

# Review Article

## Social Psychology for Theological Education and Christian Unity

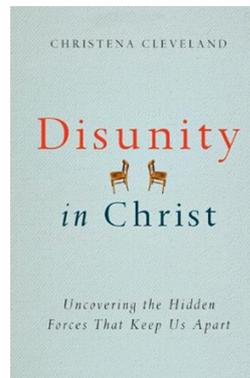
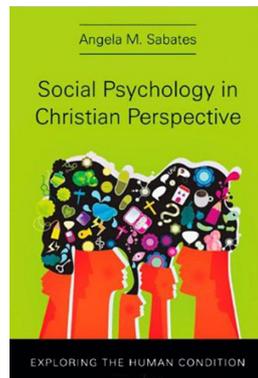
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Angela M. Sabates. *Social Psychology in Christian Perspective. Exploring the Human Condition*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012. HB, 567 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-3998-9. USD

Christena Cleveland. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2013. Pbk. 220 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-4403-6. USD

### KEYWORDS:

| interdisciplinarity | social psychology | theological education | ecypal theology |  
| christian unity | ecumenism |



For decades, theological educators such as David Kesley, Edward Farley, Robert Bank, Robert Ferris, and more recently, Carnegie S. Calian and LeRoy Ford, have joined the ranks to urge the re-envisioning of seminary education. In North America, seminaries accredited with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) have implemented steps to become multicultural.<sup>1</sup> Globally, theological education trends show sensitivity to local and international perspectives,<sup>2</sup> and reconciliation in missions has also been observed.<sup>3</sup> In some

quarters, theological education has sought to become ecumenically more inclusive of different Christian traditions.<sup>4</sup> Some even engage in inter-religious ecumenical learning.<sup>5</sup> Pedagogically, research on teaching and its practice continue to inform theological educators.<sup>6</sup> In Europe, Protestant education continues to undergo reconstruction to engage its religious diversity.<sup>7</sup> Methodologically and

1 E.g., David Esterline and Ogbu Kalu, *Shaping Beloved Community: Multicultural Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Jessica Davis, *Diversity Strategic Planning Report: An Environment Scan of U.S. Theological Schools* (Princeton, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.: Faith and Public Policy Institute, 2014).

2 Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, and Joshva Raja, eds., *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

3 Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen, *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation* (Regnum Books International, 2013).

4 E.g., Peter Schreiner, Esther Banew, and Simon Oxley, eds., *Holistic Education Resource Book: Learning and Teaching in an Ecumenical Context* (Germany: Waxman Verlag, GmbH, 2005); Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Dietrich Werner, Thomas FitzGerald, eds., *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education* (Regnum Books International, 2014).

5 Gert Ruppell, and Peter Schreiner, eds., *Shared Learning in a Plural World: Ecumenical Approaches to Interreligious Education* (Lit Verlag, 2003).

6 E.g., journals, *Teaching Theology and Religion by Wabash Center*, and *Christian Scholar's Review* by Council of Christian Colleges & Universities.

7 Hans-Gunter Heimbrock, Christoph Th. Scheilke, and Peter Schreiner, eds., *Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe* (Lit

in substantive content, theological curriculum (in biblical, theological, historical, pastoral, educational, and missiological studies) has also expanded interdisciplinarily. We live in unprecedented times, with ever-expanding horizons to equip churches in the service and mission of the gospel.

Theological educators and learners continue to be guided by a belief that holding the right truth-claim(s) will transform thinking, beliefs, and behavior. As Evangelicals, we would affirm Truth's fundamental role in shaping doctrines, morals, and practices.<sup>8</sup> Still, Evangelicals would also promote the triadic conception of orthodoxy (right beliefs and worship), orthopraxy (right action or application of beliefs), and orthopathy (right passion or values) as a model for wholistic Christian nurture, and rightly so too.<sup>9</sup> However, for some Evangelicals, orthodoxy sits at the apex of the triangulated theological model of transformation.<sup>10</sup> Yet, God freely effectuates Christian nurture and transformation by inverting the triadic model. In the aftermath of revival movements, i.e., after encountering God's spontaneous and dramatic acts in the affective life of believers

and in church practices, cognitively expressed doctrines undergo revision so as to better articulate an understanding of God and His ways.<sup>11</sup> The process only reveals how finitude affects human life and our quest for deeper knowledge of God in the religious quest.<sup>12</sup> The process also clarifies that doctrinal truth-claims, as fundamental as these are, remain incomplete explication of Truth, because ultimately, only God alone has the complete comprehension of Truth (because He is the Great, I AM). What I have explained so far does not repudiate Evangelicalism's fundamental scriptural axiom (John 8:32; 14:6): it merely reminds that Truth lies more profoundly than our finitude can ever comprehend. Thus, the classical distinction between archetypal and ectypal types of theology keeps finite beings humble: God sovereignly reveals and conceals. In as much as it is necessary for humanity's salvation, God has revealed. However, Abba is not obliged to illuminate all truths, even Truth, exhaustively to us. He did, however, make clear that He alone, in the Incarnate Christ, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The knowledge of God known only to God, concealed from humanity, belongs only to God (archetypal theology) whilst the knowledge revealed to man (ectypal theology) is a gift, albeit that we will continue to grow in comprehension even of ectypal truth, and of truth concerning God's creation.

If readers could accept my statements of the need for broadening theological education's scope to better formulate truth-claims and

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Verlag, 2001); Peter Schreiner, Gaynor Pollard, and Sturla Sagberg, eds., *Religious Education and Christian Theologies: Some European Perspectives* (Germany: Waxman Verlag, GmbH, 2006); Peter Schreiner, *Religion im Kontext einer Europäisierung von Bildung* (Germany: Waxman Verlag, GmbH, 2012).

8 E.g., Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and the Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

9 E.g., Paul R. Stevens, *Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 254; Henry K. Knight III, *Is There a Future for God's Love: An Evangelical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 2012), 3-34; Noel B. Woodbridge, "Living Theologically – Towards a Theology of Christian Practice in Terms of the Theological Triad of Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Orthopathy as Portrayed in Isa 6:1-8: A Narrative Approach," *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 66.2(2010): 1-6.

10 Henry K. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1997).

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11 Steven Lands, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). In retrospect, some of Jonathan Edwards' writings reassessed and reformulated the then existing doctrinal conceptions of God, truth, beliefs, and practices in light of the renewal movements in Northampton.

12 Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Finitude and Theological Anthropology: An Interdisciplinary Exploration into Theological Dimensions of Finitude* (Louvain: Peeters, 2011).

comprehend the Truth, then, you would want to read the two books am reviewing. This short article explains, via my review of the two books, why theological education should include the subject, social psychology, in its revised curriculum. Seminary prepares ministerial candidates to be change agents for God in church and society. Change agents attend, not only to the interpretation and proclamation of revealed truth, but also to non-theological factors that influence beliefs and practices, so as to steer the churches' present state to their desired stage. It is here that social psychological insights could complement the Christian leadership's quest to be God's instrument, along with the necessary theological roles of interpreting, formulating, and retelling biblical truth. It is also here that the two volumes provide resources to deepen a Christian perspective of creation, redemption, and the witness and mission of the Church, albeit with insights outside of theological loci *per se* (especially for the first book under review).

The subject of both books under review is social psychology. The discipline seeks to understand human behavior and should not only interest colleagues in psychology but also those seeking ministerial vocations. Human behavior is integral to Christian formation, witness, and mission. Furthermore, it is in human attitude and behavior that education realizes its transformative goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. In part, this is because Christians grow or experience stagnation in cooperation with the intersubjectivity dynamics of individual, intra-individual, interpersonal, intra-groups, and intergroup developments. Furthermore, human interaction and development are also subjected to the interplay of social/group conformity, attitudes, stereotypes, aggression, pro-sociality,

friendship, and relations of attractions (with a significant other) in the human life and developmental cycle: these multi-variant dimensions of life impact and continually shape our beliefs, convictions, affectivity, practice, and experience of God. Here, we locate the contributions of both Angela Sebates and Christena Cleveland, who, though they write about social psychology for a broad Christian audience, it is also clear that their goals, orientations, presuppositions, and depth of contents treatment differ from one another. I must immediately add a caveat here: though social psychology has been typically assumed to stand in the trajectory of the secular-humanist foundation of the social sciences, there are alternatives to this approach. Both the authors provide Christian perspectives, albeit that some similarities and differences exist between their work. I say this to nullify any assumption that both authors published their works as secular social scientists. Deliberate attempts to approach their discipline from Christian perspectives are evident, though I would not be surprised that secular scientists may find some of their Christian presuppositions and approaches unconvincing. For instance, while both authors do not come across as natural-selectionists, the field of social psychology has been dominated by natural-selection presuppositions that may be turned on their head. It is however not my focus in this review article to run with a tangential argument.

Angela Sebates teaches as an associate professor of psychology at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota. Chiefly, she proposes a theistic reading of social psychology, with a theological confluence of creation, fall, and redemption, to contravene the typical non-theistic evolutionary perspective in social psychology. The book is suited as a high school to college level textbook on

social psychology from a Christian perspective, although her treatment of backgrounds in case studies and reported findings are much less informative than a typical college-level social psychology text.<sup>13</sup> And because she writes for a more advanced-general Christian readership that could handle more sophisticated concepts and learning in the broader field of social psychology for their own development (though not as professional social psychologists), Sebates has made an important contribution. Even though she does not target her work as a complement to theological education, her decision to publish with InterVarsity Academic Press already indicates her desire to reach a critical Christian audience, which would include theological educators and seminarians. In this volume, she successfully introduces, collates, and summarizes important analyses in social psychological themes, case studies, and findings, even as far back as empirical study results from the earlier part of the twentieth century. She claims that the field has advanced research and discoveries of more than seventy-five years. It resonates with historiographies on the development of social psychology, especially after post world wars.<sup>14</sup> However, she does not make sufficient connections with the development of sociality from the eighteenth century Europe to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (London) which preceded contemporary advances.<sup>15</sup>

13 Compare with textbooks by Roy F. Baumeister and Brad J. Bushman, *Social Psychology and Human Nature, Comprehensive Edition* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), or Susan Fiske, *Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology* (New York: Wiley and Wiley, 2014).

14 Arie W. Kruglanski and Wolfgang Stroebe, eds., *Handbook of the History of Social Psychology* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011).

15 Gustav Jahoda, *A History of Social Psychology: From Eighteenth-Century Enlightenment to the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Sebates' treatment has provided a clear path for connecting this supposedly secular field of empirical research and learning in domains of social psychology with Christian reflection, using the threefold theological motif of creation, fall, and redemption. In the ten chapters, the volume includes methods and assumptions of social psychology, Christianity and social psychology, the self in the social, understanding others in social perception and social cognition processes, social influence (through group conformity, attitudes, and persuasions), antisocial behaviors (aggression, prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination), prosocial helping behavior, and interpersonal attraction and relationships. The materials contain rich resources on the power and processes of individual and group influence for prosocial and anti-social convictions and actions. For a field of studies that has largely been scattered and non-unitive (i.e., without an overarching framework that other social psychologists would agree or adhere to) Sebates has done a good job in bringing these insights in a coherent way. Her threefold theological engagement of creation, fall, and redemption, with themes in social psychology in each chapter is one primary reason why she has effectively brought some of the sub-fields of social psychology together in her volume. And though she appears to have given secondary roles to dominant theories like social identity theory, she has managed to reorganize the body of social psychological findings to suit her purposes. Thus, some degree of repetition, e.g., ingroup-outgroup dynamics, social categorization, etc., is to be expected. She did manage to minimize these repetitions and highlight their various contributions to her organizing structure. Each of her three chapters – “social influence,” “attitudes and persuasion,” and “prejudice, stereotypes, and

discrimination” – could have been brought to a sharper focus if she discussed them as intragroup and intergroup processes. But for a work that is slightly more than 550 pages, Sebates has condensed pertinent literature in her field with some depth and breadth of discussion for her purpose and readership. There are 18 pages on glossary of terms, and 72 pages of bibliography.

Compared with Sebates' volume, Christena Cleveland who teaches at St. Catherine University obviously writes for a less sophisticated audience. In ten short, readable chapters, Cleveland gathers social psychological insights to explain a specific issue: the unseen dynamics as to why churches remain in disunity. Combined with personal biographical narratives, Cleveland easily brings core technical concepts with lively examples, humor, and analogies well within the grasp of a general and popular Christian readership such as those who are familiar with InterVarsity Press. Readers will not miss the primary question asked in each chapter, even as the chapter-titles clearly show some social psychological insights to aspects of unity and division within and among churches. More importantly, Cleveland's presentation did not come across as cut-and-dry empirical reports. The theories and processes that she has engaged do cover the pertinent cases and findings, such as group polarization, shared identity, prejudices, group homogeneity effect, categorization processes of ingroup and outgroups, sociometer, social identity theory, self-serving bias, self-attribution theory, and conflict dynamics between groups such as black sheep, cultural identity, and common identity marker. And because of Cleveland's sharp focus, she has been able to channel discussions toward reconciliation and healing in interchurch and intercultural Christian relations today. If there is a major

drawback, Cleveland does not explain how her project would weigh in for churches that typically locate or justify their disunity on grounds of the fundamental differences in theology or theological systems. She presents her data as if churches should be reasonably open to these hidden dynamics at work. As a result, readers who are not convinced by her propositions – no doubt well collated from social psychological insights – would wonder if disunity is indeed a consequence arising and continuing entirely from social psychology intersubjectivities, in and between individuals and groups. To Cleveland's aid, her concluding chapter challenges churches/Christians who have formulated identities that have become too small and too color blinded (or culturally blinded) in ways that no longer commensurate with the pre-eminence of Christians' identity we have all received in Christ. And with her earlier chapter on creating positive cross-cultural interactions to correct blind spots and biasness, and antidotes from other chapters on reconciliation, this will be warmly received as a resource with good and practical suggestions.

Here is why I would recommend both volumes. As an ecumenist who has examined the ecumenical recognition of churches in interdisciplinary perspectives, I appreciated the value each brings to the table, despite my critique of their weaknesses. Sebates moderates between highly dense subject fields for an advanced Christian readership, while Cleveland presents the information much more accessibly to a general to popular Christian audience. If only these volumes were available when I first started to write my Ph.D. dissertation, I would have cut my navigation of the maze by six months of rigorous work. That said, historical and ecumenical theologians would probably not be convinced by these volumes,

especially Cleveland's, if Sebates and others' work are not available to show the complicities and multi-dimensionality involved. We stand at a threshold of a yet better future, with better resources that inform of the churches' realities, which cannot be explained merely by theological accounts. Non-theological factors, such as human dynamics, often provide explanations that theological truth purports. For instance, while theological anthropology recognizes human propensity to sin on account of the Fall and human altruism to the *imago dei*, social psychology explains human behavior without necessarily connecting behaviorism to the divine; however, it does not necessarily mean that theological truth and social scientific understanding cannot cohere so much as to compel readers to choose between either of the conceptions. Ultimately, social psychology's empirical findings and theorizations should line up with biblical truth, because all truth is God's truth, and they should not contradict. Any ambiguities or ambivalence between the findings of social/human sciences and theological claims means that more work is required to clarify the extent of their complementarity or differentiation. Furthermore, the lack of apparent complementarity could also mean that scientific explanations remain incomplete renditions of Truth even as human apprehension of truth will never arrive at full archetypal theology known only to God.

As Cleveland opens her book, we all hold various notions of right from wrong, and as Christians, we prize some articulations of truth and condemn or criticize others. Without relativizing differences, Christians are called to respond to differences and be bridge-bearers for Christ. And often without our awareness or conscious knowledge, we respond and react to those who are like-minded (ingroups) and those

who differ (outgroups) because of the layering of group conformity dynamics at work. These segregations continue, often unjustifiably, when we focus on what differentiates us, and because of the suspicion, prejudices, and stereotypes we hold against each other. At times, differences are exaggerated to the extent that their common identities are no longer recognizable. Competing groups become further polarized for identity-formation, likability, security, comfort, and stability. Group categorization occurs, and thereby distorts mutual reception of each other, especially when information against the other is exaggerated to disparage or belittle them, and when we condone what we would not normally accept from a less-favorable outgroup because of group-serving biasness, ingroup favoritism, or group attribution dynamics. Through these processes and other dynamics in cultural wars (which replay these dynamics in cultural complicities instead of only in inter-ecclesiastical battles) we develop mutual perceptions and influence equivocally, thereby exacerbating disagreements and widening the gulf between groups. Anyone who has worked with people would be able to attest to many of these reported dynamics. And with the more advance explanations in Sebates' volume, readers would be poised to relate their own realities with their experiences of successes and failures in the course of their life and ministry. Could these mistakes have been avoided if churches and leaders were equipped with the knowledge as to how humans interact and how groups work with or against each other?

If theological education in the twenty-first century and beyond can no longer ignore other disciplinary contribution to the quest for truth about God, creation, and creation's roles in God's world, then, both Sebates and Cleveland would enrich our goal. I conclude this review-

article as one convinced of the importance of interdisciplinary work, and of the prospective role theological education can become as God's change agents in the churches and society. Thus, I ask, what are the pillars of seminary education today, if the years of formal theological education are the seasons God equips workers for His service in His field? God-field, we must remember, exists in culture even though eschatologically, this temporal sphere and other-worldly existence are also God's field. We can only seek to be God's change agents where we are called, placed, and planted. No one escapes the socio, political, and ecclesiastical realities of life that we are placed as disciples of Christ. Real-life ministry reveals that inasmuch as biblical, historical, theological, and practical ministry foundations are needed, ministry (that is inherently relational and transformational) requires some competency in the bolts and nuts of human intra-personal interaction, human sociality, and intra-and-intergroup processes. To emulate Christ's incarnational ministry of reconciliation is to be light/love-bearers and boundary-crossers between ingroups and outgroups, and here, insights from social psychology could enrich God's workers preparing for service in God's field. Otherwise, when we are eventually placed for service, our

own conceptions, esteems, quarrels, attitudes, stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations, could stall the witness we are called to bear, mobilize, and crossfrontiers. Hence, I conclude that all who seek service in the name of Christ should not ignore the two books under review, even as we await a more focused treatment of social psychology in and for the churches' manifold witness and mission of the gospel among the churches and in the world.

#### **Timothy LIM Teck Ngern**

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