Theological Method and Engaging the Secular

J.A. Daley, PhD Candidate

In order to meet the challenge to engage the secular with the gospel, Christian theology should reflect sensitivity to conscious and unconscious hermeneutical choices of secular society by leveraging the way people understand their identities and the way the communities construct themselves.

Against ‘subtraction stories’, Charles Taylor (2007) posits that we live in a Secular 3 age (cf. pre-modern secular 1 & 2) distinguished by new conditions of belief and made possible by a legitimizing modern social imaginary (MSI), “exclusive humanism”. Social imaginary is “the way in which contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain”. The MSI was catalyzed by economics (see Fig 1), when ‘fullness’ in the form of human flourishing redefined a replacement telos for humanity amidst cross-pressures to revert (Taylor).

Taylor’s social imaginaries adopt Castoriadis: social imaginary significations create the social-historical world. Hence, the MSI is a social construct but possesses “a greater reality than the real itself” (Castoriadis, 1987). Figure 1 shows changes in the background to lived conditions and fullness.

Philosophical phenomenological hermeneutics to analytically describe and evaluate Taylor’s economic social imaginary as communicating the contemporary self-identity and therefore suitability for use as method to communicate to society.

Tripartite biblical hermeneutics—systematic theology, sola-tota-prima-analogy Scripture with spiritual discernment, and narrative analysis with close reading of the text—to identify principles for theological method from the apparently analogous imaginary of the rich young man (RYM) of the Matthean narrative.

Hermeneutics generally founded on a commitment to a biblical conception of God, human nature and telos, and knowledge that seeks to uphold faithfulness, coherence and correspondence to divinely revealed precepts of the biblical canon as evident in the text.

The analysis produced some basic insights and fairly convincing support of the thesis to utilize economics in theological method for engaging the secular. Figure 2 shows % of adults responding for different ranges of household income. The US is proxy for the West. Income is proxy for human flourishing.

Evidently, theology’s challenge is with the self-sufficient immanent social order of the West as the buffered and closed MSI relegates God to superfluity. Economics has increasingly “immanentized” the MSI since the 18th century via Natural Law theories of Grotius, Locke and Smith. The self-understanding in the MSI results from Reform: shifts and “reconfiguration in meaning” (Taylor).

How theology tackles the church-society impasse in a way that is intelligible contemporaneously might mean employing borrowed concepts from secular culture (Green, 1998; Tracy, 1983). The current context justifies a model for engagement with society that addresses the critical dimensions of the MSI in “new harmonious economic-centered order”.

Narrative analysis of Jesus with the RYM suggests “cross-pressures” analogous to those presently apparent in the MSI.

“[A]cceptance of Jesus’ message had economic implications ... for the ... social order” (Crosby, 2004).

Indicative biblical allusions of a relationship between theology and economics in the narrative about Jesus and the RYM.

Taylor’s conceptualization of “secular” has intuitive appeal and significant inherent utility as it is, apparently, a plausible framing of contemporary society taking into account the philosophical, historical, sociological, theological and economic dimensions. However, it might be the case that such a move, by the same token, would involve misconstructions.

Minimal interpretative correlations from the biblical clues indicate how a model might be constructed to address the contemporary church-society impasse and complement and reconstruct Taylor’s secular social imaginary for use as theological method.

Increasing secularization seems to fly in the face of Adventist proposals for a Scripture-only principle for theology. The church’s imperative is to identify creative theological method to embrace the relationship between economics and theology and yet—within the constraints of her rules of engagement—provides a biblical paradigm for efficaciously engaging secular society.

Systematic theology renders the extra-biblical MSI not incompatible with sola Scriptura. Theological method should “listen” and leverage Taylor’s broad, deep, multi-faceted and historically-constructed MSI to ‘preach the gospel in all the world’ and engage the secular for “how are they to believe in him of whom they have never [really] heard?” (Rom 10:14).

Contact
J.A. Daley, PhD
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University
Email: daley@andrews.edu
Phone: (269) 471 6885

Select References

*Title adapted from Johnson, Ronald W. How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen? Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 1994.