Catholic Social Teaching, Theology, and Sociology: Exploring the Common Ground

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Abstract: Drawing on some secondary literature and using sociological perspectives, in this paper, I trace the fundamental conflict and differences between sociology and theology as academic disciplines and draw some implications on why the contributions of sociological inquiries and their empirical assessments of society and human behavior are seldom used in literature and learning materials on Catholic social teaching (CST)—a body of moral principles based on papal, conciliar, and other official Church documents on the Christian faith and social concerns. I argue that despite methodological and theoretical differences, sociology and CST’s moral theology can share a common ground in dealing with the social order: the moral theologizing of CST begins where sociologizing ends. Sociology is a necessary tool to reformulate CST’s Christian message to the constantly changing historical and social contexts and provide empirical illustrations to its moral teachings.

Keywords: Catholic social teaching; Catholic social thought; sociology; theology; moral theology; positivism; sociology of religion

1. Introduction

Over the centuries, and especially in the past 150 years, the Catholic Church has built up a body of social teaching called Catholic social teaching (CST) that aims to contribute to the formation of a society marked by peace, concord, and justice toward all (Dulles 2002, p. 279). In the modern sense, CST is the body of social principles and moral teachings that are articulated in the papal, conciliar, and other official documents issued since the late nineteenth century and that deal with the economic, political, and social order. In the strict sense, CST started with the publication of Pope Leo XIII’s social encyclical Rerum Novarum (Of New Things) in 1891. Through the years, CST documents, as part of the Church’s official social doctrines, have tremendously increased. Recently, they have been compiled by the Church into one volume called the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSDC). The Church’s social doctrine is “not an ideology, but moral theology since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people’s behavior” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 72–73). It is a branch of moral theology that addresses contemporary issues within the political, economic, and cultural structures of society (Wright 2017).

In spite of the richness of its Christian message on the dignity of the human person and societal liberation, CST remains underappreciated and underpracticed by the vast majority of Catholics around the world, prompting some authors to refer to it as the Catholic Church’s “best-kept secret” (Deberri et al. 2003, p. 3). As part of the official Church’s teachings, CST is obligatory to all Catholics. Although, it contains fine ideas about social change and the common good, CST moral principles remain ineffective in the implementation phase (Sniegocki 2008, pp. 39–41). Despite its openness to the contribution of other human sciences, CST remains largely indifferent to the contribution of mainstream social sciences, especially that of sociology, in pursuing its spiritual goals. CST, as the Church’s primary source of social doctrines, often talks about society, culture, and social behavior, and
yet, it often disregards the theory, methodology, and structural analysis of sociology—a discipline that describes itself as a scientific study of society and social behavior—in the explanation of CST principles to Catholics and the implementation of its Christian message in society. Thus, one wonders: Why is CST as part of moral theology indifferent to sociological perspectives and their scientific inquiries of society? How can sociology be a potent tool for the propagation and implementation of CST message?

Using some secondary and documentary literature, in this paper, I aim to investigate why sociology is seldom used in the propagation of the Catholic Church’s social doctrines. Sociology, as a scientific study of society, can provide CST with analytical and scientific tools to understand society scientifically and provide empirical illustrations to social doctrines to make the Church’s Christian message more appealing. I argue that the apparent lack of sociological perspectives and methodologies in the current CST literature and instructional materials, which are currently dominated by theologians and philosophers, is rooted in the Catholic Church’s distrust of sociology’s positivism and the alleged incompatibility of sociology and theology as academic disciplines. Although both fields of study consider themselves to be science, their basic assumptions and methodologies are said to be distinct and sometimes contradictory and thus have parallel developments. I also explore the common ground of sociology and theology in the case of CST and argue that both of these disciplines can have a nuanced complementarity in the clarification and implementation of CST in society. To achieve these goals, this paper has two major parts. The first part discusses the underlying reasons behind CST and moral theology’s indifference to the significant contributions of sociological perspectives on enriching the Church’s social doctrines. The second part broadly explores the fundamental differences and the common ground between sociology and CST in dealing with society and human behavior, despite their differences in methodology, theory, and academic goals. Finally, I attempt to illustrate how sociological perspectives can enhance the moral analysis and implementation of the Church’s social doctrines in society, particularly with respect to CST’s teachings on the social and structural sins and common good.

2. Positivism and the Catholic Church

One underlying reason the perspectives and methodologies of sociology are underutilized in the Catholic Church is the fear of positivism. While the Catholic Church acknowledges its openness to the contribution of the social sciences for the enrichment of CST, it has not recognized the full potential of sociology as a potent tool for the application and dissemination of its social doctrines. Positivism can be defined as “the view that accepts a correspondence theory of truth, that there is a single reality independent of human beings, and that the methods of the natural sciences should be adopted in research on social questions” (Mackenzie 2011, p. 534). It can also be understood as a philosophical position or school comprised of several doctrines as applied to diverse domains of thought and action: politics, ethics, religion, science, economics, art, psychology, and more. Sociology initially emerged as a science of modernity, pointing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to a crisis scenario predicated on the decrease of religion’s significance. It looked at the birth of rationality in the modern secular state and tried to understand the social bond in these emerging modern societies (Amiraux 2012, p. 337).

The anti-positivist attitude of many Catholic clerics, philosophers, and theologians, who see early sociology’s mechanistic conception of society and human beings as contrary to the Christian principles of solidarity and human dignity, has contributed to the Church’s indifference to sociological enterprises. Auguste Comte, the father of positivism who was responsible for laying the foundation of sociology as a science, envisioned sociology as the new rational religion of humanity. This vision somehow caused jitters among Church authorities and Catholic intellectuals concerning sociology’s overall agenda. The rejection of positivism and indifference to sociological inquiries has also influenced American Catholic scholars. Thus, in the 1930s, for instance, a small group of Catholic sociologists began to strip sociology of its positivist bias and established a unique brand of sociology called “Catholic sociology”. These sociologists founded the American Catholic Sociological Society (ACSS) and the American Catholic Sociological Review (ACSR) to counteract the positivist orientation of what
they consider to be secular sociology. The first volumes of their ACSR contained papers and articles that offered new sets of arguments to explain why the dominant American sociology deserved to be rejected and why Catholics should pursue their own sociology, in keeping with the Church’s social teachings. They especially criticized mainstream sociology’s positivism and its implicit determinism and evolutionism in understanding the human being (Baum 2012, pp. 718–19). Instead of accepting sociology’s “secular” and scientific orientation, these Catholic sociologists tried to shed the discipline of its positivist bias and incorporated some primary Church principles on human person and society. They “share a willingness to think about sociology in the light of their faith and use the best ideas of secular sociology to help advance a more authentically Christian culture in the contemporary era” (Sharkey 2012, p. ix).

Despite the Catholic Church’s openness to enter into dialogue with the various disciplines that study the human being (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 76), sociological perspectives are apparently lacking in the current literature and learning materials that aim to explain and implement CST moral principles in society. The ACSS and its sociologists may have incorporated some sociological insights into the discussion and dissemination of CST’s moral principles; however, the fact remains that current literature that directly incorporates the theories, research, and methodologies of the “secular” sociology of “hard-nosed” sociologists (Baum 1975) in contemporary society is apparently scarce.

3. The Problematic Alliance of Sociology and Theology

Another underlying reason why the Catholic Church is indifferent to sociology in the formulation and application of CST’s moral teachings is the implicit fear of adopting scientific methods and theories in the explanation and implementation of moral principles in society, which can be traced to the problematic partnership between sociology and theology as academic disciplines. Through the years, the relationship between sociology and theology has been one of peaceful coexistence. It is often characterized as an alliance and conflict (Pickering 1980). Although both sociology and theology give an account of the human condition and include topics through which they can potentially find common ground, the majority of sociologists and theologians have dismissed each other’s views as irrelevant and thus created a closure that has marked much of their coexistence (Brewer 2007). Both sociology and theology are sciences, but each is so in a different way. Tonna (1967) argued the following:

While sociology is empirical and secular, theology is speculative and divine. Sociology abstracts from integral experience to focus on its formal object of social relations of individuals in society while theology assumes the whole of this integral experience as it concentrates on its formal object which is God and thus seeks the ultimate explanation of man’s plight. (Tonna 1967, p. 55)

The contemporary relationship between Christian theology and sociology is, therefore, ambivalent. Neither theology nor sociology is, strictly speaking, a unified discipline. Both are conflictive fields competing for theoretical and methodological positions, some of them simply contradictory. Milbank (2006) argued that theology and the social sciences have often trod similar ground in their respective searches for explanations of the social world and its disorders. However, this ground is often contested. The priest-sociologist Greeley (2012) characterizes the root of the conflict between sociologists and theologians as one of respect: both claim to view their disciplines as a science with a distinct methodology. However, theologians who are concerned with the proper methodology for their own discipline seem to consider themselves dispensable from the methodologies of the social sciences when they want to discuss society (Greeley 2012, p. 34). For most of their coexistence, sociology and theology have erected barriers to engagement that constitute disciplinary closure.

However, this closure appears to be partial. In the 1970s, attempts were made to establish a more fruitful dialogue between sociology and theology as biblical studies discovered sociology and as theologians and sociologists first began to meet. Historically, British sociology had a more friendly stance towards theology and was in support of the ethical tenets of faith compared with the sociology
of religion of French and American sociology, which treated religion as a scientific approach in the twentieth century (Brewer 2007, p. 8). Despite their conflicting views on the social importance and significance of religion, there are still other authors who think that sociology and theology were never really rivals but only think of each other as strange (Martin et al. 2003).

The search for the connection between theology and sociology as methodologically distinct but related disciplines is relatively recent. One positive stance of Christian theology is to accept the mutual accommodation between the two areas, each feeding and enriching the other: sociology and social science theory have much to offer to theology (Beed and Beed 2010, p. 1). Religion, for its part, is somehow dependent on the activity of science as it makes manifest something of the objective rationality inherent in the universe of science. “In so far as theology is influenced by culture it will, wittingly and unwittingly, reflect culture and use it as a medium or sounding board for its message” (Torrance 1981, p. 8). Therefore, all theology contains, implicitly, sociology and a sociological theory of the self and society, as it often raises questions about the societal implications of God’s law to individuals and social structures.

Every theological claim about individual and societal conversions may be subjected to the empirical analysis of sociology for a factual basis. Thus, if CST judges a particular social system as unjust, the role of sociology is to test it as a sort of a hypothesis and prove by means of its scientific research whether this moral judgment is empirically true or false. The value judgment of CST about society and human behavior has to be converted into a hypothesis for empirical verification of sociology or the social sciences to test whether this is scientifically acceptable. Judging social realities using common sense knowledge of the social order in view of implementing CST’s moral principles is a haphazard academic enterprise and shows disrespect for the social scientists’ long years of hard labor to serve and provide humanity with a more reliable and descriptive knowledge of the world for the betterment of society. The empirical verification of sociology of any factual claim of CST and its instructional materials on society and human behavior is necessary to minimize subjectivism and prevent some empirical claims of CST and moral theology from falling into what Greeley (2012) calls a superficial “pop social science”.

4. CST’s Reliance on Reason and Philosophy

The third underlying reason CST is generally indifferent to the potential contribution of conventional sociology is its reliance on reason and philosophy as tools in achieving its religious goals in society, making it unenthusiastic of whatever sociological enterprises can contribute to the dissemination of the Church’s social doctrines. What makes theology and CST seem autonomous from sociology and the social sciences is its claim that CST is not an ideological or pragmatic system intended to define and generate economic, political, and social relationships but is a category unto itself (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 72). This implies that CST can stand on its own, with or without the contribution of sociology and other social sciences. As part of the Church’s official teaching, CST sees itself as having the same dignity and authority as the Church’s moral teaching, which relies on reason and philosophy as its fundamental guide (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 80). Thus, it cannot be defined according to political and socioeconomic parameters. In this case, CST views itself as a complete normative system for reflection, analysis, and action for Catholics confronting social issues, guided by reason and philosophy, regardless of what sociology and the social sciences can impart to enhance it. Although it welcomes the contributions of human sciences, CST views philosophy as essential and indispensable to the development of social doctrines. In the Catholic Church, philosophy’s contribution has always been seen in the appeal to human nature as a source and to reason as the cognitive path of faith itself (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 72–77). By means of reason, seen as guided by natural law, the Church’s social doctrine espouses philosophy in its own internal logic in the argumentation and implementation that is proper to it.

This dependence of CST on philosophy in achieving the ends of CST has inadvertently sidestepped the contribution of sociology and social sciences in providing an empirical account of the social order,
which is necessary for attaining a sound moral judgment and analysis. Philosophy, as a discipline, lacks scientific methodologies to test the appropriateness and applicability of its theories in the empirical world. CST’s step in implementing its moral principles is to make empirical assessments on social issues and moral situations in society before it can judge them as deviating from or conforming to the Church’s social doctrines. The reliance of CST and moral theology on reason and philosophy to achieve its evangelical goals, regardless of sociology’s scientific assessment of the secular world, can re-echo Andrew Greeley’s observation (2012) that theology combines professional reflection according to the methodology of its discipline with extremely amateur observation about the world (Greeley 2012, p. 32).

5. Treading the Common Ground

CST and moral theology need the empirical methodologies of sociology to make reliable empirical claims on human behavior and the growing complexity of the current globalizing world. Catholics cannot acquire sufficient scientific basis on social realities before applying CST’s moral principles and taking social action to Christianize society without the help of sociology and the social sciences. That is why after the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), a universal council that adapted the Church’s teaching to modern times in the early 1960s, Catholic theologians began to dialogue with the proponents of sociology and inquire into new social action models to relate Church and society. Sociological analysis is then seen as an essential tool in understanding the social context and meaning of theology’s dogmatic statements.

Theologians claim that theology is a faith-seeking-understanding enterprise, which studies things of ultimate truth. Sociologists, however, do not make this type of claim despite Auguste Comte’s intention to establish sociology as a rational religion in society. In general, sociology only aims to see isolated data about society and human behavior, not only partially, but also holistically in a determined perspective, and presents them to theology in this form. It is then up to theology to re-integrate them at the higher level of the individual’s total experience, as the latter is finally rooted in relations with God (Tonna 1967, p. 55).

Every social theory in CST is also a theory about society and social behavior, thus requiring sociological perspectives. The social doctrines of CST also implicitly contain sociological theories about the social order. Church models reflected in CST documents also presuppose some sociological theories on organization, institution, and society. In the writings of some moral theologians, explicit moral principles also imply a sociological understanding of society. Theologians are not equipped with scientific tools and methodologies of the empirical sciences, which are necessary to understand the world more realistically and objectively; thus, their claims about society and social behavior need the empirical evaluation of sociology and other social sciences for their accuracy. Their investigations and moral assessments of certain unjust social institutions or systems using the moral principle of social justice, for instance, can become inaccurate and unreliable without the assistance of the scientific methodologies of sociology and other social sciences. In short, sociology, as a scientific study of society, is indispensable to the empirical enterprise of moral theology and CST, especially in the latter’s first stage of implementing moral principles—the observational state, that is, the reviewing of the concrete situation before the application of CST moral principles. In his social encyclical Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher), Pope John XXIII summarized the three stages of applying CST:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. (Mater et Magistra 1961, para. 235)

These three steps of implementing CST moral principles can be summarized by three keywords: see, judge, and act. The first (see) is observing and assessing the concrete social situation as accurately as possible. The second stage (judge) is passing moral judgment on the situation, whether it is immoral
or moral or deviating from or conforming with CST principle. The last stage (act) is doing based on one's moral judgment to change or Christianize the concrete situation. The first step is crucial, because the second and third stages are dependent on it. An inaccurate assessment of a social situation can lead to an inaccurate moral judgment and application of CST principles and inappropriate plan of action to address or Christianize it. The contribution of sociology to guide Catholics and Christian reformers in applying CST is indispensable to attain certainty in all these stages, especially in the first stage, which requires objectivity and scientific accounting of the concrete situation so as not to err in the next two stages. Positivism may have its own limits in knowing the empirical world, but it can serve as a check against subjectivism and inaccuracies of common-sense knowledge.

6. The Rise of Sociology and CST

Tracing the historical context and main concerns behind the birth of modern sociology and CST can be a steppingstone in exploring the common ground that can connect these two disciplines. The rise of the modern world in the nineteenth century was precipitated by three great revolutions in the world, namely, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the American Revolution, which resulted in the birth of sociology (Inglis 2018) and CST. Both sociology and CST responded to the needs of the century. The former used scientific rules to understand the modern social order, whereas the latter used faith and reason to interpret and redirect societal changes according to the moral principles of the Catholic Church. Both were, then, born in the same tumultuous historical era with different perspectives and analytical tools. Sociology’s founders intended the discipline to provide scientific accounts to the massive social changes of the era, while Pope Leo XIII and the Catholic Church intended the modern CST to evangelize the world in light of the Gospel.

The birth of modern CST, which started with the publication of \textit{Rerum Novarum} by Pope Leo XIII, coincided with the birth of sociology as a social science in the nineteenth century. The massive changes in Europe brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, had inspired Auguste Comte, a French positivist philosopher who coined the word “sociology” in the 1830s, to establish a synthetic science that unites all human activity and scientific disciplines that study society (Calhoun et al. 2002). Initially, Comte conceived this science as a form of social engineering to understand the various social, economic, and political changes during this period. To Comte, science did not oppose efforts to make a better world, but it was first necessary to develop the science that studies society. To him, without a deep scientific understanding of how society operates, it is difficult to know how to go about constructing a better society (Turner et al. 2012, pp. 37–38). Pope Leo XIII and the Catholic hierarchy were also concerned for the betterment of society during this era using the Christian faith and moral principles of the Church. Emile Durkheim, a student of Comte, started instituting sociology as a scientific academic discipline, distinct from philosophy and theology in France.

The founders of sociology were then trying to understand the emerging modern world in the nineteenth century using the scientific method. No other academic discipline used the scientific method to study the social order during this period. There were natural sciences, but with their focus on animals, plants, and things, they were obviously incapable of analyzing social behavior and social systems. Comte’s first essays signaled the beginning of sociology. In one of these essays, Comte argued that it was necessary to create a “positive science”, which ultimately rests on empirical observations, but, similar to all other sciences, it would formulate the laws governing the organization and movement of society . . . ” (Turner et al. 2012, pp. 38–39). Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, conceived of the sociological enterprise as the scientific study of social facts, distinct from philosophy, which relies purely on reason.

Theology and philosophy advanced Catholic social thought and other religiously inspired works in developing an interpretation of social systems, just as sociology in the twentieth century was differentiating itself from theology. This resulted in a serious and dysfunctional rift between sociology and CST’s theology. Although it is difficult to merge the prescriptive approach of theology with the
descriptive approach of sociology in analyzing the social order, there has to be a way to replace this rift with a more nuanced complementarity (Sharkey 2012, p. x). Fahey (1998) aptly describes the distance between sociology and the social sciences and CST as the Church viewing its social doctrines as belonging to moral theology and not to the technical sphere of the social sciences:

In keeping with its reluctance to commit itself to any particular social model, Catholic social thought held aloof from technical analyses of existing social systems. Pius XI defined the church’s role in social teaching as belonging to the moral rather than the technical sphere. This meant that the specialist competence which the church required in order to enunciate social teaching lay in the field of Moral Theology rather than social science. In consequence, Catholic social thought took no systematic cognizance of economics or any of the other emerging branches of secular social analysis. It was largely indifferent to the increasingly extensive and rigorous empirical examination of social problems and declined to equip itself with the analytic tools necessary to grapple with such forms of inquiry. It thereby set itself on the margins of major intellectual currents then beginning to shape secular thinking about social and economic issues and lost the opportunity either to draw from them or to influence them in a Catholic direction. (Fahey 1998, p. 152)

Although it is open to the contributions of human sciences, the Catholic Church clearly views CST as dependent on reason and philosophy, thus making it autonomous from sociology and the social sciences. The contemporary social sciences are primarily dependent on secular assumptions, concepts, and theories, whereas CST is dependent on the Church’s official moral principles and religious teachings. The former aims to generate descriptive knowledge of social systems, whereas the latter intends to change social systems based on a set of normative knowledge on how the social order must be structured according to Gospel values and Church teachings. CST aims to achieve the vision of a just society grounded in biblical and ecclesiastical teachings and experiences of the Christian community, which is beyond sociology’s main concerns. It has religious and reformist goals to Christianize societies, which are different from sociology’s scientific agenda.

Sociology is dependent on scientific theories and methods, which cannot easily be mixed with the normative moral principles of moral theology and CST. As a distinct academic discipline, sociology, or any other social science, cannot just be diluted with the moral standards of CST without destroying its very foundation as a scientific discipline. Sociology seeks to understand the world of facts through sociological theories and quantitative and qualitative research studies, while CST wants to influence the empirical world through prescriptive moral norms of the Gospel and Church doctrines. There seems to be no serious rift between the two if one sees the nuanced complementarity between sociology and CST: sociology provides the empirical assessments of social systems, and CST can avail of these assessments as bases for moral judgment and plans of action to change the order using the moral principles of the Church.

The rift seems to emanate from an unfounded fear of some Church authorities, causing them to see science as a pure secular endeavor that tries to colonize the religious mission of the Church. Changing the scientific orientation of sociology and the social sciences according to Catholic theology and CST’s reformist agenda of “converting all for Christ” can create unnecessary tension as sociology generally does not intend to undermine theology and CST’s moral agenda. Sociology can present to moral theologians social theories and empirical studies about social phenomena based on research findings, but it cannot analyze and judge them as good or bad or moral or immoral without losing its scientific character. CST can proceed with its reformist agenda of changing the world for Christ after it has sufficiently understood the social facts and empirical realities that are studied and described by sociology through its rigorous scientific process.

Sociology and CST must then be seen as “partners” rather than “enemies” in dealing with the social order. While sociology aims to understand the social order empirically, CST aims to convert it according to its moral principles. However, the latter needs the scientific findings of the former to understand society and appropriately apply moral principles in the social order. The central concern
of sociological enterprises is to document and analyze the social order, while that of CST is to apply social doctrines appropriately in a complex world. Sociology aims to generate reliable and cumulative knowledge of the regular patterns of social phenomena to comprehend society scientifically, while CST judges the conformity of social phenomena and moral situations to the Church’s social doctrines. Thus, CST can rely on sociology to gain empirical knowledge of the social order and to better judge it as moral or immoral using the moral principles. Sociology believes that it is only through regularities that one can make possible descriptions and explanations of the social structure. Thus, sociologists aim to find order and regularity, not only in stable societies and smoothly functioning organizations, but also in bitter social conflicts and bloody uprisings and in a period of rapid, unplanned, and superficially chaotic transformation (Kuruwa 2012, p. 34). Providing empirical enlightenment through research concerning the dynamics of the various regularities of the social order is one great assistance of sociology to CST.

Sensing the regularity in the social order may be quite imperceptible to ordinary people but can be apparent to sociologists faced with data on many similar situations (Kuruwa 2012). Sociology provides a scientific assessment of the social order based on scientific research in various social contexts, which is necessary for Christians to understand the empirical world and pass moral judgments using CST principles to evangelize the world. Sociology can enable people to see empirical connections and allow them to pull together all kinds of stray observations that seem unrelated. C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist, calls this type of holistic thinking “sociological imagination”—a quality of the mind, born out of rigorous sociological training, to see the connection between the micro and the macro and biography and history, as well as the local and the global. Social reality is one. All social components of the human community are interrelated. Aside from seeing the local from the global or vice versa, sociologists can also create a new sensitivity so that people become better observers of the world, assimilating the past in a new way and laying the foundation for action and involvement (Baum 2012).

7. Reconciling Sociology’s Relativism and CST’s Absolutism

Another way of exploring the nuanced complementarity between sociology and CST is to accept the basic difference in terms of the ultimate goals of these two disciplines. This implies examining sociology’s relativism and CST’s absolutism in looking at the truth in society. In understanding the truth about the world, culture, and the meaning of people’s behavior, theologians find themselves asking the question of sociologists on how to account for the differences in truth and values in various cultures without falling into relativism (Baum 2012). In understanding the truth and the world, there is often a conflict of perspectives between CST theologians and sociologists. Sociologists, as social scientists, often adopt a cultural relativist understanding of society and culture, while theologians usually adopt an absolutist position in appreciating the universe. In general, the terms relativism and absolutism refer to many different ideas, and both often clash on how to account for the world.

Relativism views the truth as constructed and relative to particular cultures, times, places, or individuals. “Relativists deny that there is a knowable, static reality and, consequently, they deny the possibility of absolute, universal truth” (Bleasby 2011, p. 455). In sociology, relativism, which is often understood as “cultural relativism”, refers to “the idea that the values, knowledge, and behavior of people must be understood within their own cultural context. This is one of the most fundamental concepts in Sociology, as it recognizes and affirms the connections between the greater social structure and trends and the everyday lives of individual people” (Cole 2019). Relativism is not what Mannheim (1946) assumed to be grounded in a social experience of hopelessness and in successful classes or groups that have lost the sense of their own destiny. Relativism is a recognition of the plurality of normative systems people from different cultures used in looking at the truth and judging what is right or wrong in the world.

Cultural relativism understands the truthfulness of moral values and norms as entirely dependent on society’s cultural contexts. A moral value may be right in one culture but wrong in other cultures. Therefore, whether an action is right or wrong would depend on the cultural meaning and context
where the action takes place and on the type of normative cultural standard used by the local inhabitants to judge it. The social sciences acknowledge the cultural diversity and normative pluralism of what is morally right or wrong. Because sociology and the social sciences are descriptive disciplines, social scientists do not—as a rule—pass moral judgments on cultural practices, values, norms, and beliefs of different peoples around the globe. They do provide factual reports, analyses, and cross-cultural comparisons to describe the world and show the cultural diversity of various societies in the world.

Sociologists generally describe behavior and social phenomena but refuse to pass moral judgment over them as “right” or “wrong” and “good” or “evil”. Thus, they usually adopt an attitude of moral neutrality in judging people’s action and social situations. To them, moral claims and truth claims are not self-evident or absolute but are relative to the cultural conventions in which those who utter them are embedded (Jarvie 2007). In contrast, CST theologians and moralists generally adopt an absolutist position in evaluating social phenomena. Absolutism is generally making normative ethical decisions based on perceived “objective rules”. It maintains that there are some things are always “morally right” and “wrong”, regardless of the cultural context. Moral theologians believe that there are universal moral truths relevant across all contexts and all people based on divine law and human reason, as asserted by CST.

Moral absolutism holds that moral commands are true at all times, regardless of cultural context. Thus, moral theologians and moralists evaluate people’s behavior and social phenomena, whether they conform with or deviate from the ideals of moral commands beyond sociological verification. CST, as a moral normative system of the social order, is absolutist in its concepts of what is good or evil, morally right or wrong in the social order as dictated by divine law. CST principles are moral absolutes and non-negotiable for Catholics, because they are connected with supernatural truths. Absolutism is the metaphysical view that there is an absolute reality that exists independently of human knowledge. Hence, its existence is objective and unlimited in, or beyond, space and time, to which human knowledge is restricted (Kelsen 1948). The Catholic Church believes that CST is based on the divine revelation, which is beyond human knowledge: CST is “a reflection and an expression of the Church’s constant commitment in fidelity to the grace of salvation wrought in Christ and in loving concern for humanity’s destiny” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 8). Although a product of relevant theological, philosophical, moral, cultural, and pastoral considerations, CST moral principles, as part of the Church’s teaching office, have divine origins: “These principles are an expression of Christian anthropology . . . fruits of the revelation of God’s love for the human person” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 9).

On the one hand, CST as an ethical system not only judges moral situations, whether they conform to or deviate from the Church’s moral principles, but also guides people to attain holiness and to evangelize the social order: “The sole purpose of the Church’s social doctrines is to help people on the path of salvation” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 69) and to urge them to liberate society from structural sins. Thus, CST has a reformist orientation in the sense that it aims to evaluate and change unjust social structures using its moral principles. It calls for people to take social action and liberate society from sinful social systems to achieve the common good. Sociology, on the other hand, using scientific theory and methodology, aims to study social phenomena using scientific rules.

Sociology can provide CST theologians and moralists some research reports about the social order to be used as bases for moral judgment and analyses to implement CST’s moral prescriptions. Although some sociological findings can always be challenged by other experts in peer reviews, sociological accounts, nevertheless, contain a more reliable description of human behavior and the social order compared with speculations and common-sense knowledge of non-scientists.

8. Prescriptive and Descriptive Knowledge and CST

One final area to understand the fundamental difference in the knowledge production between sociology and CST is the basic difference in the knowledge generation between sociology and CST’s moral theology. The advent of sociology as a social science has changed people’s thinking
about social reality, separating itself from previous speculative and metaphysical concerns and differing progressively from other sciences as a rational and systematic way of understanding society. As a science, sociology begins to follow the same general principles applied to all scientific knowledge branches, despite the peculiarities of social phenomena when compared with the phenomena of nature (Bauman 2014). Although there are several theories on how to conceive sociological knowledge, one can broadly say that sociology generally provides a descriptive scientific knowledge about the world and social behavior, while CST’s moral theology provides a prescriptive knowledge on how to analyze and change the world based on a set of social doctrines: “The Church’s social doctrine is ... aimed at guiding people’s behavior” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 73), according to the Gospel values.

Using a more positivist perspective, one can characterize sociological knowledge as a form of scientific knowledge that describes the social structure and behavior of people in the world. It describes the world of facticity based on observation, experimentation, hypothesis testing, and other scientific techniques. Descriptive knowledge is based on rigorous research methodology using the qualitative or/and quantitative methods that improve the validity and reliability of a theory (Jick 1979), which can result in objectivity in which researchers try to minimize distortions in observation or interpretation due to personal or social values (Persell 1990). Descriptive approaches see the primary task of social science as discovering and describing real worlds, which are taken to exist independent of their observations and their subjects. The individual’s understanding of the world and, more specifically, how it works is descriptive knowledge. Descriptive models aid in understanding what actually happens or might happen; the prescriptive ones point out directions for improvements (Kunreuther and Paul 1981, p. 389). It is a form of knowledge that is morally neutral in a sense that it does label a social phenomenon as “good” or “evil”, “right or wrong”, or “moral” or “immoral”.

CST as part of the Church’s moral theology is generally prescriptive as a body of knowledge. Emphasizing the prescriptive nature of morality, the post-structuralist Michel Foucault describes morality as prescriptive codes of moral behavior that are externally imposed (though they may be taken up as a person’s own desires) and ethical projects of the self on the self (Foucault 1985). Prescriptive knowledge is one that describes the people and the world “as they should be”, based on a normative system, such as CST. The principles, ethical norms, and prescriptions of CST documents are meant to judge and change the world according to Gospel values and Church teachings. As a normative set of knowledge, CST judges social phenomena according to their conformity to the Church’s ideal standards of what constitutes a Christian social order. As a set of norms, CST prescribes how the world and history must unfold according to Christ’s and the Church’s teachings. Unlike descriptive knowledge, CST usually employs value-laden judgments about people and social phenomena.

There is nothing wrong with each type of knowledge. The world of things and humans are perceived and judged by people in a descriptive and/or prescriptive way. However, overgeneralized and groundless prescription can do more harm than good (Tsang 1997). As Arce (2001) argued, value or moral prescriptions can have a great deal of validity. However, they are bound to be ambiguous when used in concrete situations. That is why sociology is necessary to validate prescriptions about the social order, which are not supported by facts. What is evident is that there will always be a gap between the imprecisely defined situation to which a prescription applies and the concrete situation faced by an individual who is looking for a prescription. Scientists can generate descriptive knowledge through research to validate the empirical claims of preachers, moral theologians, or reformers about society and human behavior. These normative claims about the social order need empirical testing and validation from sociology and other social sciences. Philosophy can generate theories, but it cannot validate them, whether they are supported by data due to lack of scientific methodologies. In general, the role of sociologists vis-à-vis CST is to provide scientific knowledge about society and complex moral issues to Christians to implement CST principles. Sociological knowledge, through its concepts, theories, and methods, can therefore be a potent tool for moral theologians and ordinary Christians.
to assess the facts of moral situations and apply CST principles to change the world for Christ and His Church.

9. Social and Structural Sins and the Common Good: Illustrating the Contribution of Sociological Perspectives to CST

Sociology can extend empirical and conceptual clarification and illustration to CST’s teachings on social and structural sin and the common good through its theories and research studies on social structure, culture, and human behavior. It can provide CST with an empirical insight on how people commit sin, not just individually, but also socially and collectively through social relations. Clarifying social issues through research and theories to achieve a better understanding of oppressive and unjust social relations and how to overcome them is a primary contribution of sociology towards the common good (Porpora 2017).

CST seems to be too broad in describing the nature of social sin and structural sins, which can be misunderstood and misapplied by ordinary Catholics. It describes social or structural sin as a type of sin whose very object is a direct assault on one’s neighbor. It is a sin committed against justice in relationships between individuals and between the community and the individual (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 118). Pope John Paul II says the following:

If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not of place to speak of structures of sin . . . which are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behavior. (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 1987, para. 36)

Because CST only provides general prescriptions on how Christians should deal with the social order, the social doctrines and some of their instructional materials tend to be broad and philosophical and need empirical assessments of the specific culture where they are to be applied by believers. In this case, sociology can clarify the dynamics of social and structural sins as rooted in individual sins. Following the structuration theory of Giddens (1984), for instance, individual agency constitutes the social structure or grouping of people in society, while social structure affects the behavior of individuals. There is no dichotomy between agency and structure, between the individual and society. They are mutually influencing each other. The individual influences society just as society affects the individual. The individual sins of people can collectively constitute a structural sin. Thus, in a corrupt government agency, employees and their clients can be influenced by the structural sins of corruption that drive them to perform dishonest acts, which, in turn, legitimize the structural corruption of the agency.

In CST document Reconciliation and Penance, Pope John Paul II characterizes social sins as sins, which, by their very nature:

[C]onstitute a direct attack on one’s neighbor and, more exactly, in the language of the Gospel, against one’s brother and sister. They are an offense against God because they are serious offenses against one’s neighbor . . . [T]he term ‘social’ applies to every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed either by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual . . . Also social is every sin against the common good and its exigencies in relation to the whole broad spectrum of the rights and duties of citizens (Pope John Paul II (Paul 1984, para. 16)).

What seems clear in the Church’s teachings is the idea that “social” and “structural” sins are direct and serious injustice against one’s neighbor. Thus, engaging in human trafficking, illegal recruitment, and destruction of the environment are social and structural sins. They are both rooted in personal or individual sins and are created by the accumulation of many social attitudes, two of which are the all-consuming desire for profit and power (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines 1991, para. 270). What is unclear, however, is the distinction between these two types of sins. They seem to refer to the same reality.
In sociology, the word “structural” always implies the social, and the social also always points to some form of structures. The social world of people is intimately related to the social structure of society, which involves the social stratification of people in society in terms of social status and social class. Unequal distribution of wealth and statuses in society can lead to an unequal opportunity structure for people in society, with the wealthy and powerful always at the top and the poor and powerless at the bottom of the hierarchy. To maintain their grip of power and control of society’s wealth and opportunity, the powerful create structures of various kinds whether economic, political, cultural, or legal, both formal and informal, to protect their vested interests. Social norms, whether formal or informal, structure social sins. That is why social sins are embedded in society’s judicial and normative systems. Societal sins can be created formally, through the creation of laws, and/or informally, through informal cultural norms that create and maintain personal alliances and networks.

Another important area in which sociology can aid CST is the empirical understanding of the common good in society. The principle of the common good extends to the domain of groups, communities, cultures, societies, and states. The CSDC states that “the principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity, and equality of all people” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, para. 164). As understood by the modern CST, the common good is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Gaudium et Spes 1965, para. 26). It is not an end in itself. It has value only if it has reference to the ultimate ends of the person and the universal good of the whole of creation (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, para. 170).

“The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, para. 1906). One of its essential elements requires that the social well-being and the development of the public itself must be prioritized over personal well-being: “the common good concerns the life of all” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, para. 1906). The common good, therefore, is concerned with the social welfare of all citizens, rich or poor. However, in societies where social inequality is high, the common good dictates that more attention must be given to the less fortunate members of society. The Church provides preferential treatment for those who are poor and marginalized in society (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines 1991, para. 312). How to identify the group of people who should be the beneficiary of the common good in a complex and networked society requires an empirical assessment of sociology and the social sciences.

Although “the common good” is not a popular term in sociology, sociologists are generally concerned with contributing to the greater human flourishing. Their concerted effort to understand social problems suggests an implicit sociological understanding of the common good. Social scientists generally conceive of the common good as a cultural and relative term. The understanding of the common good can vary from one society to another. Because of cultural diversity, it is difficult to view the common good from one cultural perspective. O’Brien (2009), for instance, argued that it is difficult to speak of a “common good” today, especially in the context of the current global economy. The individualistic mindset of most Westerners resists the notion of a good that is somehow shared. Moreover, postmodern sensibilities of the global age also predispose people to be suspicious of the common good beyond the best interests of a certain elite group. Moreover, the principle of the common good is sometimes mistakenly equated with the utilitarian ideal of ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’. Others have conflated this concept with the recent focus in business, which is a broadening of the traditional capitalist focus on the maximization of shareholder value (O’Brien 2009).

Without empirical clarification of CST’s moral teaching on the common good, if applied in Asian cultures, such as that of Philippine culture, for example, it can result in misunderstanding and misapplication of this teaching. The main reason some Western theories are inadequate renditions of the common good for the Catholic Church is that they tend to work from individualistic assumptions about the human person and society. Most modern systems view persons as essentially alienable from
their social context. Western cultures are individualist cultures that emphasize the individual over the community, while Asian cultures are collectivist, prioritizing the good of the community over the individual. From a Western perspective, individuals are essentially monads, related only by mutual self-interest to a larger body through a social contract (O’Brien 2009).

Promoting the common good for Filipino Catholics, according to CST, for instance, implies prioritizing the needs of the insignificant other over one’s personal and group interests. What CST is referring to as the common good is beyond the sphere of the family and networks of relatives and friends. This pertains more to the welfare of the “other” or people and social groups—what is sometimes called the civil society or groups, associations, and non-governmental organizations beyond the public sphere and kinship network. The anthropologist Mulder (2000) argued that the overall image of the public world to many Filipinos is that of a marketplace, a place to bargain and to earn a living that is kept at a safe distance from private concerns. Filipinos have difficulty viewing the common good as the social welfare of the larger community, such as the nation, region, or the “insignificant other” or group that is not personally related to them as members of the family, relatives, and friends. A sociological study of Abad (2008) on social capital in the Philippines showed that Filipinos have difficulty understanding the social world beyond their family, relatives, and friends. This narrow understanding of community prevents Filipinos from being involved in something that promotes the greater good of the state and the society at large. That is why many Filipinos do not find it necessary to do transformational action beyond the social circles of relatives and friends.

Analyzing what constitutes the common in various societies is therefore not an easy task for CST theologians, clerics, and teachers without sufficient anthropological and sociological knowledge of society and culture. The social world of Filipinos is particularistic, personalistic, and more connected with their kinship networks. A kinship network is a “working coalition drawn from a larger group related by blood, marriage and ritual” (McCoy 1994, p. 10). Filipinos are people with numerous relatives (kamag-anak). According to Medina (2001), kinship among Filipinos is interpreted in terms of three criteria: descent, marriage, and pseudo-relationships. As Zialcita (2005) argues, as early as the sixteenth-century pre-Spanish period, the “Filipino’s” concept of the community has been kinship-based. What promotes the welfare of the person’s community of relatives and family members is what constitutes the “common good”. This is contrary to CST’s teaching on common good.

When CST theologians talk about the common good of the community, sociologists would probably ask about the type of community to which they are referring. There are various types of community, as there are different forms of primary and secondary groups in society. What promotes the social welfare of one group, such as the family, could be detrimental for the larger community such as the case family dynasty in Philippine politics. It may be “good” for the political family to control power in local governments for posterity and the continuity of government programs but detrimental to the common good of the larger democratic society, which requires that all citizens must be given a chance to hold public office.

Indeed, CST’s documents and learning materials need empirical studies and perspectives of sociology and other social sciences to understand the growing cultural complexity of human societies to ground and implement CST’s social doctrines.

10. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown that sociology and CST have their own respective fields of inquiry, methodology, analytical tools, and ultimate goals in dealing with people’s behavior and the social order. Sociology, similar to the other sciences, uses scientific theories and methods, while CST and its underlying moral theology use reason and philosophy to assess concrete social situations, pass moral judgment, and implement moral principles. Although the Catholic Church is open to the contribution of sociology and human sciences in enriching CST, the anti-positivist sentiment of the Catholic Church and intellectuals and the academic “closure” between sociology and theology have become the major underlying reasons behind the indifference of the Church and CST to the contributions of sociological
perspectives in the explanation and implementation of moral principles in society. Despite these hurdles and academic differences, there is, however, a common ground between sociology and CST’s theology. Both sociology and the modern CST were born in response to massive changes in Europe with the rise of the modern world in the nineteenth century, precipitated by the period’s great economic and political revolutions. Sociology is generally “relativist” and descriptive in understanding the empirical truth and the social world, whereas CST’s moral theology is absolutist and prescriptive in epistemological approach, seeing moral principles as absolutes, being expressions of the divine law. A nuanced complementarity, however, can be established as both fields of knowledge share a common goal to comprehend the social system for the betterment of society, without one intending to colonize the other. Sociology and CST have their own expertise, approaches to knowledge and views on the truth. Sociology, as a scientific study, provides an empirical account of human behavior, culture, and society, whereas CST provides moral principles to people on how to change the world according to God’s plan. CST’s moral theology, though dependent on reason and philosophy, has no scientific expertise to understand concrete social situations to empirically ground its moral judgment and plan of action to implement the Church’s moral principles. In this case, CST has to rely on sociology’s scientific accounts of social phenomena to apply moral principles. As illustrated in the last part of this paper, understanding CST’s moral teachings on social and structural sins and the common good requires sound sociological perspectives and inquiries to understand the complexity of human societies and implement the social doctrines correctly. Moral theologizing of CST begins where sociologizing ends. To achieve its ultimate goal of establishing a just and Christian social order, CST must be more open to the contributions of sociology and other social sciences.

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