



Sociology at RBC:

Seeing Ourselves More Clearly

by **Phil Weber**

My introduction to sociology was not promising. I was twenty-one, newly married, and back in Alabama to earn cheap credits at a community college before returning to Ohio to finish my degree. One of the classes I took was sociology, and I was immediately intrigued. The trouble started when our professor, Mr. Snowden, refused to make a distinction between the sociological reality of *cultural relativism*—the observation that what is considered moral or immoral can vary widely in different societies—and a philosophical commitment to *moral relativism*. At least that is how I understood him, and it disturbed me greatly that my classmates (to the extent that they were paying attention!) were being taught that to embrace the findings of

my research paper arguing that culture was not an adequate standard for important moral questions, *and to read the 17-page result to the class!* After that, I think I rested my case until he described to us his harrowing experience during a day of racial violence: some white high school students barged into his classroom and threatened him in front of his class. As he told his story, I remembered the fear I had felt in the seventh grade when our newly integrated schools lost control of their students; crowds surged, people got hurt, and our refuge in the school library didn't feel very safe. I could only imagine Mr. Snowden's sense of violation and vulnerability as he suffered indignities while his students watched. So I went to his office after class.

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sociology required abandoning confidence in the supra-cultural affirmations of Scripture and Christian faith.

To his great credit, Mr. Snowden permitted me to write

This is the part where I hesitate. Was what I said to him in his office that day a helpful, appropriate challenge, or was it a hurtful, arrogant insult? When I ask my students that question, they express mixed opinions. I would love to ask Mr. Snowden how he remembers it, but I've lost track of him and suspect he's no longer with us. In any case, here is how





I remember our exchange. Me: “Mr. Snowden, thanks for sharing your difficult experience with us today. I want you to know that I am sorry that happened to you. I think what those young men did to you was wrong. I just don’t understand why *you* do. Weren’t they doing exactly what their white Southern culture had taught them to do?” Mr. Snowden: “I’ve never met anyone so messed up so young!”

From this distance I’m not sure how accurately I understood Mr. Snowden’s take on the implications of cultural relativity for those who want to live biblically, but there is little doubt that many sociologists are very skeptical of Christianity in general and biblical morality in particular. Here is Christian Smith’s summary of the prevailing opinions of his academic peers: “American sociology as a collective enterprise is at heart committed to the visionary project of realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures” (Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*, pp 7-8). In this view, the purpose of sociology, among other things, is to identify and eliminate all the oppressive constraints or hindrances which religion or a religious community might seek to exercise on the individual’s pursuit of pleasure.

I think it can be a great help to our students to encounter the fascinating insights sociology provides into personal identity, social interaction, religion and culture in an environment that examines how these relate to Christian faith rather than how they can be used to demean it. As it turns out, sociological research sheds light on issues Jesus-

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followers probably ought to care about. And we are such an interesting species to study!

An underlying premise of much current sociology is the rational choice proposition. The idea is that even though we sometimes act against our best interests because we are angry or otherwise impulsive, we will generally seek to maximize advantage within the limits of our known, available choices, and in line with our preferences and tastes. One of the uncomfortable implications of this premise is that since it is always a practical advantage to share in the common good without making a proportionate investment, some form of coercion is usually required to prevent freeloaders from sabotaging the group enterprise. Public funding is a case in point, and although I have always paid my taxes because both the IRS and the Bible have been explicit on the matter, I pay them at least a tiny bit more willingly now because it doesn’t seem right to freeload. This principle has helped me decide to support other common goods I enjoy as well, though in the case of my Mom’s candy dispenser, for example, I continue to freeload with nary a twinge of conscience.

I am challenged every year when we get to the section examining ways in which one’s class, race, and gender status affect life outcomes ranging from economic opportunity to



“ In some classes, students are not able to overcome their uneasiness and discuss the issues openly; **in others, they go after it so freely** I’m not always sure how to moderate fairly! ”

safety and longevity. Besides the fun of seeing the way social status affects such things as the kind of bread we enjoy (Wonder bread or crusty artisan bread, for example), the size of the televisions we buy (working class folk seem to want the biggest they can afford), and how far apart we stand when talking (upper class conversations apparently occur at closer range than most Beacon readers would tolerate for long!), studying class in America pushes me in two directions. On the one hand, watching a video about the difficult life of an Appalachian single mother who walks ten miles to her janitorial job reminds me that I have the same impulse to judge the disadvantaged as some of the people who demean this woman. On the other side, looking at the incredible concentration of wealth and power in the top one percent of our country’s population helps me understand the concern of those who think business as usual is not the way to a sustainable future.

Race is sometimes our tensest issue. I’ve gotten a sort of eye-rolling attitude from some classes when we explore the ongoing impact of race in our communities, and I’ve even had some explicitly racist attitudes expressed in assignments. More recently, I’ve sensed more openness to the topic, and hearing testimonies from guest speakers has dramatically enhanced the impact of our discussions about race. It was an invitation to speak to our class that first connected me with Anthony Rivers, a recent (at that time) addition to the pastoral team at Agape in Hilliard. I’m sorry to say it was another unpromising beginning. I called Anthony, explained my interest in hearing about his experience of being African-American in our part of the world, and arranged to meet him for Saturday breakfast at the Bob Evans in Hilliard. Both of us were at Bob Evans at the appointed hour—just not the same one! It took me over an hour to figure out how to contact him and discover that I had gone to the wrong location. He was still waiting for me. I will always respect him for not judging me or being angry with me that day when we finally got together. He agreed to come to campus for a Coffee Shop Chat with the whole campus, sharing some of the unpleasant responses he has encountered from random strangers and from law enforcement. Anthony’s humble, calm recounting of real life did so much to open the minds and hearts of our students to a reality many had never witnessed first-hand.