A Theological Perspective on Social Exchange Theory

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a brief review of the basic principles of social exchange theory with an emphasis on a social exchange model of conflict. The key concepts of justice, reciprocity, and equity comprised in social exchange theory are addressed from a social and theological perspective.

It seems that when people do a certain favor for a person of high position, that other person, no matter how exalted he happens to be, should, in common fairness, do something in return . . . The laws of politeness advocate a prompt return of favors, as everybody knows; but some, whose names we would not dream of repeating, for fear they might hear us, and hold it against us, seem to be so old and discourteous that they've lost all the common decencies that others observe.

In the excerpt from October Island March elucidates a basic relational concept that most societies adopt in one form or another. “Common fairness” includes each society’s mores about equity, reciprocity, and justice operative in their social relationships. When individuals, families, groups, and even nations perceive or experience equity and fairness in their system of exchanges with others, order and stability tend to prevail. However, when people begin to perceive or experience inequity and injustice, conflict becomes inevitable. March’s October Island illustrates the conflict and turmoil that can arise when the “common decencies” of social exchange are perceived to be disregarded.

Relational implications of social exchange, also known as equity theory, are cogent in the context of marital relationships. When relational exchanges within couples are perceived or experienced as injustices, conflict arises. The struggle and resistance that often accompany conflict either yield resolution through successful negotiation, or the conflict becomes regulated and maintained by coercion and at times even violence. When the conflict is resolved, a

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new exchange emerges, and the relationship exchange continues with a renewed sense of fairness and equity which tends to promote goodwill between the exchanging parties. However, when conflict is regulated rather than resolved, individuals often experience hostility and resentment. When one spouse feels that he or she is being exploited, the satisfaction of the relationship diminishes. If one person continues to feel exploited, the relationship may terminate or the old exchange will continue to cycle with increasing feelings of resentment and hostility occurring. Figure 1 presents a diagrammatic description of this social exchange conflict model adapted from Scanzoni.

Contemporary theology has addressed itself well to the psychoanalytic and humanistic schools of psychology. There is further need, however, for contemporary theologians to respond to the social and psychological principles encountered in social exchange theory. Liberation theology has been the most helpful in elaborating on many of the principles common to social exchange theory in the context of addressing issues of justice for all oppressed people regardless of race, creed, color, or gender. Since theology is not static, one must take seriously the imperative that theologians address any and all sci-

FIGURE 1

A Social Exchange Model of Conflict

[Diagram of the Social Exchange Model of Conflict]

- Relationship Exchange
- Injustice Experienced
- Conflict (Struggle, resistance)
- Hostility Resentment (feelings of ongoing exploitation, discontent)
- Termination of Relationship
- Old Exchange Continued
- New Exchange
- Resolution (negotiation)
- Regulation of Conflict (coercion, violence)