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The Sociology of Religion and Contemporary Strategies for the Church

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The SCM Press recently reissued a work by Alistair Kee entitled *The Way of Transcendence: Christian Faith without Belief in God,* which was originally published by Penguin in 1971. The decision to reissue the book at this time seems surprising, for in its original context Kee's work appeared as something of a 'swan-song' to the trend for radical, 'secular' forms of theology which featured strongly during the sixties.[1] The book cast a critical eye over all those attempts of the preceding decade to formulate theologies which would tie theological meaning securely to empirically graspable realities, and found them all wanting. It then went on to propose its own attractively presented, but none too precise alternative, based upon an understanding of Christian faith as essentially the commitment to Jesus as the exemplar and pioneer of a radically alternative way for the world.

Now, this theological episode of the sixties is commonly regarded today (especially, in my experience, by clergy who lived through it) as something of an aberration, a fit of temporary madness parallel to the entire cultural explosion of that now rather discredited 'permissive' era, otherwise known as the 'swinging sixties'.[2] But perhaps those responsible for the decision to reissue Kee's book perceived, and I believe rightly, that the substantive theological issues underlying those twenty-year old debates, and ably summarized by Kee, have by no means gone away, and indeed could rightly form a major part of a contemporary agenda for the churches. Such a view

1 These theologies, though covering a wide range of traditions and approaches, held in common the claim to be following up the suggestions about a secular form of faith, or a religionless Christianity, made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the months before his execution in 1945; see his *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 1953. For summaries and comment see R. J. Page, *New Directions in Anglican Theology,* 1967, ch. 7; P. Ferris, *The Church of England,* ch. 11; V. Mehta, *The New Theologian,* 1966; J. Macquarrie, *God and Secularity,* 1968; J. Bowden, *Voices in the Wilderness,* 1977; R. Gill, *The Social Context of Theology,* ch. 6, and *Theology and Social Structure,* ch. 5; A. M. Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World,* 1969; J. C. Cooper, *The Roots of the Radical Theology,* 1968; R. Holloway, *Let God Arise,* 1972.

2 For aspects of the counter-cultural movements of that decade see T. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter-Culture,* 1970; O. Guinness, *The Dust of Death,* 1973; and more recently B. Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change,* 1981.

could also help to explain the fact that John Robinson's *Honest to God,* the book which catapulted the whole 'secular theology' debate into the public arena in 1963, has also been found back in the bookshops in a further reprint.

In this article I want to raise again some of those underlying issues, giving to them an emphasis which was characteristic of the radical theologians of the sixties, namely their significance for the concrete life, structures and mission of the Church in contemporary society. For these theologians were concerned above all else to rediscover a preachable, communicable Gospel for modern-day hearers; and they knew very well that ultimately, any such concern must carry with it a concern for the Church: for here, willy-nilly, the modern man would look for indications of the realized meaning, the concrete embodiment of what theological language was all about.

The three issues from the sixties I want to update for present consideration are as follows:

i. The question of the relationship of Christianity and the Church to contemporary processes of *secularization,* typified by the sixties' search for a secular theology.[1] Broadly, we need to look more closely into the merits and demerits of possible stances of resistance and confrontation, or acceptance and adaptation, towards modern social trends in the name of the Gospel.

ii. The question of the relationship of *religion* to Christian faith, exemplified by the quest of radical theology for a 'religionless Christianity'.[2] We need to ask what our approach ought to be to the widespread incidences of *religion* within our culture, as we consider the Church's present means of commending the Gospel.

iii. The question of the proper shape and style of the Church's life as an *institution,* as witnessed by the radicals' preoccupation with the forms of Christian community and the modes of Christian action in the world.[3] We need to ask whether the interests of Christ's Gospel are best served by inclusive or exclusive, by communally-oriented or small-group commitment models of Church membership and participation.

1 Among the branches of 'secular theology' would be the 'Christian Radicalism' of J. A. T. Robinson in *Honest to God,* 1963, and *The New Reformation?,* 1965, reflected in Britain by many contributors to the journal *Prism;* the secular-social form of the Gospel advanced in America by Harvey Cox, *The Secular City,* 1965, and *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility,* 1969; the so-called 'death-of-God' school, eg, P. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel,* 1963, and W. Hamilton and T. J. J. Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God,* 1968; and the much more Bultmann-influenced work of Ronald Gregor Smith, *The New Man,* 1956, and *Secular Christianity,* 1966.

2 See the discussions in L. Morris, *The Abolition of Religion,* 1964; A. Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate,* 1966; L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man,* 1966; K. Hamilton, *What's New in Religion?,*1966.

3 Especially in writings emanating from the World Council of Churches (see eg, Colin Williams, *Where in the World?* and *What in the World?* 1964-5; *The Church,* 1969), Cf, also on the Roman Catholic side, R. Adolfs, *The Grave of God,* 1967.

Each of these issues invites examination from the point of view of the sociology of religion, because each has clearly to do with the problem of the concrete, societal expression of theological meanings, the empirical embodiment of the Gospel, and the sociology of religion is the specialist discipline which addresses itself to precisely this question. In the body of this article, therefore, I will try to indicate the difference an acquaintance with the sociology of religion ought to make to our approach to each of these issues, with special reference to the formulation of contemporary strategies for mission and renewal.[1]

Secularization

The process of secularization has typically been analyzed as a master-trend in modern society, representing all that is most problematic for the churches' bid to continue to commend the Christian faith to contemporary men and women.[2] This has been argued on at least two levels: in terms of changes in the social structure and the place and role of the churches within it, and also in terms of the patterns and styles of modern culture as an inhospitable soil for the sustenance and growth of religious ideas and beliefs.

Sociologists have described the social structure as presenting increasing compartmentalization and specialization. Distinct organizations, with their own professional qualifications and areas of expertise, take care of ever more narrowly circumscribed departments of our social life. For example, within the umbrella department 'education' there is a broad division into arts and sciences. But this is not all: for within the sciences there is a multitude of discrete disciplines each possessing its own continually enlarging body of highly specialized knowledge. Further, even within each discipline, an expanding range of minutely detailed research specialisms each gives rise to its own terminologies, techniques and professional subculture. Obviously the all-round educated man, the *savant* of old, is a dying, or already extinct, species.

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1 Contemporary issues for theology where sociological perspectives could help include the mushrooming House Church Movement, the debate about the nature of belief (see eg, A. Harvey, *Believing and Belonging,* 1984), the widening gulf between conservative and 'radical' or critical doctrinal parties within the Church, and the pastoral issues of infant baptism and women's ministry, as well as the Church of England's in-house uneasiness about Church and State.

2 The contours of this type of secularization theory were set early this century by Max Weber, eg, *The Sociology of Religion,* 1922. Sociology's most consistent proponent of a thoroughgoing secularization model for modern society has been Bryan Wilson; see *Religion in Secular Society,* 1966; *Religion in Sociological Perspective,* 1982. Balanced introductions to the discussion of secularization theory are in P. Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularization,* 1977; M. Hill, *A Sociology of Religion,* 1973, chs. 11 and 12; S. Budd, *Sociologists and Religion,* 1973; K. Dobbelaere, *Secularization: a Multi-Dimensional Concept,* 1981 issue of the journal *Current Sociology.*

But this means that the Christian Church no longer quite knows where it fits in, if it does at all. For the Church had become accustomed to laying claim quite naturally to an over-arching role across the spectrum of fields of knowledge, and to a unitive approach to implementing all of them in the name of social advance. Medicine, social services, political economy, as well as education – in all of these the Church once took the significant lead, but is now all too often treated as a well-meaning anachronism, or worse, an irrelevant and amateurish nuisance, by the professional guardians of each of these fields.

In its cultural aspect, secularization has usually been presented as entailing a loss of religious sensitivity. Advances in science and technology, with their dependence upon an enlightened grasp of the possibilities of human autonomy, have gradually reduced the salience of 'other-worldly' or spiritual thinking in the minds of ordinary modern people. Talk of God and spirit, life-after-death and salvation of the soul, ceases to be, as it were, legal tender among the mass of the population, who simply imbibe a post-religious, secular-scientific culture in an unreflective way as a part of the daily diet of newspaper, television, film and so on. The old Christian currency seems to have lost its value.

Such are the images of modern society presented by sociologists under the headings of jargon terms like 'differentiation', 'rationalization', 'disenchantment' and 'desacralization'. They offer a ready basis upon which theologians may regret, deplore or denounce modern societal trends in the interests of a radically oppositional conception of the Gospel. The task of the Church becomes simply a matter of summoning men and women to repentance, in the face of social trends; of winning over, through the power of Christ crucified and risen operating by the Holy Spirit, a body of the regenerate to the way of denial of this world in favour of the next.

But only a superficial reading of sociology supports this kind of assessment of the situation, to which forms of popular evangelicalism remain prone, whatever may be the refinements made in more scholarly circles. It is my argument that a more informed examination of the sociological material on secularization leads to a counsel of *caution* for all Christians who would treat sociology as providing conclusive evidence of the radical de-Christianization of contemporary society.

For the processes of secularization display a whole range of double features which materially affect the possible responses of the churches to them.[1] Firstly, every index of secularization is capable of being counterac-

1 The first serious questioning of the straightforward theory came with David Martin, eg, *A Sociology of English Religion,* 1967; *The Religious and the Secular,* 1969. In America secularization theory was opposed by Andrew Greeley, eg, *Unsecular Man,* 1973. For accounts trying to incorporate a more sophisticated form of secularization thesis see H. Fallding, *The Sociology of Religion,* 1974, ch. 7; H. Mol, *Identity and the Sacred,* 1976; and Martin himself, *A General Theory of Secularization,* 1978. For a brief popular discussion see Robin Gill, *Faith in Christ,* 1978, chs. 1 and 4. A recent introductory treatment is David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: the Myths and Realities of Secularization,* 1985. Most recent texts are cautious about reaffirming a simple thesis.

ted by corresponding evidences of religious continuity, and this alerts us to the fact that secularization is far from being a unitary and uni-directional phenomenon. For example, whereas the measurement of church-going over, say, the last 100 years, reveals an overall picture of steady decline (with a few 'bumps' on the graph), evidence of the sorts of things people believe and consider to be 'Christian' in the most general sense suggests a much more constant 'undertow' of popular religiosity.

Again, while conventional Church religion declines, interest in all manner of alternative religious options, from Buddhism and ideas of reincarnation to horoscopes and the occult, flourishes. While this may not be comforting news for the churches, it does challenge the assumption that the modern 'secular' culture somehow makes supernaturalist belief itself more difficult to embrace.

Secondly, while secularization can appear as a complex of processes representing a move away from religion, it can also be presented as in part the product of an ongoing collusion of the Christian religion with its historical context. In brief, the type of society we have today, with its range of specialist vocations, its commitment to progress, and its belief in the autonomy of man and the potential of the human project, can in considerable measure be traced back to developing understandings, since the Renaissance, of the implications of the Christian Gospel for man's proper role and calling in God's created order.[1]

Insofar, then, as it is true that secularization can be regarded as a *fruit* of Christian faith, we have to accept that certain less attractive aspects of secularism are likewise inevitable 'fruits' tied into this process. This alerts us to the fact that the Gospel's fruits in concrete socio-cultural terms can never be unambiguously judged to be sound and proper. There is always a fresh process of reviewing, criticising and even rejecting fruits in the light of the selfsame Gospel. This does not mean attempting in the process to deny that these were really 'true' fruits at all. The churches' judgment upon secularization must therefore overcome the simple dichotomous options of either deploring or welcoming.

Thirdly, although secularization theory presents in many respects a bleak and unpromising analysis of contemporary religious life and of the prospects of the churches, it also suggests that some seeds of hope may lie in the more negative parts of the analaysis, whereas reservations are raised

1 The sociological *locus classicus* here is Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* 1905, about which debate has raged ever since its first publication. P. Berger in *The Social Reality of Religion,* 1969, expressed the idea in the general terms that 'historically, Christianity has been its own gravedigger'; see O. Guinness, *The Gravedigger File,* 1981.

about those aspects of contemporary religious life which the churches might be inclined to regard as the more hopeful.[1]

Let me explain: such things as the modernization of liturgical language, the development of a closer quality of fellowship *(koinonia)*, the desire for unstructured freedom in worship, the demand for ever stricter baptismal discipline – all features of a good deal of contemporary evangelical church life – *may* (though they *need* not) become simply the expression of a further cultural collusion of Christianity, and not a particularly promising one for the long-term. For these features *may* appear to *define* 'true Christianity' by certain characteristics congenial to a small, influential sector of the contemporary population: the articulate, younger professional classes for whom a charismatic intimacy of church life substitutes for a community spirit which the structures of wider social life nowadays preclude.

On the other hand, what appears cold and comfortless about secularization may, after all, suggest to the churches a valid and necessary programme of social and cultural criticism. For undoubtedly *some* components of the prevailing ideology are developing in a line radically inimical to the Gospel. A Church that appears marginal, almost irrelevant, made-of-none-effect in society is precisely the Church which can dare to undertake critique where necessary. Of course, this involves the Church in recognizing its own inescapable complicity in the production of the state of affairs it criticises. Therefore, an attitude of humility and compassion, not just hostility and denunciation, is called for.

But the Church cannot begin to combat or criticise anything that belongs to the secular unless it heightens, maximises and makes effective all that symbolism of the sacred and transcendent which is the distinctive property of its own institutional life. And it is here that a sociological understanding of *religion* can offer us some guidelines for recapturing the Church's distinctive social function.

Religion

Many evangelicals retain a suspicion of the term 'religion' when applied to Christianity. The formal theological ground for this may be the powerful Barthian tradition which interpreted all man's religion as just so much evidence of the sinful pride which grasps at God, instead of acquiescing in the powerlessness of man to do anything toward his salvation but to await a definitive word of address and grace from beyond him. More often, the practical ground may be the frequency with which lifelong churchgoers or

1 Both Bryan Wilson and David Martin, while disagreeing about the interpretation of the data undergirding the secularization thesis, unite in their judgment that certain 'modernizations' in the churches are less the signs of new life than of adaptations to the age; see Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, 1976, and everywhere in Martin's copious essays and articles, especially on the subject for which he is best known (to the detriment of his chances of getting a fair hearing for his other work), namely the recent revisions of liturgical language.

conventionally religious persons appear to lack the commitment to Christ and spiritual liveliness which betoken true conversion: in brief, 'religion' seems to be the province of the once-born, those who say 'Lord, Lord' but fail to show the fruits of a genuine profession.

The work of sociologists of religion offers grounds for criticising this kind of attitude, which is ultimately theologically restrictive as well as wasteful of the real religious resources still present in our culture. For whatever else Christian faith may be, it undoubtedly appears in society under the manifold forms, conventions, institutions, myths and rituals of religion, organized and unorganized; and these provide a rich cultural phenomenon which the churches despise at their peril.

Sociologists used to be interested in trying to arrive at a comprehensive *definition* of religion, which might be serviceable within *all* religious traditions, based inevitably upon some prior idea of what the 'essence' of the religious ought to be.[1] However, more recent work has focussed upon the undeniable *presence,* within a given society, of a range of phenomena, an entire cultural complex, which common consent would happily identify as 'religion'.[2] It is, therefore, the *religious cultural system* as it is manifested within our contemporary society that we should be interested in, which means in sum a counsel of *inclusiveness* about what we are prepared to regard as a *possible* carrier of some aspects of the Gospel within our culture. This we set alongside our counsel of *caution* about easy attitudes of opposition to secularization.

One notable feature of the way in which religious ideas, modes of thinking, customs and behaviours are employed, largely unreflectively, by individuals and groups in their construction of the world is their persistent dual function. Religion is appealed to in order to explain or justify aspects of the prevailing system of things, to say why society is how it is, to anchor the *status quo* in a kind of timeless and invariable divinely-decreed order, and hence to provide arguments against change. But religious categories are also employed, at different times but by the same people, to give

1 The classic definition of religion belongs to Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* 1915; 'a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them'. Some definitions have tried to pinpoint the religious essence even more narrowly than this; see eg, J. M. Yinger, *Sociology Looks at Religion,* 1963. R. Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion,* 1970, analyzes the different types of definition.

2 This is in line with Weber's refusal to begin his own sociology of religion by arbitrarily defining his subject; he wanted to examine whatever the society in question commonly considered to be 'religion' a procedure approved by, eg, Budd and Fallding in the works cited above. As a perceptible cultural whole, religion is then best analyzed by resolving it into a number of aspects or 'dimensions', as in N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind, 1971;* P. Slater, *The Dynamics of Religion,* 1979; and by the theologian G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine,* 1984.

expression to longings for a new and different, in short a better, order of things, and hence to justify pressure for change.[1]

This dual function might appear self-contradictory if it were not for the fact that just such a dialectical movement between stability and transformation, orientations to the past and to the future, tradition and promise, characterizes Christian faith and the Gospel. We need to be alert to the incidence of the culturally embodied and usually only peripherally Christian forms of this movement still alive in our contemporary religious culture.

The sociological model which helps us here is that which approaches religion as a cultural system, embodied in myths and doctrines, ritual and ethical practice, and social groupings, all expressing an orientation to the transcendent. This is variously characterized as the sacred, the holy or the divine, but particularly in terms of a whole world-order, an 'other world' conceived as the ultimate basis for and legitimation of the order of the experienced social world of the group. Because this 'sacred cosmos' or other world of religion appears as a fulfilled, perfected and normative or ideal version of this world, it not only grounds it in a metaphysical order, but also exercises a constraint over it. It comes as an imperative, summoning religious people to action to bring the world into conformity with its sacred counterpart.

For religion engages in sacred world-construction[2], embodied in ritual, symbol and social form; and the Church cannot hope to promote that construction which is impelled and informed by the vision of Jesus, without seeking to disentangle and understand the complex and compromised items of its own cultural heritage which appear dimly and distortingly reflected in the hall of mirrors constituted by the religious universes people actually sustain.

Our position means taking all manner of 'fringe practices' around the penumbra of the Church much more seriously than some evangelicals are

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1 For example, Barbara Hargrove (*Sociology of Religion,* 1979) writes of 'the common tendency, in dealing with matters of ultimate concern and sacred character, to want to preserve them in their exact form because they are too holy to manipulate. This is contrasted with an appreciation of the sacred cosmos as the repository of unreached ideals and untapped power, out of which may come at any time the impetus for major change leading to a better realization of those ideals,' Peter Berger has explained how the 'sacred cosmos' of religion comes to exercise a unique hold over men just because it presents itself as an image of how the world ought to be; Fallding develops a similar notion. T. O'Dea in his *Sociology of Religion,* 1966, shows how religion provides powerful motivations both for and against social change. B. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory,* 1983, incorporates this duality into a modification of the Marxist notion that religion functions only to bolster the *status quo.*

2 The concept of 'world-construction' derives from the sociology of knowledge of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, elaborated in *The Social Construction of Reality,* 1967. Cultural materials are adopted and assimilated by each individual in a process of erecting a frame of meaning for his or her particular experience of the world.

inclined to do. Policies which assume a situation of post-Christian heathenism and concentrate exclusively on the 'commitment' approach to the core religious minority, make for poor stewardship of the religious resources of the people. So-called 'folk religion' is far too much of a living, chaotic, confused and persistent force for the Christian churches to be able to afford *not* to assume responsibility for it.

The persistence of folk-religion is becoming the cause of a widening breach of opinion, particularly between the more extreme Catholic and Evangelical parties in the Church of England on the one hand and those of the centre on the other. The processes of cultural secularization mean that the folk-religion which does persist is becoming ever more fragmentary, confused and compounded of semi-Christian, semi-pagan or superstitious elements. At the same time, the structural marginalization of the Church is resulting in smaller and more committed core congregations, often composed to a growing extent of 'converted' rather than 'socialized' Christians.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that many clergy are tempted to cut their losses and opt out of the folk-religious arena. They want an end to infant baptism, save for the children of committed church members, who, ironically, increasingly decide to defer their children's baptism because they are persuaded of the case for believers' baptism. There is a readiness to speak of our 'post-Christian' or even 'neo-pagan' society. The Church desires to draw its boundaries much more clearly, and to refuse any longer to allow itself to be 'used' by those who have no commitment to it. The congregation is urged to build itself up as a 'community', from which base it can move out in evangelistic missions into the godless world around it. There is an enthusiasm for recapturing the spirit of the early Church.

Understandable though the desire is to go all-out for 'commitment Christianity' and to cast off the encumbrances of folk-religion, it is only the much more frustrating, messy and unsatisfactory path which does justice to the social facts. That is, we are not and could not be in either a 'post-Christian' or the equivalent of a 'pre-Christian' age. Social history cannot be rewritten, and the untidy rubble left by the crumbling of Christendom remains the reponsibility of the churches to administer – for no-one else will do it, and real people of flesh and blood are involved.

This emphasis upon taking very seriously indeed the continuing manifestation of religion within our contemporary culture leads clearly into the third area in which sociological thinking can stimulate us; as already adumbrated in what was said above about the 'committed' Church, it is the question of which model for Christian common life, religious belonging, the Church as the Christian body, is to be preferred.

The Institutional Church

There are two classical sociological sources for the analysis of religious groupings and forms of belonging. For a long time, the sociology of

religion concentrated almost exclusively, in this area, upon attempting to refine and elaborate the original typological distinction between 'church' and 'sect' first proposed by Max Weber and developed systematically by Ernst Troeltsch.[1] More recently, however, the emphasis has tended to shift to an alternative distinction between 'communal' and 'associational' styles of religious participation, drawing upon the seminal typology of Ferdinand Toennies, which was not originally deployed specifically in the analysis of religious groups. Analysis along these lines prefers to speak in terms of religious 'orientations', or 'ways of being religious' and the types of group they produce, rather than first and foremost in terms of the external structures and organizational requirements of particular church bodies.[2]

Modern social and cultural conditions clearly encourage the passage from church to sect-type religious organizations. It is in line with contemporary society that the Church should become more 'specialized', seeking to draw its boundaries more rigidly in order to include only the religiously committed. In this way, the Church can consider its mission to be fairly well-defined; for success will be measured in terms of the numbers crossing the crucial boundary between the non-Christian and the Christian, the unsaved and the saved, darkness and light. What the Church must do is concentrate its resources upon its distinctively religious calling, which has to do pre-eminently with the salvation of souls, the cultivation of spirituality, the personal and corporate walk with God.

Similarly, contemporary religiosity is more likely to be associational where it is readily identifiable. That is to say, church people will increasingly be seen to associate voluntarily together for specific religious purposes, under relatively stringent conditions of membership. Commitment will be expected of all, and may well be measured in terms of manifest enthusiasm for religious activities; attendance at Bible Study and prayer meetings, going to Church twice on Sundays, taking part in evangelistic visiting door-to-door, and so on.

However, the picture is less simple than that, as at least two pieces of evidence suggest. For, in the first place, the contemporary churches are very keen on the concept of 'community', implying a half-formed recognition that something has been lost when the associational mode becomes entirely dominant. And on the other hand, outside the Church, traditional

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1 See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches,* 1931. B. Wilson, *Religious Sects,* 1971, elaborates considerably the 'sect' division. R. Towler, *Homo Religiosus,* 1974, chs. 6 and 7, suggests a more flexible use of the typology to take in different religious 'orientations'; see also J. Beckford, *Cult Controversies,* 1985.

2 The original work is F. Toennies, *Community and Association,* 1955 (orig. 1887). On communal/associational see G. Lenski, *The Religious Factor,* 1961; and cf. M. Douglas on 'group/grid', *Natural Symbols,* 1974; V. Turner on *communitas*/structure in *The Ritual Process,* 1970; B. Reed on communal and associational churches in *The Dynamics of Religion,* 1978.

working-class environments still persist in some places where an older style of communal order continues to carry with its cultural apparatus a set of religious ideas and conventions, even if fragmented, declining and subject to confusion. Paradoxically, however, the churches are most alienated from the very cultural milieux where vestiges of the 'community' they seek are most likely to be found.

As a corrective to the all-too obvious one-sided emphasis upon the sectarian, associational type of Christian presence in society, then, let us examine what emerges if the two typologies, that of church-sect and that of communal-associational, are put together to produce four possible types of overall institutional religious orientation. The two 'dominant' types are familiar enough from all that has gone before. They involve, of course, a communal religiosity in a church-type frame, generally assumed to be on the decline, and an associational one in a sect-type frame, typically assumed to be the pattern for today. However, what we might call the two resulting 'recessive' types deserve further mention.

The first combines a sectarian frame, such as we increasingly have, with a communal type of religiosity, a possibility of particular relevance under the conditions of secularization. For the way for our smaller, marginalized, sociologically sectarian groups to capitalize on marginality could be to take responsibility for the community in which they are set and its cultural life; that is, to refuse to limit their religious specialism to the clearly demarcated associational sphere.

The other possible type would involve bringing together a church type of membership with an associational religiosity. For whereas present cultural conditions tend to be reflected in a move of religious life toward the associational end of the spectrum, a counterbalance to ineffective idealism (the 'keen' church indulging in lots of Christian in-group activities with little or nothing to show for it in the world at large) could be afforded by the heightening of the religious institution's church-type features – its givenness, its traditions, its availability to all-comers.

Let me describe a little more fully the types of Christian social presence which I am arguing it is the Church's responsibility to hold together in mutual, fruitful interaction. At the *communal* level, where the Christian faith becomes assimilated to the culture and is largely unreflectively socialized in[1], the 'tradition' which nourishes faith is the historic Christian tradition as it has snowballed along through the centuries of cultural con-

1 'Socialization' is the name given by sociologists to the several-stage process by which every individual learns to function as a member of a given society; he or she must learn its conventions, rules, mores, obligations and prohibitions and so on, in such a way that certain attitudes and behaviours eventually become more or less automatic, unreflective, being simply indices of 'the way things are'. One part of the process of growing in Christian faith, by contrast, involves learning radically to challenge that which is 'socialized-in', including communal religiosity. But this is a process of transcending what is there, not necessarily despising, rejecting or ignoring it.

textualization, picking up sundry extraneous materials along the way. But for the *committed* group, the tradition is very definitely conceived as a kind of pristine 'New Testament Christianity', persisting, if sometimes well-nigh swamped by culture, throughout the centuries of change.

The faith of the committed group is conscious of itself as a specific religious commodity, categorically not shared by all. It strains towards the future with the sense of being commissioned to proclaim and realise something quite new, and it is prepared to risk past certainties in responding to what it perceives to be the present call for decision. Such faith always sets up healthy tensions within a religious body which, by natural institutional conservatism, leans more to the 'communal' style. It is the irritant within the system which mounts a perpetual protest against the ossification of faith which the inevitable processes of institutionalization threaten to produce.

For these reasons we stress here the importance of a *threefold* pattern of Christian presence within culture and society. There are the pre-reflective, traditional patterns of community faith, and there is the commitment Christianity of the core congregation. But these also require the visible institutional presence of the Church as the mechanism for holding them together. Where local congregations are becoming more homogeneously associational, it is important that they should see that their membership within the antecedently existing institution of the Church requires them to employ their critical commitment in taking responsibility for the community in which they are set. If they do not, even while their own common life becomes more religiously well-defined and fulfilling, the culture of their local community may be suffering still further dissipation and decline. In sum, we need to find out how the promotion of a distinct 'commitment' Christianity can be compatible with taking folk-religion with the utmost seriousness.

Conclusion: The Importance of the Sociological Imagination

In the light of the sociological perspectives outlined in this article, every social and cultural form achieved by an originating religious idea appears as the fruit of a struggle, a temporary, partial and probably fragile victory gained at considerable cost in the face of daunting odds. Sociology analyses and outlines the conditions under which the normative vision carried by the materials of the Christian tradition may achieve various forms of partial realization. This is a model which ought to be attractive to evangelicals, with their characteristic emphasis upon the dynamic processes involved in the coming-to-be of that reign of God which the Gospel promises, processes rendered hazardous and unpredictable on account of the reality of the battle against sin and the need for the individual conversion of human hearts.

The position outlined here has been considerably influenced by the work of David Martin on the question of the ways in which theological ideals or norms are partially or imperfectly actualized within the con-

straints of particular social and cultural contexts.[1] The theme of Martin's *The Breaking of the Image* is the successive mutations and distortions undergone by several specific Christian images in the historical course of this kind of dynamic process. It is a dialectical process because both images and context, both theo-logic and socio-logic, affect and are affected by the other. But the pull of forces can be such that an image ceases to represent its original radical ideal. The alliances and collusions entered into by the religious images on account of social constraint are capable of leading to their being bought out by the cultural context, forced to conform to prevailing structures and patterns and so apparently made of no effect and emptied of their ability to be socially significant.

But Martin insists on a double evaluation of this. It may threaten harm to the very kernel of the Gospel ideals; and yet, it is only by entering into these risky cultural alliances that the religious ideas are ensured the probability of survival, by seeing to it that they are carried through the generations in the clothing of tradition. And as long as they are so carried, they retain their 'charge', a latent or dormant potential which can be reactivated. Theology only goes on at all, or should, in full awareness of the pains and discomforts of this dialectic.

The cultural promulgation of religion is thus a story of advance and regress, checks and balances, bargaining and control. The channels through which religion runs on its social course and which give to it a recognizable shape and direction also contain eddies and undercurrents which can sometimes belie the superficial flow. Religious people are gathered into particular groupings and try to give expression to their faith through the medium of particular religious cultural systems which regularly act back upon the faith itself to neutralize, modify or indeed to challenge it.

This article has contained as a secondary theme the proposal that the theological agenda of the radical theologians of twenty years ago was a worthwhile one, both then and now. We do need to address ourselves to the problem of the empirical reference and concrete meaning of theological statements, and this will inevitably bring the question of the visible life, structures and mission of the Church into the forefront of theological concern. But the primary theme here has been the claim that we can approach this theological task more successfully than those earlier theologians did if we avail ourselves of the insights provided before, but especially since their time, by theoretical thinking within the sociology of religion.

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1 Martin writes in *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict*, edited by himself with W. S. F. Pickering and J. O. Mills, 1980: 'I am saying how the ontological reality is embodied and the theological norm is made effective. The embodiment may be partial, the norm may not be fully realized . . . . We have to expose the socio-logic informing a symbol-system, and consider what light that can throw upon the form and development of the theo-logic' (p 58). This relation between 'theo-logic' and 'socio-logic' seems to me to be crucial, and a plea to consider it puts in a nutshell what this article is about.

In particular, this article has attempted to point out some of the probable directions of thought suggested by such an approach in three areas. We have counselled caution about the too easy assumption that the secularization of modern society represents the decline of religion and enmity toward the Gospel. We have recommended taking seriously and as inclusively as possible the continuing incidences of religion within contemporary culture, with a view to mobilizing that dialectical relation between traditional stabilities and critical innovation which the Gospel demands. And we have sought to underline the importance of the institutional face of the Church in mediating between communal religious sentiment and the more sectarian direction of a radically committed form of faith.

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