

Recovering the Tradition of Catholic Social Science

Each issue of the Catholic Social Science Review will reprint in its Documents section a classic from the vast storehouse of Catholic writing in the social sciences. What follows is the late Monsignor Paul Hanley Furfey's pithy essay "Why a Supernatural Sociology," from a 1940 number of the American Catholic Sociological Review. Monsignor Furfey lived a full life from 1896-1992, teaching sociology for nearly fifty years at Catholic University. He was the architect and the champion of a "Catholic sociology" that since the 1950s has fallen into desuetude. In the article reprinted here, he insists on the interpenetration of the supernatural and the natural, and the indispensability of acknowledging the transcendent if we are to have a complete understanding of our social realities. Monsignor Furfey's social theory, which is so deeply informed by supernatural realism, takes on a new poignancy today when the stridently anti-metaphysical ideologies of positivism and Marxism have been punctured.

Why a Supernatural Sociology?

—by Paul H. Furfey

Sociology is the study of human society, of human group life. To learn about his subject, the sociologist naturally wants to use all available means. There are three such means, namely, the scientific, philosophical, and theological methods. All these can contribute their quota to the understanding of society. To neglect any one is to leave our sociological knowledge partial and incomplete.

It is evident to begin with that science has something to contribute. There are certain social phenomena best studied by the objective and quantitative methods characteristic of pure science. These include population growth, the distribution of wealth and income, crime rates, vital statistics, human ecology, social psychology, and the like. In all such fields modern, exact, scientific methods have helped us enormously in all our understanding of society.

There are, however, certain other social facts, important social facts, which are inaccessible to scientific method. Science can tell us nothing about the essential nature of man and the purpose of his existence in the universe; yet we cannot understand society without knowing these things. Sociology does not live up to its definition, does not give us the fundamental fact about group life, unless it tells us the basic purpose of society's existence. This is a problem which philosophy helps solve.

Finally, divine revelation can contribute certain pertinent social data which are enormously important and which could be learned in no other way. The existence of the Mystical Body is a socially significant fact and it is just as actual, just as

real, just as concrete, as the infant mortality rate of Minnesota in 1939. To shut our eyes to this fact is deliberately to limit our field. To exclude these data is just as arbitrary as it would be to refuse to consider any facts contained in red books with red bindings. Theology can teach us otherwise unattainable facts about justice and charity, sin and hell, grace and love. The Catholic who overlooks these facts is simply being unrealistic in his study of society.

These principles are so obvious that it seems rather amazing that any Catholic should question them. Yet certain objections are sometimes raised and must be answered. One objection is verbal rather than real. The word *sociology*, some have remarked, is a consecrated term. It is used in nonsectarian universities for the purely naturalistic study of society. We will confuse our students if we apply this accepted term to the study of society by other than naturalistic techniques. To avoid confusion the Catholic sociologist should restrict himself to methods which other sociologists use. Otherwise misunderstandings will result.

This seems a weak objection. First of all, is it very wise to take our standards from non-Catholic institutions? If we are going to do that, we might as well close up our Catholic colleges and send out students to state universities where, after all, they could learn their religion in a Sunday-morning class at the Newman club. Obviously this would never do. The precise purpose of the Catholic college is to interpenetrate every course and the whole life of the institution with the Catholic viewpoint. The unique thing about Catholic colleges is not that they give an occasional course on religion but rather that they bring religion into every course.

Besides, there is no danger of misleading our students if we distinguish clearly between the three subdivisions of sociology, with their three characteristic techniques:

social science = scientific sociology
social theory = theoretical sociology
social theology = supernatural sociology

A teacher can frankly say: "Thus far I have been presenting scientific facts. Today we shall theorize. Tomorrow I shall give you the Catholic viewpoint which you will not find in the average textbook but which is enormously important for you and me."

Another objection runs thus: "I admit that distinctive Catholic social doctrine, doctrine based on divine revelation, should be presented to the students. That is extremely important. But let us handle these supernatural social facts in the religion class, not in the department of sociology."

This argument proves too much. If we are to exclude theological facts from the sociology classroom because they might be handled by the religion teacher, then logically we ought to exclude other matters as well. We should not discuss

poverty because it could be handled by the economist. We should not talk of mental defect: let the psychologist teach that. We should not include race relations but should turn this subject over to the anthropologist. We should not include social theory because the philosophy teacher can handle that. If we keep up this progress long enough, we shall have nothing left to teach.

Actually sociology is a broad study. It touches on many fields. In each of these fields a difficulty arises about the division of labor between the sociologist and the specialist in the field in question. There are many borderline subjects which are disputed between the sociologist and other teachers. Should social psychology be handled by the sociologist or the psychologist? Does educational sociology belong to us or to the department of education? Does unemployment belong in our field or should we leave it to the economist?

It is usually possible to settle such questions in a reasonable way. The specialist teaches the students the basic facts of his special field and, if he is a good teacher, he will say something about their social implications, without offending the sociologist. The latter, in turn, presupposing a knowledge of the facts taught in another department, will bring them up again and enlarge upon their social implications, perhaps adding a bit here and there if he finds that the students have not been adequately prepared in other classes. In actual practice this overlap is taken for granted and very little friction results. The economist discusses the causes of poverty; the sociologist takes this knowledge for granted, or possibly adds to it a little, then goes on to explain the effects of poverty and its treatment. The anthropologist defines *race*; the sociologist discusses race relations in the United States. Thus the teacher of sociology is constantly sharing common ground with other teachers and very little misunderstanding results from this division of labor.

If we are able to solve the problem of overlap in this sensible way when it is a question of anthropology or economics or psychology, why should we not adopt the same policy in regard to religion? Of course a sociologist cannot be expected to give an elementary course in the Catholic Faith. He should not have to explain what the Mystical Body is, nor to define supernatural charity; but presupposing these things, he can and should point out their social implications. If he finds his students unprepared he will even take time to teach what the religion teacher should have taught, but did not.

In this connection, we should always bear in mind the psychology of the immature student. Too sharp a division of subject matter will confuse and mislead him. Suppose, for example, a teacher is giving a course on the family. Suppose, moreover, that he confines himself to the purely scientific viewpoint, being careful of course to teach nothing contrary to the Church's dogma. From one end of the course to the other he says nothing about marriage as a sacrament, nothing about the Catholic ideal of supernatural love between husband and wife, nothing about the great fundamental truths so beautifully expressed in *Casti connubii*. In theory

he might try to justify such a course of action by saying that these facts should be taught by the religion teacher. Very well; but what about the student? It is all too easy for him to take an entirely naturalistic view of marriage, to become too sympathetic to birth control and eugenics and unlimited sex education. If a naturalistic view is presented to him week after week he may easily accept this as the only view, particularly if the sociologist is a brilliant teacher and the instructor in religion less efficient. In theory we may say that this is just a division of labor between two departments, but actually the effect on the student may be tragic.

A final objection is drawn from a parallelism with other courses. After all, the physicist talks from one end of the year to the other about the properties of matter without saying anything about the creation of this matter by God. He abandons that fact to the philosopher to be treated in the cosmology class or to the religion teacher to be discussed in the tract on creation. Nobody criticizes the physicist for leaving out religion, so why criticize the sociologist for following his example?

The answer is rather obvious. What an enormous difference there is between the study of inert matter and the study of human conduct! It is easy to think about matter without thinking about God's creative act, but it is almost impossible to think about human conduct without being aware of its moral implications. I may batter away at a typewriter for ten years and never once think: "This machine is, after all, one of God's creatures. Its material is the product of God's great creative action." But I can scarcely think of the European war for ten minutes without thinking: "This is right. That is wrong." The very nature of our material makes it very difficult to abstract from ethics and theology. To insist upon such abstraction is to do violence to our habits of thought. It is not good teaching.

One defect in modern education is that too many classes are taught by narrow specialists, by men—to use the old cliché—who constantly learn more and more about less and less. Such thorough specialization is invaluable for certain types of research, but it is not good education. A first-class teacher is one with a broad background of general culture, one who can constantly vitalize his material by references to its relation with other fields. A first-class sociologist is one who knows his own subject thoroughly, but who knows something also about economics, psychology, anthropology, history, politics, theology. In discussing social questions, he should be able to bring in facts from these other fields whenever they are relevant. This was the method of the great Scholastics. St. Thomas had mastered all the learning of his day. He distinguished sharply and cleanly between philosophy and theology. Yet in treating a specific question he generally felt free to draw on both disciplines. His deep love of truth was not hampered by artificial barriers between subject and subject. Whatever would throw light on the question in hand was grist for his mill. This is a good model for us to imitate.