# KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Volume II Number 1 Spring 1979



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THEOLOGICAL
REVIEW

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# THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: A DISCIPLINE THAT UNDERMINES RELIGION?

W.S.F.Pickering

## I

Believers coming face to face with the sociological study of religion are destined to have their faith sorely challenged. There is no *logical* reason why such an encounter should undermine what they personally believe in. Yet the truth is that the experience raises questions about their faith—and here I have particularly in mind the Christian faith—and the result is that the weak, and perhaps the strong as well, find the testing very abrasive. Some intellectually inclined Christians might argue that the challenge is to be commended, since it will eradicate spurious and weakly founded reasons for upholding religious faith. On the other hand, there are doubtless challengers of the challenging who would maintain that the threats which arise from the conclusions drawn by sociologists in their examination of religion are unwarrantable, fallacious and even reprehensible. True personal religion stands well outside such threats, ill-founded as they are. No sociology can break down that religion which resides in the heart.

In bringing to light these and other attitudes towards the sociology of religion, we encounter one facet of what might be called the sociology of the sociology of religion. To those who may be unsure about the task sociology sets itself, I shall offer a brief word. It will probably come as no surprise to learn that sociology is divided into many schools, which proclaim various emphases and approaches, and that there is considerable disagreement among sociologists on methods and aims, particularly at the present time. If, however, I were forced to give a wide, general definition, which would encompass the work of those who call themselves sociologists, I would say that the discipline attempts to speak about—some would maintain to examine objectively, even 'scientifically'—society in its entirety. It is nevertheless made up of various components and dimensions which sociologists have tended to see as constituting its institutions, such as marriage, law, religion, education, and so on. Sociology has been inclined to concentrate on established ways of behaving, thinking, and believing, within such a social framework.

To ensure clarity of communication, it is necessary to attempt the impossible and to define religion. I do not want to enter into what has been a long and sometimes fruitless discussion; but for the purposes of what I want to say here, I mean by religion a system of beliefs and practices centred on a super-human being or beings. Such a system is inevitably linked with a group of people, a church, for example; and the belief system usually involves a moral component.

## II

These definitions contain within themselves concepts and implications which if placed alongside one another give rise to potential, if not actual conflict. Such conflict, of course, exists not only between sociology and religion, but is also part of the greater and longer controversy between science and religion, that arose in the eighteenth century, and which still persists.

During that time the conflict has taken many forms and passed through diverse vicissitudes. No longer perhaps are people's religious beliefs challenged or shattered, as once they seemed to have been, by the scientific discoveries of the physical universe. It is often suggested today, and indeed this view was not unknown in the nineteenth century, that there is no logical or necessary reason for a conflict to occur between religion and the findings of the natural sciences. Each can function legitimately in its own separate sphere. This works perfectly well if certain theological claims about creation and the functioning of the world are modified. But the question arises, what if this convenient compartmentalisation dissolves? What if science directly intrudes into the sphere of religion? And what, if the natural sciences are replaced by the human and social sciences, by psychology and sociology, which examine scientifically the religious phenomena themselves? These sciences claim the right to penetrate the psyche of the individual to its innermost depths, or to study every institutional component of religion, which for us in the west could mean an examination of the sacraments or people's religious actions; and the Church itself is open to examination in the same way as an unsuccessful football club! No longer then is the science-versus-religion battle one in which the protagonists reach a *modus vivendi* by respecting each other's territories. It is a battle in which one party invades deep into the territory of the other.

Like every modern science, sociology is secular. It has no alternative procedure. It thus sees only man at work, not God. The world is man-made. Individual sociologists in their personal beliefs may discern God in the universe, but sociology itself cannot. It seeks to indicate how man has created his institutions, how man has changed his institutions, how man will direct his institutions in the future. Religion is one such institution. That God might be a creative source within the universe who sustains it, and communicates himself through it and through religion, must be excluded. All sociologists have to be methodological agnostics; or more radically, methodological atheists. They are forced to proceed *as if* God did not exist. They openly proclaim this, since from the beginning of their short history, they have had to face constantly problems of method on account of their claim in some way to be scientific.

But sociology can go further. It burrows its way through what some people might think is dubious material and one of the paths it creates in so doing is to shatter ideals of various kinds. What man in his innocence believes to be perfect, holy, rational, honest, and true, the sociologists may demonstrate is imperfect, ordinary, irrational, dishonest and false. Sociology takes a delight in comparing what is practised with what is thought to be desirable or ideal. Worship and prayer are not made to a non-existent deity but are projections about society. God is nothing more than social ideals writ large. Of all the social and human sciences, sociology is *par excellence*, the debunker of cherished virtues, ideas and achievements. It is not surprising therefore that when sociology enters a field of religion, it vitiates it. Religion is infinitely more vulnerable than other social institutions to such displacement because it rests on the notion of the sacred. The church, as a component of religion, is believed, in the Christian tradition, to be the vehicle of the Almighty, or the vehicle of the Spirit, or the vehicle of Christ. One nineteenth century commentator on the sociology of religion as it was then emerging wrote. 'Religion is on the dissecting table awaiting vivisection; standing alongside is the operating surgeon scalpel in hand' (Richard 1923/t.1975:251).

## III

Let us now see how these challenges arise as the sociologist goes about his work. I mention a few types of findings and their implications for the believer.

First, the connection made by Max Weber (1864-1920) between economic and religious organisation (1904-5). Very well known is his contention that Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries accelerated the development of bourgeois capitalism—indeed, it provided the necessary component for such capitalism to grow. The Protestantism of that period, he argued, contained within itself theological and moral ideas, such as the notion of election, hard work, domestic asceticism, which were particularly prominent in Calvinism, and which provided the launching pad of new forms of capitalism. I do not wish to argue whether or

not, or to what degree, Weber's analysis is to be supported. The argument is full of difficulties and methodological problems, but nevertheless it was widely accepted at the time he wrote at the turn of the century, and to this day there are a large number of intellectuals who have uncritically accepted it. Now, the explanation of the emergence of capitalism, made in the name of objective knowledge, is or can be ideologically contentious. Contention in part turns on a general appraisal of capitalism. If capitalism is highly esteemed, as it was by most of the middle classes in the nineteenth century, then Protestantism is likewise applauded in being instrumental in bringing about such great economic achievement. By contrast, Roman Catholicism is seen as an inferior form of Christianity which was unable to supply the required moral impetus. But Catholicism receives a contrary judgment if capitalism is viewed as the curse of modern life. Catholics have been able to keep their hands clean in the face of the willingness of Protestants to involve themselves in a filthy enterprise! Perhaps more in keeping with some kind of left-wing criticism is the belief—and it was certainly expressed by certain Christian socialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Protestantism must share some of the blame for the evils of capitalism. The close alliance that Protestants seem to have had with capitalism naturally shows Protestantism in a bad light. However, a devout and sensitive Protestant might well be challenged by that fact that a church for which he has great respect, with which he is identified and which he may believe is a truer form of ecclesiastical organisation than that of the Roman Catholics, should become entangled in economic structures and find its fingers dirtied by an 'alliance' with mammon. That a church can have such influence over a type of economic organisation would seem to be remote from that pristine form of church life exhibited in the New Testament, a type for which most Protestants yearn. Can one really believe that the church is the vehicle for the Holy Spirit, or that it is made up of true Christians, when it is associated with such economic enterprise? (One logical position might be to suggest that capitalism is also the vehicle of the Holy Spirit!)

Protestants have also suffered—if suffering is the right word—at the hands of another founding father of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim demonstrated in the 1890s—at least to his own satisfaction—that certain forms of suicide, what he called anomic suicide, occurred at a significantly higher rate amongst Protestants than Catholics (1897). He maintained that Protestantism, because of its individualistic theology, with its emphasis upon personal decision, with its lack of asceticism and institutional moral controls, explained for him the fact that its adherents tended to commit suicide more frequently than Catholics. Protestants lacked, he argued, a sense of community and of loyalty to the church and such looseness of attachment weakened the individual's ability to deal with what he called tendencies towards suicide in society.

A more recent type of sociology, bordering on what we might call micro-sociology, serves as a challenge to both Catholicism as well as Protestantism. And I include it because I cannot emphasise too strongly the fact that the sociologist is as much, if not more concerned, with the religious actions and beliefs of the man in the street as he is with those of the intellectual and theologian. This type of sociology is concerned with surveys carried out on the various churches at the parish and national levels. It seems harmless enough but until about the 1950s the Roman Catholic hierarchy resisted detailed surveys about the extent of practice and quality of religious life within the local church. Then, as the opposition to sociological research began to weaken, the authorities came to believe that such investigations would help the pastoral work of the church. Later, with the growth of liberalisation there was no limit to the types of research that could be carried out.

In the main, two classes of surveys have emerged. One, a thorough investigation into the level of church going *per capita*, which on the whole has proved to be higher for Catholics than for other major Christian groups, although it has not been as high as many people thought it would be, especially in South America and some regions in Europe. The age-structure, sexual differentiation, class analysis, were all carefully analysed. In the second, the object is to assess the difference between what the churches teach about belief and morality and what the man in the street believes, be he a devout Catholic, a loyal Protestant or even a nothingarian. As

might be expected the results of these surveys show that *even* amongst the faithful of all denominations there is a great deal of rejection or ignorance of the official teaching of the churches, and in its place as it were, there is, what might be called folk religion, including for example, superstitions like astrology, all haphazardly mixed up with orthodox Christianity.

A recent survey carried out by Martin and Pluck (1977) goes further and shows that amongst young people there is very little that resembles anything approaching Christian belief and that the ideals and beliefs young people possess are extraordinarily incoherent and illogically related one to the other. Perhaps this is partially a reflection of the permissive phase of thought and morality which we witnessed in the late 1960s.

Of the many deductions that can be made from these elementary surveys, I offer two which are relevant to the theme of this paper.

1. If the church is made up of people whose own faith does not reflect the authoritative teaching of the church, or that of the Bible, how can one in any sense refer to the church as a spirit-filled body, as Christ's body as St Paul declares? One cannot be sure that any member of the church upholds the beliefs and practices for which it stands.
2. If salvation is mediated through the church, through people being called into the church from the world, through participation in the sacraments, through hearing the preaching of the Word, God seems to favour, in this country at least, as well as in others, the lower-middle classes, the very young, the elderly, and spinsters at large! One would have expected on theological grounds, as well as those of justice, that salvation would have been randomly distributed. In fact salvation is skewed. Almost irreverently one may wonder if it is not divinely skewed.

There is another sub-discipline in sociology, closely related to the sociology of religion, which stands as a direct threat to the claims of religious truth. It is the sociology of knowledge. At the risk of over-simplification, it might be said that the sociology of knowledge attempts to show that a great deal of knowledge, especially abstract knowledge, non-empirical knowledge, is derived from society, more specifically from social structure. Knowledge does not come from a source superior to man, unless one believes that society is in some way of a higher order. All knowledge is grounded in man, and each system of knowledge is related to the society in which it is located. This approach to epistemology, relativist up to the hilt, contains many philosophical problems, not least in finding a way out of the impasse of absolute relativism.

The effects of the sociology of knowledge on religious belief are challenging in the extreme. Chief amongst them is the assertion that all language about God and other religious components is derived from the social context. Religious truth therefore cannot come from revelation, or through God speaking to the prophets, for example, but emerges as a result of man's conscious or unconscious awareness of social behaviour and structure. Since religious knowledge is nothing more than a social projection, sociologists tend to give little place to belief as an independent variable. It is itself dependent on some more basic factor. The challenge of the sociologist to both the theologian, and also the religious believer, is that they should examine what they call religious truth against factors in society itself. That process, once embarked on, will most likely lead to one outcome.

## IV

The vitiating influence that sociology tends to exert over a man of faith rests largely on the axioms and presuppositions on which sociological procedure rests.

Attention has already been drawn to the methodological agnosticism necessary in the sociology of religion. This means that the sociologist cannot stand where the believer stands, nor can he use his language with the meaning of the believer. He therefore cannot accept at face value such a statement as: 'It is my communion with Jesus that makes me happy', or 'God commanded me to go to the market place and there I met a man who recognised me', or, as an evangelist recently said, 'I just touch the sick and God does the rest', or 'The Holy Spirit guided the early church to adopt the order of presbyters'. These religious statements are causal statements which explain individual or corporate action, implying that behind the actions there is some force at work, some reality, which is beyond sense experience. The language is very

much that of the Bible and of the saints but can never be that of the sociologist. For him there can be no sociology of God or of the Holy Spirit! (Nor do such entities have a history!) However he will readily admit that an individual or a number of individuals may subscribe to beliefs and causal statements such as those I have mentioned, and that adhering to them may have certain social consequences. If he were forced to talk about origin or causality—concepts that are no longer popular amongst sociologists—he would inevitably seek reasons other than those given by the believers and, as a sociologist, would attempt to locate them within social behaviour and social structure.

Where explanations are sought—and clearly the sociologist strives after explanations—they have to be located in man, in his society, in his culture. Durkheim set sociology on one distinctive path when he maintained that social phenomena must be explained by other social phenomena. Therefore, religious phenomena, which are essentially social, are to be understood by other social phenomena—a formula that neatly excludes the reference to a transcendental reality. Religion is therefore an activity *sub specie temporis* and *sub specie communatatis*, never as the theologian and believer might see it, *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, having a non-empirical, normative, authoritative foundation (Berger). By contrast, the sociologists assumes that man is largely the product of his environment. Assuming a common genetic makeup, he would expect the same behaviour of people, given a common environment. Pure determinism is prevented by holding that there is the possibility of the modifiability of external factors.

Another axiom is summed up in the term religious relativism. Since the sociologist is agnostic or atheistic about the truth value of a religion and about the alleged reality, he is forced to have an identical position with regard to all religions. Not only is he professionally forced to admit that no religion is *prima facie* better than another, but he generally holds to such a position by conviction. One can slightly modify some words of Durkheim and say that all religions are equally true and all are equally false. In this way differentiation between religions is eroded so that they all appear in grey tones. Black and white are colours not used by the sociologist. He may admit that one religion is more developed than another, that Christianity is the most humane of all religions, as Durkheim held, but usually any positive merits accorded to a religion are negated by faults and weaknesses. It is easy to see that a professional attitude quickly becomes a personal attitude and it is not surprising to learn that nearly all the great names in the sociology of religion have been those of men who were devoid of strong religious conviction. Durkheim was fascinated by religion, probably more than any other sociologist of comparable stature. He was an agnostic Jew, born into a family of rabbis, and when his son was killed in the First World War openly admitted that he had tried but failed to receive any consolation from religion.

What the sociology of religion does—what any relevant science does—is to set up a competing explanation of religious phenomena. Two explanations thus come on the market, two claims to truth. One is a naturalistic, scientific explanation; the other a religious, God-centred explanation. I do not wish to say that one explanation is more logical than the other; nor do I raise the question whether each may contain inherent weaknesses. My point is that they are presented as competing alternatives, and that which is scientific has the advantage of being posed in a society dominated by an awareness of the success of scientific procedures. There is no place for both explanations to exist side by side. One is forced to choose one or the other. Is it surprising people choose the way they do?

## V

I return to my opening remarks. Often churchmen and theologians declare that the fiery testing of the sociology of religion far from doing harm in fact does good. It helps to sift the chaff from the wheat by exposing errors of belief and reasoning held by Christians past and present. But if in fact the sociology of religion is instrumental in causing a loss of faith, it can also be argued that there must have been certain hesitations and doubts prior to coming in contact with the discipline. Further, there are theologians and church leaders who speak in laudatory tones of the sociology of religion. One such person, by no means a radical theologian, but writing recently about Durkheim, admitted that sociological thought may menace Christianity but that once the reductionism of Durkheim is ignored,

his findings have 'provided resources which are still proving invaluable to Christians in understanding better what they believe and in realistically conducting their lives and expressing their hopes in a way which is more consistent with both what they believe and what is actually going on in their world, their society, and themselves' (Shaw 1978:80). And the selfsame writer also remarked. 'It is, in short, hardly possible to overestimate the service which sociology can render to the church in enabling it to understand itself better' (ibid:76). My own reading of certain modern theologians leads me to think that they often exaggerate the findings of sociologists with regard to society at large and on the other hand underestimate the damaging influence of the sociology of religion.

Where the results of the sociology of religion are welcomed by theologians, and in some cases incorporated into their writings, one finds that the theologian is of liberal or left-wing or even radical inclination. Using the findings of the social sciences, the theologian wishes even to change the thinking and belief patterns of religious people in the conviction that truth has been discovered by such sciences and that this truth should be widely communicated. Sociology should be incorporated both into theory, that is, what used to be called dogmatic theology, and also into practical concerns, that is, pastoral studies. In the late 1960s the radicals who supported religionless Christianity went so far as to baptise the decline of religion in the name of Christ! Such religious leaders and thinkers are as a rule of middle-class outlook if not origin, and their wish is for clarity of communication, relevance, and in the end a religious rationalism. I am convinced that this kind of thinking was in part behind the changes in outlook towards sociology that has now become apparent in the Vatican, and that it is associated with many of the reforms of Vatican II.

## VI

What a person expects of religion is certainty. However, not every component and item in a given religion is held to be certain; there are areas which are open and optional. But beyond these at the heart of every religion stands that which is rock-like, that which is dependable, that which resists every challenge, and is ultimately beyond question. We might call it the sacred.

Now, particular truths enshrined in the sacred, which are at the base of all that is religious, are eroded when science enters the holy of holies. Science, as Durkheim himself stated, is a profaning discipline, and as such, demolishes sacred edifices. At one time, western religion, especially Catholicism, when it was in the ascendancy, was able to resist the intrusions and enquiries of free thinkers, rationalists and scientists. Today, the position is different. The scientist and the rationalist are free and indeed are sometimes encouraged to search the religious house and to declare whether its foundations are sound. The process of enquiry, of challenge, of observation, is a means by which -but not the only means of course -religious structures, religious legitimation, religious plausibility become modified.

Maybe all that is happening is just that. As one type of sacredness withers in the face of the investigations of science, another emerges to take its place. As churches disappear, especially their buildings, at the rate of several hundred a year in this country--so new forms of religion based primarily on man, his uniqueness, even his sacredness, emerge. So held Durkheim, the old-fashioned rationalist, yet a worshipper of religion in general. But this to me is unfounded optimism. On *a priori* grounds religion can die as naturally as alchemy disappeared centuries ago. Science can and does desacralise religon without creating an alternative. And to the Christian who believes in a once-and-for-all revelation from God in Christ, witnessed in his Church, such a prospect must be challenging in the extreme.

No one can deny the enquiries and findings of science. Truth will out; it will never be repressed in the long run, for we no longer live in the days of Galileo. One has to face and accept the discoveries of science, even when they apply to the religious enterprise. There is no real choice; no alternative.

However two points of warning should be sounded. The first is that I do not believe that those who try to look scientifically at religion want its annihilation, at least in the immediate future. For sociologists of religion this could be counter-productive, because if they were too successful in undermining religion they, as might theologians, would soon be out of business since they would have nothing to study. Durkheim wrote (1897/t.1951:169).

'Let those who view anxiously and sadly the ruins of ancient beliefs, who feel all the difficulties of these critical times, not ascribe to science an evil it has not caused but rather which it tries to cure! Beware of treating it as an enemy.'

One has always to accept the integrity of the scientist in his search for truth.

The second point is that one should always examine critically the findings of social science, where 'proof'—I use the term with extreme hesitation—is infinitely more difficult and problematical than in the natural sciences. Many of the so-called scientific generalisations by such a grand master as Durkheim are not acceptable, and indeed were rejected by critics in his day. None the less Durkheim himself maintained that one of the most notable characteristics of any science, be it a natural or social science, is that it is always open to challenge, to doubt, to falsification, in a way that religious knowledge was not at one time to be questioned. Religious knowledge after all rests on some kind of authority, on dogmatic teaching, on the Bible, on some mystical experience. Scientific knowledge is built up slowly, not least because it is built on scepticism. As I have had occasion to note already one of the dangers, if I may say so, of sociology is that for reasons I have no time to mention here, certain theologians and populariserss of sociology all too uncritically scoop up its alleged scientific findings and treat them as 'gospel' (Berger 1967: 183). It would be helpful if these 'outsiders' could have as sceptical a turn of mind as scientific thinkers themselves are supposed to possess. What is needed is that theologians should examine critically the findings of the sociology of religion and come to terms with them within the axioms of their own discipline rather than embracing the findings with open arms. For the fact remains that religion is on the dissecting table and the very presuppositions of the surgeon underline the danger of the operation and the uncertainty of the outcome. It is up to theologians to be prepared to be surgeons as well. But if their theology is man-centred rather than god-centred they will concede precisely what the sociologist wants. The more religion is numanised—the greater the emphasis on man, on his achievements, on his personal and psychological fulfilment—the more devastating becomes the challenge of the sociology of religion. For in the end all religion does become a human activity, which is precisely one of the assumptions of the sociology of religion, and hence, the conclusions of the theologian will approximate to those of the sociologist of religion.

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