

FAITH  
AND  
THOUGHT

(Published 1980) 1979

vol. 106

Nos. 2/3

---

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the  
Christian Revelation and modern research

---

J.A. WALTER

INTRODUCTION: IDOLS AND IDEOLOGIES

The papers which follow look at some of the dominant ideologies of our society, and attempt to describe and evaluate them with the aid of concepts that are both religious and sociological. Of these, the concept of *idolatry* is prominent. In these preliminary notes we shall seek to explain why some Christian sociologists are now focussing on the notion of idolatry as a tool for analysing modern society.

The perhaps unenviable task of the Christian sociologist is to find and use intellectual tools that are (a) religious and recognisably compatible with Christian teaching; (b) sociological; (c) likely to be taken seriously by lay Christians, and by (d) academic sociologists (c does not necessarily follow from a, nor d from b!). The notion of idolatry seems to recur in Christian thinking about society because arguably it meets all four requirements:

(a) *A Religious concept.* That human beings both need to and in fact do worship something bigger and purer than themselves, is central to biblical teaching. This worship ought to be directed toward the one God of whom the Bible speaks, but if this God is rejected worship does not reach a full stop. Those who refuse to worship their Creator, soon take to worshipping some aspect of the creation, or some product of their own making. This is what the OT prophets fulminated against as 'idolatry'.

(b) *A sociological concept.* Idolatry is described in both Old and New Testaments as socially, even politically, organised. The act of worship itself may be an action of the individual, but the setting up of shrines at which to worship is something over which the ordinary individual has little control. This is organised by priests or their equivalents (religious, secular, traditional or modern) to suit the economic and political needs of society and its rulers. Even if the individual does have some choice of which gods to worship, the choice is from a limited range offered by the powers-that-be. Who worships what tells us a lot about society.

(c) *Acceptability to Christians.* Idolatry as a concept is central to Judaism and Christianity in that it forces attention on whether people orient their lives to their Creator or elsewhere. Idolatry can be spoken of meaningfully by evangelical and liberal, Protestant and Catholic, sophisticated theologian and humble churchgoer. But this fact is of little value unless idolatry

makes sense also to the academic sociologist; otherwise we shall lose the critical and creative edge that comes from dialogue with the secular academic community.

(d) *Acceptability to sociologists.* The notion of idolatry has much in common with Marx's theory of *alienation*<sup>1</sup> and its subsequent development by twentieth century humanists and sociologists. Alienation involves the social process whereby human beings collectively mistake as the property of a higher power things they themselves have made. The product of human labour becomes alien. Thus the human being fails to recognise his own inner worth and creativity: he imputes his own creations to an alien being who is consequently venerated. In his critique of religion, Marx identified this alien being with God: in his critique of capitalism, it was the capitalist class that appropriated to itself the labour of mankind. Both God and Capital are thieves of human potential.

This social critique is redolent of the language of the prophets who castigated their contemporaries for carving gods out of blocks of wood, setting them up and worshipping them; indeed, some have suggested that Marx's own Judaic-Christian background was influential for his theory of alienation. Of course, there are profound differences between the prophets and Marx concerning what should be done about mankind's desire to worship, but they do share the same basic idea: of human beings as essentially productive and creative yet not recognising their own creations for what they are.

Apart from Marxism and humanism, sociologists (like anthropologists) have shown a recurrent interest in *the sacred*. While the sociology of religion (that specialist branch of sociology that investigates formal religion) documents the demise of belief in the supernatural, of churchgoing and of other conventional manifestations of religion, other branches of sociology have observed the renaissance of the sacred elsewhere. (It was Emile Durkheim who first suggested that society itself is a religious phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.)

Thus Shils and Young<sup>3</sup> analysed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II as a great religious event symbolising the values held sacred by post-war British society; they were strongly (and in my view, correctly) criticised by Birnbaum<sup>4</sup> for their assumption that there exists a consensus within Britain over ultimate values, but *not* because they used religious concepts in their analysis of society.

Ten years later, the influential German sociologist Thomas Luckmann<sup>5</sup> argued that religion has been too narrowly conceived by sociologists, and that *any* structure which integrates society and provides an overarching framework of meaning may properly be

termed religious. He pointed particularly to 'the individual' as the religious integration point of modern society. Others might consider 'science' to perform some of the functions of the medieval church, and certainly the word 'sacred' recurs with almost monotonous regularity in supposedly secular sociological analyses of the modern family.

More recently, an article on tourism<sup>6</sup> in the journal *Sociology* analyses different modes of 'getting away from it all' in terms of the tourist's personal response to whatever is the sacred centre of his particular society. Thus those who accept the orientation of their society will go on holiday that they may return recommitted to this 'centre', while others disillusioned with whatever it is their society holds sacred may, for example, wander the world in search of something else that will give meaning to life.

Recognition of the sacred within society is not confined to sociology among the human sciences. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan<sup>7</sup> has published intriguing comparative and historical work on sacred space - on how human beings sacralise particular places - while Graber, a student of Tuan's<sup>8</sup>, has analysed the contemporary American cult of the wilderness as a search for sacred space. In economics, the late E.F. Schumacher<sup>9</sup> was concerned with what he called *the centre*, "our most basic convictions, those ideas which really have the power to move us".

Most of these authors have lost the critical stance both of the prophets and of Marx toward the sacred: for some, the sacred is just an important and interesting phenomenon, while for others positively value adulation of the monarchy (Shils and Young) or the wilderness (Graber). But they all recognise that human beings continue to worship, in perhaps the most unlikely places, whether or not official religion is still flourishing. The Christian notion of idolatry must surely ring at least some intellectual bells with them.

*Problems.* So much for the sociological acceptability of the notion of idolatry. But it is not a concept without problems.

Firstly, a sociological analysis which develops the theme of communal idolatry, may become blindly linked with the questionable idea that most people are agreed about what values are to be held sacred. Social scientists in the Durkheim tradition who develop the notion of the sacred tend to be anthropologists or sociologists of religion and to hold a rather static view of a society cemented together by religion. That there may be conflict and change inherent in society, and that the sacred may have much to do with precipitating, rather than inhibiting, conflict and social unrest has been little appreciated by such sociologists, though well understood by OT prophets. Hopefully, Christian

sociologists will be reading their Amos as well as their Durkheim.

Secondly, it is tempting to label as an idol *anything* one wants to criticise or even just comment on. That the word is in everyday use ("His idol is golf") enhances the sociologist's chance of communicating to the layman, but jeopardises the tightness of the term if it is to be intellectually rigorous. Theoretical work needs to be done here, which at the very least must take cognisance of work in comparative religion (classic texts being Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* and Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*).

A form of this danger is to imagine that one's pet hate is the *only* or chief idol of the age. However, the pluralism of modern society (discussed in Howard Davis' paper) ensures that there are a considerable number of modern gods (though their diversity does not mean they are unrelated). Perhaps the situation is more reminiscent of the plural gods of Athens than of the single alternatives to Yahweh (such as Baal, or the golden calf) that threatened true religion in ancient Israel: this changed historical context must be borne in mind when considering the relevance of many Scriptural passages.

Thirdly, it is easier to discern idolatry in attitudes to ideas than institutions. Thus when we talk of idolising science, we usually refer to scientism – the absolutising of the scientific – rather than of the actual social, economic and political organisation of science. Or my own writings on the idolatry of the modern family have tended to refer to the *idea* of the family (for example, expectations of marital bliss) rather than to family structure. It is not surprising then that the papers in this volume were presented at a symposium entitled "*Ideology and Idolatry in British Society*" rather than "*Institutions and Idolatry in British Society*". It is encouraging, though, that in his paper David Lyon looked at welfare as an institution as well as as an ideology: also that Richard Russell examined education as an institution.

\* \* \* \*

Finally, we may ask Can a Christian viewpoint influence the current state of sociological theory concerning *ideology*? Ideology, for the sociologist, is not just 'ideas'; an ideology (at least according to one viewpoint) is an interlocking set of ideas which express the material interests of a particular social group and which is conditioned by the socio-economic position of that group. Thus one can talk of the medical profession having an ideology. Marxists would add that the function of ideologies is to maintain the status quo – they are a smoke-screen that hides oppression and justifies the authority of the ruling class; for the Marxist, ideologies contain an element of illusion. The

sociologist tries to understand how ideas arise out of a socio-economic-political context, and the Marxist sociologist tries to show how ideas are used to maintain that context (which he considers faulty and wishes to change).

The Christian sociologist adds that the contexts out of which ideologies are formed are religious as well as material; ideologies express religious as well as material interests. Thus human beings produce ideologies in order to make sense of the fallen world in which they live, and to justify their own chosen way of attempting to mitigate their fallenness<sup>10</sup>. Ideologies act as a smokescreen shutting out the light of God's truth, obscuring the true gravity of the human situation. It is no aim of the Christian sociologist to *replace* the conventional sociological notion of a socio-economic-political world with that of a fallen world, but rather to *inform* and refine the socio-economic-political analysis and to place it within a broader framework. The notion of idolatry helps us to realise just how serious the smokescreen function of ideology is, and just how deeply rooted human ideas are in the total human condition.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Erich Fromm, "Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation", pp.188-196 in D.H. Wrong & H.L. Gracey (eds) *Readings in Introductory Sociology*, MacMillan 1972.
- 2 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Allen & Unwin 1976.
- 3 E. Shils & M. Young, "The Meaning of the Coronation", *Sociological Review*, 1(2), 1953, 63-82.
4. N. Birnbaum, "Monarchs and Sociologists: a reply to Professor Shils & Mr. Young", *Sociological Review*, 1955, 3(1), 5-23.
- 5 T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, 1967.
- 6 E. Cohen, "A Phenomenology of Tourist Experience", *Sociology*, 1979, 13(2), 179-201.
- 7 *Topophilia*, Prentice Hall 1974.
- 8 Linda H. Graber, *Wilderness as Sacred Space*, Assn. of American Geographers 1976.
- 9 *Small is Beautiful*, Abacus 1974, p.77.
- 10 J.A. Walter, *A Long Way from Home: a sociological exploration of idolatry*, Paternoster Press 1980.