understand what it means to be in, but not of, the world. Our reality must become the reality of the Kingdom of God – a reality which is both now and in the age to come.

Challenging Society’s Assumptions

If the more sinister carriers of secularization lurk beneath society’s surface, and if we are to confront those forces, we must first understand what society is and how it is maintained. Our efforts to communicate to others the rule of God over all sectors of life are weakened if we have a vested interest in maintaining the very system that we purport to critique. We need to “bite the hand which feeds us” (so to speak), challenging and rejecting society’s assumptions, and replacing them with new assumptions more consistent with what the Bible really teaches. Os Guinness (1983) criticizes Christians on the “extreme conservative” end of the political spectrum saying, “They raise their culture to the level of their convictions and claim too much for it, absolutizing and defending it blindly with a devotion proper to their faith. Their economics is as holy as their ark” (Guinness, p. 42). In short, we often hold too tightly to those things which stand opposed to the radical message of forsaking all things for the sake of Christ.

Society is best thought of as a process rather than a “thing.” Our chief problem in confronting secular culture is that we reify society as we know it – we forget that society itself is
a human product. Peter Berger (1967) describes this in terms of alienation, the end result of a process by which men and women forget that the social world is something that they constructed, and which depends on their ongoing interaction for its continued existence. Society involves a dialectical relationship between the individual and the world. Initially, man is the “actor” and the world is that which is acted upon. This becomes inverted in consciousness when people forget their agency in producing the world in which they live. In the end, society assumes the role of actor and man becomes the acted upon. In other words, we become alienated from society, submitting to its control even though we are its co-producers. As Berger says, “Paradoxically, man produces a world that denies him” (Berger, p. 86). In this way, we are blocked from fulfilling the cultural mandate given in Genesis. Rather than subduing the earth (by producing culture) we are controlled by it and the world of culture subdues us.

Berger (1967) describes the fundamental dialectic process of society in terms of three steps (which he cautions must be understood together). The first, “externalization,” involves the outpouring of human being into the world. The subjectivity of human beings does not simply remain locked in consciousness. The second, “objectivation,” involves the products of this outpouring attaining a reality that comes to confront its producers as something external to them. People are “world producers” – the outpouring of their consciousness into the world results in the creation of an objective reality external to them. This reality is both physical and mental, and comprises what Durkheim called “social facts.” The third step, “internalization,” is the reappropriation of that external reality back into the structures of consciousness. In other words, we produce, and then we consume those things that we produced. However, during the internalization stage of this dialectical process, we tend to forget that it is we who produced the
reality which confronts us. This is known as reification – the tendency of people to view the social world as something concrete rather than a mere subjective construction.

The reification of society has important implications for the Christian. On the one hand, it is reification that causes people to be social products. On the other, reification can have very negative consequences when people fail to critically evaluate the reality around them. For example, I find that some of my students perceive the world of business and economics as having an autonomy which legitimizes the treatment of people as objects in certain situations. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, when I explain how the drive for efficiency in the desire for greater and greater profits compels some businesses to treat employees like objects, some students simply see that as good business. “It’s a competitive world… that’s just reality.” It seems okay to use people for profit, because business is a sort of neutral zone. The point is that we frequently take the social world around us as something natural and unchangeable. And it controls us. When Jesus tells us not to be conformed to the world… I believe he is calling us to question reality as society presents it – discern what is just and right, and stand against that which is not. This is precisely what I hope to accomplish with my students. I hope that when they leave Covenant College they question the way things are done and reject the reality which surrounds them. But… we get “sucked in” by society… we buy into what it offers… and we weaken our witness because we end up having a vested interest in an order that stands opposed to God.

My vision for Covenant College is that it will always be a place where we will strive to live out our college motto “In all things Christ preeminent.” This motto calls for sober introspection. When we fail to critique our culture, when we believe we have a “lock” on the truth, and when we take for granted that the society around us represents reality as God would
have it, we fail to take our motto seriously. Peter Berger (1967) has a term that aptly summarizes the calling of the sociological prophet. That term is “ecstasy” and it captures the essence of de-reification – the process by which we step outside of society’s caves, challenging its assumptions and choosing to reject reality as society presents it. This I see as the call of the Christian sociologist – to equip students to reject reality as society presents it. The danger in this approach is that once a given manifestation of reality has been rejected, we begin the process again – pouring ourselves out into the world and building up structures which come to stand against God’s purposes for our lives. We live in the now, but not yet, and I pray that in the interim before Christ’s return, Covenant College remains a place where the wisdom of God is always seen above the wisdom of man, and where students learn to continually return to the scriptures as the source of that wisdom… That in all things, Christ may have the preeminence.
References


