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Social Science versus Christian Theology, Reconsidered:

The case of British Social Policy Studies

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders the ‘versus’ relationship between Christian Theology (CT) and social sciences with reference to Social Policy Studies (SPS) in Britain. I argue that the organised scepticism of SPS towards CT, on the grounds that it is a conservative episteme, is unwarranted. It misrecognises Church Theology as CT *writ large* and thus demonstrates an oversight towards radical forms of CT with which it might make common cause. I also question radical theologians that reject social sciences on similar grounds, i.e. for lacking a sufficiently revolutionary episteme. Although I am sympathetic to intellectual projects that seek to overcome this ‘versus’ relationship by focusing on the discursive similarities of CT and SPS, such projects are precarious. I elaborate praxis rather than discursive similarities as a sounder basis for reconciliation. Much mutual learning takes place at the level of praxis that, if acknowledged, could strengthen the movement for radical social change.

Introduction

This paper examines and reconsiders the ‘versus’ relationship between Christian Theology (CT) and the social sciences in the UK, with specific reference to Social Policy Studies (SPS) in Britain. It does so with a view to identifying how CT and SPS could reconcile around a theologically relevant and radical approach to talking contemporary social policy issues. The starting point in the paper is this: Although the British social sciences were borne of Christian influences, they have long taken a critical and sceptical view of the ‘public’ role of Christianity and its theology¹. This is particularly true of SPS, which tends to ‘classify

¹ Baker, C, ‘Spiritual capital and economies of grace: redefining the relationship between religion and the welfare state’, *Social Policy and Society*, 11:4 (2012), 565-576 at 569.

Christianity in terms of charitable organisations² ‘acting in defence of the status quo’³ and thus overwhelmingly views it ‘with suspicion and fear’⁴.

Although it is often difficult to argue with SPS in this respect, I concur with Jamoul and Willis that it nevertheless represents a ‘one dimensional and solely critical understanding of faith institutions’⁵ that Beaumont and Dias argue is the result of a limiting conceptualisation of Christianity within SPS⁶. As such, there is less appreciation within SPS that faith organisations are also politicised actors ‘fighting injustice with other civil society organisations’⁷. Yet, some of the most powerful and historically significant critiques of British social policy have emerged out of the public interventions of Christian institutions and theology⁸. This not only makes the SPS critique of Christianity contingent. It suggests

² Jawad, R, ‘Thinking about religious welfare and rethinking social policy in the British context’, *Social Policy and Society*, 11:4 (2012), 613-624 at 613.

³ Lina Jamoul and Jane Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, *Urban Studies*, 45:10 (2008), 2035-2056 at 2039.

⁴ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, 2052.

⁵ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, 2039.

⁶ Justin Beaumont and Candice Dias, ‘Faith-based organisations and urban social justice in the Netherlands’, *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 99:4 (2008), 382-392 at 382.

⁷ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, 2036; see also Beaumont and Dias, ‘Faith-based organisations and urban social justice in the Netherlands’, 382.

⁸ For instance, Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*. (London: Church House Publishing, 1985).

there is greater potential for SPS - CT collaboration than the former have acknowledged.

Yet, a problem still remains. The next part of the paper argues that, on closer inspection, the critical voice of CT in the public arena tends to speak through the discourse of SPS rather than CT. Unfortunately for Christians, then, radical forms of CT frequently turn out to be SPS in disguise. And if this is the case, the question arises of why SPS should take any notice of CT at all. Theologians that are well aware of this problem have responded by calling for CT to recover and assert its theological voice. Since they believe their theological voice to be much more radical than social scientific voices, such as those of SPS, they have begun to distance themselves from the social sciences. As such, they advocate an ecclesial theology in which the separation of SPS and CT is maintained, albeit now by theologians.

The final part of the paper provides a critique of the separatism of ecclesial theology, whilst recognising the limits of public forms of CT that are submissive to social science on matters of social policy. It seeks to overcome the limits of both 'ecclesial' and 'public' theologies in its proposal for a 'Republic Theology'. First, and foremost, the task of a Republic CT is to reclaim and reassert the governing capacity of Christian narrative and praxis *and only then* seek to establish where authentic connections can be made with social sciences, such as SPS, that are theologically sustaining rather than eviscerating.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that some theologians and social scientists are already making valiant attempts to achieve such theologically sustaining connections and thereby overcome the chasm between CT and SPS. However, I am concerned that their framework for bridging the chasm – which focuses on epistemic and discursive similarities rather than differences – is fragile. It is simply too easy for the inevitable epistemic and discursive differences between CT and SPS to eliminate the collaborative possibilities that any epistemic and discursive similarities might present. This brings me to the essence of my argument, which is contained in the schema that I develop for comparing SPS and CT in table 1.

The schema in table 1 identifies similarities and differences between SPS and CT on three levels; paradigmatic (ontological), syntagmatic (narrative) and praxis (what we actually do and why). My argument is that mutual scepticism between SPS and CT will always persist on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels where differences are most apparent. This means that we must begin to look more towards the praxis level for collaborative opportunities. Although I would not deny that differences in praxis are also apparent, I argue that they only apply to conservative forms of CT. However, when we compare radical SPS and CT praxis, their similarities are striking and differences barely noticeable. In demonstrating this to be the case, I argue that there is now much to gain from focusing on the cultivation of praxis collaborations between CT and SPS.

Specifically, praxis collaborations that overcome the ‘versus’ relationship between SPS and CT can only strengthen the movement for radical social change. Moreover, they offer real possibilities for a ‘republic’ theology to reassert itself without risking its integrity.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES VERSUS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In their early days the British social sciences co-existed peacefully with theology⁹ and were even placed into its service to form ‘Religious Sociology’¹⁰. A major part of the history of the British social sciences were organisations such as the Christian Social Union¹¹ and Charity Organisation Society¹² whereas the studies of Christian social reformers such as Booth and Rowntree form a significant part of social science history¹³. Indeed the earliest social science courses at institutions such as University of Liverpool were designed for junior clergy, amongst others¹⁴.

⁹ See John D. Brewer, ‘Sociology and theology reconsidered: religious sociology and the sociology of religion in Britain’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 20:2 (2007), 7-28.

¹⁰ See Kieran Flanagan, ‘Sociology into theology: the unacceptable leap’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25:7-8 (2008), 236-261.

¹¹ Brewer, ‘Sociology and theology reconsidered’, 16.

¹² See James Leiby, ‘Charity organisation reconsidered’, *Social Services Review*, 58:4 (1984): 523–38

¹³ Brewer, ‘Sociology and theology reconsidered’, 16.

¹⁴ Brewer, ‘Sociology and theology reconsidered’, 16; see also Abrams, P, *The Origins of British Sociology 1834-1914* (Chicago, IL: University Press, 1968).

The parting of the ways can be traced to the early 20th century when a formal break was created between the social sciences and theology. Although Anglican clergy had regularly published in journals such as the *Sociological Review*, this began to change in the 1930s when the journal started to publish papers that made Christian belief the object of, rather than motivation for, social analysis¹⁵. The consequence of this was the displacement of religious sociology by the ‘sociology of religion’ which, in turn, heralded the secularisation of the social science disciplines¹⁶. Aided and abetted by the ideas of Marx and others, the British social sciences began to adopt hostile and negative views of Christianity which they viewed as socially conservative and thus sought to separate from¹⁷. Social science journals gradually ceased publishing theological papers such that, now, contemporary “social science journals rarely publish theologically based social analysis”¹⁸. Thus most contemporary social scientists rarely, if ever, read CT¹⁹ and dialogue between the disciplines is now rare²⁰.

¹⁵ Brewer, ‘Sociology and theology reconsidered’, 20.

¹⁶ Flanagan, ‘Sociology into theology’, 239-250

¹⁷ Flanagan, ‘Sociology into theology’, 239-255

¹⁸ Clive Beed and Cara Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’, *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 16:1 (2010), 1-32 at 26

¹⁹ Beed and Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’, 19

²⁰ See Flanagan, ‘Sociology into theology’, 239-243

Social Policy Studies versus Christian Theology

A cursory look into the political history of Christianity makes it easy to understand SPS scepticism towards CT: The conformist theology of the Christian Church can be traced back to the Edict of Milan, 312, under which the once persecuted religion of Christianity became recognised as the official religion of the Roman Empire²¹. The ensuing period saw the transformation of Christianity from an egalitarian street-level movement of subversives into an institution of the Roman establishment with its own status hierarchy and structure of privileges²².

This co-option of Christianity by the state spread to Britain in the 6th century when the papal missionary, Augustine, was welcomed to England by King Ethelbert of Kent²³. Ethelbert allowed Augustine to establish the Church in Britain thereby sowing the seeds for a co-operative relationship between church and state²⁴. This culminated in the establishment of the Church of England by Henry VIII in the 16th century²⁵ which became and remains a privileged state

²¹ See J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (Michigan, Baker, 1965), pp163-4, and John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (London: Black, 1953), p4.

²² See Alexandre Christoyannopolous, *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*, (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2011), chapter 3

²³ Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, p13

²⁴ see Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, for a comprehensive history of the relationship between church and state in England

²⁵ Moorman, *A History of the Church in England*, pp161-169

institution. This is indicated by membership of the general synod which is filled with Oxbridge educated elites²⁶ and also the wider social demographic of its laity which is strongly white, middle class and socially conservative²⁷ and thus ‘alienat[ed]... from the mass of the working class’²⁸.

Now, theologians such as Astley²⁹ and Scandrett³⁰ argue that the theology of the Christian church is fertilised by the texture of the soil that nurtures it so that “where the social context of the theologian is that of a privileged class there must be a suspicion that their theological work would tend to reinforce that privilege”³¹. Leech³² suggests that this is certainly the case with “the church of

²⁶ Michael Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest as a response to urban poverty and deprivation’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 15:2 (1990), 193-204, at 197

²⁷ See Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*. (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), pp.29-32 and p62; see also Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest’, 197, and Adam Dinham and Vivien Lowndes, ‘Faith and the public realm’, in Adam Dinham, Robert Furbey and Vivien Lowndes, eds, *Faith in the Public Realm*, (Bristol, Policy Press, 2009) pp1-20, at p4.

²⁸ Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest’, 199.

²⁹ See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

³⁰ See Eurig Scandrett, *Environmentalism of the Poor and the Political Ecology of Prophecy: A Contribution to Liberation Ecotheology* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2009).

³¹ Scandrett, *Environmentalism of the Poor and the Political Ecology of Prophecy*, p25.

³² Kenneth Leech, *Struggle in Babylon: Racism in the Cities and Churches of Britain* (London, Sheldon Press, 1988), p.19, cited in Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest’, p197

England [that] not only speaks the language of class; its interests clearly lie in the present arrangement of society ... its entire ethos is bound up with the preservation of the stable order, with the monarchy, with the establishment and with the structure of capitalism”.

SPS analysts have been aware of this, more than most, in their historical and contemporary assessments of Christianity. For instance Leiby³³ has suggested that the 19th century Charity Organisation Society is regarded as problematic within SPS because it is believed to have emphasised charity and self-help over social reform. It is not surprising, then, that SPS welcomed the displacement of Christian welfare organisations by the welfare state in the post war period³⁴ whereas most SPS analysts consider the re-emergence of Christian welfare organisations under the auspices of Blair’s communitarianism and Cameron’s Big Society to constitute a state scripted ‘return to charity of former times’³⁵ or ‘roll out neoliberalism’ in which Christian welfare organisations have been ‘co-opted’ to the ‘programmes of rule’ of the state³⁶.

³³ Leiby, ‘Charity organisation reconsidered’, 523-525.

³⁴ Baker, ‘Spiritual capital and economies of grace’, 574; see also Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 37:1 (2012), 27-51

³⁵ Justin Beaumont, ‘Faith action on urban social issues’, *Urban Studies*, 45:10 (2008), 2019-2034, at 2022; a similar argument is made by Adam Dinham, ‘From “Faith in the City” to “Faithful Cities”: The “third way”, the Church of England and urban regeneration’, *Urban Studies*, 45:10 (2008), 2163-2174

³⁶ Andrew Williams, Paul Cloke and Samuel Thomas, ‘Co-constituting neoliberalism: faith-based based organisations, co-option, and resistance in the UK’, *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012), 1479-1501, at 1481

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND CHRISTIANITY IN CONCERT

Although there is a lot of validity in SPS scepticism of Christianity, Jamoul and Willis argue that it is a ‘one dimensional’ view³⁷, which Beaumont and Dias³⁸ suggest is the result of a narrow conceptualisation of religion. Jawad³⁹ concurs with this when she writes that historical discussions of Christianity in the SPS literature are erroneously confined to its charitable endeavours even though its reach has been wider, e.g. the Christian Socialist movement. She is not alone. Baignett similarly takes SPS to task for its misrepresentation of one of its favourite targets, Octavia Hill, as a bourgeois practitioner of moral charity when, in fact, “a close reading of her work shows her to have had a strikingly radical and subversive conception of charity in the Christian socialist tradition”⁴⁰ which deplored forms of intervention that left the rich to enjoy the bulk of their money; free from care of recipients and bound only to a relationship of patronage. Leiby also makes a similar complaint about SPS for misrepresenting another of its favourite targets, the Charity Organisation Society, as an “expression of the

³⁷ Jamoul, and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, 2039.

³⁸ Beaumont and Dias, ‘Faith-based organisations and urban social justice in the Netherlands’, 382.

³⁹ Rana Jawad, ‘Religion, social welfare and social policy in the UK: Historical, theoretical and policy perspectives’, *Social Policy and Society*, 11:4 (2012), 553-564, at 554

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Baignett, ‘God’s earth will be sacred’: religion, theology, and the open space movement in Victorian England, *Rural History*, 22:1 (2011), 31-58, at 38

dominant ideology of the business and professional class”⁴¹ when, she argues, the spirit of its acts were borne of feelings of solidarity with the poor rather than charitable intent⁴².

If we fast forward to the contemporary context the narrative remains the same. Contra a Church making ‘a return to charity of former times’⁴³, Leech argues that the picture is more complex with divisions between “those who see the church as a community committed to the struggle for justice and change in the world and those who see it as a conservative force, a ritual enactment of the stable order of the past”⁴⁴. In fact, Jamoul and Willis suggest that charity is often “the basis on which faith groups and people of faith can be politicised and encouraged to take part in community activism and political organisation”⁴⁵. This is something that Williams, Cloke and Thomas have come to appreciate following an extensive programme of fieldwork that has shown faith organisations in a co-productive’ relationship with the neoliberal state, involving resistance as well as compliance with the ‘state script’⁴⁶. Justin Beaumont goes even further. He thinks faith organisations have begun to take more radical

⁴¹ Leiby, ‘Charity organisation reconsidered’, 524

⁴² Leiby, ‘Charity organisation reconsidered’, 625-6

⁴³ Beaumont, ‘Faith action on urban social issues’, 2022

⁴⁴ Leech, *Struggle in Babylon*, p.128, cited in Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest’, 198-9

⁴⁵ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, 2046

⁴⁶ Williams, Cloke and Thomas, ‘Co-constituting neoliberalism’, 1480-1

stances *because* “neoliberalization [has] ... open[ed] up greater spaces for FBOs to enter the fray of political action against injustices”⁴⁷.

A current example makes the point about this charity – politics dialectic:

Despite social scientific criticism of the Christian Charity, Trussell Trust, for its enthusiasm towards foodbanks as a response to food poverty⁴⁸, its experience of delivering food charity has also prompted it to critique foodbanks⁴⁹. This has led the Trust into political territory where it has been ‘campaign[ing] for social justice’ in order to achieve ‘wider societal changes’ that address the ‘underlying structural causes of inadequate food access’⁵⁰. A key demand is for a living wage so that people can secure food in socially normalised ways⁵¹. Significantly, this places the Trussell Trust in exactly the same political space as SPS analysts that argue for a living wage to enable people “acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways”⁵². The Trussell Trust is not an isolated case. A recent report by Baptist Union of Great Britain, the

⁴⁷ Beaumont, ‘Faith action on urban social issues’, 2024

⁴⁸ Chris Allen, ‘Food poverty and Christianity in Britain: A theological reassessment’, *Political Theology*, (2015), Online First, pp6-7

⁴⁹ Hannah Lambie, *The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network: Exploring the Growth of Foodbanks across the UK*. (Coventry: Coventry University, 2011), p.vi.

⁵⁰ Lambie, *The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network*, pp29-30.

⁵¹ Lambie, *The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network*, p34.

⁵² Radimer *et al*, cited in Graham Riches, ‘Food banks and food security: welfare reform, human rights and social policy - Lessons from Canada’. *Social Policy and Administration*, 366 (2002), 648–63, at 649

Methodist Church, Church of Scotland and United Reform Church⁵³ and a series of reports from Church Action on Poverty⁵⁴ all attack neoliberalism and tell a ‘structural’ truth about poverty. They are also examples of a church occupying the same discursive space as SPS.

Even the Church of England has periodically taken critical stances on social policy issues. Moreover it has done so in concert with social scientists. A good example of this took place in the 1980s when the Archbishop of Canterbury established a Commission on Urban Priority Areas (hereafter ACCUPA) against a background of growing inequality and riots in cities such as London and Liverpool. The commission was composed of a wide range of church figures as well as prominent social scientists such as Ray Pahl. It produced a report that was notable for its criticism of the ‘middle class character’⁵⁵ of the Church of England and its conservative ethos of charitable ‘ambulance work’⁵⁶. Making a significant break with ‘traditional’ Christian approaches to urban problems

⁵³ Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the Church of Scotland, and the United Reformed Church, *The Lies We Tell Ourselves: Ending Comfortable Myths about Poverty*. (London: Joint Public Issues Team, 2013).

⁵⁴ See Niall Cooper and Sarah Dumbleton, *Walking the Breadline: The Scandal of Food Poverty in 21st century Britain*. (Manchester: Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, 2013); also Niall Cooper, Sarah Purcell and Ruth Jackson, *Below the Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain*. (Manchester: Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam and Trussell Trust, 2014).

⁵⁵ Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*. (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), p31-35

⁵⁶ Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, p.49

which it described as “woefully inadequate amounting to little more than first aid treatment for areas of acute deprivation”⁵⁷ the commission argued that urban poverty and inequality was “organised and imposed by powerful institutions”⁵⁸ and that, as such, “the most important wider question [for the church] concerns the structure of our society”⁵⁹. Suffice it to say that the report was attacked as ‘irresponsible’ and ‘Marxist’⁶⁰ by government ministers that advised the church ‘to save the souls of people rather than making political judgements about housing’⁶¹.

CHRISTIANITY AS THE STATE AND SPS IN DISGUISE

So Christianity is not merely a conservative force in concert with the state on matters of social policy. It has also been a radical force in concert with SPS. The issue that confronts us now concerns the basis on which CT has been in concert with the state (in its conservative form) and SPS (in its radical form). I now want to suggest that concert between CT and the state / SPS on social policy matters has been theologically vacuous because CT has merely reproduced ideas

⁵⁷ Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, p.174

⁵⁸ Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, p.360

⁵⁹ Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, pp.359-60

⁶⁰ Dinham, ‘From “Faith in the City” to “Faithful Cities”’, 2166

⁶¹ Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest as a response to urban poverty and deprivation’, 196

that originate within political discourse and SPS. Insofar as we have identified concert between CT and the state or SPS, then, we might now argue that there is no real concert at all. The public voice of CT is merely the disguised voice of the state or SPS. These are significant points so I will consider them in detail.

The Political Discourse of Conformist Christianity

For theologians such as Milbank⁶², Christianity is a revolutionary religion that, according to Gaston and Shakespeare⁶³, has allowed its ‘craving for relevance’ in modern society to override its theological radicalism. Specifically, it has allowed itself to be co-opted to the rule of the modern state, which has had profound consequences for the Christian episteme. This is because a Christianity that has accepted the state as *the* legitimate source of political authority not only cedes the task of governing to the state but consigns its own theology to the private realm of spirituality⁶⁴. As such it has ceased to produce its own CT about social problems, thereby placing itself in a subservient position to the state in the

⁶² See especially John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁶³ Ray Gaston and Steven Shakespeare, ‘Common wealth: Christians for economic and social justice’, *Political Theology*, 11:6 (2010), 793-801, at 797

⁶⁴ This argument has been made in the work of theologians such as John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, chapter 1; and also by William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State and The Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p.131. It is also made in the work of sociologists such as Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest as a response to urban poverty and deprivation’, 200; and Bryan Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (London, Sage, 1991), p45.

public arena that it has theologically vacated⁶⁵; reduced to sourcing its understanding of social problems from the state and then merely adding its own ‘religious gloss’⁶⁶. As much SPS rightly points out, then, the church most often acts as “the spiritual arm of the state, using its moral and spiritual authority to legitimize the state’s policies and promote its secular interest”⁶⁷ by “converting the existing political-economic system to one which may be generally described as ‘a market economy bounded by biblical principles of justice’”⁶⁸, albeit sometimes seeking to ameliorate its worst excesses.

The encouraging aspect to this is as follows: Since the voice of conformist Christianity cannot, strictly speaking, be considered theological, concert between Christianity and the state on social policy matters has been theologically vacuous. Happily, then, there is no essential *epistemic concert* between CT and the capitalist state; merely the *political obedience* of Christian institutions⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ See especially Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, chapter 1; also Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, Chapter 7.

⁶⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p208.

⁶⁷ Pacione, ‘The ecclesiastical community of interest as a response to urban poverty and deprivation’, 197

⁶⁸ Brian Griffiths, *Morality and the Market Place* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p9.

⁶⁹ See especially Flanagan, ‘Sociology into theology’, 248, who argues that “the category of religion emerged after the Reformation [R]eligion took on intrinsic properties of value [to the state] that required its detachment from theology”. In other words, the invention of public religion – which required the detachment of theology - has allowed Christianity to serve (instead of resist) the state in a way that has enhanced state power.

The Social Policy Studies Discourse of Radical Christianity

The problem with the argument that CT has vacated the public arena – and borrows its insights from those that occupy it – is that it works two ways. If such a situation suggests a lack of epistemic concert between CT and the state (convenient for those wishing to defend CT) it must also apply to the relationship between CT and SPS (less than convenient for those wishing to defend CT). This is certainly the view of Milbank⁷⁰ who argues that what passes as the radical voice of CT is, in fact, a pale imitation of critical social science. As we saw earlier, the origins of this situation lie in the ejection of CT from the social science complex in the 1930s, since this meant that Christians remaining within social science were obliged to separate their religious convictions from their social scientific work⁷¹. As CT retreated into the realm of the soul and private morality, it thereby ceded its function as a producer of social narrative to the social sciences which were left to occupy the public realm as the official and legitimate producers of social analysis⁷². Far from being in concert with SPS, then, radical Christianity stands in a subservient relationship to the social sciences which it consults for guidance on ‘worldly’ matters⁷³ thereby becoming a mere echo of SPS discourse. A good example that we have already consulted is the ‘Marxist’ *Faith*

⁷⁰ See especially Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Chapter 8.

⁷¹ Beed and Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’, 26-27

⁷² See Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city’, especially 34-47; see also Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p.136. See also the general thesis of Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

⁷³ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, especially chapter 8; see also Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p136; and also the general thesis of Beed C and Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’.

in the City report which has been criticised by some theologians for containing social scientific ‘factual evidence of deprivation and inequality’ whilst being light on theology⁷⁴.

This might not be a problem if Christian theologians could be comfortable with SPS but Milbank⁷⁵ argues this should not be the case. This is because a Christianity that is aligned with SPS is required to comply with a secular democracy that assumes “the church’s mission [to] include collaboration with the state”⁷⁶. Yet, as Crane points out, such a role restricts Christianity in two ways. First, it restricts it to secular discourse so that its arguments are clear to ‘common human reason’⁷⁷. Second, it restricts it to focussing on the redistributive ‘justice’ the state should administer⁷⁸ rather than a theologically informed justice which may look very different.

⁷⁴ David Ford and Laurie Green, ‘Distilling the wisdom’, in Sedgwick, P, ed, *God in the City*. (London, Mowbray, 1995), pp16-24, at p.16

⁷⁵ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

⁷⁶ Richard Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness, Christian political engagement, and the recovery of the apocalyptic theological imagination of Jim Wallis’ ‘The Call to Conversion’, *Political Theology*, 12:2 (2011), 237-274, at 250; similar arguments are made by Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe, *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), p4; and Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p44.

⁷⁷ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 248. A similar point is also made by Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p.135.

⁷⁸ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 243. The same point is also made by Daniel Bell, *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London, Routledge, 2001), pp256-60.

A cursory examination of recent Christian interventions in social policy matters, such as food poverty, is instructive in this respect: Despite Christian calls for a 'living wage' that would allow people to secure food in socially normalised ways, the genealogy of such an idea does not lie in a straight line route to the gospels. Rather, the idea of a state administered redistributive justice, in the form of a 'living wage', has its origins in a SPS that proposed it in the light of research pointing to negative experiences of food bank use⁷⁹. It is arguably devoid of CT.

This brings me to the essence of Milbank's⁸⁰ key complaint which is that acquiescence and accommodation to social scientific discourse has seen CT become a pale imitation of SPS and its own unique perspective lost⁸¹; it has been reduced to making theologically vacuous appeals to the state for redistributive justice, fairness and the common good⁸². Yet, as Gaston and Shakespeare argue, "Christians are called to a different perspective, because, put simply, the Gospel is not about 'fairness'. It is about revolutionary, excessive grace"⁸³.

⁷⁹ Riches, 'Food banks and food security', 649-650

⁸⁰ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.

⁸¹ See also Michael Barnes, 'Introduction', in: Michael Barnes, ed, *Theology and the Social Sciences* (New York: Orbis Books; 2001); and Beed and Beed, 'Theology as a challenge to social science'.

⁸² For instance, see John Milbank, Slavoj Zizek and Creston Davis, C, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the future of Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010); see also Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p44.

⁸³ Gaston and Shakespeare, 'Common wealth', 798-9

This makes for an interesting twist in the relationship between CT and SPS. Far from accepting the SPS view that social science provides the world with its radical possibilities whereas Christianity suppresses them, Milbank reverses the charges. He argues that the conceptual dependence of CT on the social sciences has suppressed the revolutionary radicalism of CT. For this reason, he has appealed for CT to return it to its own intellectual resources to create an epistemic break with the state and social science and thereby unleash the revolutionary social radicalism of CT⁸⁴. In doing so, he reopens the chasm between SPS and CT but, this time, placing CT on the radical side of the division. I now want to argue that this is mistaken.

ECCLESIA AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Conformist and radical forms of CT that make the journey from the biblical realm into the worlds of politics and social policy become ‘public’ theologies. However, as we have seen, this entry into the worlds of politics and social policy can result in an eviscerated version of CT; shaped by the redistributive discourses of modern politics and social science and thus detached from the particularities of its own disciplinary perspective⁸⁵. This has led some radical theologians to argue for a retreat from the worlds of politics and social policy on

⁸⁴ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Chapter 12; see also Milbank, Zizek and Davis, *Paul’s New Moment*, pp1-13; and Steve Kettell, ‘On the public discourse of religion: an analysis of Christianity in the United Kingdom’, *Politics and Religion*, 2 (2009), 420-443 at 429

⁸⁵ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 250; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Chapter 2.

the grounds that their redistributive discourses have “failed to name and identify the perils of greed built into the very heart of the structures of capitalistic commodification”⁸⁶. The problem for Ellis (1988: 16) in this respect is that most secular radicals “seek to increase and distribute the material abundance of industrial life to a humanity freed from the spiritual”⁸⁷, which does nothing to tackle the underlying problem of acquisitiveness and greed. Thus Samuel Wells has suggested that there is a secular reforming preoccupation with ‘not enough’ in which the focus is on ‘who has what’ and ‘who has not’ of the products of economic activity and where the imperative always seems to be towards ‘more’ in one way or another – irrespective of theological considerations about whether more is necessarily ‘needed’⁸⁸. CT, on the other hand, is said to have a “radically different approach to what life, power, economy and community are really about”⁸⁹ which is guided by the principle of ‘more than enough’ as opposed to ‘not enough’⁹⁰.

Hidden beneath the flaws of public CT, then, is an ‘apocalyptic theological imagination’ that “privileges the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as an interruptive event”⁹¹ and which highlights “significant discontinuity between

⁸⁶ Milbank, Zizek and Davis, C, *Paul’s New Moment*, p.1.

⁸⁷ As I suggest later, this probably overstates the Christian case against secular radicals.

⁸⁸ Samuel Wells, ‘More than enough’, *Christian Century*, 121 (2004), 19.

⁸⁹ Gaston and Shakespeare, ‘Common wealth’, 797

⁹⁰ Wells, ‘More than enough’, 19.

⁹¹ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 241.

reign of God and dominant social orders [and] economic systems”⁹². Milbank and others point to the Creation narrative as a key point of discontinuity in this respect because it emphasises the theological principle of abundance (“God always creates, and always creates more than enough”⁹³) thereby creating an ontological break with materialist ideologies of ‘not enough’. Building on this discontinuous ontology of abundance, Milbank and other CT radicals have recently argued for an ‘ecclesial theology’ on the grounds that CT is the only discipline in possession of the intellectual and spiritual resources to undo the politics of ‘not enough’⁹⁴. They regard ecclesia – the church - as the exemplary community that “offer[s] the world a living sample of the eschatological new creation in Christ by providing a visible display of community in which the disordering effects of the powers [materialism and greed] are undone”⁹⁵.

Especially good examples of this ‘display of community’ where the politics of ‘not enough’ is undone can be found in radical Christian communities that live in spiritual harmony with the abundance of Creation by refusing the individualistic and acquisitive desire to ‘have more’ of its ‘common treasury’ and, instead, freely

⁹² Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 242.

⁹³ Gaston and Shakespeare, ‘Common wealth’, 797

⁹⁴ Milbank, Zizek and Davis, *Paul’s New Moment*, pp1-13; Blomberg, C, L, ‘Neither capitalism nor socialism’, p215-218.

⁹⁵ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 241.

share in its abundance⁹⁶; assuming ‘more than enough’ for everyone’s needs but not everyone’s greed⁹⁷. Since the principle law of Christianity is to ‘love thy neighbour’, then ‘letting things go’ and ‘living simply’⁹⁸ with the ‘more than enough’ of Creation is a radical Christian way of ceasing to dominate others and thereby develop an ‘economy of grace’ based on fellowship: “we feel truly brother and sister because we can experience things with no concern for possession, profits or efficiency From this position we can be reconciled with all things”⁹⁹.

So we have seemingly irreconcilable differences. Whereas the radical CT emphasis on abundance and more than enough in the Creation story leads to fellowship, the secular political economy of ‘not enough’ leads to struggles over resources refereed by the state. Moreover, where radical CT is based on the overarching principle of love and fellowship, the secular political economy of ‘not enough’ is based on a conflict ontology that makes struggle over resources the

⁹⁶ For instance, see the discussion of the Catholic Worker Movement and its communities in Mark Zwick and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005) and in Patrick Coy, ed, *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), especially chapters 1 and 2

⁹⁷ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), pp169-172.

⁹⁸ See Claiborne, S, *The Irresistible Revolution*, chapter 6, especially p161, for a contrast between the radicalism of Christian simplicity and secular radicals such as social scientists “who talk about poverty and injustice but rarely encounter the poor, living detached lives of socially responsible but comfortable consumption”. A similar point is made by the Autonomous Geographies Collective, ‘Beyond scholar activism’, 247.

⁹⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 216.

default reality in which “any account of peace and goodness has to be reactive, a secondary attempt [by the state] to bring order to chaos”¹⁰⁰. These factors make radical CT and SPS *so* different as to make mutual accommodation seemingly impossible.

FROM PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND ECCLEASIA TO ‘REPUBLIC THEOLOGY’

Happily, two things render ecclesial exemplarism vis-a-vis SPS problematic. First, Cavanagh¹⁰¹ takes issue with the ecclesial idea of a ‘perfect community’ separate from the world because “divine election does not erase the sin of the church, but neither does sin negate divine election”. Cavanagh’s point here is not simply that the historical and contemporary Church is inevitably ‘sinful’ (e.g. acquisitive in its state of ‘not enough’ power and wealth) but that it is *necessarily* sinful because its struggle with sinfulness is constitutive of the unfolding drama of salvation playing out in the world, i.e. for sin to be overcome it must be present¹⁰². This means that a radical Christianity that retreats into its own ecclesial perfection is theologically fallacious because its proper role is to fallibly grapple with the temptations offered by the enslaving powers as it seeks to establish “the basis for alternative political, social and economic orders”¹⁰³ by

¹⁰⁰ Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), p.26; see also Crane, R, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 243.

¹⁰¹ Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p.162.

¹⁰² Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, chapter 8, especially pp161-168

¹⁰³ Beaumont, ‘Faith action on urban social issues’, 2025

developing new “practices of engagement ... [and] ... counter-hegemonic practices or discourses”¹⁰⁴.

The second problem with ecclesia is its negation of the universalism¹⁰⁵ that was instantiated by the self-emptying of God into the world through the incarnation, and by the Pentecostal unleashing of “the ubiquity of the Holy Spirit” which is thereby “not confined to the life of the Christian community”¹⁰⁶. Crucially, then, Cavanagh and others remind us that CT emphasises the “transformative power of the spirit who works through ordinary action”¹⁰⁷ to perform ‘the militant work of Love’¹⁰⁸ and, as such, transcends the institutional boundaries of the Church which is unable to contain it¹⁰⁹. In doing so, they return us to an ontology of optimism and the possibility of wider engagements. However, the grounds for such wider engagements have now changed.

¹⁰⁴ Baker, ‘Spiritual capital and economies of grace’, 570

¹⁰⁵ Katharine Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy: looking for traces of Zizek’s communist collective in emerging Christian praxis’, *Political Theology*, 13:2 (2012), 183-199 at 186; see also Galatians 3: 28

¹⁰⁶ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 268. Such a claim might also be underpinned by the corresponding belief that ‘there is something of God in everyone’, as in Quakerism.

¹⁰⁷ Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’, 270; see also Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p140

¹⁰⁸ Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy’, 186; see also Paul Cudenec, *The Anarchist Revelation* (Sussex, Winter Oak, 2013), Chapter 7.

¹⁰⁹ Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy*, p140; see also Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy’, 185-187

Since ‘public theology’ has been accused of allowing Christianity to dissolve into politics and social science, Milbank’s reclamation of the radical Christian narrative coupled with Cavanaugh’s call for faithful openness is suggestive of the need for a new kind of public theology that might more accurately be called a ‘republic theology’. The idea of a ‘Republic Theology’ is that it would respect Milbank’s call for the re-anchoring of the Christian community in the radical specificities of the Christian narrative, whilst retaining an *in principium* optimism that there are ways in which a more humble Christian community can connect with the ‘ordinary actions’ being performed beyond the boundaries of the church. It follows that these connections between Christians and the authors of ‘ordinary action’ should result in mutual transformations that are theologically sustaining rather than eviscerating. In this sense, a Republic CT is one that explicitly seeks to regain its theological capacity to govern action and thereby reclaim its role in transforming lives and civil society. This raises the question of how, exactly, a Republic CT might make these theological connections with ordinary action, which is one I must answer in this paper with reference to SPS.

‘REPUBLIC THEOLOGY’ AND SOCIAL POLICY STUDIES RECONSIDERED

If a key problem with public theology has been its dissolution into politics and social science then Milbank’s ecclesial response to this problematic, which is to retreat into CT, risks separating the Christian community from politics and social science entirely. Both positions are problematic if Christianity is to have any hope of theologically authoring transformations in lives and civil society

more generally. The task of Republic CT, then, is to seek to reopen the connections and lines of communication that existed between CT and the social sciences prior to the 1930s, in order to enable CT to more effectively break into the present and intrude upon the political terrain of the enslaving powers. Thanks to the insights of theologians such as Milbank and Cavanaugh, though, Republic CT is a form of theology that is now much more aware of the dangers, as well as possibilities, presented by its connections with the social sciences. As such, it calls Christians to remain enthralled by the Christian story whilst also encouraging them to pursue a theologically anchored accommodation with social sciences such as SPS. However, it is one thing to make an *in principium* argument that Republic CT should seek theologically sustaining connections with the social sciences such as SPS. It is entirely another to show that this is achievable. Thus, the purpose of Table 1 is to allow comparisons to be made between CT and SPS on a number of levels in order to establish whether and where theologically sustaining connections with the social sciences such as SPS might be obtained. These levels are:

- Paradigmatic: Ontological foundations and principles of CT and SPS.
- Syntagmatic: The core narrative that structures what can and cannot be said within CT and SPS and thus how they tell their story of society.
- Praxis: Modes of practice within CT and SPS.

TABLE 1 HERE

Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Fissure

Now a cursory comparison of CT and SPS on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels suggests that the potential for theologically sustaining connections is weak; CT holds to universals (i.e. love and a ‘common wealth’ where all are reconciled through God) whereas SPS is wedded to a set of particularities (i.e. epistemic justice in the context of social struggle). CT points towards the paradigmatic idea of love¹¹⁰ which involves building a ‘common wealth’¹¹¹ of one people in communion with God. SPS, on the other hand, is based on conflict ontology and the paradigmatic idea that knowledge is social construct that serves power. It sees its task, therefore, as the pursuit of epistemic justice¹¹². So in contradistinction to the Christian ethos of ‘right relating’ with neighbours¹¹³ which necessitates loving enemies¹¹⁴ and rejecting ‘class struggle’¹¹⁵ SPS asks

¹¹⁰ Robert Knowles, *Relating Faith: Modelling Biblical Christianity in Church and World* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2014), pp50-53

¹¹¹ See Gaston and Shakespeare, ‘Common wealth’.

¹¹² See Jane McConkey, ‘Knowledge and acknowledgement: “epistemic injustice” as a problem of recognition’, *Politics*, 24:3 (2004), 198-205

¹¹³ Knowles, *Relating Faith*, pp56-58

¹¹⁴ Matthew 5: 44

¹¹⁵ David Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), pp155-158.

‘whose side are we on’¹¹⁶ and ridicules the reconciliatory idea of the ‘common good’¹¹⁷.

Cross-Narratives as Possible Sources of Unity

Despite what we have said so far, some theologians and social scientists remain insistent that “some values and aspirations can be common to the fields of social theology and social science”¹¹⁸ and that connections of sorts can be achieved through the development of cross-over narratives¹¹⁹. Cross-over narratives are translations of generic ideas such as ‘justice’ into new and genuinely inter-disciplinary understandings that do not reduce theology to a pale imitation of the social sciences or vice versa¹²⁰. As such, they present real possibilities for the development of a Republic CT.

Now, certain conditions are necessary to the successful cultivation of cross—over narratives. A key condition for the creation of new inter-disciplinary narratives

¹¹⁶ Howard Becker, ‘Whose side are we on?’, *Social Problems*, 14:3 (1967), pp239-247

¹¹⁷ see Chris Allen and Pauline Marne, ‘In the name of the people? The state, social science and the “public interest” in urban regeneration’ in Chris Allen and Rob Imrie, eds, *The Knowledge Business: The Commodification of Urban and Housing Research* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp57-76

¹¹⁸ Beed and Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’, 15.

¹¹⁹ Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city, 33.

¹²⁰ Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city’, 37-8; Baker, ‘Spiritual capital and economies of grace, 574.

is intellectual openness and a refusal of epistemic arrogance¹²¹. For theologians, this requires acquiescing to the idea that there is no such thing as a ‘right belief’ and to hold their understanding of God ‘lightly’ thereby “allowing both the spirit and other people to challenge” theological thinking¹²². For social scientists it requires an attitude of ‘reflexivity’ towards the social sciences such that they are acknowledged to reveal “theory-laden and world-view based conceptualisations of aspects of reality [and that] there is no reason to believe that these conceptions are more valid than theologically based ones”¹²³. The important thing for CT and SPS, then, is that the disciplinary episteme is occupied in a pragmatic way¹²⁴ “that leaves determinations of truth open ... leading to the creation of collectives that ... operate, quite literally, beyond belief”¹²⁵. When these conditions are achieved new narratives can be generated through the mutually reflexive transformation of theological and social scientific ideas¹²⁶ which Blomberg¹²⁷ and Crane¹²⁸ think is eminently possible, given the

¹²¹ Beaumont and Dias, ‘Faith-based organisations and urban social justice in the Netherlands’, 385.

¹²² Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy’, 195.

¹²³ Beed and Beed, ‘Theology as a challenge to social science’, 23-24; see also Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, especially chapters 3, 4 and 5.

¹²⁴ See Bryan Turner, *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp237-243 for a discussion of this understanding of ‘epistemological pragmatism’.

¹²⁵ Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy’, 194-5.

¹²⁶ Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city’, 37-40

¹²⁷ See Craig Blomberg, ‘Neither capitalism nor socialism: a biblical theology of economics’, *Journal of Markets and Morality*, 15:1 (2012), 207-225

¹²⁸ See Crane, ‘Ecclesial faithfulness’.

similarities between Biblical and SPS themes, e.g. oppression, exploitation, dehumanization, accumulation, dispossession.

Praxis as Actual Points of Unity

The idea of developing cross-over narratives is a productive one because it means that neither CT or SPS are stripped of their significant concepts but deployed together to create new ‘spaces of rapprochement’ that are the product of the “reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities”¹²⁹. That being the case, the reflexive development of cross-over narratives would seem to serve the project of building a Republic CT. However, there is a catch. Cross-over narratives only provide potential rather than actual meeting points for CT and SPS that, as syntagmatic constructs, are as likely to be sources of fissure (e.g. the idea of the ‘common good’) as meeting points (e.g. themes such as land grabbing). So the connection they create, and the Republic CT they serve, is potentially fragile.

A different picture emerges, however, if comparisons are made on the level of praxis: If we start at the higher part of the CT praxis column in table 1 we identify a set of normative practices (sacrifice, charity) that are based on the paradigmatic principle of love and that have been a source of conflict with SPS. As we saw earlier, a key social scientific problem with Christian charity is that

¹²⁹ Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city’, 37.

the privileged that practice charity are largely unreflexive about the manner in which it buttresses their privilege and maintains oppression¹³⁰. Conversely critical social science requires its practitioners to be reflexive about the manner in which their own privileged standpoints infuse their episteme and understanding of the oppressed¹³¹, i.e. they are required to exhibit epistemic humility. So, there is a lack of correspondence between CT and SPS in the higher part of the praxis column which leaves the possibilities for a Republic CT floundering.

Happily, this is not the end of the matter: Social science reflexivity is based on the idea that reflexive social scientists are the legitimate knowledge producers and that they simply need to be reflexive about how they understand the struggles of others¹³². Yet this is problematic because it maintains the social, institutional and epistemic separation of radical scholars from the oppressed thereby reproducing social inequalities¹³³. For this reason, some radical social scientists embrace prefigurative forms of research that necessitate ‘practicing

¹³⁰ Allen, ‘Food poverty and Christianity in Britain’, 4-5

¹³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), p1; see also Skeggs, B, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London, Sage, 1997), chapter 2.

¹³² Autonomous Geographies Collective, ‘Beyond scholar activism: making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university’, *ACME*, 9:2 (2010), 245-275 at 247-250; Larch Jukes Maxey, ‘Moving beyond from within: reflexive activism and critical geographies’, in Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin, eds, *Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?* (Vernon and Victoria: Praxis (e)Press, 2004), pp159-171 at 161.

¹³³ Rob Heyman, “Who’s going to man the factories and be the sexual slaves if we all get PhDs?” Democratizing knowledge production, pedagogy, and the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute’, *Antipode*, 39:1 (2007), 99-120 at 101 and 108-110

the principles that we espouse' rather than merely epistemic sympathy with the oppressed¹³⁴. This requires 'rejection of the university as a privileged site of knowledge production' and submersion of 'ourselves in the messy world' by making 'longer term commitments' to work on an equal basis with oppressed communities on the research needed and solutions sought¹³⁵, i.e. by 'being involved' or even living (rather than just 'working') with the oppressed. Ultimately, it requires a humbling of social scientists so that they commit to the 'reality of winning struggles'¹³⁶ rather than pursuit of recognition in the academic field¹³⁷.

The implication of this humbling is profound for my argument. Specifically, it suggests that the centrality of the paradigmatic principle of epistemic justice (which orients SPS to the study of social struggles and asks the question 'which side are we on') be reconsidered. In its place, prefigurative forms of SPS initiate a series of reversals by:

- Reversing the relationship between its paradigmatic principle (the pursuit of epistemic justice) and syntagmatic context (the course of social struggle)

¹³⁴ Autonomous Geographies Collective, 'Beyond scholar activism, 265.

¹³⁵ Autonomous Geographies Collective, 'Beyond scholar activism, 265

¹³⁶ Autonomous Geographies Collective, 'Beyond scholar activism, 265

¹³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004), pp55-62.

- Involving a prefigurative approach that requires practical involvement in the course of social struggle as axiomatic
- Thus making ‘submersion in the messy world of social struggle’ its new paradigmatic principle
- Thereby making some sort of ‘living involvement’ in social struggle a pre-requisite for achieving social justice rather than, as currently, reducing social struggles to the status of ‘case study’ contexts for the academic pursuit of epistemic justice, i.e. by merely requiring academics to choose which side they are on.

This series of reversals, which results in a paradigmatic emphasis on submersion in the world of struggle on equal terms with those involved in struggle, brings SPS back into concert with Christian praxis in a very concrete way that has so far eluded us. So where prefigurative forms of SPS require a ‘letting go’ of social scientific power and privilege in the service of properly understanding others, Moody informs us that radical CT praxis similarly requires the refusal of power as a condition of non-dominating relationships¹³⁸ and “becoming nothing, just as Christ made himself nothing”¹³⁹, i.e. by making himself poor and taking the humble form of servant of others. Moreover, radical CT praxis is based on the

¹³⁸ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, pp210-11.

¹³⁹ Moody, ‘Retrospective speculative philosophy’, 196.

similarly prefigurative idea of ‘personalism’¹⁴⁰ which locates the agent of change in one’s own life rather than via appeals to ‘the state’ which, as an institution defined by its capacity for violence and coercion, is considered incapable of love and thus bringing about real change¹⁴¹. Radical CT calls for nothing less than a ‘revolution of the heart’ as a pre-requisite for ‘building a new world inside the shell of the old’¹⁴² where Christians are called into ‘being with’ rather than merely ‘being for’ marginalised and excluded others in social spaces defined by their egalitarianism and solidarity¹⁴³.

And as if to emphasise how such praxis similarities between CT and SPS can overcome their rhetorical differences, Jamoul and Willis provide an interesting empirical account of a social policy coalition in which “many secular organisations – and academics – [had] no time for this belief in the power of religious faith [and] argue[d] that there [was] no scope for working across the secular and religious divide”¹⁴⁴, i.e. paradigmatic and syntagmatic fissure. Yet, they describe how “*in practice* ... [secular organisations came] to recognise the

¹⁴⁰ See Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, chapter 6, and also Geoffrey Gneuchs, ‘Peter Maurin’s Personalist Democracy’ in Patrick Coy, ed, *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988), pp47-68, for an account of the revolutionary Christian radicalism of ‘personalism’

¹⁴¹ See especially Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, pp110-115; see also Gneuchs, ‘Peter Maurin’s Personalist Democracy’, in Coy, ed, *A Revolution of the Heart*, pp56-57

¹⁴² Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, p149.

¹⁴³ Samuel Wells and Marcia Owen, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp.19-47

¹⁴⁴ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, p2048.

strength of the religious organisations [and] that they [had] a lot in common”¹⁴⁵.

Cloke, Sutherland and Williams¹⁴⁶ concur. In their latest contribution to rethinking the ‘postsecular’ role of Christianity, Cloke and colleagues draw on an extensive programme of fieldwork with the Occupy movement which, they suggest, has prompted a “rediscovery of prophetic religious practice”. In a fascinating account of the prefigurative politics of Occupy, they emphasise how praxis was integral, even fundamental, to the emergence of authentic connections between Christians and secular activists, which included social scientists. First, they discuss how praxis connections made and broke relationships between Christian communities and secular activists with reference to the established church (governed by a ‘prosperity theology’ that was too ‘concerned with the disruption of its spiritual and economic practices’ to sustain its postsecular alliances with Occupy) and its prophetic witnesses (shaped by a ‘theology of incarnational praxis’ which was ‘more than only words’ and thus involved ‘joining postsecular forces to identify and live out mutual principles’). Second, they show how robust cross-narratives could still be developed; but only when they were ‘more than just words’ and thus anchored in the solid ground and fertile soil of praxis, i.e. collaborations defined by their

¹⁴⁵ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, p2048, *emphasis added*.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Cloke, Callum Sutherland and Andrew Williams, ‘Postsecularity, political resistance and protest in the Occupy movement’, *Antipode*, 48:3 (2016), 497-523

rootedness in mutual commitments to 'becoming nothing' and 'being with' each other in the 'messy involvements' of creating prefigurative change.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that SPS scepticism of CT is unwarranted and that CT attempts to assert its radicalism vis-a-vis SPS are unproductive. It argued, instead, that genuine and theologically sustaining connections with SPS are eminently possible and should therefore be made. Although laudable attempts have already been made to couple CT and SPS using cross-over narratives I have suggested that such an enterprise might be precarious. This is because the discursive resources of CT and SPS are a source of fissure as well as a potential meeting point. They are not a secure basis on which to build cooperation.

This brought me to a key point in my argument, which was this: Considerations of the relationship between CT and SPS have generally taken place on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. Since CT and SPS have key paradigmatic and syntagmatic differences it is not surprising that attempts to reconcile them have only had moderate success. Realisation of this led to my development of a comparative matrix that compares CT and SPS on three levels; paradigmatic, syntagmatic and praxis. My suggestion has been that the conventional focus on the first two, and a relative neglect of the third, has led to an overemphasis on the differences between CT and SPS and has fed the organised scepticism of the

latter towards the former. On the other hand, a focus on the third (praxis) level led to reconciliations that returned CT and SPS to the fold they shared before the 1930s when CT was evicted from the social science complex and transformed into a subject of SPS critique rather than its bedfellow. That said, it seems that the true and proper basis for a Republic CT might lie in Christian praxis rather than simply its public theological voice.

I would argue that this situation is productive for both parties. First, a prefigurative social science that seeks to humble and immerse itself in social struggles has a lot to learn from a radical Christianity that has a long historical tradition of ‘making itself nothing’ and living in solidarity with the poor in order to build new egalitarian social spaces amidst the carnage of capitalism. For a SPS that has conventionally felt that it has little or nothing to learn from Christianity, then, radical CT provides SPS with exemplary ways of ‘being nothing’ and ‘being with’ the oppressed in order to build alternatives. Second, and despite this, Howson¹⁴⁷ suggests that radical Christian social praxis now only exists in small pockets of an otherwise conservative church. Yet where SPS and the like have been open to practical engagements with Christianity, Jamoul and Willis¹⁴⁸ have shown that they have helped congregations to ‘reawaken their radical faith’ by transforming them into radical citizens as well as congregants. So, practical collaborations have produced mutual benefits that, if strategically

¹⁴⁷ Chris Howson, *A Just Church: 21st Century Liberation Theology in Action*, (London, Continuum, 2011), p.34 and 128-30.

¹⁴⁸ Jamoul and Willis, ‘Faith in politics’, p2046

acknowledged, could broaden and strengthen the movement for radical social change.

	THEOLOGY	SOCIAL SCIENCES
Paradigmatic	Love	Epistemic justice
Syntagmatic	Kingdom of God ← Justice → Social struggle (e.g. Love your neighbour)	(e.g. Class struggle)
Practices – normative	<p>Sacrifice</p> <p>↓</p> <p>‘Being for’ - Charity</p> <p>↓</p> <p>(Re)assertion of privilege</p> <p>-----</p>	<p>Standpoint</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Reflexivity</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Epistemic humility</p> <p>-----</p>
Practices – Radical	<p>Personalism</p> <p>↓</p> <p>‘Becoming nothing’</p> <p>‘Being with’</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Living Simply / Voluntary Poverty</p> <p>Hospitality / Servant</p>	<p>Prefiguration</p> <p>↓</p> <p>‘Letting go’</p> <p>‘Messy involvement’</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Participatory research / co-production</p>

Table 1

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