Critiquing Christianity:  
The Socratic Method and the Christian Liberal Arts  
in Sociological Perspective  

Jonathan Cordero

One Sunday morning at our local church worship service, the pastor hesitantly delivered a message on the subject of tithing. When finished, he apologetically reminded the congregation that this only happens once a year, implying that they should not feel put out. I sat there wondering why we should be overly sensitive and infrequent in our dealings with money. I wondered, had the cultural norm for discussing money in a public setting invaded our church? I know for certain that Christ frequently and openly taught about wealth and the love of money, yet for our congregation the potential impact of God’s truth appears to have been inhibited by a cultural norm.

In this paper, I explore sociology’s contribution to critically analyzing the relationship between human culture and God’s will. The distinction between what is human and what is God’s is particularly important to evangelical Christians, some of whom, according to James Davison Hunter, tend to uncritically accommodate secular culture. If Christianity is a conflation of a social group’s interpretation of God’s intentions for the way people should live and the social group’s culture, then one of the important contributions sociology can make is to illuminate the essential components of cultures so that the distinction between God’s intentions and human culture can be discerned and examined. Implied in the distinction is an understanding that culture is a predominantly human creation embedded with social sin, and that culture creates ideas and practices that are antithetical to God’s intentions. Sociology provides the perspectives and intellectual tools required of the Socratic method’s imperative to critically examine not simply the self, but one’s culture. Moreover, critical self/cultural-examination helps bring the practice of Christianity into closer alignment with God’s intentions.

The Socratic Method in Sociological Perspective

I begin with the assumption that the Socratic method of critical self/cultural-examination is an essential component of a liberal arts education. According to Martha Nussbaum, “the critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions” is “essential to the cultivation of humanity in today’s world” (9). Critical examination serves to draw attention to the individual and social components wherein truth and its corresponding practices have been maligned. From a Christian perspective, critical self/cultural-examination rests upon the critic’s capacity to identify the components of culture that inhibit our understanding of, and capacity to, practice Christianity in accordance with God’s intentions. The task of discerning Biblical truth and disassociating it from social sin requires tremendous vigilance and a willingness by the convicted social group to alter cultural practices. At the same time, criticism should be moderated and efforts must be made to preserve the essential components of culture, such as the religious traditions that provide coherent worldviews and the symbolic meanings necessary for social functioning.

Neil Postman argues in Teaching as a Conserving Activity that one of the primary functions of education, especially as a critical tool for remedying social problems, lies in its capacity to “counterbalance . . . the information biases of culture. Such biases, if left unchecked, are

---

1 I use the term critical self/cultural-examination to point specifically to the critical examination of one’s own self and culture.
tyrannies, closing off our awareness of different metaphors of the world and of different opportunities for understanding and expression” (46). Referring primarily to the media, Postman suggests that the task of educators is to “know what these biases are and what to balance them with” (46). He further argues that education should help students think critically about the information they derive from the wide variety of cultural sources. In this case, the goal of education is to avoid producing “incompetent intellectuals and distorted personalities” (25). Referring to this view as “thermostatic,” Postman suggests that counterbalancing current informational biases contributes to a more holistic education.

The idea of counterbalancing is significant in another way, especially regarding issues of social justice and equality. Instead of focusing only upon how evangelicals can help others, self/cultural-criticism begs the question, “What components of my culture and what social sins get in the way of my ability to help others?” A recent study of how evangelicals view racial relations illustrates the dire need for self/cultural criticism. Emerson and Smith argue in Divided by Faith that, in addition to possessing erroneous information about non-White racial groups, evangelicals lack the capabilities to solve the problems of racism in effective ways. The authors identify in evangelical culture the presence of color-blind racism – a perspective that falsely claims equal opportunity for all races and the absence of racism. In addition, evangelicals lack the cultural tools required to alleviate racial inequality and injustice; evangelicals tend to solve social problems in individualistic and relational ways thereby ignoring the social foundations of many social problems. From a sociological perspective, evangelicals lack the sociological imagination – that is, the ability to grasp the relationship between the individual and society (Mills). Because social problems often require social solutions, transforming individual people (either through counseling or spiritual transformation) and treating the symptom, though necessary, are insufficient to solve social problems. Self/cultural-criticism is absolutely necessary to reveal the social scientific fact that evangelicals hold incorrect assumptions about contemporary race relations and that evangelical culture fails to provide the cultural tools necessary to solve systemic racism.

I have illustrated the necessity of self/cultural-criticism in counterbalancing cultural inadequacies. The Socratic method implores the examination of self and tradition, and as a sociologist I would assert that the critical examination of one’s own culture is necessary to a more holistic education and to becoming a better Christian. The task of uncovering these aberrant tendencies is difficult simply because culture operates in often subtle ways. In the following section I explore some of these difficulties and point to the need for Christian sociologists’ to further investigate stigmatized areas of inquiry, such as psychoanalysis, since social sin operates in an unconscious, taken-for-granted, way to elicit desire and create pleasure.

The Social Construction of Culture

The basic distinction I wish to make here is between God’s intentions for the way we should live and the culture that humans create. I realize of course that our interpretation of God’s intentions is to some degree culturally relative and that God’s intentions may even shape human culture. The point I will try to make clear is that particular components of culture may inhibit our ability to live as God intended. The ability to be self-critical of one’s culture, then, is crucial to right living.

Anthropologist and philosopher Arnold Gehlen claims that human beings are biologically deprived: Human beings have few inherent physiological capabilities to accommodate nature, few instincts to direct behavior, and no inherent language system for communication. In other
words, humans, lacking specialized organs and instincts, are not naturally adapted to their environment and are thereby thrown upon their own ability to survive. Human beings must create culture in order to survive and especially to communicate. Humans communicate symbolically, and so symbols constitute the fundamental components of any cultural system. The meanings imputed to symbols are shared or social, and comprise the primary elements with which individuals construct reality. To that end, much of human reality is socially constructed.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann make the assertion that what is real is constructed and maintained as real in social interaction by means of symbols. Symbols create the possibility for meaning and their use in ordered spheres of existence reaffirms reality as such. Without social interaction, symbols would be void of social import. That reality is constructed by fallible human beings implies that culture is a human creation embedded with sin, and since culture is socially constructed, sin enters into culture as collective in nature. Christian sociologists in particular underscore the notion of social sin, and sociology as a discipline enables Christians, through the process of self/cultural-examination, to identify the aspects of culture that constrain them and prevent them from living as God intended.

One of the overlooked aspects of Berger and Luckmann’s work is the notion that much of reality is taken-for-granted as real. The possibility that individuals can be socially influenced in subtle ways invites the exploration of the ways in which social action results from less overt means of influence, including desire and the unconscious. Any investigation attempting to identify the elements of culture that inhibit living out God’s will must include these areas of research. Sociologists cannot ignore the unconscious simply because Freudian theories have been questioned; sociologists must continue to explore ways of coming to terms with unconscious social influence. For example, the Stanford Prison experiment in the early 1970s clearly demonstrated how the power of situational forces dominated the will of individuals. In the experiment the potentially sadistic role of prison guard took over unwitting individuals. In other words, normal individuals were unaware that they had become sadistic and that the social interaction within a simulated prison environment had exerted a detrimental influence over subjects.

Another area of study related directly to social sin involves the social construction of desire. In many ways cultural producers create what is desirable through advertising, and social groups create class distinctions based on access to various cultural resources. Understanding the difference between needs and wants is crucial here. What we need to live often differs radically from how we want to live, and those wants are socially prescribed by various entities in American culture. For example, when purchasing clothing, the image associated with the product, as opposed to utilitarian needs, is often the catalyst for consumption. The association with the image links the consumer to a particular taste culture defined by corporate advertisers that may well serve as an idol for the consumer. Pleasure can be linked to consumerism, leisure, tourism, taste cultures, and etiquette and can interfere with right living (however that might be defined by particular communities).

**Costs of Self/Cultural-Criticism**

I have argued above that particular components of culture may be inhibiting the ability of Christians to live as God intended. Culture is not all bad, however. In fact, culture is absolutely necessary, as is tradition and community. Social groups require social structures, like religious institutions and traditions, in order to exist and endure, but the absence of self/cultural-criticism contributes to the maintenance of the status quo. Comprehensive social change requires sacrifice
of the dominant social group and requires change in Christian culture. Being a living sacrifice sometimes means living in ways that contrast with non-Christian others. Furthermore, this kind of living is mandated of Christians collectively and stands in contradiction to the current evangelical tendency to individualize social problems.

In his analysis of capitalistic societies, Karl Marx identifies subordinate groups as the site and mechanism for social change. To alleviate inequality and injustice, Marx calls upon a united working class to rise up against its oppressor. Though Marx explains how the dynamics of capitalism obligate capitalists to remain economically and politically competitive, he fails to discuss how the capitalist class itself can assist the working class. In other words, Marx does not focus upon the conditions that inhibit capitalists from remedying the social problems that plague the working class. Perhaps Marx saw this as irrelevant and impossible given the imperatives of capitalism. Christians, however, do not answer only to the dictates of capitalism and must therefore be willing to evaluate the circumstances under which they live. As contributors to the subordination of others, Christians in privileged positions must question the cultural imperatives that influence their style of life.

Springsted makes a similar point when he challenges Christian colleges to counterpoise the impetuses of contemporary culture. Springsted suggests that, because individualism has permeated religion and education (i.e., a Christian liberal arts education), Christian colleges have lost their capacity to produce a “countervailing force” that challenges the individualism and utilitarian dispositions that undermine Christian community and virtue. The solution is to produce an alternative Christian community (or educational institution) that produces a distinctive (or virtuous) student. The tension is again between the religious and secular: “being in the world but not of the world”; living as God intended versus living according to worldly dictates. The problem may be particularly acute for evangelicals who tend to be theologically and morally conservative and culturally accommodating.

In order to create a more Christ-like community and be a more effective witness in society, evangelicals must focus more upon living sacrificially in community. Christianity is distinctive, Gerhard Lohfink suggests, when Christians live as a contrast society. Unfortunately, the call to be salt and light is typically a request for moral correctness made only of individual members of congregations; it is not a request for cultural moderation made of collectivities. In my opinion, we need to live collectively in contrast to society. This requires collective sacrifice not just individual moral scrutiny. Living in a meaningful community requires a critical self-examination of all we call Christian, including the ways in which we at Christian colleges and universities define our theological and educational traditions.

Conclusion

Critical self/cultural-examination is crucial to make human culture transparent to God’s will. The well being of individual Christians and the Christian community depends upon the critical examination of the relationship between human culture and God’s intentions, though the problem of understanding God’s intentions independent of human interpretation still remains.

Westmont College is the product of a few primary institutions: a liberal arts tradition; an evangelical Protestant religious tradition; an evangelical subculture; and a predominantly white-middle-class culture. In order to understand God’s intentions more clearly, in order to live more Christ-like lives, human tradition and culture must be made transparent. Social sin is embedded in our traditions and cultures in overt and subtle ways. The ability to discern the detrimental components of culture requires the development of wise cultural critics who act in integrity to
preserve what is good and to remove what is damaging. After all, what are worthwhile may only be those ideas and practices that are able to withstand criticism and spiritual discernment. But serious criticism requires tremendous effort and moves beyond superficial displays of virtue. As Stephen Carter argues, the appearance of wholesomeness is suspect. When defining integrity, Carter asserts that integrity is not simply knowing right from wrong but requires doing the hard work of critically examining foundational beliefs. Christian liberal arts colleges must actively engage in the self/cultural criticism in order to bring Christians closer to living as God intended.
Works Cited


