Sociology, Christianity and Boundaries

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Abstract

Although the issue of boundaries is not new, in recent years sociologists have shown renewed interest in the topic. For example, the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in 2006 featured the theme of boundaries. This paper is an exploratory effort to analyze sociological work on boundaries and to compare and contrast this work with a biblical view on this topic. In doing so, the following issues were discussed: the blurring of boundaries, overemphasis on boundaries, idolatry, and more specifically, issues of boundaries in the area of marriage and family, gender roles, social identity, and materialism. From this it can be concluded that there are gaps that should be addressed, discussed and written about from a Christian perspective.

KEYWORDS: boundaries, holiness, idolatry, sociology

The theme of the 2006 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association was "Great Divides: The Sociology of Boundaries" (Asanet.org, 2006). Approximately 28 thematic sessions at the annual meeting related various sub-disciplines in sociology to the question of boundaries. In recent years, the subject of boundaries has arisen in areas such as network theory (e.g., Karafillidis 2008), race and ethnic studies (e.g., Ritzer, 2007), social inequality, construction of gender (e.g., Lucal, 2008), work roles (e.g., Lane, 2006), religion (e.g., Jones, 2000), and relationships (e.g., Cloud & Townsend 2000, 2001, 2002). The topic was not new because boundaries were discussed by early sociologists. Marx pointed out the significance of class boundaries (Marx in McLellan, 1977) and Weber (1968) the importance of ethnic and status groups. Boundaries are a functional necessity and probably inevitable (Durkheim, 1965). Many boundaries are human creations and, consequently, arbitrary. Some boundaries, however, are not social constructions and as such, are not relative, antiquated, or expendable.

Religious faith assumptions are foundational for an accurate and fruitful social science and should not be neglected. In the late 1800s, religious thought and academic sociology were less segregated than currently (Henking, 1993). Unfortunately, sociology fostered a separation between values and science, even working to refute Christian truth claims. As a result, Christianity was viewed as somewhat insignificant to the study of social life, which was certainly problematic. Even though some scholars have recently attempted to reformulate the discipline of sociology from the perspective of *personalism* while criticizing existing theoretical perspectives

such as network theory or rational choice theory (e.g., Smith, 2010), there is a paucity of work specifically concerning boundaries and sociology from a Christian perspective (Carnes & Yang, 2004).

This research serves to demonstrate the need for a well-informed perspective on the sociology of boundaries. To clarify the issue, insights on the denial of boundaries, idolatrous boundaries, and overemphasis on boundaries will be explored. The key contribution of the research is a Christian basis for the concept of boundaries.

Topics in Sociology and Boundaries

A. Denial of Boundaries

In late modern or postmodern society, boundaries have been increasingly disappearing. This is noticed in the ever-increasing globalization, interdependence between and blurring of boundaries between countries and between the local, the national, and the global levels (e.g. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Ritzer, 2004), but also has become evident in private life (Beck, 1992; Beck, & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The weakening and denial of boundaries appear in contemporary debates in the areas of marriage and gender, for example. Whether individuals are married, when the marriage occurred, and if, or how long, the marriage will last is no longer clear. Many Americans cohabit at some point, and while some get married after a few or more years of cohabitation, others split up or live together indeterminately (Bianchi & Casper, 2002; Smock, 2000). Cohabitation, while not necessarily the norm, has become much more accepted in the United States. So, too, have divorce, single parenthood and a myriad of other changes in the family (Cherlin, 1992, 2010; Manning & Smock, 2000). Whether evaluated positively or negatively, the changes are real. Such changes must be taken into consideration when studying marriage, family and social life in the United States. Thus, the question arises whether the weakening of the boundaries of marriage have possible negative effects on children and spouses, a question the discipline of sociology long tried to avoid by highlighting the liberalizing effects of divorce, for example, and the temporary nature of problems arising from divorce. Recently, researchers identified and discussed several negative consequences of divorce for adults and children including lower levels of happiness, increased stress and health problems, social isolation for divorced individuals, lower academic achievement, problems with conduct, difficulty with social adjustment, and self-concept problems for children from divorced families (Amato, 2000).

Changes have not only occurred in the structure of marriage and family, but in how love and dating are viewed and how genders communicate as well (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990) described the ways in which the new ideal of love replaced old notions of relationships between men and women, and how the ideals could lead to instability.

A related theme is gender, a controversial topic both in Christian and non-Christian circles. Jacob Bohme, for example, believed that Adam was androgynous and that the distinction of two sexes was the result of the fall (Jones, 2000). Some sociologists have been similarly liberal in their view of gender roles and gender differences (e.g., Kimmel, 2009). Regardless one's stance on the issue, boundaries are at stake.

B. Overemphasis on Boundaries

Another key insight that sociology has provided is that people often create boundaries to gain or strengthen their sense of identity. In this manner, some people make too much of boundaries.

In social psychology, for example, there is ample evidence how important boundaries are in people's lives. People form groups and distinguish the group from others, estimating their group as better. Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif (1961) conducted the "Robbers Cave Study", in which two groups of boys on a "camping trip" were housed in two separate houses in the countryside. First kept apart and unaware that the other group existed, each group engaged in activities that constructed in-group solidarity. After a few days, when in-group solidarity was high, the two groups were introduced to each other by having them play games against each other. Within a few days, the tension between the two groups had grown and reached a point of open hostility. To reduce this tension, the researchers had the two groups engage in solidarity-building activities. The central finding that emerged from the study was power of in-group solidarity and the costs it sometimes entails in the form of tensions with outsiders (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) similarly suggested that an individual's identity was strongly connected with and derived from the group with which the individual identified. There was evidence that people gain a sense of social identity by distancing themselves from other groups with which the individual did not identify. Durkheim (1964) noted that people generally gain a sense of solidarity and in-group identity when fighting against a common cause.

All these insights apply to racism and prejudice. The social construction of race in the U.S. has led to many social problems, even when not considering actual prejudice and racism (e.g., Howell & Paris, 2010). Are racial distinctions helpful in social science, for example, or in collecting census data? Should such statistics be considered useful and appropriate? Is the risk of misuse of racial data too great? Should people be identified by race (cf. Roberts, 1997 and Jenkins, 1999)?

C. Boundaries Arising from Idolatry

Misplaced or inappropriate boundaries could be analyzed by looking at the idolatries represented. This is significant social problems are rarely, if ever, called idolatries and not

considered boundary issues. Instead, social problems are attributed to inequalities in the social structure, problems in the family and other social factors. However, social science has pointed to the significance of boundaries, as visible in studies describing co-dependency and addictions, for example. Overall, the issue of idolatry as a source of false boundaries has not received much deserved attention.

Sociological research has recently begun to pay attention to generally accepted idolatries such as materialism and *workaholism* (e.g., Kasser, 2003). Such phenomena are intertwined with culture and are difficult to detect from a purely sociological, and supposedly value-free, perspective.

Boundaries derived from an idolatrous view of the world do not comport with God's framework. They can result in calling evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5.20). An interesting variation of the Hebrew word for holiness can be translated "harlotry" (Lazerson, 2009). In Biblical times, pagan temples had women set apart for sexually-based worship; the Hebrew variant word is used here. The word for harlot can also be interpreted as living outside of the normal and honorable rules of conduct. In contrast, for example, a married person is bounded by the rules of marriage (Elwell, 1984).

Holiness: A Biblical View on Boundaries

A. Scriptural Background: Boundaries and Holiness

The key biblical idea behind the sociological concept of boundaries is holiness. The Hebrew word for holy is *qados,* fundamentally meaning separate or apart (Elwell, 1984). God is holy and separate from His creation. In addition to God's being, things associated with God become holy, such as a holy mountain (Psalm 2:6), holy assembly (Exodus 12:16), and God's chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6). Israel became a people set apart not because of some inherent virtues, but simply because God set them apart (Elwell, 1984). The use of the idea of separation began very early in Scripture, in the book of origins, Genesis. A common belief was God created everything "ex nihilo". God can speak something into existence from something that did not previously exist.

Notice, however, a more common way that God creates. God creates by separation. Consider Chapter 1 of Genesis. Verse 4 stated that God separated the light from the darkness. Verse 7 stated that God separated the waters under the expanse of the firmament. In verse 9, God separated the waters such that dry ground appeared. Verse 14 and 18 indicated that God created light to separate the day from the night. In chapter 2, God separated and forms man from the dust of the earth. In verse 25, God created woman by separating a rib of the man. Therefore, divisions, separations, and boundaries are part of creation order.

B. On the Blurring of Boundaries

Holiness is a significant doctrine throughout Scripture, not only in Genesis. The idea is best exemplified in the book of Leviticus, which is sometimes said to contain the "holiness code." How can the book of Leviticus be explained? Should the various rules be considered arbitrary or inexplicable, or are the regulations actually allegorical teachings? An example could be leprosy as representative of sin. Was the holiness code designed for medical reasons? If so, do all the rules relate to health, or were the rules merely nonsense made by a capricious God in order to trouble humanity with seemingly endless rules with no apparent coherence? The holiness connotation of separation became the key for understanding Leviticus, and this is where the work of Douglas (1966) is significant, demonstrating that the regulations promoted order, wholeness and completeness. The rules in Leviticus were object lessons promoting conformity, correct definition and proper discrimination within God's creation. For the Jew, "Holiness meant living according to the classification system and the sense of order expressed by it" (Neyrey, 2001, section 4.1, para. 1).

Another way of exploring the meaning of holiness is to look at its opposite. If not *holy*, then an object or act was *profane*. The Old Testament Hebrew word for profane was *tebhel*, which can be translated *mixed up* or *confused* (Douglas, 1966). The implication was that something profane was impure or outside of the boundaries. The Greek word for *profane* was also opposite of the word *holy* (Vine, 1966).

The distinction between the *holy* and the *profane*, that which is set apart and that which is outside of boundaries, provides clues to the meanings ascribed to human interaction with creation. By making divisions, God made distinctions. Order was created out of chaos. Divisions were the basis for orderliness. Through the concept of holiness, people were given the *grid* for reality. God-given boundaries were real, and humans do well not to ignore, obliterate, or change the boundaries. In a fallen world with finite people, however, distortions exist as evidenced in the lack of boundaries, group identity theory, and idolatry.

Distinctions are relevant for gender roles. Even though Christians are not uniform in their views regarding boundaries for gender roles, many do not believe that the male-female dichotomy is a purely social construct, especially in regards to sexual identity (e.g., Howell & Paris, 2010). Two organizations represent evangelical positions on gender roles: Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). Both groups have produced extensive scholarship and popular-level discussion of issues related to gender (see http://www.cbeinternational.org/ and http://cbmw.org/). CBE promotes egalitarian views; CBMW promotes what might be called "traditional" perspectives on gender distinctions. Christians, however, exhibit a nuanced view of gender roles, accounting for the difference between practice and gender schemas. For example, how people organize decision-making and daily work allocation sometimes differs from what they profess to believe (e.g., Gallagher, 2003; Wilcox, 2004).

C. Rethinking Boundaries

Jesus was uniquely able to violate or transcend boundaries in order to bring outsiders back into the community. Jesus was willing to meet and even touch people called unclean. Here, the second person of the Holy Trinity does something that by Jewish law would make someone unclean. He was violating the holiness code. Yet, Scripture did not suggest Jesus became unclean, or was declared unclean by the religious leaders observing him interacting with people outside Jewish *holy* categories. His holiness was greater than the uncleanness of the unclean, and that Jesus' grace defeated the sinfulness of others. Jesus' *purity* was transferred to the lepers instead of the leper's disease contaminating Jesus.

Reflecting God's holiness, Christians, too, can be redemptive in the use of boundaries. St. Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth stated that children are sanctified by a believing parent even if the other parent is an unbeliever. Furthermore, an unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse. The believing spouse is not to leave an unbeliever *merely* because that person is an unbeliever. Separation, in these cases, seems to be an unnecessary boundary.   In a broader sense, Christians do not leave "the world" when they become Christians. Being a faithful Christian includes interacting with people who are not necessarily Christian; people who might be called unclean or sinners (I Corinthians 5:9-11).

Rethinking boundaries can also apply to the topic of inter-racial marriages. It seems as though the Old Testament makes a distinction – that the Jewish people should not inter-marry with outsiders (ex. Deuteronomy 7:3; Jeremiah 29). Moses married someone outside the Hebrew ethnicity and was criticized by his own family members (Numbers 12:1). However, God did not condemn this exogamous marriage. In fact, God united certain Gentiles into the lineage of Christ. In the New Testament, Christians are not to marry unbelievers. The solution to this riddle of whether or not to marry someone racially or ethnically different seemed to focus on whether the prospective spouse served the one true living God (e.g., I Corinthians 7.39). That appears to be the God-given boundary.

D. On Idolatry

In another area of re-thinking boundaries, Christians need to resolve confusion between appropriate and inappropriate goals for material well-being and success. Idolatries blur the boundaries between what an individual might covet and what is needed. The distinction between proper rest and work is also blurred. Some boundaries promote health and well-being and other boundaries do not. For example, an article in the *Christian Scholars Review* focused on the problems of stress and *workaholism* (Diddams, Surdyk, Daniels & Van Duzer, 2004). Kasser (2003) made materialism his main theme. The former piece delineated the consequences of overwork and lack of rest, illuminating the topic from a biblical perspective. The latter showed

that the more people strive for "external" goods, such as fame, money or beauty, the lower the respondents scored on a happiness scale. However, the more people focus on relationships and internally held goals such as personal growth, the happier the respondents were. According to Kasser (2003), the results were probably due, in part at least, to materialistically-inclined individuals spending large amounts of time and energy pursuing financial or status rewards while neglecting relationships and goals related to personal growth.

Because the human heart is idolatrous, re-thinking boundaries takes vigilance and persistence. This can happen only through the Grace of God. Sanctification can be thought of as process of renewing one's mind (Romans 12.2) or thinking God's thoughts after him (Frame, 1995).

Conclusion

Readers of this paper should have seen holiness as the Biblical basis for God-given boundaries and distinctions. This key insight is helpful for analyzing contemporary American society with its blurring of boundaries, overemphasis on boundaries, idolatry, and more specifically, with issues of boundaries in the area of marriage and family, gender roles, social identity, and materialism. From this, it can be concluded that there is a more recent overlap between what sociological research has demonstrated and biblical insights in some areas (e.g. the recent research on the effects of divorce), and in other areas there are gaps that should be considered, discussed and written about from a Christian sociological perspective.

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