

REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

*Social Relationships
in Ancient Scripture and
Contemporary Culture*

JOHN BRUEGGEMANN
AND
WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Book design by Erika Lundbom-Krift
Cover design by Mark Abrams*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brueggemann, John, 1965-, author. | Brueggemann, Walter, 1965- author.
Title: Rebuilding the foundations : social relationships in ancient scripture and contemporary culture / John Brueggemann and Walter Brueggemann.
Description: First edition. | Louisville, Kentucky : Westminster John Knox Press, [2017]
Identifiers: LCCN 2016041540 (print) | LCCN 2016048632 (ebook) | ISBN 9780664262655 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781611647884 (ebk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Sociology, Biblical. | United States—Social conditions—21st century. | United States—Economic conditions—21st century. | United States—Moral conditions—21st century
Classification: LCC BS670 .B78 2017 (print) | LCC BS670 (ebook) | DDC 261.0973—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016041540>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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for
James Bonner Brueggemann
our well-beloved son and brother

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INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING IS TORN IN THE FABRIC OF AMERICAN SOCIETY. We lead the industrialized world in child poverty, food insecurity, homicide, incarceration, carbon dioxide emissions per capita, and the number of billionaires. Confidence in core institutions like government, business, unions, journalism, education, and the criminal justice system has reached record lows. Our leaders cannot seem to make decisions or pass laws that most citizens want. Ordinary people make choices destructive to themselves and one another. Gross domestic product goes up, but so many feel like they have less. The collusion of government and big quiet money has designed a redistribution system that leads to even greater concentrations of wealth, in turn resulting in the evaporation of the common good and the unbearable displacement

of vulnerable persons in the political economy. That extraction system now has global reach, so the displacements are global in scope.

How did we get to this point? What is it that really matters in our shared life? Why is it so hard to keep our attention on such things? What kinds of conversations must we have to reorient our lives? These are the concerns that animate this book. More specifically, what do sociology and biblical interpretation have to say about such matters? What do sociologists and biblical scholars have to say to one another? What common ground do they have? And where do they necessarily part ways?

In pursuing these matters, we have several goals in mind, listed here in no particular order. The first is autobiographical and confessional. As much as the essays below decry the moral disorder of our time, we seek to lay out our own struggles. Our interrogation is directed as much to our own assumptions and complacency as it is to anyone else's. We ourselves are habituated in a strong moral tradition; that moral tradition, however, is anemic in its present form in the face of these complexities that pose immense challenges. The problems of our time are not simply the result of some elemental evil force, but rather reflect a complicated historical moment in which the structural arrangements and cultural circumstances have been aligned to disastrous effects.

How we respond to this moment, individually and collectively, is a vexing challenge indeed. We proceed in the conviction that reframing these complex issues in a moral narrative that is critically informed and that does

not evade the depth and complexity of the issues is work that is worth doing.

This is not an abstract set of social variables that intrigues us, but a lived experience with daily dilemmas. Do I have the right job? Am I working too hard? Saving enough? Are the pressures my boss or coworkers put on me legitimate? Am I asking the right things of my children? Am I pushing them too hard? What food should we be eating? What media should we be consuming? Am I volunteering enough? Donating enough? Is my household environmentally responsible? Am I compromising too much? Not enough? Am I advocating enough? Am I thinking clearly and imaginatively enough?

Together, such endless questions about how to live reflect something about modernity. Charles Derber calls it “the overburdened self.” Michael Pollan talks about “the omnivore’s dilemma,” which relates to Barry Schwartz’s broader notion of “the paradox of choice.” Problems of scarcity and abundance are tied up in complicated ways. No, this is not merely about the collusion of a few greedy strongmen—though such efforts are certainly part of the problem. It is more complicated and involves all of us.

As personal as this topic is, we also have a modest theoretical agenda in this project. The framework for our commentary is derived from Jonathan Haidt’s moral foundation theory. Haidt is a moral psychologist who has studied a broad range of evidence and arguments from archaeology, anthropology, biology, history, psychology, and sociology. He has also carried out a number of laboratory experiments testing and retesting the arguments that comprise this theory.

Based on this work, Haidt and his colleagues have identified six moral foundations (Haidt 2006, 2007, 2012; Haidt and Graham 2009; Haidt and Joseph 2004):

Care versus Harm

Fairness versus Cheating

Liberty versus Oppression

Loyalty versus Betrayal

Authority versus Subversion

Sanctity versus Degradation

All societies that endure must confront fundamental questions about how they are going to arrange themselves. Each foundational category represents a dilemma that must be negotiated to the satisfaction of most people. If sufficient members of a group believe that cheating, harm, oppression, betrayal, subversion, and/or degradation are too common, through the actions of either leaders or other individuals, turmoil is not far off.

This project is *not* intended to test, assess, or extend Haidt's theory. We hope that it will be useful in fleshing out the meaning of the concepts embedded in the theory by adding evidence and insights from academic disciplines other than psychology. Being deeply grounded as we are in a covenantal narrative that yields a moral theory, we find Haidt's exposition illuminating of our own moral grounding. Haidt has given specificity to the impulses that are very deep for us. Ultimately, though, we are borrowing moral foundation theory for our own use. The extent to which we do make a theoretical contribution will be a collateral benefit.

A related and more important goal is to illuminate

the moral disorder of our time. This is the most fundamental point of the project. We seek to bear witness to the unsustainable patterns of life in twenty-first-century America and suggest possibilities for reorientation. Such a reorientation does not depend on more technology or more advances in scientific awareness. At bottom we are humanists, albeit “believing” humanists. For that reason we believe that any significant shift will be reorientation that takes the neighbor seriously (including our nonhuman neighbors), that intends the flourishing of the neighborhood as common good, and that, in our tradition, is grounded in a vision of holy intention that undergirds, anticipates, and summons to neighborliness.

A secondary aim here is dialogical. Some might regard this exchange as strange: sociologists are all naive leftists; people who love the Bible are premodern rubes. Right? How could they talk to, let alone learn from, one another? But it could not be more natural for us. Walter, who is a biblical scholar, was a sociology major in college. John, who is a sociologist, grew up in a family of clergy (including a biblical scholar!). As father and son, we have both been breathing in these topics and talking about them for a long time. To sit down and think through such conversations and convert them into more systematically developed formulations has felt logical and energizing.

But the dialogical agenda here is more ambitious than our own conversation. As noted above, we ourselves grapple with the troubles laid out here. So many people, including the two of us, often find false comfort and confidence within a little subcultural bubble where our certitudes are reinforced by the like-minded. The

imperative to engage in a discourse beyond such boundaries is central to this work.

Such dialogical discourse that may matter must cut below our usual mantras that we too readily reiterate. And when we go “below,” what we find is the reality of human suffering and pain. Some of that human pain seems to be an inescapable given. Much of it is structurally and historically generated among us. In any case, we share the conviction that truth that may inform our social practice has a peculiar alliance with pain. And when truth is offered that is not filtered through the reality of pain, it must at least be suspect. The moral narrative in which we are situated has known about that alliance of truth and pain long before Foucault, but the critical theory that swirls around Foucault and his cohorts is much in the background of our probes.

We trust that a few sociologists who take the Bible seriously will feel like we are preaching to the choir. We have no doubt, moreover, that a company of Scripture interpreters with an acute interest in sociological analysis will join us in the same choir loft. But all choirs need rehearsal as well as encouragement, and, we suspect, ours is rather small. More broadly, we hope anyone interested in sociology, the Bible, or the state of society will find some resonance and perhaps insight here. Or at least a topic to debate.

What follows are six chapters based on the six moral foundations mentioned above. In a conclusion we reflect on the themes that emerge over the six chapters, explaining how sociology and biblical interpretation inform and intersect with one another and where they necessarily part ways.