

BOOK REVIEW

A Brief Introduction to Sociology from a Christian Perspective

by Henry Hyunsuk Kim

San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2022, 179 pages

Introductory sociology textbooks tend to be long and dense. John Macionis' popular *Sociology*, now in its 17th edition, tops out at 800 pages. George Ritzer and Wendy Widenhoft Murphy's 5th edition of *Introduction to Sociology* weighs in at 600 pages, Henry Tischler's 12th edition of *Introduction to Sociology* offers 538, and Anthony Giddens and colleagues top the field with a whopping 984-page 12th edition of *Introduction to Sociology*. Who can get through 984 pages—or even half as many—in a single semester? While some introductory courses in the natural sciences utilize the same textbook over two semesters, I have yet to see a sociology program that does so. There are a few exceptions to the long intro sociology text format. One notable example is Lisa McIntyre's excellent *The Practical Skeptic*—304 pages—but it has recently gone out of print.

In the introduction to *A Brief Introduction to Sociology from a Christian Perspective*, Henry Kim writes, "Confession: this book was not written to be the sole text for any given course; its purpose is to complement other readings" (viii). The book is 179 pages, including references. Despite Kim's confession, I find the length—perhaps a bit short—to be about right for an introductory class. Introductory sociology, at its best, helps students cultivate a sociological imagination and equip them with the conceptual toolkit that makes one possible. Slugging through copious amounts of information in a huge textbook can be off-putting for students learning to see old things in new ways through the lens of the sociological imagination. When it comes to intro sociology texts, less is frequently more, which is why, for me, Kim's new offering could work well as a core text that an instructor could augment with additional readings. Even better, Dr. Kim could develop a companion reader for his new text.

Length aside, *A Brief Introduction* offers an unusually well-crafted Christian lens through which to view and interpret the insights of sociology. My assessment on this measure derives, in part, from Kim's rather impressive credentials. Dr. Kim earned an undergraduate degree in hotel management and then went on to complete a Master of Divinity, an MA and PhD in Sociology, and a PhD in church history. His dexterity in these fields is evident throughout the text. For example, the reader will find the text peppered with Greek words and their interpretations. I felt a bit divided on this. On one hand, Kim's facility with Greek brings authority to his interpretation of Biblical texts and integration of them with various sociological

ideas. On the other, the liberal sprinkling of Greek throughout may be a slight deterrent for students for whom Greek was not prerequisite for taking sociology. In the end, although I have little to no knowledge of New Testament Greek, Kim's explication is clear and, more than anything, will remind readers of the authority he brings to his writing. The seminary student utilizing this book will likely find the Greek insertions helpful and illuminating. I have long thought that seminaries would greatly benefit from requiring their students to take both introductory sociology and sociology of religion. Perhaps Kim's book is the catalyst they need.

A Brief Introduction is organized into seven chapters which include: Laying a Foundation; Methods of Inquiry; Race and Ethnicity; Social Class and Inequality; Sex and Gender; Groups and Institutions; and The Future of Sociology. The book has a conceptual feel to it, which I prefer over the more traditional approach that focuses on institutions and social problems. As such, this book can help sociology students develop a conceptual tool kit that will help them analyze problems even as the world changes and unforeseen problems arise. I found the chapter on Race and Ethnicity particularly compelling. In it, Kim addresses some of the unique histories and concerns of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. That Dr. Kim, who is Korean, offers anecdotes and examples from his own experiences living in a racialized country, adds further credibility to his comments on race and ethnicity. As I have two Chinese American children through adoption, I was pleased that he includes material on the *model minority thesis* that plagues many of Asian descent, but often puzzles majority group members. The chapter is sensitive, nuanced, and helpful. For example, in addressing ways that theology becomes racialized, Dr. Kim explains:

The problem with assuming that there is one "theology" without modifiers and then there are other types with modifiers is that this reifies the belief of a pure theology as a norm. To say that Black people are just as smart as White people or that Asian theology is a valid type of theology are subtle statements of inequality. All theologies as well as racial and ethnic groups need exegesis; theology without sociology is blind, and sociology without theology is powerless. (63)

Theology without sociology is blind—I couldn't have said it better! One other example from the Race and Ethnicity chapter that I had not considered before relates to the common use of the term "reconciliation." About this Kim writes,

However, I have an issue when certain Christians make a jump to employ "reconciliation" between different racial groups. This makes an assumption that there was an initial fellowship or friendship between the various groups. The noun "reconciliation" is used four times in the New Testament (Romans 5:1; 11:15; II Corinthians 5:18; 19), and it appears that all of the uses are with respect to soteriology, "reestablishment of an interrupted or broken relationship, reconciliation." . . . It is not surprising that in my experiences, White evangelicals

prefer disproportionately to speak of “reconciliation,” not people of color, who prefer the concept of “conciliation.” (69)

Chapter Five, *Sex and Gender*, offers a comprehensive array of frameworks and concepts that factor prominently in the sociological literature on gender. Here, for example, the reader will learn about complementary gender roles in contrast with egalitarian gender roles. I have long felt that these terms are inadequate for explaining male/female and husband/wife relationships. Kim engages the reader in a discussion of these terms and their implications, bringing in a variety of examples that illustrate how changes in the social world and various institutions make transhistorical pronouncements about roles in marriage and other facets of male/female relationships challenging and problematic. Explaining how we cope with the difficulties of matching our contemporary lives with traditional frameworks for understanding gender relationships, Kim offers the concept of *pragmatic egalitarianism*, which captures how some couples uphold traditionalism (complementarianism) while practicing a functional egalitarianism. I think this an important concept, and have observed it in the common practice of some couples who identify as complementarian (generally a traditional hierarchical arrangement), while still distinguishing their spouse as their “best friend” (friendship being egalitarian by definition).

One concern I have with the sex and gender chapter is the invisibility of LGBTQI+ people, as well as any reference to gay marriage. Early in the chapter, Kim plainly states, “However, if one is called to marriage, the scriptures are clear that this covenant is between one man and one woman” (107). My sense is that an unqualified theological statement like this would resonate with some Christian sociologists but raise a red flag for others. Reference to gay marriage, or to any persons identifying outside the traditional gender/sex binary, is completely absent in the chapter. As issues involving the rights and statuses of LGBTQI+ persons, gay marriage, intersex, and transgenderism are prominent issues in sociology, and discussed extensively by Christian sociologists, their omission in the chapter is noteworthy. Christian sociologists fall all over the spectrum on these matters, and they could be presented in a Christian sociology text in ways that would allow students and professors to discuss them from a variety of theological and ideological perspectives.

The chapter on Groups and Institutions offers an array of frameworks and concepts that are part of the familiar sociological canon, and then offers a protracted discussion of network theory and social network analysis. I learned a great deal from this material, and I think it represents a central interest for Kim. Since introductory sociology classes are offered to students from a wide array of major fields of study, the inclusion of this material may increase the book’s appeal to computer science majors, and others studying information science or natural science. It is not often that you read the following in an intro sociology text: “I’ve often dreamed of having a Bloomberg Terminal or a qubit processor—it is very unlikely that I will ever have access to these in a CCCU [Council for Christian Colleges and Universities] system” (146).

This would indeed be a new dream for me! While the Groups and Institutions chapter with its network theory approach offers a robust and novel entry into this key area in sociology, I felt that the inclusion of information about primary institutions and their social functions would have been a helpful addition to the sociological toolkit provided.

A Brief Introduction concludes with a chapter entitled The Future of Sociology. This chapter is continuous with the material on network theory, and discusses algorithms, labeling, complexity science, a nexus with natural and physical worlds, and randomness, among other things. This will be new material for many of those who teach undergraduate sociology, but I think it is new material worth knowing. Today's college students live in the worlds of algorithms and apparent randomness, and Kim's final chapter brings insight and wisdom to a significant part of the sociological world frequently not explored by those teaching intro sociology. The book concludes with a Christian perspective on algorithms, complexity science, randomness, and chaos. Here Kim's theological training is clearly evident, and he offers reassurance that God the creator guides and governs chaos and order, emptiness and fullness, disunity and unity, and that the patterns of our lives, sociological and otherwise, are held in God's capable hand. He writes, "It is as if our being made in His image has created an algorithm where we long for Him because it is 'hardwired' into our being, 'because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them'" (Romans 1:19). And for contemporary students searching for meaning in a world that is fragmenting and difficult to understand, Kim's words offer great comfort.

Dr. Kim's new book is a welcome entry into a field with few options for sociologists desiring a text that offers Christian perspective. Theologically, it has remarkable depth, and sociologically, it covers most of the bases, as well as bringing new relevant material that is most welcome at the dawn of the 21st century. I highly recommend it.

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