Thesis Statement & Introduction

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 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 pressres to revert (Taylor).

Theoretical Background & Hypotheses

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.

Conceptual Methodology

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-analogia Scriptura 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 Mattehan 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.

Results

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.

Discussion

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.

Conclusions

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).

Select References


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