



Towards a Christ-centred sociology: An envisioned ideal

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Abstract

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This article is a brief explorative exposition of what the nature and content of a Christ-centred sociology could entail. In this regard brief attention has been paid to what a Christ-centred sociology is not – after which an exposition of what a Christ-centred sociology could entail, is given. cursory reference to the possible ontological, epistemological, teleological and methodological implications of a Christ-centred sociology has been made. Brief reference has also been made to research, teaching and causality.

1. Introduction

A Christ-centred sociology as presented in this article is considered to be the resultant sociology flowing from the sociological thoughts and actions of those sociologists who have accepted Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; as the Way to God the Father; as the Truth and the Life; sociologists who have accepted the Bible as God's Word and authoritative revelation of Himself to humankind; who have therefore moved from a position of defiant pride towards God and knowingly or unknowingly being an ally of Satan, his demonic angels and his kingdom of darkness, to a position of voluntary and conscious submission to God as Almighty Father, to God the Son as Redeemer and to God the Holy Spirit as Comforter; sociologists who have thus moved from a point of putting their scientific words in the place of His Word to a point of placing their scientific words under the guidance of His Word.

This article furthermore briefly states what a Christ-centred sociology would entail in terms of the following: the teleological, ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions.

2. Visions elsewhere and in Sociology

To explain the nature and dynamics of visions in action, this section will start off with a story of two washing machines. This will of course be done with the full realization and acknowledgement that humans are not washing machines!

Two washing machines had a discussion about their respective visions: The one dreamt of becoming the best washing machine possible while the other rather condescendingly replied: "I prefer to become a concrete mixer. It's a much more worthy task I'll be performing. I'll therefore have a much more fulfilling and satisfying life and my full potential will be realized." The first responded and said: "But you're not a concrete mixer, you're a washing machine and furthermore – what about the manufacturer's manual?" With defiant pride, the second washing machine replied: "What does he know anyway? I'll become the best concrete mixer ever!" Both started working towards the realization of their respective visions – and succeeded. The first washing machine had a fulfilling life, operating within the purpose with which the manufacturer had produced it in the first place, lasting twenty years. The second machine lasted two hours – two hours marked by numerous breakdowns and frustration due to lack of fulfilment and a sudden premature death – never realizing that there were true concrete mixers out there.

Of course, people are not machines – especially not washing machines or concrete mixers – yet the principles involved in this story to a frighteningly large extent also apply to humans.

The Titanic – not only because it was the largest human-built moving object on earth at the time, but also because of the spirit of defiant pride in which it was built (as it was said that not even God could cause it to sink) – became symbol of an unfulfilled vision and purpose and a premature death.

Tragically this could have been prevented had the radio operator on the Titanic not responded in the same spirit of defiant pride to the message from another ship, the Californian, that could have saved the ship and hundreds of lives had it been heeded. When the potentially *life saving information* was conveyed via radio message to the Titanic, warning it to stop as icebergs lay ahead, the operator on the Titanic retorted: "Keep out! Shut up! You're jamming my signal! I am working on Cape Race!" He was busy sending birthday messages to a radio station – Cape Race – on land.

Perhaps some sociologists are a bit like this too – dreaming of their own visions regardless of what God's vision for them is, thus defying God and putting themselves in His stead and also putting their scientific words in the place of His Word instead of under the guidance of His Word. In fact Auguste Comte who had "... overbearing sense of his own importance" (Johnson, 1981:73) – believed that theological knowledge had to and would be replaced by more

scientific forms of positive knowledge – yet presented himself as the “Founder of Universal Religion” and “Great Priest of Humanity” (Johnson, 1981:75). His goal was to develop a new religion – the Religion of Humanity. Once the new social order with its new Religion of Humanity which he envisioned, was established, Comte expected that other sociologists would follow his lead by serving as moral guardians and priests providing guidance to industrial and political leaders and promoting sentiments of altruism and emotional identification with humanity (Johnson, 1981:74, 75).

Comte’s Religion of Humanity was a utopian proposal for the complete reorganization of society. Sociology would be the queen of the sciences. It would promote an all-embracing system of morals that would unite all people in the worship of humanity and ensure the social order necessary for continued progress. Comte’s proposals for a positivist society under the moral guidance of the Religion of Humanity gradually became more and more elaborate. There would be various rituals and prayers designed to bring about the sublimation of individual desires and absorption into the “great being of humanity”. There would be a cult of womanhood, with feminine altruistic sentiments celebrated (Johnson, 1981:88, 9).

Comte became so enamored by his vision of the positivist society of the future, that he even envisioned the time when perhaps men and women would develop to the point where the sexual act would no longer be necessary and ‘birth would emanate from woman alone’ (Johnson, 1981:75).

“This was Comte’s conception of his mission when in 1857, he was stricken with cancer and died” (Johnson, 1981:75).

Other sociologists followed basically the same route: Karl Marx saw the coming communist society as one in which people would all be atheists without any need for God or religious ideas” (Fraser & Campolo, 1992:16). According to Fraser and Campolo, many sociologists display what they call a “secular bias” and refer to Max Weber and Durkheim in this regard:

Max Weber ... portrayed the modern technical world as being disenchanting – that is, as losing its mystery or sacred qualities. As humans enter the modern era, according to Weber, they explain more and more through science and reason leaving less and less to religion and revelation. Emile Durkheim, the most important sociologist France produced, was aggressively secularist. The public values needed by modern democracy must have strong and convincing foundations. Durkheim was sure that religion could no longer provide these foundations, while a scientific sociology would (Fraser & Campolo, 1992:18).

In spite of – or perhaps at least partly because of – more than 150 years of sociologizing, societies worldwide are in a terrible mess – perhaps even more so than before the advent of sociology. Although humankind has advanced technologically beyond imagination, one gets the impression that exactly the

opposite is true as far as spiritual and evaluative or moral advancement is concerned.

In fact, contemporary sociology and the society it claims to serve, *remind us a bit* of the washing machine trying to be concrete mixer and the Titanic heading for a watery grave four kilometers beneath the grey and icy waters of the North Atlantic. Our societies and its scientists – especially its social scientists perhaps – seem to be not only part and parcel of but perhaps even contributing (albeit often unknowingly) to a degenerative dynamic operative in our societies. Why would this be so? Maybe the answer – or at least a major part of the answer – can be found in the domain of visions with its invitational dynamics luring humans – and therefore also sociologists – toward the realization of some goal hidden at a certain point in time in future. In this case, we can assume that such a vision couldn't have originated in the heart of God but rather within the heart of the Godless self-god.

Looking at the three visions briefly referred to thus far – namely those involved in our illustrations of the washing machines, the Titanic and sociology, a number of critically important elements of visions became apparent.

- *Visions* have a *source*.
- Those inspired by a vision follow a specific *course* of action towards realizing that particular vision.
- That which is eventually realized – the *destiny* – either corresponds with, or can differ tragically from the original vision, depending on the degree of obedience to the evaluative directives coming from the chosen source.
- A definite *directionality* or *directional dynamic* therefore – i.e. a definite evaluative movement towards what is believed to be the envisioned ideal – is involved in the dynamics of visionary action.

3. What is a Christ-centred sociology?

How would the following dimensions (some taken from Mouton & Marais, 1985:9-17) of the sociological enterprise be influenced by a Christ-centred sociology? In an attempt to answer this question, attention will be paid to what a Christ-centred sociology, in terms of these dimensions, i.e. the teleological, ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and methodological, could mean. The possible influence on these different dimensions will be discussed as questions in need of answers.

3.1 Teleological assumptions

The quality of humans referred to above i.e. being evaluatively on the move towards an envisioned ideal, could be termed directionality in human behaviour and involves people being evaluatively on the move away from that which is considered wrong/bad towards that which is considered right/good, however, these evaluative opposites are defined. This movement occurs in terms of the evaluative directives (values) derived from a chosen *directional source* by which a *directional vision* of the right and good to be realized is created. According to the directives, a definite *directional course* or mission is outlined (i.e. the how to get there) and a definite *directional destiny* is implied (Senekal, 1989:13).

Accepting the phenomenon of directionality, however, still does not answer the question: Which then is the right direction and which the wrong; which the good and which the bad? The answer is to be found in *purpose*. If the directional orientation of an individual's or group's life is out of line with God's purpose – namely being His representatives on earth according to the example of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit – the diagnosis has to be: *wrong direction*. The inevitable result will be a tragic discrepancy between directional vision and destiny. Where the directional vision corresponds with that of the manufacturer, with that of the Maker as directional source, where the directional mission is carried out in obedience to the guidance of the Maker, the directional destiny will converge toward and eventually correspond perfectly to the original directional vision. The result? A joyous, fulfilled, victorious, though not necessarily pleasing, painless life without suffering, sacrifice and rejection – but perfectly within its intended purpose. Such was the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But visions born out of blindness, result in tragedy and premature death. The question inevitable occurs: are sociologists moving in the right direction, i.e. according to their purpose?

Being of such fundamental importance in the phenomenon of directionality, the concept, *chosen directional source*, needs further clarification. A chosen directional source simply refers to that person/idea/object/substance, an individual or group acknowledges as god in its life. This god is acknowledged as having *ultimate definitional authority* in the life of that particular individual or group – i.e. the ultimate authority to define categorical realities and evaluative truths (i.e. distinctions between good and evil) – and is therefore ultimately obeyed when choices between these alternatives are made. If for example Marx, socialism, the human body, money, science or alcohol is one's god, one will obey the definitional dictates concerning reality, truth and required actions coming from the god one has chosen.

If the living God, as He has revealed himself through His Word, the Bible, His Son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit is not acknowledged as God, it follows logically – seeing that each and every living human being needs and

acknowledges some or other god – that a substitute has to be found, with the closest and easiest alternative at hand of course being the *self*. More generally speaking, this substitute could either be of an alternative supernatural nature – e.g. Satan or his demonic angels, recognized by Satanists as their god – or of a more mundane nature e.g. the *self*, as August Comte thought himself to be, or some other human being like Hitler or Marx etc. or a combination of these.

Sociologists are clearly directional beings and sociology therefore is and will always be a directional enterprise. Accepting that we as human beings and as sociologists are inevitably directionally oriented in anything we say and do, the question cannot be whether we are directionally oriented but rather what the direction is in which we are moving and furthermore whether the direction we are moving in, is the right direction? Who, however, will decide in what direction we are moving and whether that is the right direction? The answer of course will be derived from the directional source/ the ultimate definitional authority/ the god we choose.

Perhaps its a good idea to start off answering this question by stating what a Christ-centred sociology is not.

- Firstly it is not necessarily the same as a Christian sociology. Of course it could perfectly correspond with a Christian sociology in so far as Christian sociologists are truly Christ-centred in their lives and work. This category would include those people Moberg (1989:8, 9) calls “committed Christians” who have the following characteristics: Their identity as Christians is the result of consciously entrusting themselves to God through Jesus Christ for salvation. They are members of God’s family voluntarily through faith, not merely by creation, location, church membership, citizenship, ethnic identity, nor even rituals imposed upon them by parents and priests. They accept the Bible as their normative guide in all matters of faith and conduct.”
- Secondly it is not a church-based sociology though it definitely could be insofar as the particular church is Christ-centred and fulfilling its God-intended purpose. With the religious and church scene in America for example (and one could validly argue, for many other countries as well – including South Africa) increasingly operating on the basis of an open market system and on the basis of creating social space for cultural pluralism (Warner, 1993), these two bases could easily be given higher priority than Christ and what He requires – and would thus refute the possibility and feasibility of a church-based sociology.
- Thirdly it is not a sociology based in, or operationalized through any social movement or political party and is, or could therefore never be, power seeking. By the way, Christ would not be carrying an AK 47 if he lived today. In John 18:36 He personally declares: “My kingdom is not of this

world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.” Claiming Christ for a political or any other kingdom than His own, is a claim coming not from His servants but from the servants of another kingdom and amounts to the worst kind of idolatry.

- Fourthly therefore, a Christ-centred sociology can never be Christ in the service of sociology or some or other social scientific kingdom, but always vice versa.

Why then can a truly Christ-centred sociology not be all these things? The answer is simple: These things have the tendency to become so prominent in our hearts and minds, and to be granted such persuasive power by us, that it could quite easily eclipse the living Christ in our hearts and minds and could eventually simply replace Him so as to become idols which could result in our efforts and enterprises as sociologist becoming ultimately death-directed.

David Lyon (1983) in his article: “The Idea of a Christian Sociology: Some Historical Precedents and Current Concerns” discusses two of the more important historical attempts to make a Christian sociology, namely the English and American precedents.

Attempts to make a Christian sociology on both sides of the Atlantic grew from a socially-minded Christian feeling of inadequacy to cope with modern industrial capitalism. They were, in other words, motivated by precisely the same desire to comprehend the social world as others who are more commonly regarded as founding fathers of sociology. New forces apparently beyond the control of individual citizens were shaping their lives. How could authentic humanity be sought in a world increasingly dominated by mass-production, bureaucracy, new social classes and economic theories?

The crucial questions were certainly not born of detached academic curiosity. In America, Christian sociology had overtones (but not the content) of the American Dream, as great faith was placed in human ability for social improvement and the transcending of social evils. In England, on the other hand, Christian sociology often involved a nostalgic backward look at the ideals of medieval Christendom, and an attempt to translate them into terms appropriate for the alleviation of suffering in the bitterly depressed 1920s and 1930s. Here again, there are parallels with the motivational thrust of the classical founding fathers, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others who also sought a social science related to the perceived social ills of their day. “The social criticism of the Christian Sociologists is a reflection of their membership of social movements. To a certain extent it is plausible to speak of the common roots of Christian sociology in England and America as being in Christian Socialism.” Both of these efforts though seemed to have developed into some social movement which immediately takes the focus away from the Christ of Christianity.

Also Harold Fallding (1984) in an article: "How Christian can sociology be?" looks at this topic and suggests that a "Christian sociology" is judged to be mistaken, but what can be defended is an open-door sociology that admits Christian proposals regarding both areas of subject matter and conceptualization.

Although Moberg (1989:20) acknowledges that there are Christian sociologists centred around commitment to Jesus Christ and taking their ultimate values from the Bible, he finds the question of whether there is a "Christian sociology" more problematic. In so far as a set of distinctive theories, methods, and subjects in addition to distinguishing presuppositions and other values, are the basic criteria, he concludes there is no such thing as a "Christian sociology."

The question then: "What is a Christ-centred sociology teleologically speaking?" needs some attention.

In distinction from a Christian sociology, a Christ-centred sociology is a sociology not so much characterized by its own paradigms, models, theories and concepts, though these could form part of a Christ-centred sociology, but first and foremost by the following: *Sociologists* who choose to accept God through Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord and who at that, accept His Word – the Bible – and Holy Spirit as their directional source, as *Ultimate Definitional Authority* not only for their personal lives but also for the way in which they practise sociology. *Sociologists* who will derive their directional visions for society and the role they as sociologist could play, from God. *Sociologists* who, when on a particular directional course or mission, will be guided by Gods Word and Spirit – not by power or by might. *Sociologists* who will be blessed and pleased to see a directional destiny unfolding; to see not a perfect society or humanity, but small steps towards individuals, families, organizations, nations being delivered from the bondage of sin whether it be in the form of political oppression, racism, ethnocentrism, corruption, crime, violence, addiction, corruption, sexual and other kinds of abuses, etc. and set free to experience life in abundance i.e. the kind of life intended by God (John 10:10).

From *sociologists* thus Christ-centred in their lives and work, will follow a Christ-centred sociology. Inspired by God's *agape* love and by His truth, spreading *agape* love, forgiveness, hope and joy to colleagues, students, the public and whoever might witness the way in which they practise their sociology – as they act according to their purpose as human beings and as representatives of God and His love.

In this sense then, it is not so much the tool (sociology) that changes, but the one who uses the tool (sociologist) in the same way as a Christ-centred (Christian if you wish) surgeon would use his tools (knowledge and skills). With *agape* love and because of this love, a surgeon would operate on his patient as if he were operating on himself – with compassion, care, devotion and respect as opposed

to another surgeon who might be purely profit and honour-driven. In the same vein there is hardly any tension or contradiction between science as tool and the Christ-centred social scientist (scientist if you wish) as the user of the tool. The latter is simply moulded and applied with *agape* love as it is used by the former as an instrument. Once again, the major change occurs not so much in the tool, but in the user of the tool who now chooses to redirect his or her life to correspond to God's purpose – namely to be His representatives on earth – and to use his or her sociological tools towards fulfilling that purpose: Always living according to that purpose, always proclaiming the Good News but never coercing, never blaming, never rejecting others – be they students, colleagues, members of the public or whoever – if they choose to live by another purpose. Not even God coerces or forces anybody to acknowledge or follow Him through Christ Jesus, though He consistently and softly pleads and invites all of us to choose Life.

Those sociologists choosing to practise a Christ-centred sociology will experience a radical directional reorientation in their work – a paradigm shift if you wish – from a human-centred paradigm to a Christ-centred paradigm (Smith, 1988:218). Perhaps this should be qualified to read as follows: A paradigm shift from an exclusively human-centred, to a firstly Christ-centred and only secondly – as a consequence or result of the first and in the Light of the First – a human-centred paradigm.

3.2 Ontological assumptions

This will be taken to refer to questions about the true nature of both categorical realities and normative or evaluative categories.

3.2.1 Categorical realities

As far as the true nature of categorical – be they human or supernatural – realities, is concerned, Christ-centred sociologists would probably accept the following as valid:

3.2.1.1 Supernatural categories

The supernatural realm as defined and described in the Bible will be accepted as true, e.g. God as Creator, Christ as Saviour, Holy Spirit as comforter; Satan as adversary; Sin as destructive dynamic not only in individual and social lives but in the totality of creation; eternal death and eternal life as existent; deliverance from the power of Satan, the gravity of sin and guilt and the reality of eternal life through Jesus Christ, for everyone who will accept Him as Saviour and Lord.

3.2.1.2 Natural categories

The natural realm would include the totality of physical and organic creation, and is clearly distinguishable from God and clearly not to be equated with God. The physical realm is primarily governed by natural laws instituted by God and operates primarily within the parameters of a deterministic causality which could of course at any time be altered if and when God decided to do so.

The organic realm, especially animal and plant life, operates in terms of biological laws based on genetic information imparted from God into his organic creation also primarily within the parameters of a deterministic causality though perhaps to a lesser extent than is the case in the physical reality.

3.2.2 Normative or evaluative categories

As far as normative or evaluative categories are concerned, a Christ-centred sociologist would probably also accept the following as valid.

3.2.2.1 Of good and evil

Cherbonnier (1956:21) calls the issue of good and evil “*everybody’s problem*” – an issue which demands a verdict from each and every individual in each and every situation and which cannot be evaded. Accepting this “... *forces the inquiry: ‘What is the true good’*” (Cherbonnier, 1956:23).

Human history to a very large extent is the history of a continuous struggle between good and evil with God as representative of good and being the *Ultimate Definitional Authority* on definitions of good and evil/ good and bad/ right and wrong. He is also not only the ultimate source of truth but also ultimate Truth itself. In John 14:6 Jesus states that “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. Satan represents evil and the lie and is himself the ultimate lie.

Both God and Satan operate through human beings who choose to obey them – God unto life and Satan unto death. Satan’s ultimate aim is to achieve a *polar transpositioning of evaluative opposites* of cosmic proportions in a futile attempt to destroy God, God’s creation, God’s kingdom, God’s children. This he does by trying to portray himself as the true God and the true God – Christ being the prime target – as the Evil One, trying to portray God as the liar and himself as the one who speaks truth.

We as sociologists witness this battle – which is also a battle of life and death (spiritually and otherwise) – and which also rages with vehemence in our own hearts and minds. We see it in tendencies and efforts to blur the distinction between right and wrong:

- by questioning the validity of distinctions between these polar opposites;

- by emphasizing the supposed correspondence between these opposites thus setting in motion a dynamic of doubt in the mind of the individual;
- by ultimately convincing the individual that, in light of the above, anything goes;
- by subtly substituting, within the psychological climate thus created, definitions of bad for definitions of good, which ultimately amounts to attempts to *transpose these evaluative opposites*.

Basically attempts like these, in practice, manifest itself in explicit or implicit statements calling the truth a lie and the lie the truth; calling what God calls good, evil and what God calls evil, good; presenting death as life and life as death; love as hate and hate as love; darkness as light and light as darkness etc.

Examples abound: Calling adultery swinging; calling cigarettes Life; calling crime “innovation” (Merton, 1968:230); presenting sexual contact between adults (hetero- and homosexual in nature) and children, as good (René Guyon Society and Naambla – National American Man Boy Love Association – with their slogan: “Sex before eight or else its too late”) (Mayhall & Norgard, 1983: 176; MacArthur, 1994:85).

Christ-centred sociologists will accept God’s definitions of good and bad – right and wrong also as basis for their evaluation of social phenomena. Accepting His words – as coming from the *Ultimate Definitional Authority* – Christ-centred sociologists will see non-material reality – especially evaluative reality, spiritual, sociocultural and sociopsychological realities in its social, political, economic and other sociologically relevant manifestations – as it really is. This is also the general idea of Ellul’s work in his *The humiliation of the word* (1985)

Walter Lippman suggested: “First we look, then we name and only then do we see” (quoted in Bredemeier & Stephenson, 1962:2). If we name reality using God’s Words as ultimate source of our definitions of situations, we not only *see* what really is, but we also *see God’s better alternative* to the broken situation we might have in front of us. If we choose, in obedience, to act accordingly, we not only bring hope to the situation, but also the source of hope, namely Christ.

Finally Christ-centred sociologists would have to be bold in calling right, “right” and wrong, “wrong” – simply put, calling sin, sin – and to resist the temptation to call bad things by good names and vice versa. The emphasis here is on “calling” i.e. not hating, rejecting, despising, coercing, persecuting ourselves and others who might be involved in these things, but continuously inviting to come out of bondage, to hold out hope, to encourage through *agape* love, to hold out joy if we choose to obey God instead of the dictates of sin.

3.3 Anthropological assumptions

Every human being is created in the image of God, and therefore worthy of *agape* love and respect and also distinguishable as creatures from God as Creator.

Humans have been corrupted by their choice in the Garden of Eden to obey Satan instead of God. As a result sin entered the human realm, causing not only spiritual death and blindness but also physical death – a death which also permeates the physical realm in the process of continual decay. Humans have inborn knowledge – genetic knowledge if you wish – and therefore a natural *tendency* to sin (of course not always manifested in actual or observable behaviour). No father finds it necessary tell his boy: “Son, today Dad would like to teach you how to lie ...” His son knows it right from the start without having been taught how to do it. Of course this should remind both father and mother of their own sinful nature and the fact that God loves them in spite of their sins, forgives them in Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross in their stead, and that the same *agape* love should guide them as they teach their children to do what is good and right.

Humans have been created by God with an inescapable freedom of choice – a freedom of choice to acknowledge Him as God or to acknowledge some substitutional god (idol) in His stead. Humans also carry an inescapable responsibility for their choices.

Therefore a distinctly a-deterministic approach would most probably be followed by Christ-centred sociologists regarding the understanding of causality in individual and social behaviour. Accepting that God is the ultimate *causa sui* and in control, does not exclude the *response-ability* and with it, the freedom to choose how to respond to whatever comes our way as well as the freedom to initiate behaviour. Clearly, we have to acknowledge the presence and impact of the social structures within which we live but also that these structures and processes never determine our behavior – but at most, *influence* our behaviour.

Deterministic explanations – be they of the nature or nurture variety – reduce humans to objects surrendered to the blind dictates of external or internal forces, which could originate from the sociocultural, psychogenetic or biophysical category. Voluntarism on the other hand tend to underplay the influence of social structures and tend to grant too much autonomy to individual choice. The concept of *obedience* probably combines in a powerful way the best of two explanatory worlds: It acknowledges on the one hand the external influences – be they social, economic or political – and the internal psychological or biological pressures to which we are subjected, but without stepping into the pitfall of determinism which tends to exalt these influences to the status of forces that cannot be resisted or challenged. It also acknowledges – on the other

hand – the individual’s ability – i.e. our freedom to choose to respond and to initiate – without stepping into the pitfall of voluntarism which tends to exalt the individual’s will to the status of sole causative factor in social life.

In short, Christ-centred sociologists will therefore probably tend to bring back the *causa sui* (on a human level) in explanations of human and social behavioural phenomena. This would in other words probably involve a redefinition of causality in non-natural-scientific terms as being linked to the concept of obedience to some ultimate and/or lesser (i.e. sociocultural, psychological, biological) definitional authority as well as to teleological considerations in human behaviour without denying the human capacity to initiate or generate structures, to consciously and willingly submit to, i.e. obey, act defiantly towards, i.e. disobey, structural prescriptions and proscriptions, abandon or change these structures.

Being guilty of sin, humans across time and space, suffer from the burden of guilt and the need to rid themselves of this guilt either through denial, sacrificial religious rituals – or even sociological theories which transfer guilt, blame and responsibility for the things that went wrong, to somebody or something else (i.e. society or a particular class, race or gender).

In this process the individual – or a group of individuals from the alternative race, class of gender, favoured by the particular theory, is declared “not guilty”. In this sense, sociology and some of its theories as well as some theories in the other social sciences, operate as scientific blameshifter and thus easily become a substitutional gospel for those who choose not to accept the true gospel of Jesus Christ through whom they could really be declared “not guilty” as He paid the price for their guilt on the cross.

Having accepted the liberation from Satan, death and guilt through Christ Jesus, Christ-centred sociologist would therefore also be liberated from the compulsion to find explanations for human behaviour outside of the realm of personal responsibility but would be so doing guided by God’s *agape* love for sinners.

3.4 Epistemological assumptions

How do we know what we claim to know? How can we really know what is really out there in the different realms of our existence – be they supernatural, natural (physical/organic) socio-cultural, psychological etc?

The first premise that Christ-centred sociologists would probably agree with, is that knowledge about the different realms of our existence is not only discovered on a human level (via science for instance) but has an origin external to the human category i.e. God as the omniscient Creator. This implies the existence of ultimate knowledge (revealed knowledge if you wish) and enters the human category through God’s Word (the Bible), his Son Jesus Christ and his Holy

Spirit. If we as sociologists were to interpret, evaluate and apply the sociological knowledge we discover by means of social scientific efforts in terms of and in the light of God's revealed knowledge, our directional orientation will be guided by God's purpose.

In the human category this external and potentially life-giving source of knowledge demands a choice – a choice either to accept and obey it as true or accept and obey some other source (and this could imply exclusive faith in scientific knowledge as provider of answers). God respects the capacity to choose for or against Him – a capacity which He created into us by not encoding directional knowledge genetically into us but leaving it to us to make a conscious, voluntary choice to acknowledge Him as God. This is illustrated by God not placing the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden behind bars, but only giving His word, directing Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree, while still acknowledging the freedom of choice He created into them.

In the non-human category, especially the physical realm, God instituted knowledge in terms of the natural laws according to which physical objects behave. The organic reality contains knowledge in the form of genetically encoded information which directs the course of biological life in animals and plants. Gitt (1989:7) refers to the existence of information in creation as the third quantum in physics, the other two being energy and matter and concludes that this information can only have an external origin – implying God.

There is therefore a reality out there and that reality can to a large extent be known at least as far as is necessary for our physical survival and spiritual redemption. In so far as the words – especially the words of science – about the empirical and other realities out there we generate and use, are enlightened and directed by God's words, our scientific enterprise will not only be of greater use and relevance to humankind but also be guided by God's purposive wisdom as we become co-workers in the enterprise of establishing a new and uplifting kind of sociology.

The reality we look at with our eyes (empirical reality – the focus of our sociological efforts) should be seen, interpreted, responded to, improved, directed according to the word – God's Word – if we really want to see validly. The beauty of it all is, God gives us the freedom to check Him out – not making us robots who have no other choice but to accept his Word without having discovered that it is true. It is furthermore inspirational in the sense of differentiating between the realm of reality and the realm of the truth of the Word (a distinction discussed by Ellul, 1985:22-23). Faith in Christ, as the truth, inspires us to look at and respond to reality with hope and anticipation. Looking at an apple seed through the eye of empiricism, one sees a small, physical, round, black object, a few millimeters in diameter. Looking at the same apple seed through the eyes of faith in terms of the truth of the Word – one sees an

orchard with thousands of apples, with thousands of seeds, etc. (illustration used by Miles Monroe in a sermon). Applying this principle of *God's truth superseding reality*, to the way we look at human beings and society and to the way we do research, could have an uplifting impact on our sociological enterprises beyond imagination.

3.5 Methodological assumption

Methodological assumptions are considered here to involve two dimensions: Firstly, a research dimension and secondly a teaching dimension.

3.5.1 Research

The above has important implications for the research Christ-centred sociologists would be interested in. Although the basic mechanisms would remain largely unchanged, the intent, focus and goal of research would probably change from being less *diagnostic* – to being more *prognostic*, more *visionary* in our research. (*Diagnostic* for the purposes of this argument implies researching and reporting on the nature and extent of our societal illnesses and in fact creating a negative feedback loop, further infecting societal members with depressing and discouraging scientific findings.)

For example, instead of focusing too extensively and too intensely on what's wrong in family life, the focus could be more on research on how to improve marriage and family life; instead of focusing so extensively on e.g. how someone becomes an alcoholic, a criminal, a prostitute, a gangster, a homosexual etc. and focusing on the destructive dynamics of these social phenomena, the focus could also and rather be on how people have moved out of, have become delivered from, have had an exodus experience with regard to alcoholism, a life of crime, prostitution, gangsterism, homosexuality, adultery etc. In this way, Christ-centred sociologists would also be empirically documenting the fact that people can and are being liberated from these phenomena through submission to, and placing their trust in Christ.

Important here of course is that also visionary research has to be directed by God's Word in order to be purpose-guided and in order to result in true improvement of society. In this way Christ-centred sociologists would not only create and sustain an uplifting, inspiring and encouraging feedback loop towards society with a research focus of this nature, but would also be creating a *sociology of hope*, a sociology which is life-directed and would furthermore, in so doing, start balancing the overwhelming quantity of research in sociology which inculcates a sense of despair in its audiences as a result of it being predominantly death-directed in its focus.

3.5.2 Teaching Sociology

Students have the right to know what directional source is making a lecturer tick. In fact the word professor means to openly declare your faith in some belief, i.e. Marxism, Socialism, Feminism etc. By knowing one's point of departure, students will know how to interpret and respond to what one says in class.

It goes without saying that no sociologist, whatever his or her faith/belief/conviction, should abuse their position as teachers to coerce or pressurize students to accept what they believe – not even God goes that far – or to penalize students in any way for believing or living according to – i.e. obeying – the evaluative directives of another directional source.

4. Conclusion

This article in general terms gives a brief overview of what a Christ-centred sociology would entail in terms of the following dimensions: the teleological, ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and methodological.

Would a Christ-centred sociology for South Africa be possible? It could become a reality depending on whether any sociologist or sociologists would, out of their own free will and consciously, choose to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord and practise their sociology in the light of His Word – taking Him as their directional source, or *Ultimate Definitional Authority*, allowing their personal and sociological directional visions to blend in with His; navigating their directional courses according to His evaluative directives and His Spirit and seeing a directional destiny being fulfilled according to the purpose intended by God. Marxist and other sociologists have been doing so for decades with Marx, or whoever else they have chosen as directional source. Perhaps the time for Christ-centred sociologists to do likewise with Christ Jesus as their directional source, has arrived. Such sociologists might be surprised at the resonance between their Christ-centred personal and sociological lives and public expectations and needs outside of academia – particularly in South Africa in which almost 80% of the population claim to be Christian, and in which fundamental forgiveness and healing is very desperately needed at this point in time.

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