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The Phenomenology of God: Two Perspectives

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Religious beliefs and practices have been a universal feature of human society. But not only have men prayed, worshipped and sacrificed, they have pondered deeply on their own practices and in so doing have evolved the studies which we call theology, philosophy of religion and comparative religion; the sociology of religion is the latest member of this intellectual coterie. In this paper we shall examine two perspectives on the phenomenology of religion, the sociological as exemplified by Emile Durkheim and the theological/philosophical approach of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

Theologians have, by and large, not questioned the existence of God. Differences among them have centred mainly on the issue of whether or not God's existence can be proved. Aquinas thought that it was possible to do so, that man could move from pre-rational faith to rational understanding.[1] Other thinkers, however, have held that spiritual truth by its very nature could never be attained by the concepts and categories of reason. Martin Luther believed strongly in the "hidden God" unknown except through his supernatural self-disclosure in Christ. Calvin emphasised the fact that the effects of original sin extend even to the natural intellect, so that it cannot by itself be an adequate approach to divine truth. Later lineal descendants of this mode of thinking are Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth and Kierkegaard himself.

Early sociological thinkers tended to negate the very existence of God as the product of "primitive" modes of thought which characterised cultures at a lower level of development than their own, in which scientific explanations had come to predominate. Their reasoning ran something like this: at the dawn of civilisation, man's technology was wholly inadequate to combat the powerful and capricious forces of the environment. In such circumstances it was but natural for the psyche to take refuge in compensation fancies. This approach to religion is best exemplified in the work of four of the most prominent exponents of nineteenth-century positivism, Comte, Tylor, Spencer

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1 St Thomas Aquinas, "Five Proofs of God's Existence," in J. Hospers, ed., *Readings in Introductory Philosophical Analysis*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

and Frazer. As Scharf notes, they "all begin from the assumption that men do not, in their religion, apprehend reality outside themselves, but rather come to imagine, because of certain mysterious aspects of human existence, spirits, gods, and supernatural forces. Man's thinking is immature, uncontrolled by pragmatic tests, and perhaps goes awry under the influence of powerful emotions."[2] The underlying judgement in these positivist schemata is that "real" and "scientific" are closely identified and therefore, in order to arrive at a true perception of man's sphere in the natural order, it is necessary to discard the "imperfect representations of religion."

There are several examples of the "revolt against positivism" through which religion was given a much more comprehensive and less evaluative treatment. In an extremely useful essay, Talcott Parsons[3] outlines this development in the work of Pareto, Malinowski, Durkheim and Weber. He traces the links between "rationalistic positivism" and the more recent developments in the sociology of religion in which the incorporation of beliefs that cannot be tested by the methods of the empirical sciences is an important part of the attempt to account for perceptions of meaningful reality that the actor regards as authentic and which cannot simply be dismissed as mistaken.

Our entire study, Durkheim wrote, rests upon this postulate that the unanimous sentiment of the believers of all times cannot be purely illusory. This postulate allowed him on the one hand to refute all the theories which presented religion as made up of illusions. He rejected animist and naturist theories according to which man has superimposed on observable reality an unreal world. It was, he argued, incomprehensible that humanity should throughout the ages have remained obstinate in errors of which experience would very soon have made it aware.

This is the one point on which Durkheim concurs with Kierkegaard: both agree that the reality which religion represents is no mere fantasy. The point of resemblance however ends here.

Kierkegaard is an existentialist who takes his point of departure from man's subjective experience, supposedly universal, of incompleteness, insufficiency and despair, "an anxious dread of an unknown something." On the basis of this and similar subjective experiences Kierkegaard insists he cannot rationally establish the existence, beyond an "infinite yawning abyss," of an objective Absolute, completely transcendent to man and therefore essentially unknowable and mysterious. The reality religion posits—God—cannot be bound by man's understanding. In the words of Karl Barth (a lineal descendant of Kierkegaard), God is "wholly other than man."

[2] Betty Scharf, *The Sociological Study of Religion*, London: Hutchinson, 1970, p. 14.

[3] Talcott Parsons, "The Theoretical Development of the Sociology of Religion," in *Essays in Sociological Theory*, New York: The Free Press, 1954.

Kierkegaard conceded that once we have assured ourselves by other means about God's actuality, then we can use this truth as an interpretative principle in the study of nature. But physico-theology is a consequence of accepting God, not a primary source of our conviction about His actual being. The mind and the heart must be previously prepared by some other type of evidence before we can discern God's providential work in nature and history.

In a very real sense, this approach is anti-anthropological. There could be no approach from man to God, only the one approach from God to man by means of a divine revelation that was wholly due to God's activity and not in any way rooted in man's nature and condition. "In other words, an anthropology could be theologically deduced but there were no inductive possibilities from anthropology to theology."[4]

God's existence cannot be subjected to rational enquiry. It can be grasped only by a unique sort of historical belief, namely faith in the strict sense of religious and supernatural assent to the God-Man. Every attempt to rationalise faith, Kierkegaard notes, ends by destroying the very roots of religion. The man who wishes to prove belief has something further to learn, namely that he does not believe. "If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this, I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over 70,000 fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."[5]

Durkheim, on the other hand, believed that it was quite possible to grasp objectively the reality behind religion. Of course, he admitted, one could not do so in terms of the concepts and categories employed by the believers. The unanimous sentiments of the latter were at least partly illusory. From the fact that a religious experience, if we can call it that, exists, it does not follow that the reality which is its foundation conforms objectively to the idea which believers have of it.

The major problem, to Durkheim's way of thinking, was to attain that reality—to know how to delve beneath the symbol of reality which it represents and which gives it true meaning. Primitive religions, he argued, relate to reality and express it; the task of the sociologist is to discover whence these realities expressed by religion come and what has made men represent them under the singular form which is peculiar to religious thought.

[4] P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 67.

[5] Kierkegaard, quoted from L. Miller, *God and Reason*, New York: Macmillan, 1972, p. 128. For other discussions on the Kierkegaardian dichotomisation of faith and reason see H. Hawton, *The Feast of Unreason*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1952; H. J. Paton, *In Defence of Reason* London: Hutchinson University Library, 1951, and R. Sinarii, *Reason in Existentialism*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966.

This reality is society. The believer is not deceived when he claims belief in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself. This power exists; it is society. Durkheim supports this secular explanation of religion by discussions of the similarity of man's attitudes towards God and society: both possess moral authority, stimulate devotion, self-sacrifice and exceptional individual behaviour. Religion thus acquires a rationale which the most sceptical of critics cannot fail to recognise. Religion is a symbol of ideas by means of which individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members.

Durkheim asserted that religion involves a perception of the world in terms of the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Rather than concentrating on the actions that are appropriate to different occasions, Durkheim took as his key points of reference the attitudes which are exhibited towards the supernatural. On this basis he argued that the sacred could be clearly marked off from the profane by the attitude of respect and awe that is exhibited towards it. Kierkegaard would have held that "sacredness" is intrinsic to God; it cannot be imputed to him from without. Durkehim held that sacred objects could not have any intrinsic quality of sacredness because one society's sacred object is another's everyday article. They must therefore be symbols of something else. "The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once and for all. The extent varies infinitely according to the different religions."[6] The equation now lacks only its final equivalent. If sacred objects and entities are symbols of something else, and that something else can command moral respect (for Durkheim, the attitude of respect towards sacred things is identical with the attitude shown towards moral obligations and authority), then the sacred things of any religion are symbols of the *society* which practises that religion.

Durkheim has, then, following Feuerbach's dictum "reduced theology to anthropology." Feuerbach interpreted man's religious beliefs as projections of human needs. They are either ideal liberations from his most pressing concerns, or, when they express fulfilment longings, ideal fulfilments. For him, as Hook remarks, the secret of theology is anthropology.[7] Feuerbach took over Hegel's notion of dialectics but profoundly changed its significance. The concept of dialectics in Hegel refers to a reciprocal relation between a subject and its object, a "conversation" between consciousness and whatever is outside consciousness. As Hegel's notion of this was first developed in a theological context, the "conversation" was ultimately one between man and God. With Feuerbach it was a "conversation" between man and man's own productions. God was nothing more than "perfect man." Durkheim's thesis that God was

[6] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954, p. 3.

[7] S. Hook, *The Quest for Being*, Westport (Connecticut): The Greenwood Press, 1971, p. 137.

nothing more and nothing less than society divinized is primarily an elaboration of the same conception and the same procedure.

Durkheim applied his conception of religion both to totemic religion and to specific beliefs. In general, he held the totemic principle or god was nothing more than the clan itself, personified and represented by the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable, which serves as its token. He believed that society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds merely by the power it has over them, for it is to its members what a god is to his worshippers: it instils the sensation of perpetual dependence, pursues its own ends but demands man's aid, makes them servitors and submits them to every kind of privation, exercises moral authority and demands a veritable respect. At the same time it is a stimulating influence, acting as a perpetual sustenance for our moral nature, revealing the other aspect of society which, while being imperative, appears at the same time to be good and benevolent.

More specifically, Durkheim attempted to account for the antithesis between body and soul. He argued that the idea of the immortal soul is useful in rendering intelligible the idea of the continuity of the collective life and that the individual totem and the Protecting Ancestor are to be interpreted as an external projection of the individual soul. Again, the great god is the synthesis of the totem, the personification of tribal unity; religious forces are thus nothing else but objectified sentiments so that when a society is going through circumstances which sadden, perplex or irritate it, men imagine that outside them there are evil beings whose hostility can be appeased only in human suffering. These beings are nothing but collective states objectified; they are society itself seen under one of its aspects.

Kierkegaard regards God as a transcendental, unknowable entity. For Durkheim, God is merely a symbolic representation of a cognizable social reality. Primitive man represented this social reality in mythological terms because social pressure operated in mental ways, thereby giving the impression that outside man there existed several powers both moral and at the same time efficacious upon which they depended. It was undoubtedly true that if they could see these influences, then mythological explanations would never have been born. As long as scientific analysis has not come to explain it to them, men know well that they are acted upon but do not know by what.

Crucial to Durkheim's theory of religion was his claim that religion is socially determined. He held that certain social institutions, those of collective effervescence, generate and recreate religious beliefs and sentiments. He argued that it is out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea is born, that after collective effort men believe themselves transported into an entirely different world from the one they have before their eyes. Moreover, the only way to sustain the religious sentiment is to retemper it in the very source of religious life, that is to say, in assembled groups. The nearest he came to accounting for

the mechanism supposedly involved here was to postulate a change in the conditions of psychic activity, an enhancement, even creation of energies, passions and sensations and a resulting attribution of exceptional powers and virtues to things with which men are in most direct contact.

For Kierkegaard, the only way by which man can become aware of God is through a revelation. And this relationship can be sustained only by a subjective faith. By "subjectivity" Kierkegaard does not mean that the individual becomes the source of a standard of truth, but that the highest truth, which yet remains objective in some sense, can be discovered only in inwardness or subjective consciousness. As Miller[8] remarks, his doctrine is not a variation of Protagoras's relativistic principle, "a man is the measure of all things," but Socrates' introspective "Know thyself."

Kierkegaard provides his own definition of subjective truth and faith: "An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriations-process of the most passionate inwardness. . ." Faith is not something exercised once and for all. "The existential individual lives continually in fear over the meaningless dread that can be assuaged only by a continued and renewed commitment to God."

The conflict between faith and reason is visible in the compromise which Kierkegaard sometimes outlined in his remarks, for example, regarding infinite resignation.[9] He thinks in fact that before faith which God alone can communicate to man, a first step towards faith can be achieved by the "movement of infinite resignation." However, by his own initiative and effort man can force an entry at least into the ante-room of faith.

The sum of the argument is that, for Kierkegaard, faith is born out of and sustained by the individual's relation to God. For Durkheim, religious sentiment is fostered and nurtured by the social collectivity.

The profoundest difference between the two approaches is in their conception of morality and religion. For Durkheim, religious faith is identical with the attitude shown towards moral obligations and authority. For Kierkegaard, religion *transcends* this social morality. This is brilliantly illustrated in his remarkable analysis of the Abraham-Isaac story in his *Fear and Trembling*. He uses the story to exemplify the meaning of absolute faith in deity. Kierkegaard sees in Abraham the classic case of a man whose belief in God is exposed to supreme stress and tension when he receives an authoritarian command from God to sacrifice his only and beloved son to him as a burnt offering. The test of Abraham's faith was his willingness to violate his duty as a father, husband, citizen and compassionate human being in order to carry out his absolute duty to God. This "teleological suspension of the ethical" reflects the exemplary nature of Abraham's faith where he

[8] Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

[9] S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1955, pp. 49-58.

suspends his moral sense altogether in order to act in strict accordance with a creature's absolute duty to his Maker.

In various parts of the Gospels it is implied that the essential failing of the Jews was moral pride; they were more concerned with personal importance than with obeying God's will. However, Abraham had the spiritual courage to resolve the paradox of faith, to believe that the Individual is superior to the Universal, the faith to believe that his relationship with the Universal was determined by his relationship with the Absolute. As Abraham remained unfaltering in his intention to obey the will of God and sacrifice Isaac, he transcended the terrestrial categories of moral actions. He placed absolute faith in the superiority of God's directives over relativistic human conceptions of reasonableness and rightness. Abraham's individual obedience transformed conduct ordinarily conceived as demoniacal, absurd or morally repugnant into a supremely commendable task of absolute faith in God. The idea of faith as a leap beyond immediate perception, moral judgement and knowledge or a refuge into which man is driven by the "latent melancholy of unendurable despair" is a recurring theme in Kierkegaard. The biblical story furnishes the crowning proof of the irrational nature of faith.

This "teleological suspension of the ethical" raises Abraham in the eyes of Kierkegaard above tragic heroes like Agamemnon, Jephthah and Brutus who sacrificed their children to the common good. They were "tragic heroes," exalting the universal over the particular. Abraham is no tragic hero. He must be regarded, Kierkegaard says, as either a murderer from the ethical standpoint or a true believer from the standpoint of absolute religion. Kierkegaard admits that Abraham acts "by virtue of the absurd," but claims that, though it is ethically wrong to subordinate the universal to the particular, in the case of one's absolute duty to God, the particular is higher than the universal. In serving God one is beyond good and evil. "Hence it is," writes Kierkegaard, "that I can understand the tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham, though, in a crazy sense, I admire him more than all other men."[10]

For Durkheim, the active attitudes associated with religious ideas are manifested not only in "ideas" but in certain actions or behaviour, and these actions share the quality of sacredness and involve relations to sacred entities. This whole class of "actions in relation to sacred things" Durkheim calls rituals. Now, ritual to Durkheim was not merely a manifestation of value attitudes, but of great functional importance in relation to social solidarity, a mode of revivifying and strengthening the common value elements which are ordinarily more or less latent in the course of profane activities. Ritual is one of the fundamental defense mechanisms of society against the tendency to *anomie*.

Kierkegaard holds that what is essential to authentic Christian behaviour is that the self establish strong ties with the eternal. This

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

dialogue with the eternal is carried on in the medium of spirit, not in the medium of collective activities described by Durkheim. Spirit in man is given a special motive of its own, a directedness that is separate from the empirical self-directedness of man. This extreme individuality becomes the sole support of man's dignity and of his relationship to the eternal. "Man is saved from the world of nature and of history by his unique ties to the infinite. He is saved by the special faculty of spirit, defined as otherness, and by the operations of self-transcendence, which is the primal characteristic of spirit."[11] Contrary to the Durkheimian position, Kierkegaard holds that the religious dimension of existence serves to separate a part of man from his total human situation, his ties to nature, culture and history. Kierkegaard's analysis of the Abraham-Isaac story is an amplification of this view.

Thus the two approaches to the phenomenology of God are antithetical. Kierkegaard would have rejected Durkheim's sociological approach as profane. Durkheim would have found equally unacceptable the idea of a transcendental, unknowable entity ruling man.

Closely connected to the two thinkers' conceptions of God is the relative importance they give to the individual and society. Durkheim conceived of the human group as a *collective conscience*,[12] which could and did have an existence quite distinct from that of its component members. It was external to the individuals who constituted it and exerted a coercive control over them. According to Durkheim, the supremacy of the social over the individual is not only an inescapable fact, but rational and justifiable as well. From an early stage, a major concern of his was the problem of order and social cohesion. In both *The Division of Labour* and *Suicide* he indicates that the *anome* which afflicts modern industrial societies results primarily from insufficient integration of the individual into the collectivity. The function of religion is to sustain and maintain this social collectivity. However, in modern societies religion no longer has this power; it must perforce be replaced by another, namely the professional organisation, or, to use Durkheim's own term, the "corporation."

Kierkegaard's writings, on the other hand, are distinguished by the primacy he gives to the individual. "The Christian heroism," he wrote, "is to venture to be wholly oneself, as an individual man, alone before the face of God, alone in this tremendous exertion and tremendous responsibility." The insight into the individual person as the centre of existence and the bearer of the supreme values of rational insight and freedom is of course to be found in Greek philosophy. But this insight was greatly deepened and accentuated by the influence

[11] W. Horosz, "Religion and Culture in Modern Perspective," in J. C. Feaver and W. Horosz, ed., *Religion in Philosophical and Cultural Perspective*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1967, p. 327.

[12] This is somewhat similar to the Hegelian conception of a soul substance (*objectiver Geist*) producing ideas and acts of its own, living a life quite distinct from its component members.

of Christianity and the doctrine of the Incarnation. God incarnates himself first of all as an individual and in a group only through this mediation. It was from these religious sources that Kierkegaard derived his sense of the opposition of the individual person to the anonymous mass, or what sociological parlance would call "the system."

Very important then is the Kierkegaardian notion of "subjectivity." Subjectivity is an insistence upon the very real value of the individual from the religious point of view.[13] The species and society are subordinate to the individual. The individual is distinguished from the collectivity by the dogma of sin. "For sin, though common to all men, does not embrace them all in a common concept, a group, club or company, nay more than the dead in a cemetery form a club: but it scatters them as individuals and keeps each one isolated as a sinner. This dispersion is, moreover, in accordance with the perfection of existence and tends towards it through its finality. It is because this has not been understood that it has been said that the human race as such was redeemed en bloc by Christ. How easy everything would be, in that case; the individual would gain everything, without trouble merely by participating in the abstraction known as 'the human race.' *But humanity, all the same, is something different from animality, where the species is of more value than the individual. What distinguishes man is the natural superiority of the individual, of the single example over the species. And this characteristic is again dialectical: it means that the individual is a sinner, then again that it is perfection to be the individual*" (emphasis added).[14]

Durkheim, then, sees man as operating within a system. "God" both represents and maintains this system. For Kierkegaard, God not only transcends this human system, he liberates men from it. The crux of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy is his opposition to traditional speculative philosophy (culminating for Kierkegaard in Hegel) which sought to render the world rational or intelligible by subordinating particulars to universal concepts and general laws. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, located the highest truth not in universal ideas but in the "passion of individual existence." The Kierkegaardian categories of individuality resist, of course, the very sort of rationalisation indulged in by traditional philosophers.

Closely connected with Kierkegaard's concept of God were the concepts of freedom and responsibility. To exist is to be the individual; the abstract does not exist. And to be the individual is to choose freely and to be impassioned. Kierkegaard affirmed an individualism more radical than had either Christian or secular liberal tradition. The paradoxes of faith included the idea that "the individual is higher

[13] R. Jolivet, *An Introduction to Kierkegaard*, London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1950, p. 177.

[14] S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, p. 251 (note).

than the universal" as Abraham demonstrated when he prepared to transgress the ethical law against murder.

To be a real individual, to assume the responsibilities of freedom and selfhood is, however, no easy task. In an industrial mass society it has become harder to maintain personal integrity and personal independence. One may even undergo certain key experiences through which one comes to censure oneself as an individual. One such experience is the despair which Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death.* A man can become really conscious of his own being only through "fear and trembling"; he must learn that "to exist as the individual is the most terrible thing of all." All men have to struggle with *Angst* (dread) if they are to become aware of their being, but they could and should master it, win their way to Christian faith. To live in unawareness of one's being, to allow oneself to become a mere part of a system is an offence against God, the author of our being.

(In a sense Durkheim also recognised that "to exist as the individual is the most terrible thing of all." But Durkheim, in contradistinction to Kierkegaard, regarded detachment of the individual from the collectivity as pathological, to be remedied by integration into a social institution, rather than stabilised by attachment to God.)

Conclusion

A basic issue that can be deduced from the two perspectives is that of the individual and his freedom. Durkheim narrated the story of religion as having roots in the cultural conditions of existence and says, in effect, that "God" cannot be understood apart from the human community which worships him. Kierkegaard, who appears as an antagonist of modern culture, states that modern man cannot understand his cultural order apart from its spiritual and ideational roots. Durkheim stresses the social structure almost to the exclusion of individual freedom. Kierkegaard has emphasised the freedom of man almost to the exclusion of his biological, psychological and social inheritance.

Contemporary social science, especially phenomenological sociology, claims that man does have a certain freedom. "Unlike puppets," writes Peter Berger, "we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom."[15] However, this freedom is only within the structures of man's environment. The relationship between man and society is a dialectical one. Man creates both physical and mental products as a result of his activities and these products gradually take on a reality over and above their individual contributors, which then react back on the subjective consciousness of man.[16] Kierkegaard continues as the spokesman of "that

[15] P. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963.

[16] P. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966; also, P. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967.

individual" and claims that man has a freedom beyond the structures of his total behavioural environment, the freedom enhanced by his relation to God. The issue of the relation between the two perspectives seems to depend on the resolution of this conflict: freedom within structure and freedom beyond structure.

Positivistic thought is not readily inclined to give man the kind of freedom that will enable him to go beyond experience in transcendent acts and thoughts, for it does not have the methods and techniques for tracing and observing man at that transcendent distance. Existentialist theology, as exemplified by Kierkegaard, does not seem to have a sufficient interest in man in temporal depth and does not study man in his relatedness to nature and culture. A meeting ground for the two could perhaps be provided by a social science that admits some measure of freedom within the social structure and a religious outlook which admits to having some commerce with the human disciplines.

The former, as earlier indicated, is come into being. The latter is perhaps to be found in the writings of certain theologians who do not find the scientific and religious outlooks to be irreconcilable opposites. Langdon Gilkey suggests that if we look at the activity of scientific enquiry itself we find that it points to an ultimate area of meaning for which religious symbols are alone adequate. Gilkey goes on to argue that the peculiar language of myth and of religion is not only unavoidable but necessary in a scientific culture if its major issues are to be dealt with creatively. This, he argues, is because man's intellectual comprehension is different from his more existential self-understanding and because the links between the two have to be articulated. This is very close to the Spencerian view that both science and religion are agreed in admitting that there is an unknowable area that lies beyond the things of which we have knowledge and the function of religion is to prevent man from becoming too involved in his immediate concerns by sustaining his consciousness of something beyond this.

The achievement of an authentic communication between religion and science on the theory of man required a redefinition of directive agency in human reality. Kierkegaard's concern for the individual in modern life is legitimate, but his focus on man is out of perspective. By relating man to the special directive agency of the spirit, Kierkegaard can no longer have a whole view of man in terms of self-direction. Man's spiritual direction conflicts with his empirical self-direction; he has separated the religious directives from human self-direction and left us with the traditional problem of man's relation to the infinite.

Involved in this would be further debates on the phenomenology of God. While Durkheim's theory of religion as a source of social cohesion is generally accepted, his explanatory theory, namely that God equals society, finds little credence even among sociologists. The transcendental, unknowable God seems also to have lost his vitality. He might even, as Nietzsche declared, be dead!

Before anything else it must be emphasised that the death-of-God approach does not necessarily indicate a desire to reduce all life to the scientifically knowable. Raymond Firth points out that "if in the western idiom we think of monotheism and write God with a capital initial, it is inconceivable to most people that God could die... But among primitive peoples all over the world anthropologists have seen or had report of the death of gods."[17] Now, what is meant by the death of a god? Firth explains. When a human person dies, "ideationally his personality lives on in the memory of his family and friends," and, if he has been a creative person, in his creations. So, Firth concludes, "Even if there be no belief in a survival of his soul after his bodily death, as a person and not simply as a physical individual, he cannot be said to have completely died."[18]

Something analogous occurs in the death of a god. While the worship of a god may cease, belief in his existence may still remain. Further, the themes which have given shape to the conceptualisations of the gods may still live on, in other forms.

It may also happen, as Schneider points out, that men may continue to believe in the mysterious, the sacred, the holy or the transcendent and only refuse to call such things by the name of God.[19] Here we may dwell a little on a rather extraordinary book by Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*.[20]

In his early book on religion,[21] Berger had followed the Durkheimian stance of considering religion to be a social product. In *A Rumour of Angels*, he tries to answer critics who accuse him of positing a sociologically determinist view of religion. Berger suggests that fresh evidence of the supernatural might be found "in signals of transcendence within the empirically given situation." Signals of transcendence are phenomena to be found within the domain of our natural reality but which appear to point beyond that reality. Such signals may be found in our faith in order, in play, in hope, humour and even in our disposition to assign the worst evil-doers to "damnation."

Traditional theology held that an anthropology could be theologically deduced, but there was no inductive possibility from anthropology to theology. Berger justifies his doing so in the following terms. "There is a fundamental unity between the structures of man's consciousness and the structures of the empirical world...Projection and reflection are movements within the same encompassing reality ...Religious phenomena will also be human projections...If the

[17] Raymond Firth, "Gods and God: An Anthropologist's Standpoint," in A. J. Ayer, ed., *The Humanist Outlook*, London: Pemberton, 1968, p. 321.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[19] L. Schneider, *Sociological Approach to Religion*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970.

[20] P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.

[21] P. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*.

religious projections of man correspond to a reality that is superhuman and supernatural, then it seems logical to look for traces of this reality in the projector himself. This is not to suggest an empirical theology —that would be logically impossible—but rather a theology of very high empirical sensitivity that seeks to correlate its propositions with what can be empirically known."[22] The prospects are interesting.

Postscript

To end this essay with Berger's work might appear to present his theory as the final word on the study of the phenomenology of religions. The intention, however, is quite different. We are not indicating where the sociology of religion should stop, but merely one of the trends it may follow up.

The truth is, every human order is a community in the face of anomic forces, notably death. Religion represents an attempt to make a pact with death. Whatever the fate of any historical religion, or that of religion as such, we can be certain that this attempt will persist, as long as men die and have to make sense of the fact.

[22] P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books 1969, pp. 64f.