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Social Analysis for the 21st Century

Book Review

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Maria Cimperman, in her book *Social Analysis for the 21st Century*, explores and engages with the topics of “seeing, analyzing, reflecting, and responding” toward what we sense and discern God wants for the world. (Cimperman, p.11) She specifically shows how to apply the steps and techniques of social analysis merged with the process of what is known as the *pastoral spiral*. Her book takes very seriously the current context when tackling questions and issues related to ethics and social change. Right from the beginning the author emphasizes that this is a book about hope: hope that is rooted in Christ and brings forth not mere change but genuine and lasting transformation.

In the first few chapters Cimperman provides an astounding introduction as well as an overview of the Scriptures and theology. This provides a well-established theological foundation for the upcoming chapters that lay out very practical, hands-on steps of how to respond to our current 21st century context. Although the author does not have a specific geographical focus as the reference point in the book, she does provide a few very detailed examples of application. The very last chapter specifically focuses on a very clear sampling of cases, showing how the theory works in real life in real situations. Once again, the key point is a proactive hope rooted in Christ: “Hope is not inattentive to the realities around us. In fact, hope must be rooted in reality.” (Ibid, p.29) She also emphasizes that transformation (another key word) rooted in hope manifests itself as radical, embodied, imaginative and relational, which ultimately is the result of proper theological reflection and formation.

It is very important to note that the author draws our attention to the fact that our concern and our care are not primary, so to say. This means that before we ever had concern for something or someone, God did. Our care and concern originate in the very heart of God. Cimperman also highlights the broad meaning of the word *poor*. It does not simply imply lack or

absence of money. Proper biblical approach sheds light on this word, revealing its breadth and depth: “The *poor* in the Bible are almost without exception powerless people who experience economic and social deprivation.” (Ibid, p.35) Ultimately, our call and responsibility to engage in the transformative work of God through the means of social analysis is found in the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh. Once again, the incarnation reveals to us that the initiative always comes from God. He initiates, we respond and join in the work of Christ in our cities and in our neighborhoods. In addition to being called by God we need to be grounded in love and understand the value and purpose of community as the basis for healthy and holistic discipleship.

Before the author gets into the nitty-gritty of social analysis and the process and application of the *pastoral spiral*, she makes sure that our focal point is well considered and chosen properly based on appropriate criteria. Especially when it comes to urban life and urban ministry, so much is happening at one time and often one location. It is very easy to be distracted and overwhelmed by the amount of needs and issues present before us. This could lead to irrational and practically unattainable goals and ministry visions. In a way, the author suggests that it is okay to have a plan and measurable goals. Yes, it is true that we trust the Lord to do the impossible, but because of the importance of responsibility and accountability not only before God but also others, we need not shy away from practical steps and measurable tasks and goals. For example, the author states: “Stories and statistics both moved me to take action, though in different ways, and I am convinced that we need both to offer an effective response.” (Ibid, p.67) We need to exercise the convergence of both the spiritual and the practical.

Another step that the author takes before laying out the steps of social analysis is giving a warning: “A bias is usually present in social analysis; social analysis is rarely if ever value free. Values are key factors that guided the analysis.” (Ibid, p.81) Consequently, as Christians our

values are rooted in the reality of the presence and the future coming of the Kingdom God. As the author explains “This book is value-laden, and the values are clearly gospel-oriented—concerned with the dignity of each person and with the Earth community. (Ibid, p.81) Because *social analysis* is a puzzle piece of a larger circle, it is important to remember “Scripture and tradition are absolute necessities for considering issues...Any life issue will somehow be connected, but it is essential to make connections cogently and with proper theological grounding.” (Ibid, p.86) For this reason, Cimperman dedicates an entire chapter to the topic of faith reflection, the third movement in the *pastoral spiral*, as it pertains to discernment and decision-making. She stresses: “At this point our deepest values and the best possible responses we can imagine converge and move.” (Ibid, p.127) At first, the idea of reflection may sound relatively passive and maybe even disengaging. On the contrary, it is very proactive and necessitates complete and stretching engagement with our ourselves, the world around us and God: “Faith reflection, while ongoing, is a contemplative process of engaging as we gaze; it requires an attentive receptivity and a desire to listen to the Spirit’s invitation to respond to the cries of our world today.” (Ibid, p.145)

Social Analysis for the 21st is an excellent resource for those who are asking the question “what am I suppose to do?” This may seem at first like a daunting question, but with the proper tools and with the appropriate lens, we can truly begin to answer the question in a way that would honor God and bring the restoration of human dignity in our cities across the globe. This book should find its proper place on the shelf of every community leader.

Works Cited

Cimperman, Maria. *Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action*.

Orbis Books, 2015.