

hand meeting with the “graceless” that enables the martyrs to see the tragedy of these people’s lives and so to forgive them. Edith Stein writes the only truth that can be said about persecutors – that only God may judge them:

“Let us not judge, lest we ourselves be judged.  
Outward semblances delude us all.  
Enigmas are the pictures earth presents,  
To the Creator only is true being known”.

(From *Dying We Live*).

If the grace of martyrdom is the gift of God to those who choose to follow Christ in a situation of persecution, perhaps the witness of the martyrs is God’s free gift to all men, a call to discipleship which means an invitation to share in the divine life, in the way of the cross which is also the way to life eternal.

## Theology and Sociology: Two Approaches To Religious Conversion

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This is intended to be a practical comparison between two approaches. Accordingly it would be as well to start with a few truisms that are shared between them. In the first place, people only discover themselves and the world through their relationships with other people and this relationship is primary. Perspectives on the world follow and are fashioned by these relationships. In view of this, theology may be said to be reflection on human experience specifically understood as directed towards God. Thus Schillebeeckx (1969:214) describes man, from a theological point of view, as ‘a free being who must define himself in and towards the world in dialogue with God’. This may be contrasted with the definition of one sort of sociology, ‘critical sociology’, described by Hansen (1976:3) as ‘an invitation to become an involved, critical explorer of human and societal possibilities’.

Unless the theologian is to consider for the most part his own

experience (the source of much individualistic agonizing of an existentialist sort commonly characterized as bourgeois sociology) he must perforce draw on some systematic body of reflection on the human condition. Traditionally, this has been provided by philosophy, but in more recent times the social sciences have rather cornered the interaction business.

There is no reason why anyone at all should be inhibited by the existence of the social sciences from reflecting on the human condition, through fear of engaging in taproom sociology and the like. (All doubts as to competence in either sociology or theology have therefore been suppressed in this paper.) Reflection is however inevitably influenced by the social sciences. Growing awareness of the historical dimension of existence has, for example, influenced all disciplines. The social sciences have come to form the context and express the problems of modern experience, differently constituted for earlier generations. To this extent a body of knowledge such as sociology is 'needed' by theology. Equally, there is no reason why sociology should exclude from its subject matter, as one system of ideas and behaviour, theology and the conditions under which it is produced. In its own way, sociology too is a parasitic discipline, drawing on the insights and constructions of other disciplines.

In considering any subject, both theology and sociology are affected by the ambiguity of human existence. Past, present (and all interpretations of them) are always debatable. The interpretations proffered by both sociology and theology incorporate an awareness that they are not the only ones, and could be wrong. Indeed theology, if its talk of faith is to mean anything, must go so far as to be aware of the possibility of being mistaken as to the existence of God, its subject matter, an existential risk to which the sociologist is not professionally subject. Moreover, interpreting the human condition as they do, theology and sociology may possibly find themselves in conflict. There are two reasons for this.

In the first place, they do in practice run up against each other. Thus, for instance, a man may have an emotional experience when attending church with his girlfriend – against a whole background of facilitating circumstances: becoming weary of waiting for her on Sundays at her parents' house, this being his first time of going to church, his always having been a christian but regarding this in strictly ethical terms of helping, not harming people; and so on. He finds the significance of this experience in the religious terms in which it is embedded (though he need not do so) and joins the church that has provided it. 'I'd found there was something missing in my life.' Subsequent events – notably disagreements over

birth control and the discovery that the Church owns a goldmine in South Africa – might lead him to the opinion that his experience at the church service was due to his ‘immaturity’ and ‘looking for security’. He withdraws from the Church, though maintaining his adherence to christianity as ethics. Here, events have rendered his first interpretation of his experience implausible and reflection has provided an adequate psychological explanation.

It is not that the theological and psychological approach to what happened to him are in themselves incompatible – looking for security does not necessarily invalidate the theological interpretation; ownership of a goldmine, if that is indeed the case, probably raises more difficulties for theology. What has happened is that he has used a psychological model to reconstruct his whole history – immaturity to maturity – and has done so in such a way as to explain his previous theological interpretation.

Thus it is clear that theology and sociology can in practice come into conflict through the way they can be interwoven. At one time a model could be proposed in which, say, empirical sciences, human sciences, and theology examined their subject matter within different (and widening) perspectives, asking questions within their perspectives which did not trespass on those asked within others, for their concerns were limited by their perspectives. The concerns of the human sciences are too wide-ranging for this model to be tenable.

In the second place, sociology and theology may come into conflict through the presuppositions as to the human condition on which they draw. To simplify matters by eschewing the variety of theologies and sociologies, it may be said that one kind of sociology shares with one kind of theology the presuppositions that people are concerned with meaning and seek emancipation. By no means value free, they unite interpretative and structural concerns within a framework of emancipative praxis (as the saying goes). Even so, their presuppositions may be in conflict for there is another one that the theologian must make.

This arises because it is evident enough that belief in God is not needed for living in the world – for explanatory and all practical purposes there are other and adequate resources. In so far as christianity did fulfil these functions, their loss is regarded by theologians as a gain on the grounds that it was not the business of christianity to provide what science and technology now provide; that this provision fostered a false notion of God; and that man should take the ordering of the world into his own hands. As these ‘supplementary functions of religion’ fall away the ‘proper soil of religion in the heart of man’ will be increasingly revealed. (Thus, Schillebeeckx, 1969:18-22).

Nevertheless, if the world were to be considered totally of itself, talk of God would be strictly meaningless. The theologian must therefore suppose that the human condition in itself is open to the possibility of something beyond itself. This is not to do natural theology in the sense of suggesting that there is something that points to the existence of God, but to say that the possibility must be incorporated as a presupposition to make talk of God possible. The world must be seen in such a way as to 'render existentially possible something like a word of God' (Ricoeur 1969: 440). The theologian may say this or that form of religion is illusory – perhaps as nothing more than a reflection of society – but he cannot suppose it all is. This presupposition perhaps causes the most trouble, for some sociology is conducted upon precisely the opposite supposition: that all religion is illusory.

One kind of theology that cannot survive the explanations of sociology is that which claims direct and physical contact with God proved by subjective conviction, as some evangelical theology of conversion appears to do. A characteristic account of sudden conversion may be cited:

When I went to the grammar school I came across exams for the first time. I was in an awful flap. So my mother told me about Jesus. So I just knelt down by the sofa and Jesus came into my heart and it was all right.

This coming of Jesus may be regarded as a literal account of what happened – like somebody coming into a room – or as a metaphorical account – indicating the meaning of what happened. The difficulty arises if it is to be understood literally.

Some theology regards a subjective experience of this sort as its principal concern in such a way as to make itself subject to three corrosive possibilities. First, if it regards an experience of this kind as an unmediated experience of God (rather than, as for other sorts of theology, as an experience of ourselves as 'addressed' by God), it is in effect asserting the intervention of a being who is part of the world, one that is in the end no different from, say, a giant or the wind. The object of this experience is in principle available for examination. If it turns out not to be so, its existence may justifiably be doubted. Secondly, the subjective experience may be claimed as the sole and privileged basis of theology in such a way that it is in effect withdrawn from critical examination. Here, so much may be made of the 'yawning abyss (which) is crossed, not by man, not by both God and man, but only by God' (Barth 1956:82) that the presupposition of the world being open to something beyond itself is not made but denied. An absolute break is maintained. Thus the basis of theology is entirely withdrawn from critical examination and cannot escape the suggestion

that it is meaningless. Thirdly, theology, generally of this subjective sort, may take on sociology as a rival in the same field, in effect turning its theology into an alternative (and implausible) sociological explanation. 'The actual facts are', crisply begins a refutation of a psychological account of conversion, going on to say that God 'pours out his Spirit, and so the revival begins and spreads' (Lloyd Jones 1959:30).

A more traditional type of theology escapes this difficulty by maintaining both that the world is open to the possibility of God's existence and that the being of God is beyond understanding. God is neither seen nor experienced, except, in some fashion, 'in faith'. Theology is thus a study of reality envisaged in a particular religious fashion (i.e. as understood by faith) but it is clear that the reality it sees in the world is the same reality as that studied by sociology. If something is to be regarded as the result of God's influence on man, then it is only to be expected that only one party is available. Unlike a musical or other aesthetic experience its object is not available for examination but the experience is still a human experience not in principle peculiar.

The ambiguity of the experience may be illustrated by an incident that resolved the question of whether or not someone should adopt a religious framework in the first place (against a background of an upbringing that was both hostile to christianity and unsatisfying, followed by mixing with christians):

(I climbed the hill.) It was winter and all dark and this, and I got to the top, and I suddenly decided I was going to be a catholic; and I came down, and I just knew . . . It was a strange feeling of not knowing what had happened to me, as though I'd been hit by something. I just felt terribly sensitive and very high (as on drugs).

Just so; where inspiration is attributed to God the source of that inspiration (if not what is regarded as the transcendent aspect of that source) must be in the world, and activity attributed to divine influence is the same as any other activity. Communion with the divine must be mediated and manifested materially in ways that are no different in kind from other sorts of experience, for if God exists, it is not a question of the world being one way or another (for any world would be his creation), nor of behaviour being discernibly one way or another.

In short, there are as it were no extra-terrestrial experiences, only concrete acts on the human plane. Moreover, the resolute attack on dualism has dispatched all notions of essences or inner cores lying behind these actions or found in people. 'The form of religious reflection', as MacMurray sums it up, 'is necessarily determined by its data, and these are our practical experiences of our

relations with each other' (1961:169).

There is no conflict here between sociology and theology. They are both interested in the same thing, and their starting point is the same: what *use* people make of their notions of God. Even the theologian has no other source for knowledge of God. It is, according to Schillebeeckx again (1967:7ff), the 'critical function of Israel's prophets' interpreting Israel's history that turned it into a revelation of God, and this could no doubt be understood of any process of revelation: he thus links both criticism and use together. Moreover, to ask what people do with their notions of God – and why they want a God – is to bring theory and practice together; from the theological point of view praxis is intrinsic to any belief in God. This also directs theology towards its actual problems, which arise from assumptions that its perspective is uninteresting rather than, say, from difficulties about religious language. Finally, any consideration of the approach of theology should bear in mind that the demand for a God who must be seen to do something is after all characteristic of one sort of society, just as the notion that God must intervene in the natural world or not exist is part of a particular mechanistic model of society.

When sociologist and theologian consider a topic such as religious conversion, do they in practice come into conflict? Their procedure may be examined.

In the first place, they may both enjoy a moment of academic esprit but, like Graham Greene's man in the British Museum, reality will call them back. They will both become conscious of the presuppositions of their traditions. The theologian, say, may be working either within an ecclesiastical tradition in which the existence of the church is understood to precede the incorporation of its members, or within a more strictly evangelical tradition in which the church is understood as constituted by its members. In the first case, the 'moment' of change associated with conversion is more likely to be seen in developmental terms and as taking place within the institution; in the second, it is more likely to be regarded as having been completed before joining the church. (The common resort to scripture in response to a pluralistic world has not eliminated these traditions of interpretation.) In a similar way, sociologists have been somewhat mesmerized by the classic model of conversion evolved by psychologists influenced by American evangelicalism: internal conflict giving way to surrender and subsequent equilibrium. The adoption of other models, such as those of problem-solving or the undertaking of a project, remains in the same individualistic tradition.

Both, that is to say, will have gleaned some notion of conversion from their texts. They will next examine conversion on the



ground, as it were, for the perceptions of converts form their common starting point. Here they may have difficulty with their texts, unless they are prepared to define rather carefully beforehand what they mean by conversion, and equally carefully to select those who will count as converts. If they want to be concerned with a fairly large spread of people, they will be unwilling to make impositions of this sort, except in so far as is necessary to make their investigations practicable. They will then be confronted with a wide range of circumstances in which the word conversion is judged appropriate: a change of life, a requirement before joining a particular church, a change of religious affiliation or (in places where christianity is commonly regarded as everyone's birthright) in no circumstances at all. This variety is satisfactory enough to both sociologist and theologian, for the one is interested in people's circumstances and how they are understood, the other regards this as the source of his theology.

A further point confronts them both. Any narrative of conversion includes to a greater or lesser extent (as any autobiography must) a refashioning of the teller's past in the light of his present and his projects for the future. Thus, the illegitimate daughter of a catholic father (who disappeared before her birth) married a catholic and subsequently became one in the hope that it would bring him back to his religion as a cure for his mental instability. On spending her widowhood among catholics for whom roots were important she came to the conclusion that her catholicism was 'in the blood'.

Not only do people's interpretations of events change, but the events they regard as significant change. This does not make it necessary to suppose that a person's accounts of their past should be regarded as false, nor as all of one kind. There is a difference between testimony and an attempt at historical recollection for instance. In terms of a polarity between fiction and what 'really' happened, it is necessary to regard narratives as related to what really happened; not to do so would be to become lost without any base in the elucidation of the rules of language in which people discover and express themselves. But the function of narrative does compel attention to the anticipatory nature of some conversions, to the latitude available in the creation of religious reality and the way in which conversion can fashion its own object: 'the old story of the god who creates the faith which creates the god who creates . . . ' (Desroche 1974:380). Conversion may then be seen as not 'an empirical accomplishment but an interior decision to adopt a project' (Billette 1975:130).

An example of this process (in this case a quite conscious one) may be seen in someone who described how he would once have

maintained he became a christian at a particular point – at a time when he considered it was ‘something that happened at weekends, and it was a set of rules that were there to help you lead a good life and get better instead of going down to hell’. Subsequently he took the view that he became a christian at a much later date when ‘christianity (became) really to me more identified with Christ than with God’, and he tried to make it ‘relate to where people work’, evolving the belief that ‘if Christ knew he was God then we’ve been cheated’ since Christ had to have the same struggles. This changing notion of christianity was related to a changing view of his job, to becoming involved in the trade union and deciding he could not ‘relate religion with capitalism, nor with Toryism, and that’s why I’m a bloke who lives in a three-bedroomed house and have a hell of a conscience about it’. For completeness, one of his significant experiences may be referred to: in this, when sitting at his drawing board worrying about Cuba, the predicted end of the world, his family and so on, everything became clear ‘like suddenly getting a crossword clue’ in terms of adopting a christian view.

The apparent dissolution of reality before the continuous reworking of someone’s history, and indeed before all the different ways of approaching reality, need not disconcert the theologian any more than the sociologist (starting from the converts’ perceptions is the way of making something of this). The example chosen above was chosen because of its obvious amenability to the theologian’s exercise of examining how the human condition may be understood in terms of religion: the problem-solving at the drawing board is the discovery of meaning.

The sociologist then (to put it explicitly but briefly) will examine the circumstances in which people find themselves that serve to funnel them towards religious conversion; try to participate in situations where conversions are happening or obtain narratives of them to extract their essential features and the purposes and expectations of religion they disclose; and relate them to a wider social context by such means as noting the affinities between certain groups and kinds of religion.

In doing this he may well be struck by certain aspects of conversion (mentioned here so that this summary does not become too abstract) such as a relationship between conversion in a revivalist setting and the ethic of steadily pursuing success; or the observation that conversion within a catholic framework is generally a matter of people brought up as christians being drawn into the ambit of the Catholic Church and joining it for the purpose of family solidarity.

None of this represents any threat to the theologian. Perhaps



it makes it clear how limited religion is by its social context, something no doubt evident enough to the theologian anyway. It indicates the world in which he works. The fact that conversions are very largely drawn from the children of church members is simply one of the limitations with which he has to cope, if not necessarily accept.

What the theologian does with the material before him is, first of all, look out for possibilities of suggesting or discovering what God (the christian gospel etc.) is about. This is clear from their approach when giving directions on how to be converted, ranging from Jones' 'Take a good look at your life and its directions' as the first of seven steps (1960:198) to Curran's more comprehensive demand that conversion requires someone 'not only to change his own heart but also to change the social, political, economic and cultural structures of human existence' (1969:65). These are instructions to seek meaning in the sense of purpose – a teleological view of man.

In the second place, then, what is for the sociologist the adoption by the convert of a project, the giving of meaning to his life, becomes for the theologian a process that can at the same time be described as the calling by God of that person – that is to say as an offer to that person to discern the religious significance of his history.

Moreover, since the theologian (like the sociologist) will not be primarily concerned with the individual – and will indeed be agnostic as to the relationship between God and a particular person – he will, thirdly, locate that significance in a wider history: 'History made by nature and by man according to their own laws become something which is offered to man by the living God in order that, actively and creatively, man may give it a religious significance' (Schillebeeckx 1969: 28-9). This attribution of significance is a way of coming in at a tangent to history, rather than producing a different history. The paradigm case is Noah's rainbow; just a rainbow but Noah interpreted it as a promise for the future.

Fourthly, the theologian will have some criteria for the verification of the incidents of conversion. Thus he will enquire if the description of the experience goes beyond the representation of it, as for instance when a crucifix lying in a crypt of a church 'said to me, you'll have to paint us, I want to go back up into the church', some larger experience than this representation was clearly indicated. (If the person has a god within the world, then the representation and the god will be identified.) He will examine the religious tradition of the person (to evaluate the conversion within that tradition) and compare it with other religious traditions. And

he will test its authenticity in terms of the 'sincerity of our human solidarity, and love for our fellow men' (Schillebeeckx 1969:205). A refusal to distribute Christian Aid leaflets on the grounds that 'you don't have to be a christian to do that' coupled with a view such as the following

He must have got a good car like that after he became a christian. – Why? Because of good management as a christian – may lead the theologian to wonder what notion of God is being employed.

Of course the sociologist may wonder too. Comparison between religions and consideration of the functions of belief are his concern as well. But how far he goes towards evaluation is a matter of debate. At any rate it is evident that there is no conflict between them.

Finally, it could be asked if any possibility of conflict can be seen from the manner in which they criticise themselves and their own kind. Both are increasingly aware of how they are confined by the social conditions in which they are produced. Both fear the possibility of simply reflecting existing social relations and their characteristic separation of theory and practice. Both are stimulated by the difference of past formulations under other conditions which are found no longer appropriate. To conclude in restful harmony by returning to the emancipative profession of one sort of sociology and one sort of theology, they both draw on the same kind of critical theory and accompanying talk of praxis in the attempt to tie themselves in to those regarded as the agents and measure of emancipation. Thus, according to a theologian of this sort (Cone 1977:95 and 98), 'the question that theologians must ask themselves is not whether their theology is determined by social interest, but rather, *whose* social interest . . . The Christian theologian, therefore, is one whose hermeneutical consciousness for an interpretation, of the gospel is defined by the oppressed people's struggle for freedom.'

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## Visual Metaphors, Theatres and Courts

Hamish F. G. Swanston

There was, earlier this winter, a great deal of ribald talk about a scene in the National Theatre's production of Howard Brenton's play *The Romans in Britain*. There is likely to be more talk of the same sort now that the Secretary of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association is proceeding with her suit against Mr Michael Bogdanov for procuring the commission of an act of gross indecency between Mr Peter Sproule and Mr Greg Hills on 19th December last. And all this talk will doubtless be excited by public interest in Mr Timothy Sainsbury's Indecency Displays Bill and the Government's promise to assist the progress of that Bill through Parliament. We are, it seems, again about to debate the meaning of 'indecency'.

Though Sir Peter Hall has not followed the distasteful example of another theatre director, I would yet like to suggest that *The Romans* and indecency should be considered with the Old Vic production of *Macbeth* in mind.

I had secured my ticket for that *Macbeth* some weeks before the production opened, so I was not required to join the line of those who had been excited by the critical notices which quickly made Mr Brian Forbes' production and Mr Peter O'Toole's performance notorious. The opportunities for happiness, or even a little pleasure, are not so common in my life that I would easily forego a performance of any of Shakespeare's plays, and among them, *Macbeth* has especial claims. Once, when quite a small boy, I surprised the greatest Macbeth of my time rehearsing to himself across the lawn: 'Learning me lines, dear laddie', Godfrey Tearle admitted with a flourish. And later, in my last year at school, I