

CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

MICHAEL P. FOGARTY

LET us forget 'religious sociology', a misleading mistranslation from the French, which to an English audience confuses two quite different things. The 'Christian' or 'Catholic' sociologist studies, like the sociologists of any other denomination, how behaviour—not particularly religious behaviour, but behaviour in general—is affected by the social structure. His method is factual and scientific, like that of the non-Christian. But he uses insights from the theology of social order and the Christian conception of the natural law as a guide in picking problems to investigate, and to help decide what should be done about them once the facts are revealed. 'Religious sociology', on the other hand, as it has come to be understood on the Continent—the right English translation is the 'sociology of religion'—is a much narrower field, and one not specifically Christian. It studies how the practice of religion, that is religious as apart from general behaviour, is influenced by the social structure. As Fr Virton, S.J., puts it in a question quoted in this¹ report:

'If I were a wage-earner, an employer, a shopkeeper, a farmer, in this or that part of the country, working such and such hours in such and such a plant, living in such and such a neighbourhood, what difficulties would I find in coming to a mission, in practising my religion regularly, or in helping others to know Christ and his Church?'

The religion studied need not be Christian. Much of the best work in this field has been and is on primitive religions. There is some on Judaism, and today also on Mohammedanism. Nor need the sociologist making the study be Christian. The Congress belatedly reported here was of Catholics specializing in the sociology of Catholic religious practice. They insist, quoting horrible examples, that the non-Catholic who studies Catholic practice from the outside is even more likely than his Catholic

¹ *Sociologie Religieuse et Sciences Sociales*. Report of the fourth (1953) International Congress on the Sociology of Religion. Paris, Editions Ouvrières, 1955.

colleague to be led up the garden path. To that extent, it is just as well that the sociologist of Catholicism should also be a Catholic sociologist in the sense defined above. But these Catholic sociologists of religion see themselves as part of a wider movement in which religions of all types, from the most primitive to the most advanced, are studied by scholars of many different backgrounds, and they do not hesitate to quote Protestant or non-Christian colleagues whose work seems relevant to their own. The fresh eye of the outsider is often revealing in its own way.

The Catholic contribution to the sociology of religion is in fact becoming both wider and deeper. Catholic scholars have been drawn into this field from all over Europe, outside that is of the Iron Curtain, and from the Americas and the mission countries. They have a far clearer idea of what they are driving at, and how their task fits in with that of the theologian, the canonist, or the practitioners of other branches of social science such as psychology or economics, than a few years back when their movement began. There is still a certain naivety among some of them, notably of those who came to the sociology of religion from outside the field of the social sciences. I like the story—it is not in this book, but dates from the same time—of the American professor of sociology to whom a very distinguished Continental 'religious sociologist' laboriously explained the technique of sampling as a new discovery, stopping every minute to ask anxiously 'Do you really understand?' And there is the inevitable conflict between those who want results quickly, in a field which is after all of great importance for Catholic Action and the pastoral work of the clergy, and others who prefer to wait till terms can be defined precisely and fully scientific procedures used. But many of the studies listed here—Boulard on rural France, Quoist on Rouen, Hoyois on the Ardennes, Leone on Mantua, to pick only a few at random—deserve a place on any sociological bookshelf. And there are more in prospect. Gabriel Le Bras was an outstanding canonist before he became the chief academic leader of the Catholic study of the sociology of religion. He throws up here some fascinating suggestions about the possibilities of combined research by the canonist and the social scientist. One studies the family, the other *De Matrimonio*; might they not do well to work together? In general, the newer studies of the sociology of religion are penetrating deeper, getting well beyond the

superficial though necessary accumulation of statistics of religious practice with which many countries began, and which is still the limit of the achievement of British Catholics. Methods are being standardized; that was one of the objects of this Congress. The time is coming when Catholic sociologists of religion in countries like Holland or France can expect to give as full and penetrating an answer to Fr Virton's question as the methods of social science permit.

The individuals and organizations working in this field now run the whole gamut from the pure academic to what might, without disrespect, be called the market research agencies of the Hierarchy and the various Catholic Action movements. Encouragement by the Hierarchy has been particularly official and direct in Holland, France, Germany, and, more recently and most important, Italy. The report quotes several important Papal and episcopal statements on this. This multiplication of agencies raises problems familiar to anyone who has been concerned with a field of applied research, whether in the social or the natural sciences. The first is that of the relation between the research agencies and the 'line' organization, in this case the Bishops and parish priests. In industrial and government research there are well-established procedures for ensuring that research organizations find their right place, and no more than their right place, in the process by which decisions are reached. Nothing quite so formal is recorded in this report, but several papers show that the problem is being considered and, at least in a country like Holland, increasingly successfully solved.

A more ticklish question is that of the freedom of the pure researcher. It is obviously true, as Cardinal Lercaro insists in one of the statements published here, that not all the findings of research into the sociology of the Church should be published, at least at the time. No one will complain if the reports, of, let us say, one of the diocesan research bureaux which are beginning to be established in Italy are kept for internal circulation. Their case is exactly parallel to that of the research division of some industrial concern, where secrecy may be and is often reserved; though Bishops will no doubt note what industrialists have also found, namely that it is good for research workers' morale, and for the recruitment of first-class men in future, to allow a great deal of freedom to publish. But rather different issues are presented

by 'pure' or academic research, as in University Ph.D. theses, and generally by research of which publication has been promised or begun. Tact is part of an academic research worker's training, and those who give him information can rightly insist that it be exercised. But there are very good reasons for the tradition of free inquiry and publication at the University level, and they should not lightly be brushed aside. There have been cases, like the suppression of the last three volumes of Fichter's *Southern Parish*, which leave a bad taste in academic mouths. The Congress report touches on these matters delicately, but enough to show their importance.

Who does this research into the sociology of Catholic practice? The answer so far is that, like most Catholic activities, it has been done on a shoestring by the casual labour of those who could find time from other duties, or else at cut rates, regardless of the Just Wage, by the clergy: or sometimes, by official bodies incidentally to something else. Why worry, it might be said, so long as the work gets done? First, because it remains to be proved that enough of the kind of work required will get done in this way. And, secondly, because to limit specialized, full-time, work in this field too exclusively to the clergy is to miss a chief part of its significance. The study of social conditions, in this case as they affect the practice of religion, is surely an obvious field for the layman with a social science training. To make studies of this kind, and to co-operate in doing so with the Bishops and parish clergy, could be an immensely effective way of bringing Catholic social scientists to take that active share in the apostolate to which all the laity are called today. Looking at this Congress report, it seems doubtful that this point has yet been sufficiently understood.

These material matters remind me that I miss in this report any adequate treatment of St Praxides. Praxides is a fortunate saint, who presides, so I am told, over a parish somewhere in the United States in which no one's income is below \$10,000 a year; a typical American parish of the upper middle class. In England we have always been rather chary of investigating the very rich. *Punch* once had a cartoon of a baronial hall, with the rich sitting at their tea and an enquirer framed in the pillared doorway. 'Don't disturb yourselves, my good people; I am investigating the living habits of the rich.' It just couldn't happen.

But surely it ought to happen? We talk a lot about American materialism. But if we could qualify to live in St Praxides parish, would we not do so? All of us in Europe are going there just as fast as the balance of payments will let us. And we may not be too badly off, spiritually I mean, when we get there. St Praxides people, they tell me, are not a bad lot, nor lacking in apostolic spirit; go round the boys at Ampleforth or the girls at the Sacred Heart at Woldingham, or even their parents, and you may see what I mean. In any case they are important people, with influence: doctors, lawyers, managers. Here is, materially speaking, the target area towards which all of us are striving, and which many Catholics in many countries have entered. I suspect that the sociologists of Catholicism would find it worth while to spend a great deal more time on this group than the numbers involved today or the present acuteness of this class's problems would suggest.