

## Sociology as the Handmaid of Critical Theology

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### Abstract

The dialogue between sociology and theology spans centuries. With the recent emergence of critical theology in Canada, there has been an increasing use of sociological theories in service of theological hermeneutics. The exchange between these disciplines raises relevant theological questions, which forms the thrust of this essay: How have the critiques of sociologists helped theologians understand post-modern society and frame appropriate questions for theological discourse? What aspects of critical theology can enhance sociological studies? Can the dialogue between sociology and critical theology be expanded?

This essay examines the historical development of critical theology in the Canadian context as well as how sociology has continued to shape critical theological discourse in post-modern Canada. The essay examines selected contributions of sociology in the pursuit of critical theology, drawing mainly from the writings of German-Canadian theologian Gregory Baum as well as other relevant scholars. It also evaluates the exchange between sociology and critical theology and proposes an expansion of this intellectual partnership.

With examples drawn from the Canadian social context, the essay argues for a deepening of the exchange between sociology and critical theology to include the use of social demography in theological discourse. Besides numerical data, social demography provides critical theological discourse with data analysis that dissects the social conditions of persons in a given context. The essay contends that critical theology can benefit from consideration of socio-demographic

analysis, toward deconstructing social structures and institutions that reinforce poverty and perpetuate injustices.

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## Introduction

The dialogue between sociology and theology spans centuries. Since the emergence of critical theology in Canada in the 1970s, there has been an increasing application of sociological analysis and social theories in the service of theological discourse. Some four decades later, it is worthwhile to reflect on the role of sociology in the pursuit of critical theology, and how this collaboration can be expanded. Questions worth considering in evaluating the dialogue between sociology and critical theology include: What is the reaction of non-critical theologians to this collaboration? How have sociological theories and analysis helped critical theologians? Is the relation between sociology and critical theology mutual? What other aspects of sociology merit consideration in critical theological discourse? Without diminishing the worth of these questions, this essay argues for an extension of the dialogue between sociology and critical theology, most especially in appropriating insights from social demography. As a cognate field of sociology, social demography is a valuable tool for critical theology, offering statistical data analysis of social structures and institutions that oppress, marginalize, degrade, and reinforce injustices.

This essay is structured into three parts. The first is a summary of the historical transition from philosophy to sociology as a relevant dialogue partner in theological discourse. The second part presents an overview of the emergence of critical theology in Canada, as documented by the German-Canadian theologian Gregory Baum. It equally highlights examples of the application of sociological theories in the theological writings of Baum. It also underscores the conversation between critical theologians and sociologists in light of this collaboration. The conclusion argues for the inclusion of social demography as an appropriate sociological tool for critical theological discourse.

## Developments in the Union between Sociology and Theology

Christian theology has long been a dialogue partner with other academic disciplines. The medieval philosopher and theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).<sup>1</sup> Anselm's understanding of theology lays emphasis on the use of human rationality in discerning the mystery of the faith and indicates that the gift of faith

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1 St. Anselm, *Proslogium–Monologium: An Appendix on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1951), 33, 178.

is illuminated by the gift of reason. This definition of theology contributed to a deepening of a systematic approach to studying theology. During the early centuries, Christian scholars drew upon philosophical categories to interpret Scripture and expound on doctrines.

Tertullian (ca. 160–215), for instance, though less fascinated with philosophy (describing it as deceitful and having nothing to offer the Christian faith), employed philosophy in constructing his claims. Tertullian's dependence on Stoic philosophy was obvious in his theology of corporeity, and the dual nature of all beings. In *De Anima*, C. 5, Tertullian writes: "I call on the Stoics also to help me, who, while declaring almost in our very terms that the soul is a spiritual essence, will yet have no difficulty in persuading us that the soul is a corporeal substance."<sup>2</sup>

Besides stoicism, Platonic philosophy was another principal interlocutor for Christian theologians. This gained currency in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354–430) whose insightful interpretation of the faith, most especially in the development of the transcendent, immaterial and omnipresent God, benefited greatly from his encounter with Platonism and Neoplatonism. He affirmed that mere belief without questioning, and truth-seeking without faith, were both insufficient, Augustine wrote in his tractates on the Gospel of John: "Understand so that you may believe, believe so that you may understand" (On the Gospel of John, 29.6; *Sermon CXVII.I*). Augustine applied philosophical analysis and reasoning to the issues of religion, thus sowing the seed for subsequent systematic integration of philosophy into theological discourse.

In the thirteenth century, theologians such as Albert the Great (1206–1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) began to turn to Aristotelian philosophy to explain Christian doctrines. The dialogue between philosophy and theology continued into the sixteenth century, when theologians like Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) used nominalist philosophical categories in their theological writings.<sup>3</sup> During these centuries, philosophy (which then included the natural sciences) served as an appropriate vehicle for explaining Christian doctrine, exemplified by the phrase: "philosophy as the handmaid of theology." During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theologians from Europe and North America began to consider the social sciences as a dialogue partner for Christian theology.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, neo-scholastic classical tendencies endure, and thus the use of philosophical categories as representing the only legitimate way of doing

2 Tertullian, "De Anima," in *The Theology of Tertullian*, ed. Robert E. Roberts, (London: Epworth Press, 1942), C. 5.

3 Michael Bourgeois, "Why Social Theory Matters for Theology," in *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 34.

4 Ibid., 33–48.

theology survives to this day. Indeed, many Catholic seminaries in some part of the world, such as Africa, still maintain this unbroken link between philosophy and theology.

The nineteenth century ushered in a new social order. It was a century characterized by growing industrialization, and the emergence of economic capitalism and democracy, as well as the tough consequences of unemployment and poverty. These social changes motivated a formal study of human society from the perspectives of social structures, behavioral patterns, forms of socialization, and social groupings.<sup>5</sup> Scholars sought to understand the driving forces behind these social changes, and to systematize the differences between the nineteenth century and its antecedents. According to Baum, this impetus to compare the nineteenth century's social order with those of past centuries generated a new branch of scientific inquiry—sociology.<sup>6</sup> Although a broad field of study, sociology is unified by the quest to examine patterns in human social relationships and institutions.<sup>7</sup> Using diverse approaches, early modern sociologists like Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Karl Marx (1818–1883) argued that society has a profound effect on individuals' consciousness and their cultural expressions. Their claims showed how the social transformation of the nineteenth century informs human self-awareness and cultural values. Such sociological insights would be later considered as relevant trajectories for theological studies.

The twentieth century appropriation of sociological theories into theology can be seen in the works of political and liberation theologians. Such theologians found conversation partners with sociologists, and these interactions have since come to define a unique approach to contextual theology. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has argued, liberation theology is “critical reflection on praxis” in the light of God's word, for the sake of social transformation.<sup>8</sup> Critical theological reflection goes beyond mere engagement between theology and philosophy, to the availability and use of sociological data and knowledge of social conditions as well as the causes of social conditions. Gutiérrez maintains that turning to social sciences as a dialogue partner allows for a broader knowledge of society and demonstrates with greater precision the challenge society poses to theological reflection.<sup>9</sup> The use of sociological theories in political theology and subsequently in liberation theology has had a significant influence on the method of critical theology.

5 Margaret Lavin, *Vatican II: Fifty years of evolution and revolution in the Catholic Church* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2012), 44.

6 Gregory Baum, *The Social Imperative: Essays on the Critical Issues that Confront the Christian Churches* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 101.

7 Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997), 2.

8 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 5.

9 Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology and Social Sciences,” in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 55.

## Gregory Baum and Critical Theology in English Canada

Critical theology is, ingeniously, a contextual theology. It offers a platform where social and political approaches to theology converge as a basis for bringing about concrete social transformation. Critical theology prioritizes historical reality as a legitimate locus for Christian theologizing—a place of encountering God. Critical theology can be traced to Christian-Marxist dialogue in Europe and Latin America during the 1960s. These creative dialogues contributed to the evolution of political and liberation theologies, prominent in the writings of Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003), Johann Baptist Metz (1928–), José Míguez Bonino (1924–2012), and Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–).<sup>10</sup> By the late sixties into the seventies, the writings of these theologians had gained prominence in North America, contributing to the development of critical theology.

The emergence of critical theology in English-speaking Canada can be situated within the early 1970s. This era witnessed the rise of a ginger group in the New Democratic Party (NDP) called the “Waffle,” who advocated for a democratic socialism, economic independence from American capital, replacement of American-owned companies by publicly-owned corporations.<sup>11</sup> In 1972, the Waffles were expelled by the Ontario NDP. However, their aspirations had found a place in the hearts of Christians inclined to working for a social transformation of Canada.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid-1970s, with the rise of the faith-and-justice movement in Canadian churches, Christian concern for social justice led to cooperation in social ministry by Anglican, Catholic, and Reformed churches. These Christian faith-justice groups included the Jesuit’s Social Faith and Justice Center in Toronto, Citizenship for Public Justice, and the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. The faith-and-justice movements published joint ecumenical statements, addressed to the various levels of government in Canada.<sup>13</sup> They also published theological reflections that drew upon political and liberation theologies. In 1977, a conference focusing on “Political Theology in the Canadian Context” was held at the University of Saskatchewan, with a goal of deepening the conversation on the Christian social response in Canada. Participants, including Canadian theologians, deliberated on a wide range of issues, such as the Canadian identity, and undertook a critique of capitalism. Conference lectures were published in a book

10 Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon, “Introduction,” in *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 9.

11 Gregory Baum, “Critical Theologies in Canada: From Solidarity to Resistance,” in *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 49.

12 Ibid., 49–50.

13 Baum, “Critical Theologies in Canada,” 50.

entitled: *Political Theology in the Canadian Context*.<sup>14</sup> A major outcome of this conference was a renewed research interest in critical theology in Canada.

Baum defines critical theology as “a theological reflection on the emancipatory meaning of the Christian Gospel.”<sup>15</sup> He argues that the primary task of the critical theologian is to show how the Gospel ties in with human life. On the one hand, critical theology offers a critique of human life, and thus manifests its transcendence. On the other hand, it transforms human life, and thus demonstrates its relevance.<sup>16</sup> Similar to political and liberation theologies, the starting point of critical theology is an act of love, which leads to solidarity with the victims of society. It unearths social injustices, oppressive structures, system marginalization, and explores God’s summons to compassion and liberative action. In addition, critical theology is a method of doing theology that engages reflective Christians to become transformative agents who precipitate the movement from oppression and injustice to liberation and just human community.<sup>17</sup>

Given this primary task of critical theology—uncovering social injustices and exploring God’s summons to liberative action—Baum asserts that the theologian needs the social sciences as a dialogue partner. Sociological literature records insights that are otherwise absent from theology but are bound to shape theological discourse. Thus, critical theologians must possess adequate knowledge of what constitutes social reality as well as relevant analytical tools to undertake social analysis. Baum notes that sociology is not a unified discipline, but “a conflictual field of study,” involving a variety of interests, such as social institutions, organizations, religion and culture. These varied and often competing interests can be cataclysmic for the diverse aspects of sociology as a discipline: functionalism, empirical-positivism, phenomenology and critical sociology or critical theory. Each of these aspects of sociology adopts unique theoretical approaches, presuppositions and research methods.<sup>18</sup> Baum argues that adopting a particular field of sociology involves choosing from different conceptual models. Thus, a critical theologian is confronted with choosing what is best suited to his/her inquiry.<sup>19</sup> He writes: “The relationship of theology and sociology is something that must be

14 See Benjamin G. Smillie, *Political Theology in the Canadian Context* (Waterloo, ON: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982); Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon, *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004).

15 Baum, “Critical Theologies in Canada,” 50.

16 Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming: God in Secular Experience* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 9.

17 Baum, “Critical Theologies in Canada,” 50–51.

18 Baum, *The Social Imperative*, 99–100; Peter C. Phan, “Social Science and Ecclesiology: Cybernetics in Patrick Grandfield’s Theology of the Church,” in *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Horace Barnes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 62.

19 Gregory Baum, “Sociology and Theology,” *Concilium* 10, no. 1 (1974), 22–31.

created. It is not a given to be analyzed (given by the very nature of the two sciences), but a multiple project to be undertaken.”<sup>20</sup>

There are three procedural steps for critical theology, according to Baum: first, “listening to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized;” second, “dialoguing with social and political scientists;” and third, “paying attention to biblical scholars and church historians.”<sup>21</sup> These steps vary depending on one’s theological field of study. Regardless of which method is used, critical theology can offer an entry into the hermeneutical circle. The second step (dialogue with social scientists) implies drawing upon sociology as a conversational partner. Here, Baum’s preference rests with critical sociology. According to Mary Buckley, critical sociology studies society in a manner that supports relevant insights, highlights relationships, links the present with the past, and prepares the way for responsible action and commitment in the present.<sup>22</sup>

Before highlighting examples of how Baum employs social theory in his approach to critical theology, it is important to summarize his argument that there is no value-free study of society. Drawing from the axiom that the society to which an individual belongs creates a certain consciousness within us, Baum contends that every social critique is based on a specific social theory. Every given social theory adopts an implicit philosophical or religious worldview that includes a set of values. Consequently, there exists a subjective element in social analysis, since the consciousness of the sociologist is grounded in the consciousness of society. Hence, analysis of a society is based on the values that define a society. In the case of critical theology, analysis of society leads to articulating the social consequences of faith action, in terms of Christian teaching and witnessing. This is rooted in option for the poor, solidarity with victims of oppression, and commitment to the process of social transformation.<sup>23</sup>

Baum frames the contributions of sociology to this primary task of critical theology under two themes: “the historicity of truth and the historicity of error.”<sup>24</sup> For the “historicity of truth,” he affirms that the notion of symbols drawn from sociology assists the theologian and a believing community in interpreting reality, understanding itself and its mission, and opening itself to the divine self-communication. From symbolic realism it is possible to consider divine revelation in Israel and Jesus Christ as manifestations of God’s hidden but graced presence in human history. It also enables seeing revelation not only as a truth addressed to the mind, but also as providing symbols for the believing community. Since symbols can speak differently in different cultural and socio-political contexts, they

20 Ibid., 31.

21 Baum, “Critical Theologies in Canada,” 51.

22 Mary I. Buckley, “*Sociology and Theology: Response (II) to Gregory Baum*,” 41.

23 For this summary see Baum, *The Social Imperative*, 119.

24 Ibid., 119.

can also embody new meaning as societies undergo significant changes. While Christian symbols of divinity remain static for all ages and societies, their actual meaning continues to lead to renewed action-oriented understanding of divine revelation.<sup>25</sup>

An example of Baum's historicity of truth is discernable with social sin. Social sin is a deliberate act by a person or persons damaging the common good. For Baum, social sin is committed out of blindness, and comprises religious symbols operative in human imagination and fostered by society. Further, it reinforces unjust social systems and intensifies the oppression of peoples. This notion of social sin is at variance with moral sin, which is seen as a personal violation of a divine law, and freely committed. Emphasis on moral sin that can blind a community from seeing the oppressive trends built into their social structures and institutions.<sup>26</sup>

Under the "historicity of error," Baum maintains that every group of people produces their own blindness. Through an unconscious process they create an understanding of reality that legitimizes the abuse of institutional power and privileges. For Baum, this is an ideology that distorts the truth for the sake of social interest and can create a false consciousness. He believes that sociology provides tools for critical theology to critique the evil and injustice inherent in society. This tool constitutes analysis of society, which critiques the extent that religion legitimizes people's sufferings, and re-formulates the Christian teaching as being God's promise to deliver the oppressed.<sup>27</sup> With the example of social sin, sociological analysis becomes a valuable tool for showing how both individual and community actions can contribute to the enthronement of unjust structures, and falsely legitimate social injustices in society. As Karl Barth would say, a conscious Christian is one with his/her Bible in the right hand, and a newspaper in the left.<sup>28</sup>

### **Critiques of the Dialogue between Sociology and Critical Theology**

For its analysis of human society, critical theology benefits from using the valuable epistemological tools and social theories of sociology. In examining the world of the oppressed and the prevailing structures of social injustice, sociology provides critical theology with valuable insights for theological interpretation and a Christian response to a particular social context. Nevertheless, the Anglican theologian

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25 Ibid., 119.

26 Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 175.

27 Ibid., 119.

28 Though this quotation is often attributed to Karl Barth, the closest link of the statement to Barth was a *Time Magazine* piece on Barth, published on Friday, May 31, 1963.

John Milbank is skeptical of this collaboration. He maintains that such a partnership could lead theology to surrender its claim to be comprehensive.

Milbank sees theology as unnecessarily conforming to secular standards, and to the constraints of scientific objectivity. He contends that theology ought to maintain its historically specific faith in God, so as to render its unique account of the ultimate causes at work in human history. If there should be any cross-conversation, “it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis*, in a manner that restores their freshness and originality.”<sup>29</sup> However, Baum avers that only when there is a dialogue between critical theology and sociology can critical theology express “a new fidelity to its nature and mission.”<sup>30</sup> In developing this position, some theologians opine that critical theology requires interaction with other disciplines. Roman Catholic theologian Mary Jo Leddy observes that in the Canadian context, theology should be done at an intersection. Leddy argues that it is at intersections where realities and perspectives meet, and sometimes collide. It is at intersections where critique and creativity flourish, as well as where theological thought gets redirected and reoriented.<sup>31</sup> The tension between these two perspectives, those of the inclusivists and the exclusivists, is illustrative of the unresolved struggle between neo-scholastic classicalism and contemporary theological method in their paradigms of Christian social responsibility. While the inclusivists collaborate with others in contributing to a flourishing and humane society, the exclusivists maintain that theology and Christianity neither borrow from nor partner with the outside.

There seems to be some inconsistency in exclusivists’ withdrawal attitudes. First, it may seem they have forgotten the long history of theology’s interaction with philosophy and other disciplines, as mentioned in the initial part of this work. Paradoxically, as Baum observes, Milbank’s opposition to theology partnering with other disciplines is itself based upon social theories, such as the alienation theories of sociologists like Max Weber and Peter Berger.<sup>32</sup> These sociologists criticize modernity, locating its dehumanizing trends in the growing power of technology and bureaucracy.<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, growing technology and bureaucratic power heavily contribute to dehumanization, and, as structural evils, they should be critiqued. Yet, it is no remedy for these evils to abandon global partnerships or reject global solidarity for the common good of all. The potential for such aban-

29 See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (New York: Blackwell, 1999, 2006), 382.

30 Gregory Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 160.

31 See Mary Jo Leddy, “Foreword,” in *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 7; Emeka Xris Obiezu, “Community versus Empire: The Catholic NGOs/United Nations Relationship in an Augustinian Perspective,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11:1 (2014), 162.

32 Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 19.

33 Baum, *Theology and Society*, 164–66.

donment is reason why Christian social justice activists may accuse the exclusivists of supporting the status quo, and rejecting a critical solidarity encouraging alignment with social change groups in challenging unjust and unequal institutional structures.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the dialogical relationship between Christianity and social change groups should be seen as complementary and not antithetical to Christian theology. Rather than divisiveness, this collaboration promotes solidarity.<sup>35</sup> Pope John XXIII promoted this partnership in his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, wherein he affirmed Christian participation and partnership with other social entities in the search for common good. He referred to this as a moment of discovering and adhering to the truth, but cautioned that such engagement should not be abandoned, not even on the account of a history of past failure.<sup>36</sup> The Second Vatican Council also supported mutual exchange between theology and the social sciences. In the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council asserts that the Church's social mission entails reading "the signs of the times," which demands social analysis.<sup>37</sup> In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis asserts that "dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message to different cultural contexts and groups."<sup>38</sup> Generally, this points to the indispensable and invaluable role of non-theological disciplines in contemporary theological discourse.

### Social Demography and Critical Theology

Social demography emerged as a field of sociology during the course of the twentieth century. It can be described as the analysis of sociological questions using statistical data, such as censuses and population surveys. Social demography makes the connection between social reality and demography on both a macro-level and a micro-level. On a macro-level social demography studies systems, cultures, and societies on a large scale. On a micro-level it studies individuals, groups, and families as units of society. With the latter, social demography gives priority to rigorous data analysis and population trends, backed by theoretical methods associated with sociology, statistics, and anthropology.<sup>39</sup>

Sociologists, Stewart Tolnay and Charles Hirschman, identify a three-phase

34 Obiezu, "Community Versus Empire," 162.

35 David Hollenbach, *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), xii.

36 *Pacem in Terris*, nos., 159, 160.

37 See *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 38–40 in Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations—a Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).

38 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), no. 133.

39 Stewart Tolnay and Charles Hirschman "Social Demography," in *Handbook of Population*, ed. Dudley L. Poston and Michael Micklin (New York: Springer Science Business Media, 2006), 419.

hermeneutical circle involved in social demography. First is “data collection and descriptive interpretation,” which involves a thorough process of accessing the numerical composition and exposition of the indicators of a given social concern.<sup>40</sup> The second is “theory development and model testing,” entailing analysis through a process of isolating, and comparing variables on a given social phenomena.<sup>41</sup> The third is “contextual analysis,” which interrogates the interaction between individuals and their social context in light of a given social issue.<sup>42</sup> These interrelated phases employed by social demographers provide an analytical tool for an immersion into a specific social concern and context. They support a transitioning from data collection to investigation of the personal experiences of the human subjects in a particular social order, leading to critical theological reflection in that context.

Some theologians have drawn from social demography in their studies. An example is the theological analysis of poverty in a global context by the Roman Catholic theologian Daniel Groody. In his book titled *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace*, Groody employs demographical analysis to articulate a hopeful vision for the twentieth-century social order. More recently, the British theologian Paul Lakeland writes from a Catholic perspective on the dialogue between ecclesiology and demography. Lakeland demonstrates how the present demography of the Global South and North informs the Roman Catholic Church’s self-identity, and its evangelizing mission.<sup>43</sup> Social demography adds value to critical theology, in articulating a socio-statistical analysis of the structures of inequality and social injustices, and in accounting for the victims of oppression.

The data collected and index analysis arising from studying inequality and social mobility by social demographers can be relevant resources for critical theologians. These statistical data are appropriated in the study of social issues related to poverty, gender, ethnicity, immigration, and ecology. Social demographers have developed a method to study inter-cohort social change from cross-sectional data, toward models of relationships among changes in social structure, social institutions, and social mobility. As a result, social demography as a dialogue partner for critical theology (1) offers analysis that can shed light on unjust social structures, (2) articulates a transformative vision, and (3) enables concrete action toward the liberation of the poor.

With reference to Baum’s assertion that every society has its own blind spot

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40 Ibid., 422.

41 Ibid., 422–23.

42 Ibid., 423–24.

43 Paul Lakeland, “Ecclesiology and the Use of Demography: Three Models of Apostolicity,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

that often creates a distorted view of social reality, the application of demographic data can become an analytical tool for critical theology in uncovering false assumptions that can reinforce such distortions. It is capable of leading not only to a statistically-based knowledge of the victims of oppression, but also to the demographical variations of the oppressed in light of their social conditions. Uncovering of the institutions that perpetuate injustice is also afforded.

Baum's assertion is relevant to the Canadian social context. Within the last two decades, the number of Canadians living in poverty has significantly declined, with a negligible number living with low income. Research from Statistics Canada, for example, shows that the percentage of Canadians living in households below the basic-needs poverty line has fallen from 6.7 percent in 1996 to 4.8 percent in 2009.<sup>44</sup> The percentage of Canadians living in households below the low income cut off (LICO) has also decreased, from of 15.2 percent in 1996 to 9.7 percent in 2013.<sup>45</sup> The challenge with such snapshot of poverty indices is that they rarely capture comprehensively the categories of persons and their specific social locations. Statistical reports on poverty often neglect to distinguish between people who experience short spells of poverty or low income versus those who have been stuck below the poverty line for many years.<sup>46</sup> Often lost in a broad poverty index are real persons with names—children, young people, women, single parents, the disabled, the terminally ill, and the aged. New immigrants to Canada, though, depending on government social interventions and the generosity of faith-based and non-faith groups are often living in poverty. For these new Canadians, acclimatizing and assimilating to a new environment is a process that spans several years.<sup>47</sup>

Social demography can assist in unearthing multifaceted levels of poverty, and thus provide verifiable statistics for undertaking critical theological reflection, and appropriate pastoral response. Such demographical perspectives are relevant for critical theology, providing for a proper contextual analysis and articulation of a theological response. A theology of social transformation ought to initiate a process of liberation in the present, as well as guide a hopeful-vision for the future, based not on a utopia but rather long-term demographical trends and differentials. Thus, critical theologians ought not to ignore social demography in pur-

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44 Charles Lammam and Hugh MacIntyre (2015), *An Introduction to the State of Poverty in Canada*, Fraser Institute. <http://www.fraserinstitute.org> (accessed September 2017), 1.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 See Dominique Fleury, *A Study of Poverty and Working Poverty among Recent Immigrants to Canada: Final Report* (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2007), [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2008/hrsc-rhdsc/HS28-121-2007E.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2008/hrsc-rhdsc/HS28-121-2007E.pdf) (accessed September 1, 2017).

suit of solidarity with the victims of oppression and walking with them through a process of liberation.

## Conclusion

Assessing the contributions of critical theology to sociology may be a proper task of the sociologist. It is important to note that only a few sociologists are inclined toward the potential benefit of theology to sociological discourse. The British sociologist Graham Howes writes that students of sociology tend to see theology as an “archaic sub-discipline, lacking the rigor of pure ‘philosophy,’ the intellectual chic of contemporary social theory or the breadth and stimulus of religious studies.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the American sociologist Robert Bellah maintains that every theology implies a sociology, and every sociology implies a theology. Bellah argues that theology and social sciences are part of a single intellectual universe. To refuse to relate them is to admit to intellectual bankruptcy.<sup>49</sup>

Our analysis has been asymmetrical in the sense that it prioritizes how critical theology has benefited from sociology, and not vice-versa. Thus, this essay examined the dialogue between critical theology and sociology, with selected references from the writings of Baum. This dialogue serves as a backdrop for proposing the inclusion of social demography in contemporary critical theological discourse. The arguments advanced for this inclusion are not exhaustive. The objective has been to inspire discussion on how the dialogue between sociology and critical theology can thus avoid the constraint of “intellectual bankruptcy.”

There are limitations to the applicability of social demography in the field of theology, since population data cannot absolutely capture all social concerns or social changes in society. The strength of social demography lies in its ability to statistically decipher false claims or assumptions and set forth a reliable hypothesis for theological analysis. In some cultural contexts, statistical collection are sensitive processes. Active participation in social demographical assessment may be inhibited due to various religious and ethnic obligations on the part of participants, and concomitant fears of these persons or groups of violating cultural norms and expectations, along with the perceived consequences of such violation, by revealing the human subjects and social institutions that perpetuate injustice, oppression, and marginalization. While social demographers are faced with these challenges in many nations of the Global South, it is less likely to occur in nations of the Global North, where there exists strong institutional structures, and reliable systems of data and information management.

48 Graham Howes, “Surprised by Grace: The Sociologist’s Dilemma,” *New Blackfriars* 78: 913 (1997), 136.

49 Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 206.

Nevertheless, sociology and critical theology holds the potential of mutually enhancing each other in breaking new ground for dialogue in the area of social demography. The field of social demography studies is driven by sound theory, high-quality data, and tractable research questions, which lead to cumulative research conclusions. To paraphrase Paul Lakeland, it is driven by human curiosity, to know more than we do about the world in which we live, the church we love, and the company we keep. If the use of statistics becomes the starting point of critical theology, then analysis can be the intermediary, and fruitful understanding can be the result.<sup>50</sup>

Expanding the dialogue between sociology and critical theology to embrace demography reinforces sound social analysis with concrete statistical knowledge. As a result, demographical interpretations become even more credible, improving the prospects for determining appropriate theological response to a given social issue and context. In all, the union between critical theology and sociology can be sustained through conversation on the points of divergence and convergence. On the points where they do intersect the critical theologian can speak effectively and be heard in the Canadian context.

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50 Lakeland, "Ecclesiology and the Use of Demography," 24