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Teaching Sociology: A Biblical-Christian Approach

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Introduction

During my second year of college I took an introductory sociology class, a class, which would change the course of my life. I had no prior exposure to the subject matter of sociology except through my earlier experiences of life, so I came to study the discipline with a relatively open mind. The discipline raised to a level of consciousness issues which I had previously pondered but about which I had no philosophical perspective within which to interpret my musings. I began to wonder why I had so little prior exposure to its subject matter, and came to realize that those trained in the discipline of sociology who taught in Seventh-day Adventist schools were few and far between. During the more than two decades of my teaching sociology on Seventh-day Adventist college and university campuses, I have noticed a slight increase in the number of sociologists employed by our tertiary institutions, but a noticeable paucity still remains.

This paper begins with an acknowledged bias in favor of the need for more sociology professors in our institutions. Herein we shall attempt to address two questions:

Why should sociology be taught in an Adventist college or university?

How can an integrated approach to biblical understanding take place as part of the process of teaching sociology?

Why Teach Sociology?

Three basic assumptions underlie my philosophy of teaching sociology courses in Adventist educational institutions. First, in order to live in a world with other human beings one needs some understanding of how to operate successfully within societal groups. The study of sociology provides a framework for that understanding to take place. Second, in attempting to

arrive at a true perspective of human behavior, societal views should be examined in light of the revealed truth of Scripture. "The Bible should be made the foundation of study and of teaching."¹ An Adventist institution should provide the opportunity for students to develop an understanding and appreciation of others within an interpretative framework of the Bible as the central reference point. Third, to study human behavior without reference to the Bible leads toward an avoidance of one's ethical and personal responsibility for one's own behavior.

Setting the Stage

As is most often the case, it is necessary to introduce a new course by providing an overview of the discipline, its historical underpinnings, the course requirements, expected outcomes, and the direction the professor intends to take in guiding inquiry. In this regard, sociology is no different than any other subject. However, since the topics of sociology concern human behavior, which students feel they know something about already, they feel somewhat skin to the subject matter. Rather than beginning with "foreign" material, subject matter, which seems to fall outside the realm of everyday experience (e.g. philosophy), the study of sociology involves many issues of life which students face on a regular basis. This provides a good starting point for dialogue with students and for helping them form a connection between theory and real life.

The approach to know which can be shared by Christian teachers is early sociology courses has the potential to bring a fresh perspective to beginning college students, since so few

¹ White, Ellen G. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View, Ca: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942, p. 401

of them have been exposed to the discipline of sociology at the primary or secondary school level. To the Christian sociologist the topics in the discipline lend themselves almost naturally to a discussion of related biblical examples for application and reflection.

This paper attempts to provide both a process and an experiential perspective of how to incorporate biblical concepts into the teaching of many of the basic concepts of sociology in a Seventh-day Adventist college and university. Admittedly this is only one of the many possible approaches to doing this, but it is an approach, which has worked for me over the last twenty-five years. The following nine sociological topics will be addressed: Research, culture, groups, and social interaction, socialization, deviance, social stratification, racial and ethnic groups, family, and religion.

An Approach

A successful approach I have used in laying the groundwork for teaching freshmen and sophomore students, is to introduce the concept of what sociology is, by relating it to other social science disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, psychology, and political science. In this way I attempt to draw attention to the different perspective each discipline brings to the study of human behavior. This leads to a further broadening of the discussion to how other non-behavioral sciences lend unique perspectives to the concept of knowledge in general. From this position, I introduce the idea that if one were to take all disciplines together, something like the shape of a pie, one would have a broad-based understanding of the scientific world. Yet, with all the accumulated knowledge, I suggest that the scientific world reflects only available knowledge man has been able to discover, not all the knowledge which is possible.

A further extension of this line of reasoning brings us to the discussion of why it is necessary for us to constantly change textbooks as new editions become available and why journal articles are usually more current than books. I explain that knowledge available to human represents the best knowledge available *at the time*. God's truth is all encompassing and was true yesterday, is true today, and will be true forever, making it unnecessary to update. I further assert that only God has *all* knowledge available to Him. Man's knowledge is *relative*, God's knowledge is *absolute*. I couch any succeeding discussions of sociological topics in terms of this faith perspective.

Doing Research

A considerable amount of effort is spent by humans in the search for truth. Some methods include intuition, authority, tradition, common sense, and science. I suggest that while these methods are insufficient to guide us into *all* truth, they may point us in the direction of truth or provide a way for us to come to grips with the challenges of life. This leads to a discussion of how scientists attempt to arrive at truth and how the paradigm of science differ from non-scientific approaches.

In viewing the scientific principles of research, we discuss the meaning of variables, methodology, validity, reliability, types or research designs, objectivity, subjectivity, ethics, and the like. Research involving humans also has moral implications that suggest the need for carefully chosen research designs, disclosure, informed consent, the lack of deception, and so forth.² Many of these topics can be made directly or indirectly relevant to biblical examples.

² Rumble, Beverly J. "The Use of Human Subjects in Research at Adventist Colleges and Universities: Suggested Guidelines." In *Christ in the Classroom*, Vol. 14, pp. 341-355.

For example, a discussion of empirical data and ethics can be approached through an examination of the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery and how Christ dealt not only with her but with her accusers. The topic of variables can be approached by having the class look for commonalities and differences between each other, in terms of physical features, culture, language, and disposition. Yet the differences between humans can be couched within the biblical context of God's creation of a variety of animal and plant life, and within the framework of "and hath made of one blood all nations" (Acts 17:26) and the commission by angels in Revelation to deliver the everlasting gospel to "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" in preparation for Christ's return (Revelation 14:6). The context of the gospel commission implies the necessary for the gospel to be available and adapted to diverse peoples. Sociological perspective can assist students in learning how to understand diverse people groups.

Culture

A common practice in sociology is to address the origin of man, which usually leads to an attempt to place dates and time periods on human existence and to follow the evidentiary approach to dating. This leads to an evolutionary view of human existence and usually comes into conflict with the perspective of biblical creation. I suggest that the student become somewhat familiar with tenets of the evolutionary view(s) of mankind to compare these views with the biblical account of creation, in order to be better able to address differences should they encounter individuals who hold the evolutionary view. I employ an unapologetic "faith" perspective here, arguing that it takes considerable *faith* to believe in an evolutionary view, at

least as much or more than to accept the Scriptural view of creation. Further, I suggest that with incomplete knowledge (relative truth) one is limited to speculation. Why not accept God at His word?³

The discipline of sociology began to develop during the mid 19th century out of an interest by social philosophers in understanding the social, political, religious, and economic changes surrounding the industrial revolution. Sociologists began to believe that the social world had patterns and that they could be understood (McBride).⁴ Social structure is a term which conveys the concept of pattern behavior.

The topic of culture implies elements of structure, such as those of status-the position or rank individuals hold within groups or in society, and role-the expectations placed upon a person by virtue of the position in society he or she occupies. Being adopted into the family of God as a child of the King provides a status which carries with it certain expectations as to the nature of our responsibilities-"to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with they God" (Micah 6:8), to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), and to "show forth the glory of God" (1 Chron. 16:24). We launch into a discussion of the multidimensional map of statuses, which each individual holds, and the potential for conflict due to the many roles we each play.

The concepts of *folkways*, *mores*, and *laws* easily lend themselves top a discussion of how customary ways of doing things differ from concepts of right and wrong, and how

³ See *Seventh-day Adventist Believe...A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988, pp. 91-92.

⁴ McBride, Duane C. 1996. "The Sociological Imagination and a Christian Worldview," *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning*, Vol. 18,355-357. Publisher: Institute for Christian Teaching, Education Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD.

conceptions of the rightness or wrongness of acts are culturally determined, compared with theological concepts contained in Scripture (Exodus 20:1-17).

Group and Social Interaction

By focusing on the nature of groups, whether primary or secondary, in-groups or out-groups, formal or informal, one is able to point students to an analysis of group structure and type. The concept of anticipatory socialization lends itself nicely to a discussion of the necessary of preparing for acceptance into a group even before one actually becomes a member. This concept can easily be extended to discuss the necessity of preparing for acceptance into God's kingdom, and the part we now play in preparation for that blessed event.

The concept of *reference groups* provides a perspective which suggests that we often gauge ourselves in terms of outside groups, although a reference group may be an in group. "Keeping up with the Joneses" (a reference group) may cause one to engage in *conspicuous consumption* (Purchasing something for the primary purpose to show others you have it rather than because you really need the item). From here we launch into issues such as the temptation to engage in activities to keep up with others and the consequences of that behavior.

Deviant Behavior

Doob⁵ argues that deviance is social behavior that violates significant social norms at specific points in time. What is considered as deviant today may be considered acceptable behavior at another time. The relativity surrounding the concept of deviance allows us to consider whether there are enduring principles of Christianity embodied in Scripture, which are

⁵ Doob, Christopher Bates. (1997) *Sociology: An Introduction*. Fifth edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

not variable through time. We can raise questions such as "What allowances are made in Scripture for cultural conceptions of deviance," such as the fact that "this person was born there?" (Psalm 87:4), or how does one deal with the concept of crime as culturally defined? Are there any behavioral absolutes that God requires?

We study issues of *formal* and *informal social control* and the extent to which the concept of "control" is limiting or liberating. For example, how do the laws of God as defined in Scripture (Exodus 20) and the laws of humankind provide freedom within their restrictions? Or is that possible? A violation of man's laws may involve punishment, fines, imprisonment, loss of credibility, and so forth, but what are the consequences of a violation of God's law? Does God punish by personal imposition of His displeasure? Do we receive the negative, natural consequences of our own behavior (that which we sow we also reap), or is it the Devil who interposes-as in the case of Job (Job: chapters 1-42)?

Most recently the institution in which I was teaching required that each person majoring or receiving a degree in a particular field take a "capstone" course. The content and approach of the course requires students to come to grips with the interrelationship of their discipline and their Christian life and what implications each have for the other. One approach, which I have used in connection with a capstone course in behavioral science, involves the requirement that students react to a series of issues in the format notes on page 17-19. The same approach can be used in requiring students to juxtapose, reconcile, or compare their personal belief/position, society's perspectives, and biblical perspectives to other social issues.

The requirement that students come to grips with how their personal belief system and of what is appropriate, ethical, and how this consonance or divergence effects their conception of what is appropriate, ethical, or justifiable in the experiences of life, constitutes the essence of the course. Students are led to reflect on issues thought to be already settled in their minds, but upon reflection, they often find these issues not as clear as they once thought. I have found it healthy to discuss students' "reflections" in the corporate setting of the classroom, in a non-threatening environment, where their own peer group can feel free to participate with them as they grapple with important issues. Many questions we do not settle, but I am able to provide guidance into how students may continue thinking about their personal responses to life's issues in terms of their discipline and biblical examination.

Social Stratification

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore⁶ have attempted to explain the unequal distribution of rewards, resources, and privileges in society by suggesting that these occur due to the functional importance a society attaches to certain critical jobs, functionally important to the survival of the society. Karl Marx's conflict approach⁷ and Lenski's approach⁸ to stratification are discussed along with the key dimensions of wealth, income, power, and prestige. We discuss the

⁶ Davis, Kingsley and Moore, Wilbert. (1945). "Some Principles of Stratification," *American Sociological Review*, 10, 242-249.

⁷ Karl Marx's Theory of Social Classes," in Lipset, Seymour Martin and Reinhard Bendix, *Class, Status, and Power*, 1953.

⁸ Lenski, Gerhard. (1966). *Power and Privilege: A theory of Social Stratification*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

subjective, reputational, and objective definitions of class and how "classiness" relates to life expectancy, mental illness, communication effectiveness, self-esteem, fertility, approaches to child rearing, deferred gratification, and the like. By this point in the class, many of the students' minds have become open to a vast area of their mind world in which they seemingly had given little thought.

We are thus able to raise issues regarding how God views people and their importance to Him, why He seemed to choose certain types of people to represent him in Scripture, and what responsibility we each have based on our knowledge of how initial placement in life affects life chances. We discuss intra-and inter-generational social mobility and the expectations our parents, friends, and heavenly Father may have for us as we approach life's opportunities.

We discuss open and closed class system and how one's life chances are constrained or enhanced in the light of one's culture context. This provides as easy transition into the topic of race and ethnic relations.

Racial and Ethnic Groups

I have found that the best approach to discuss race and ethnicity must take into account the type of life experiences students have had previously. In recent classes I have had the privilege of having members of various ethnic groups as members of the class. This allows for a more robust discussion, and enables me to draw upon the personal experience of these students.

Students, in my opinion, are better able to deal with issues relating to race after coming to an understanding of the meaning assigned to race by various cultures. We then introduce the concepts of *ethnicity*, *minority group*, *racism*, and *stereotypes* and how they are maintained through selective perception, selective interpretation, selective identification exception. *Self-*

fulfilling prophecies,⁹ *what prejudice is, discrimination, social distance*,¹⁰ and the like are introduced to aid students in an understanding of how their own or society's ethnocentrism affects their perception and treatment of other people. A useful tool for discussing the relationship between the attitude of prejudice and the action of discrimination is through use of the following table.

		Prejudice	
		Yes	No
Discrimination	Yes	X	
	No		X

By placing a "x" in different boxes of the table allows for a discussion of why or in what situations the two variables interact. For instance, as the table now stands, a person who is prejudiced would normally be expected to discriminate against members of a targeted group. Likewise, one who is not prejudices would not be expected to discriminate. These assumptions rest upon the idea that actions follow attitudes-prejudice being an attitude and discrimination

⁹ Rosenthal, Robert and Lenore Jacobson. (1968). *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

¹⁰ Bogardus, Emory S. (1925). "Social Distance and Its Origins." *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 9: 216-226.

being an action. However in real life, are there instances where one who does not have an attitude of prejudice against members of a targeted group will still discriminate? And, are there circumstances in which one who is prejudiced will not discriminate? These various possibilities raise questions about how situation and attitudes interact-a meaningful learning experience for students.

We introduce the idea of how prejudice when support by *ideologies* (system of beliefs that provide organized explanations for the justification for one group's outlook and behavior toward another group) are particularly difficult to change. Students begin to recognize that many of their responses to situations involving race are decisions of choice rather than being prescribed by context (Luke 10:30-37). In discussing sources of prejudice and discrimination we are also to review issues regarding the effects of hostility displacement (scapegoating) on the targeted group(s), majority and minority behavior patterns, and minority responses to dominance, whether the minorities be Chinese Americans, Vietnamese refugees, Native Americans, African Americans, or other groups.

Through the discussions of individual and institutional racism, anti-Semitism, and the like we have been able to raise the issue of how God views racial and ethnic differences, what is the meaning of each nation of kindred to God, whether they are equal or unequal in His sight,¹¹ and what are the consequences in the treatment of other groups when viewing the world from a biblical Christian perspective.¹² Examples of how Christ dealt with persons from different

¹¹ "Of a truth I perceived that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation everyone which fears Him...is respected with Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

¹² "And hath made of one blood all nations for to dwell on the face of the earth..." (Acts 10:35).

groups-Samaritans, Publicans, Pharisees, widows, prostitutes, sick people, and other castaways-assist us in addressing these issues more squarely.

Family

Introduction to the concept of *social institutions*-family, education, religion, government and economics-allows me to emphasize how each of these institutions fits into God's plan for this world. Family can be discussed as it relates to an institution created in Eden for the perpetual dissemination of a knowledge of God's love and for the procreation of the human species, while education can be related to the system of communication God uses to transmit knowledge through families first, through educational systems, and through life experiences. Government and economics may be discussed in terms of the biblical concept that God sets up kingdom and rules (Daniel 2:21,38) and how the system of money, barter and trade were used in Scripture, both in terms of normal exchange for work (Matthew 20:1-16) as well as by virtue of the sacrificial system (Numbers 28).¹³

Family as a reality and as a concept is of great importance to students. Students feel they have a "handle" on this subject because of their experiences of life and seem to relish the discussion of topics such as how traditional views of the family mesh with current realities, socialization, family structure, lineage, residential patterns, the societal and personal effects of incest, power relationships, the extended family, and the changing patterns of love, courtship, and marriage which exist today.

I introduce the topics of divorce, remarriage, and alternatives to marriage in connection to the concepts of manifest and latent functions. This approach allows me to address the realities of

¹³ See also Christ's reaction to the money-changers in the temple, Matthew 21:12-13.

today's world from the perspective of the intended and unintended consequences of the choices individuals make to real life situations. I ask questions regarding the purpose of marriage, the benefits and disadvantages of marriage, the consequences of marriage failure to individuals, children and other family members, the changing roles of marriage partners, and the like. The issues of endogamy and exogamy, homosexuality, and the consequences of homogamy as relates to the ages of the man and woman at time of marriage, are discussed. I have found that the marriage and family course, the family in cross cultural perspective course, or the capstone course are better forums for a full discussion of alternative family patterns than the introductory course in sociology, mainly because of the maturity level of students.

Students seem to enjoy the exercise of designing a family to meet their own needs. The question: "If you were to design a family which would best suit your needs, what would it look like?" What type of family does it appear from the Bible that God designed?¹⁴ How does yours compare with His design? Does God's design seem relevant to today's world or not? Why?

The topic of family allows for full engagement by students into the content of the course, whether or not they have shown timidity at any earlier time.

Religion

The sociology of religion provides an opportunity to discuss how individuals and societies view forces, essences, and/or entities outside themselves and how their attributions and conceptions of these entities affect behavior. The subject matter allows individuals from

¹⁴ See pp. 300-303 of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988.

different faith traditions to engage in open discussion of cultural patterns of which they are familiar.

From the discussion of cross-cultural perspectives of religion, I am able to introduce the God of Scripture as a personal God interested in the affairs of individuals and of the world. On occasion I provide examples of my personal faith experiences with God in an attempt to show some evidence that He is real to me.

Conclusion

There is never enough time to address all salient issues in a class, but my goal in teaching is to expose, not to indoctrinate. My classes are not evangelism classes, and I do not attempt to teach them as if they are tests of fellowship. Since I am aware that students draw their own conclusions, Christian belief system and approach to issues of life and eternity.

Topic: Crime and Delinquency
Issue: Capital Punishment

Capital punishment may be defined as a deliberate act, imposed by society, in which an individual is put to death, usually as a result of some presumed intentional heinous act or series of acts the person has committed in violation of law.

Your assignment is to answer the following questions regarding capital punishment. Give your own perspective, but also provide biblical or other support for your position where requested or appropriate.

1. Does a society have the right to impose capital punishment? Why or why not?
2. What conclusions have scientists reached with regarding to the effect of the death penalty on deterrence from crime?
3. If you were asked to serve on a jury in a capital case, would you be willing to serve? Why or why not?
4. What do you feel is the most reasonable punishment for a crime in which a person intentionally takes the life of another?
5. Does God have the right to impose capital punishment upon individuals? Why or why not?
6. Are there any instances in Scripture in which capital punishment was used? If not, why do you think capital punishment was not used in Scripture? If there are instances of capital punishment in Scripture, under what circumstances was it used? If used, give at least three examples with corresponding circumstances surrounding its use.
7. Discuss how your personal view of the reasonable consequences of taking the life of another fits with your understanding of the biblical perspective regarding punishment?
8. What do you think is the best personal deterrent to crime? Why?

Note: The paper must be typed, single-spaced, and you must be prepared to discuss/defend your position(s) orally. Think in terms of:

Society's Perspective	Your Perspective w/Support	Biblical Perspective
See library, internet, etc.		Reading suggestions: John 15:4,5. John 1:13. John 3:5.

Topic: The Environment
Issue: Air Pollution

Environmental pollution is a social problem in both industrialized and non-industrialized countries. **Your Task** is to address one aspect of this problem through answering the following questions:

1. Does a society have a responsibility to ensure that the environment is safe for its citizenry? Why or why not?
2. Do you have a personal responsibility for ensuring that the environment is safe for other? Why?
3. Does society have the right to impose upon your restrictions in an attempt to ensure that the environment is safe? Why?
4. Are bans on smoking in certain locations, or an insistence on motor vehicle emission standards, which may be required by a city, township, or state, legitimate? Why?
5. What responsibility do you have as citizen to report suspected violations of health standards to authorities?
6. What Scriptural instances do you find which suggest that we should be concerned about the environment?
7. What do you think is the most effective way to lessen the incidence of air pollution in cities?

Note: The paper must be typed, single-spaced, and you must be prepared to discuss/defend your position(s) orally in class.

Think in terms of:

Society's Perspective	Your Perspective w/Support	Biblical Perspective
		Reading suggestions: Psalm 8:5-8. Genesis 1:26.

Topic: Alternative Family Styles
Issue: Homosexuality

Your assignment is to answer the following questions regarding homosexuality. Give your own perspective, but also provide biblical or other support for your position where requested or appropriate.

1. What do you consider to be the ideal type of relationship or marriage? List some of the features. What are the primary sources from which you arrived at this perspective information from friends, your own ideas, ideas from your parents, ideas from the media, what?
2. If the type of relationship or marriage you stated above actually existed in real life how would you assess its success? Over what time period?
3. What is God's ideal for partnership? How do you know this view is accurate?
4. How does the concept of homosexuality relate to God's ideal as stated in Scripture?
5. What is your personal view regarding homosexuality? Is one born that way? Does one become homosexual because of life's experiences? What?
6. Is homosexuality a state of mind, a feeling, a state of being, or an action? If it is something other than the above, tell me what it is.
7. Is homosexuality a sin? Is it deviant behavior? Or is it acceptable by society?
8. In the Bible how does homosexuality rate with other types of behaviors such as adultery, incest, murder, etc?
9. Should homosexuals have the same rights as other individuals or groups? Why?
10. What is the best way of finding out whether a person is homosexual or not?
11. Once a homosexual, always a homosexual? Or not? Explain your answer.

Note: The paper must be typed, single-spaced, and you must be prepared to discuss/defend your position(s) orally in class. Think in terms of:

Society's Perspective	Your Perspective w/Support	Biblical Perspective
		Reading suggestions: Genesis 19:4-10 Jude 7,8 Leviticus 18:22;20:13 Romans 1:26-28 1 Timothy 1:8-10 John 8:11 Genesis 29:16-30:24.