SOCIOLOGY: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Lionel Mattwews, Ph.D.
Andrews University

Sociology: A Biblical Perspective

Lionel Matthews
Andrews University

If some are prone to deem a relationship between sociology and religion an unholy alliance or even an unacceptable concubinage of strange bedfellows, they may not be that misguided given the early history of sociology. Conceived and largely crafted by one, Auguste Comte, whose unmistaken ambition was to have the new discipline take the place of religion, and who himself was later to be called the "Pope of humanity", sociology undertook its maiden mission on rather stormy ecclesiastical seas. The storm that gathered about the field of sociology raged with fury in past years, much to the denigration of the discipline. Though there has been considerable abatement of that storm in recent times, indications of a lingering tail wind are evidenced in observations such as: "I have met many conservative Christians who have deep misgivings about sociology...several ministers who regularly warm their congregation against sending their children to liberal arts colleges... [where] they might take a course in sociology...[as a result of which] their faith would certainly be undermined." (Perkins 1987, p.13).

What, however, seems to have escaped the attention of the detractors of the discipline are the historic demonstrations of God to redirect the course of events. Joseph had no misgivings about this and reminded his brethren that that which they conceived as evil against him "God meant it for good...to save much people alive". (Genesis 50:20). This lesson was much more poignantly repeated to Balaam in the brays of his defiant, talking donkey, and more embarrassingly by Balaam's own uncompromising lips which

uttered blessings instead of curses upon the people of God, contrary to Balaam's desire to carry out the wishes of Balak (Numbers 22 – 24).

I wish to suggest that in many ways sociology has become the proverbial Balaam, speaking words that were unintended and facilitating the generation of meanings and the sustenance of patterns that stand in counter-position to the intentions of its founder. True, sociology is still not that ready, compliant, unabashed advocate of the Christian perspective but it can, and does, utter "brays", like Balaam's donkey that are instructive and eye-opening, and it behooves us to listen.

In this paper, I argue the case of sociology being an "ally' of the biblical perspective, while not ignoring the furor it has engendered in the ranks of believers. Therefore, let me first attempt a confession of sort in admitting to the "sins" of the sociologist, and in this connection ensure that I write with a clear conscience, as I later set forth my argument for the "just deeds" of sociologists in their conceptualization of social reality.

Let me hasten in confession and tell you that the discipline has committed, among others, two 'evils': the evil of ontological naturalism and that of ethical relativism. However, before I attempt an unpacking of these "evils," as I see them, allow me to create some context.

The Rise of Sociology

Sociology emerged as a scientific field of study during the 19th century in reaction to several factors. Though anticipated in the works of social ideologues such as Plato and Aristotle some two millennia earlier, the formal promulgation of the sociological

perspective had to await the intellectual climate and yearnings generated by the French revolution, the Industrial revolution, and the travels of Europeans to the New World (Charon 1999).

The French Revolution in particular provided much cause for concern. Carried out under the motto of liberty, equality and fraternity, the revolution drew on the ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers who sought to counteract the influence of traditional authority, in particular that of the clerics of the church. (Zietlin 2001). Reasoning that societal order resulted from the rational mind of individuals rather than the collective will of institutions, disciples of the Enlightenment questioned the basis of the ranking ecclesiastical order that dominated society at the time. For these thinkers, ultimate power rested with the individual not the collective. The collectivist assumption that provided justification for the way society was organized was therefore not to be tolerated. Because the individual was capable of making sense of social reality through the unaided powers of the mind, the Enlightenment thinkers reasoned that social institutions where they did not accord with rational principles should be rejected, with preference given to individual rationality.

The Enlightenment mind-set led in time not only to distrust of the established authority, but also to military assaults on that authority. The resultant upheavals mounted to such highs that they led to the capture of the Pope by the French General Berthier. The latter development seriously disturbed the confidence and peace of mind of those who had placed their trust in the status quo, and provoked the studied response of the French Catholic revolutionary philosophers who reasserted the fundamental position of the collectivist argument in 10 statements opposing the extreme individualistic view of the Enlightenment thinkers (see Zietlin 2001).

Besides the French Revolution, the discovery of the New World with its puzzlements as well as the after-math of the industrial revolution did much to elicit the type of concerns that created the climate for the rise of sociology. Dissimilarity in life style patterns observed in the New World stood in stark contrast to those Europeans had left behind in their homeland. While this piqued the curiosity of the intellectuals, the social problems of prostitution, vagrancy and the general drift of the society away from the bondedness it knew in earlier times (all this coming in the wake of the Industrial Revolution) clamored for explanations. The old order was indeed changing yielding place to a new one; and uncertainty and forlornness were high as was the determination on the part of scholars to figure out the nature of the changes taking place. Those who sought explanation for the ferment were encouraged by the advances that were realized in the field of the natural sciences and were hopeful that a social resolvent would be found to counteract the disturbing changes.

It was against this background of despair and hope that Auguste Comte, a trained physicist, conceived and advanced the sociological vision. Comte posited the idea that society should be studied the same way as the natural sciences. Accordingly, he embraced positivism, a mode of inquiry that departs from the assumption that the empirical is all there is, as holding the key to societal problems.

Comte (1855) theorized that human society necessarily passes through three stages, which he also dubbed the Law of Human Progress. These stages typify the characteristic way humans make sense of reality. Human beings, Comte thought, had progressed through the theological stage, were confronting the metaphysical stage during his time, and were headed for the final stage of positive science, when, he felt, sociology priests would rule society.

Comte's approach to social phenomena was rather mentalistic. He, therefore, argued that society's problems were an outcome of how we viewed the world. In this vein, once the correct view and the associated method were arrived at human beings would have come of age, and the explanations and answers for society's problems would be known.

Sociology's 'Sin'

But it was in Comte's own view of the world and the associated method of inquiry involved in that view that we have the first cardinal 'sin' of the discipline. Comte's embrace of positivism, the position that reality lies 'out there' and is accessible only through empirically verifiable methods implicates Comte on the side of the ontological naturalist. The suggestion of ontological naturalism that reality is what empirical science says it is not only discounts the extra-empirical as a reality source, but by implication denies the validity of the believer's claim of a transcendent divine other. Yet the positivist argument of an 'out there reality' presents a logical platform from which the Christian believer can launch a defense of her belief in a transcendent God reality. (But more of this later.)

Perhaps even more threatening, it would appear, than sociology's embrace of ontological naturalism is the other cardinal 'sin' of the discipline, meta-physical relativism. Meta physical relativism holds that all reality, including truth reality, varies in essence. This position is often conflated and confused with cultural relativity which emphasizes the relative nature of perceived reality. From the standpoint of the metaphysical relativist truth reality is necessarily a social construction and not transcendent in nature. This position harmonizes well with the postmodernists' view of

multiple realities and their opposition to claims of universal truth. Against this position the Bible becomes nothing more than the construction of particular people in particular places and times, and therefore not deserving of the global relevance Christians and others seek to credit it. Moreover, the very idea of an unchanging God, transcendent and eternal stands perilously compromised in this light. Yet, within due limits the 'relativism' idea is a helpful conceptual tool to the Christian. I shall elaborate on this later.

In summary, whereas the first cardinal 'sin' of sociology, ontological naturalism, commits and limits reality, including the reality God, to the social realm, the second, metaphysical relativism, while conceding the social nature of reality as well, imposes a situational constraint on the latter. But all is not gloom and doom, Sociology speaks with eloquence to several biblical themes to which we now turn.

Sociology an 'ally' of the Biblical Perspective

It is my studied position that the Sociological and biblical perspectives harmonize on several counts. Among these are their common positions on: the fundamental nature of the group; the relevance of context in human action; the external nature of human's moral energizing; and the creative nature of humans.

The Fundamental Nature of Reality

One of the questions that engage the continuing interest of scholars is that regarding the fundamental nature of reality. Sociologists have rejected the nominalist position, which posits the primacy of the individual, and have embraced the realist point of view that holds the group as the fundamental unit of analysis. This position is shored up by the logic of systems theory which states that the whole is more than the sum of its

parts, and that while the parts may be understood in terms of the whole the converse is not true. (see Goldenberg and Goldenberg 2003). It is in this light that Whitiker (see Olson 2006, p. 64) advanced the notion that "there are no individuals in the world- only fragments of families." The implication here is that the individual, while limited in her effect upon the group, cannot escape the impact of the latter, in particular the family group; and, indeed, is deeply influenced by her primary group background.

Thus, the contention of the nominalists that groups have no real existence apart from the individuals who make up them ignores an important point, much as it seeks to isolate the identity of individuals outside the group context. That ignored point has been emphasized by Durkheim who has maintained that the group is not limited to its constituent members, but becomes a new thing- a *sui generis* reality independent of its individual members. Thus, contrary to the nominalist tradition, groups are real and constitute a fundamental aspect of reality.

The Biblical View of the Group

The position regarding the fundamental nature of the group is a pervasive biblical theme. This notion comes up early in the biblical account. God having made the first human being declared him with the rest of His created works to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). But God considered it not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:17) and provided Adam a companion in Eve. But what could God mean by saying that the man was good, but that it was "not good" for him to be alone? The point of emphasis here, as I see it, is that the human person as a product of God's creation, given all his/her potentials for creative expressions, is in excellent shape. However, human beings are not inanimate objects or will-less creatures, but are rather beings endowed with the capacity for

meaningful relationships. They will thus be hopelessly stifled and stagnated without the opportunity to fulfill their need for relationships. In this light, it is not good for human beings to live in isolation, without the benefit of interaction with others.

Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1964), many years ago, captured the essence of this thought when he noted that 'a separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience' (p36). What Cooley meant is that a developed and actualized individual is inconceivable outside of a group. Humans do not fare well apart from the group. Indeed, several studies (Davis 1940/2003; Rymer 1994) have supported the idea that the actualization of our humanness is difficult to achieve outside of the group context. For example, Davis and Rymer descriptive accounts of two abused girls serve to illustrate the impact of social isolation on human development.

Davis' after-the-fact, single subject was Anna. Born in 1932 to her unmarried, mentally retarded mother, Anna was confined to an attic room because of the rage of her grandfather over her illegitimate birth. With minimum contact from her mother and others, Anna received little attention and just enough milk to stay alive. After five long years in this condition, according to Davis, Anna was emaciated, unable to laugh, smile, show anger, or speak. Davis reported that after Anna's discovery she was exposed to much social contact, after which she showed some improvement in her social skills. She became more alert and was able to smile after about 10 days of visits from him. She was able to walk after a year, and feed herself after a year and a half.

Somewhat similar to Anna's situation is Genie's. Genie was a 13 year old girl from California. She was severely neglected by her parents who abused her in several ways, including locking her alone in the garage for extended periods. When discovered, she was found to have the mental development of a one year old. In spite of intensive

treatment by specialists, Genie improved only minimally, and her language skills remained that of a child. (Macionis, 1999). These examples of the effects of social isolation on its human subjects, despite their after-the-fact, single subjects samples, are illustrative of what happens to the human person when deprived of the benefits of interaction with other humans. Indeed, it is not good for human to live in isolation of others.

God and Group

The group reality must be appreciated not only for its relevance to human development but also for its appropriateness, it seems, in capturing the divine reality. In spite of its clear monotheistic ring, the biblical account seems uncompromised on the idea of God as a group. While God has been declared to be one God (Duet. 6:4,1 Tim. 2:5), He has also been presented as a plurality of beings (1 John 5:7; Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 4:5). Moreover, Genesis 1:2 gives us the very first limit of the plural nature if the Deity in the invitation extended for the collaborative effort that yielded the creation of humankind: "come let us make man in our own image". These positions on the Deity, while they seem to smack of a contradiction of terms, become clearer within a wider sweep of scripture.

Spouses become one flesh at marriage (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5, Ephesians 5:31), and Jesus prayed for His followers to be one (John 17:21). Paul (1 Corinthians12) presents the church with its plurality of members as one body, and Matthew (chapter 25) pictures the redeemed of the ages as a bride. Thus, the notion of oneness emerging from groupness seems clearly biblical. Yet this group-based oneness, as we are aware from our experience in regards to husbands and wives and the followers of Christ, does not

translate to fusion of beings or personalities. Neither husbands and wives nor individual

Christians are ramified into a single entity at the point where oneness between them is

reached.

What the notion of a triune (group) God seems to suggest is that the three

members of the Godhead become joined in their relationship with each other, on the basis

of their common purpose, values and interests. Furnish (1989) has suggested that a

mystical oneness emerges when people interact in a group context. If this is true of

human beings, how much more might it be illustrative of the oneness of the Godhead.

The point underscored by scripture in the persistent image it portrays of 'oneness'

being a function of 'groupness' is that reality is ultimately relational; that it is within

relationships, and in particular the group relationship, that reality is best conceptualized,

accessed, and constructed. But this view does not sit well in cultures dominated by the

Western individualistic notion of human nature. This notion is best summarized by

Locke's concept of ontological individualism, by which the individual is deemed to be

prior to the group, and the group is seen to emerge upon the coming together of

individuals, whose existence is independent of the group. (Bellah 1985). William

Henley's (1936) 'Invictus' captures the spirit of this notion in its extreme implications of

the self-determined individual who strives and triumphs alone. Henley writes:

> *It matters not how straight the gate,*
> *How charged with punishments the scroll,*
> *I am the master of my fate;*
> *I am the captain of my soul.*

Yet, it is not my wish to propose an 'individual-less' collective as the ideal. The biblical

worldview would have me steer clear of this. What seems inescapable however, is that

God in whose image we have been created is communal, and we are in essence social

beings made for God and for each other (Sire 1990). That the group is the primary reality it is the contention of the Bible- and it seems clear that it is the point of the Sociologist too.

The Relevance of Context

The emphasis of sociologists on the primacy of the group logically commits the discipline to underscore the importance of context. Emile Durkheim who in many ways can be seen as the premier architect of the sociological perspective, argued for an external locus for human activities. He maintained that social facts which are group-produced and group-sustained phenomena constitute the mainsprings of human conduct. In the development of his ideas on the forces that inform human behavior, Durkheim (1964) took issue with the reigning theories of psychologism and sociobiologism of his time period. The former proposes that human behavior is due to psychological factors such as the will and other characteristics of the mind, while the latter suggests that biological principles such as genetic predispositions and hormonal levels are the real cause of human behavior.

Durkheim argued on the contrary that the way in which people relate to the world around them (construct, sustain, or deconstruct that world) are socially rooted. For example, he noted that the ways in which people fulfill their duties with respect to their jobs and other personal relationships, have all been given in the social expectations and established practices of their society. The way one relates to one's brother, mother, or boss are largely influenced by the norms of the society in which one lives. The key

therefore, to understanding human behavior lies in a study of social facts[1]. Sociologists in keeping with this Durkheimian logic recognize that there is an objective yet socially created reality in social facts that provides the impetus for, and sustenance of human action and interaction.

I am often struck by the taken-for-grantedness with which many people think of their behavior. Not many, it seems, are able to readily see their behavior within the multi-layered circumstances of their lives. Saddled with an individualistic ethos, most people seem to think of their behavior in terms of their personal qualities, thereby demonstrating a lack of the capacity to grasp the general in the particular; to see themselves within the widening circumstances of their lives. In this they display a notorious innocence regarding the 'thereness' component of their behavior. Yet, this notion seems clearly biblical, in light of the Psalmist's suggestion that God will take note when He documents the life of the people that "this man was born there" (Psalm 87:6). The implications here seem to be that God considers the place of our birth and our socialization experience to be important to our life activities and character formation. This position of the Psalmist is consistent with the sociological perspective, which pursues an understanding of the behavior of people within the context of their social locations.

C. Wright Mills who drew on and extended the Durkheimian notion of social facts, has given us perhaps the most insightful account of the 'thereness' approach. Mills (1959) advanced the notion of the "Sociological imagination' as a critical requirement for us to grasp the point that the behavior of humans is guided by the norm demands of their

---

Durkheim (1964) defines social facts as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him" (p. 3).

society. He suggested that one who possesses the sociological imagination is able to see how history and biography interest in their impact upon the lives of people.

In Mills (1959) own words, "the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner and the external careers of a variety of individuals" (p. 65) and "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society" (p. 66). Accordingly, Mills argues that any social investigation properly carried out will demonstrate a grasp of human conduct as a function of the intersection of history (those broad structural features within a society) and biography (the personal and more immediate circumstances of the lives of individuals). It is these 'historical' and 'biographical' 'thereness' factors that comprise the multilayered circumstances of people's lives, and against which sociologists (and the Psalmist, Ps 86:7) seek to understand social behavior. It is thus too within this perspective that we may fruitfully trace the forces that underlie the varied patterns of behaviors that Christians manifest across cultural boundaries.

Let us take for an example a comparative look at Adventist Christian men in the United States of America and Northern Cameroon. While these two groups definitely share the same compelling worldview, and are constrained by it in significant ways, they yet differ in some important ways. Adventist men in Northern Cameroon speak French, don Muslim-like robes to worship, and are likely to be married to wives chosen for them by their parents. On the other hand, Adventist men living in the United States of America, speak English, attire themselves in jacket and tie for worship services, and are mostly likely married to wives of their personal choice. Both these groups, despite their common beliefs and values, differ in the ways they enact these beliefs and values largely because of the social expectations of their respective societies.

Michael Schwalbe (2001) has argued that the sociological perspective empowers us to meaningfully love others, because of the ability it gives us to see people in context. He has suggested that sociological insights invest us with a "sociological mindfulness", which enables us to pay attention to the hardship and options of others. He noted that "if we observe how others' circumstances differ from our own we are more likely to show compassion for them and to grant them the respect they deserve as human beings, and less likely to condemn them unfairly" (p. 5). In other words, being sociologically mindful equips the Christian with the capacity of reflexivity (Perkins 1987). A reflexive Christian is one who is able to step outside one's social situation and frame of reference (one's thereness) and "judge" oneself and others based on a careful and objective understanding of the facts. This ability to be reflexive is indispensable to one's capacity to follow the golden rule, i.e., treating others as one wishes to be treated (Matthew 7:12). Doubtless, this is why Leming et al (1989) argued that "the sociologically conscious Christian is better equipped to realize Shalom, to implement love and justice in the world" (p. 12).

The Proverbial Balaam Speaks: The Positivist Vision

One of the criticisms leveled against sociology for its emphasis on the social context is that it is socially deterministic. Determinism by definition disallows the free will expression of humans, and locates human conduct in forces other than human's free will. While this criticism rings true to some extent, the varied perspective of the discipline would be much compromised were one to accept the validity of this criticism without an examination of the facts. The sociological perspective is not a single,

monolithic, invariant view of the world. In fact, three broad paradigms frame the discipline: structure functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and the conflict perspective.

The structural functionalist and the conflict paradigms are closely aligned with the positivist vision of Comte. Both these paradigms display a rather passive, mechanistic view of humans. They suggest that social order results from the predictable reaction of social actors to the empirical conditions of their environment. People are either, in the case of the structural functionalists, instilled with the values and norms of their society from which constraints they act, or they are coerced by the powers that be, according to the conflict theorists, to behave in ways that are conformable to the norm demands of the society.

In this light humans are either trained to be compliant or are forced to be such. While these positions are consistent with conventional wisdom, they are ultimately discordant with the biblical view of human behavior. The implication is that humans are at best manipulable creatures, incapable of originating actions outside of environmental constraints. The image thus conveyed of humans is that of creatures whose behaviors are determined, that is, caused by factors other than their free choice.

While one will be hard put to deny evidences of the impact of external constraints (whether internalized as norms and values or more directly exercised as force) on human behavior, it is the degree of determinism implied by positivist sociology that sets the discipline at odds with the Christian worldview. Determined behavior removes the account of behavior from the actor's responsibility. Blame for misconduct must therefore be placed elsewhere. Extending the logic of this argument to the phenomenon of sin demands that culpability for sin be attributed to someone or something other than the sinner. This, of course, denies the free will of humans and suggests that God is to be

blamed for the act of sin. Thus, both the conflict and structural functionalist paradigms fail to account for the creative capacity of the individual. Human beings thus stand passive and robot-like with their God-endowed, free will capacity much compromised.

Nevertheless (and it is here that I will ask us to listen to the proverbial Balaam), we may yet glean insights into the biblical worldview from the positivist argument of Comte, and the derived accounts of social order rendered from the conflict and structural functionalist stand points. Positivism, insofar as it points to an objective reality, although empirical in nature, facilitates the Christian claim of a God whose existence and will remain independent of human construction. Such a perspective makes allowance for the recognition of moral values as more than a social construction. Additionally, the positivist's deterministic interpretation of human conduct must necessarily imply that social conduct derives its energy from an extra-individual source. For the structural functionalist that energy-providing source is the various social institutions through which humans are equipped with the constraining values of society. From the conflict paradigm standpoint, that source is some powerful other in the society.

Similarly, Christians have identified an external source of their strength and empowerment. In fact, Jesus reminds us that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). And St. Paul, capturing this reality in personal terms, notes that he has been crucified with Christ but nevertheless lives on, because Christ lives in him (Galatians 2:20). This, however, should not be understood as a unilateral invasion and control of the Christian's life by Christ. Paul dismisses any such view in his suggestion that we become servants only to whom we will our lives in obedience (Romans 6:16). In fact, the biblical view of humans gives much more agency to humans than to present them as beings under the unilateral control of others, even God. Nevertheless, positivistic sociology, in

locating the driving force of behavior outside the individual, approaches congruence with the biblical perspective which recognizes God's power as the source of the Christian's empowerment (Philippians 4:13).

The Co-creative Role of Humans

Sociologists, who espouse the symbolic interactionists' paradigm, while not ignoring the impact of social location on human behavior, have assigned considerable agency to humans. Unlike the conflict and functionalist perspectives that focus on the contingency nature of human action, interactionists emphasize the interactive, process-oriented and emergent aspects.

Blumer (1969), one of the chief architects of the interactionist perspective summarized its basic assumptions as follows: (1) human act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them, (2) meanings are derived from social interaction, (3) meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process in dealing with the things that are encountered. Meaning, from this perspective, is not given in things and edicts but is rather emergent being, contingent upon the interactional process. (Matthews and Gabriel, 2001). Scholars who stretch this notion to its extreme implication end up in the camp of ethical relativism, positing the interactional medium as the alpha and omega of social reality. The balanced Christian approach stops short of such vulgarism, and seeks to extract the unintended message instead.

So again I will let the proverbial Balaam speak, and will point out some ways in which Sociology concedes to the biblical perspective. As I have argued earlier in respect of the conflict and structural functionalist paradigms, it is my view that the symbolic

interactionist paradigm can facilitate insights into the Christian perspective. There are at least two examples that bear this out.

First, symbolic interactionism stands amenable to the biblical perspective insofar as it seeks to point out that humans are more than mere 'stimulus response', determinable creatures, but are rather beings with the capacity to innovate and create meanings. That human beings were meant to be meaning generators is indicated by God's call to Adam to participate in the naming of His creation (Genesis 2:19) and in Jesus' characterization of the disciples as light of the world (Matthew 5: 14). Indeed, to participate in naming something is to engage in an activity that is both creative and innovative. Such an activity consists of generating categories that are appropriate fits for the material as well as the non-material aspects of the world. In this process, not only the flora and fauna but humans as well and the associated abstract properties and processes are paired with names and meanings. In a real sense it is the work that botanists, biologists, physicists, psychologists, and sociologists do in their knowledge generation, pattern identification, and prediction activities. The light reflector image that Jesus has assigned to humans is especially pertinent in this connection. For Jesus himself, the light of the world, is the eternal logos that have brought salvation (order, restoration, reconciliation, enablings, etc.) to all humans.

The naming of the world is of especial importance, and it takes place at various levels of the church and the wider society as one of the means by which order is created and sense is made of the world. Researchers accomplish this task whenever they come up with new findings. Committees carry it out when they generate new ideas and structure these into new policies and procedures, aimed at facilitating the smooth operations of the church and the wider society. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the

development of God's kingdom on earth without this naming and meaning generation process?

Second, the symbolic interactionist's emphasis on the process-oriented nature of reality is reflected in the Seventh-day Adventist Christian's belief regarding salvation. Seventh-day Adventist Christians see salvation in terms of a three-phase process which begins with justification, when the unmerited righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner and the sinner receives full salvation (Seventh-day Adventist Believes ...27, pp 119- 132). Seventh-day Adventists believe, however, that the sinner who opts out of the relationship with Christ can forfeit this unmerited gift. Salvation results not so much from a thing applied but rather from an interactive relationship. What this suggests is that the application of Christ's blood in the salvific process transcends its literal meaning and is rather symbolic of the empowerment Christ makes available to us in our interactive relationship with Him. This position avoids the "once saved always saved" notion, which implies a unilateral act of God in saving the sinner, even against the sinner's will.

Sanctification, the second phase of the process, describes this relationship as life-long , during which time, the Christian in a surrendered, interactive relationship with God becomes more and more like Him, being polished after the similitude of a palace (Psalm 144:12). The Adventist's process-oriented, progressive view of Salvation takes in the experience of the redeemed in heaven, where in the third phase of the process the beneficiaries of salvation are glorified. Indeed, even in the heavenly context the process of growth continues, as Ellen G. White has observed: "There every power will be developed, every capability increased...And there will arise new heights to surmount new wonders to admire new truths to comprehend...And the years of eternity as they roll, will continue to bring more glorious revelations" (White 1903/1952, pg 307). Thus, it seems,

growth in its varied forms is endless, when viewed from the Adventist Christian theological position on salvation. As we have intimated earlier, this process-oriented viewing of the nature of phenomena is also typical of the sociological variant of symbolic interactionism.

Conclusion

Despite the reputed anti-religion stance of sociology, there are areas of common focus the discipline shares with the Bible and the Christian religion. In this paper I have identified and discussed four such areas of commonality.

First, I have noted that though the two perspectives depart from fundamentally different standpoints on ultimate reality, they are joined in their common position on the group as a fundamental reality. Second, the relevance of context to human conduct has been presented as a theme shared by both sociology and the Bible. The other two areas of commonality between sociology and the Bible were prized, if you will, out of the mouth of the 'proverbial Balaam". Positions that would ordinarily pose a threat to the biblical perspective were 'coaxed' into speaking for it. Thus, in the third area of common focus discussed, I observed that both the Bible and sociology identify an external source of human moral energizing. In this connection, it was noted that where as the Bible advances the view that the Christian's power to do good is from Christ, sociology presents that source of power as the socialization experienced in society. Finally, it was argued that the focus on human agency by sociologists who espouse the symbolic interactionist perspective is consistent with the biblical view of humans as meaning generators and co-creators.

REFERENCES

Bellah, R.H. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life.* Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and method.* Englewood Cliffs. N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Charon, J. M. (1999). *The Meaning of Sociology.* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Comte, A. (1855). *The Positive Philosophy.* Translated and condensed by Harriet Martineau. New York: Calvin Blanchard.

Cooley, C.H. (1964). *Human nature and the social order.* New York: Schocken. (Originally published in 1902).

Davis, K. (1940/2003). "Extreme Isolation". In *Down to Earth Sociology: Introductory readings,* 12th ed., James M. Henslin, (Ed.). New York: Free Press, 2003:133-142.

Durkheim, E. (1964). *The Rules of Sociological Method.* Translated by S. A. Soloway and J. H. Mueller. E.G. Catlin (Ed.). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Furnish, B.F.J. (1989). Are Groups Real? In *The sociological perspective* by M.R. Leming, R.G. DeVries, & B.F.J. Furnish. MI: Academic Books.

Goldenberg, I. & H. Goldenberg. (2003). *Family therapy: An overview.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Henley, W.E. (1936). Invictus. In *The Best Loved Poems of the American People.* Hazel Felleman, (Ed.). New York: Garden City Books.

Leming, M.R., R. G. DeVries, & B. F. Furnish (Eds.). (1989). *The Sociological Perspecitve: A value committed introduction.* Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books.

Macionis, J. J. (1999). Sociology. (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination.* London: Oxford University Press.

Olson, D.H. & J. DeFrain. (2006). *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and strengths.* (5th ed.). CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Perkins, R. (1987). *Looking Both Ways.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

Rymer, R. (1994). *Genie.* New York: Harper Perennial.

Schwalbe, M. (1998). *The sociologically examined life: Pieces of the conversation.* Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Sire, J.W. (1990). *Discipleship of the Mind: learning to love God in the ways we think.* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The Holy Bible. King James Version.

White, E. (1903/1952). *Education.* The Ellen G. White Publications.

Zeitlin, I. M. (2001). *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory.* (7th ed.). NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.