

Theology and Sociology: the Irish Flâneur's Account

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"O senseless and foolish people, who have eyes and see not, who have ears and hear not."¹ That would seem to be Kieran Flanagan's verdict on liberal theologians in *The Enchantment of Sociology*, though the accused are not named or their unhappy deeds documented by textual reference. As a class they are those who appear to accept the sociological mode of social scrutiny while resolutely avoiding its clear implications, whereas their traditionally-minded opponents appear to reject sociology and all its works while putting forward essentially sociological arguments. Flanagan suggests that one reason liberal theologians are so disoriented in their understanding is because their location in the secular university has made them strangers to the body of the Church. He, on the other hand, is enabled both to see and to hear because he is a stranger and an alien in the body of English society. He walks in our supermarkets and our semi-secularised cathedrals assisted by distance to envisage the true nature of the secular challenge and a possible response.

One response is to find unmarked (and unremarked) theological clues scattered in the detritus of postmodernity. At the end of the line in the trajectory of modernity we may discern again our beginnings. As sociology seeks sources of enchantment to reverse the chill closure of Weber's "iron cage" it may also stumble upon an unexpected preparation of the gospel.

The argument is that sociology can locate metaphors of the sacred and of theology lodged in the calculative, administered and commodified culture of postmodernity. The existence of such metaphors in itself points to a deficiency and to a vacancy at its heart where "superstition dances on the grave of positivism". So what exactly is signified by the emergence of "fundamentalist" groups and New Agers seeking sacred space; by the partial retention of rites of passage which point to underlying existential questions; by the re-emergence of the categories of evil and personal responsibility with reference to intolerable acts; by the limitless need to know and its bedfellow in overweening curiosity? What do the renewed search for community and the desire to recover respect, trust and courtesy signify? In all such matters Flanagan claims "The hermeneutic act of understanding can shift the sociologist from a reading of the surface of culture to a decipherment that embodies an issue of theology" (p.143).

One of Flanagan's examples turns on how a sociologist such as Bourdieu not only uses a theological vocabulary of habitus, priesthood, vocation, consecration and transubstantiation but also delineates the ways

in which we demarcate sacred space and protect the holy by powers of conferral, designation and naming. Of course, the context for Bourdieu's analysis is the secular university rather than the Church, and he is, in fact, discussing the dissimulations of the powerful in pursuit of their own interests rather than the disinterested invocation of the divine Presence. Yet the analysis illustrates the general principles which govern the management of symbolic capital and it is just such principles that are likely to be scanted in liberal academic theology. Flanagan seeks to regain them for the cultural field of Catholicism and to assist theologians in attending to the realisation of faith "in the detail of a practice".

The case of Bourdieu is just an instance of Flanagan's broad thesis about the way sociological procedures for understanding the administration of culture might lead back by analogy to the ministration of the sacraments. In this area, the paradoxes are cumulative but the undergirding argument remains. It is that what the theological guardians threw away in careless rapture may be uncovered, even recovered, for the tradition even though bereft of its "Christian name".

Flanagan feels equipped for this heroic and perhaps lonely venture because he is the Wandering Celt and so the contemporary version of the Wandering Jew. After all, the critical discipline of sociology was created mainly by outsiders, especially Jews, in contradistinction to the mainstream of Catholic civilization. Jews analysed their social environment as they were released from the ethnic ghetto by Enlightenment. Today the Celt will find the resources to retrieve a mainstream now marginalised, by recourse to the ghetto of holiness in the monastery. In the unregarded life of the monastery, dedicated to the reproduction of virtue and holiness, the Stranger in modern culture can find himself at home. Perhaps he echoes Alisdair MacIntyre's words at the close of *After Virtue* about civilization being saved by another St Benedict. Or perhaps there is a further echo of Kenneth Clarke's words at the beginning of *Civilization* where he speaks of being saved "by the skin of our teeth" on the remotest periphery of south-west Ireland.

In pursuing this project Flanagan invokes certain allies and precursors. While it is true that sociological thinking on religion owes much to a secularised Judaism and has largely ignored Catholicism, there remain significant exceptions, for example, in the writing of Simmel, in the circle of Durkheim and in some of the intellectual debts of Weber. Flanagan finds precursors of a different sort in some of the pioneers of modernity (and decadence) such as Huysmans, Wilde and Baudelaire. They were sufficiently scorched by the experience to "take out fire insurance in Catholicism". Flanagan sees himself as engaged in a similar demarche a hundred years later when intimations of modernity have given way to the fragmentations of postmodernity.

Developments helpful to Flanagan's project have occurred in recent years within sociology itself. Whereas the situation of religion in Europe has deteriorated since the sixties the changes in sociology over the same period have made for a more rounded understanding of religion.

Sociology has become more self-conscious and many sociologists have stripped off the masks of positivism and pseudo-objectivity. Some have recognised the scientific apologetics pursued through the bleaching out of the inherent colour of language. Alternatively they have recognised the way certain potent metaphors and phrases subserve various kinds of social reductionism. (For example, what is implied when we re-describe martyrdom as “passive-aggressive behaviour”?) People are expected to show where they are coming from and even to indicate the relevance of their autobiography. And this can be done without collapsing all shared criteria of judgement and assessment of evidence into pure subjectivity and relativism.

Sociology as a humane discipline has rediscovered agency and narrative and thereby not only brought itself closer to the theological universe of thinking but extended its range to include topics such as risk, trust, anxiety, demoralisation and spiritlessness. It might even be permissible to explore what kinds of social context promote a culture of virtue. How, for example, does habituation to order and to rule help nourish such a culture? This is where sociology can share a terrain with theology. At the outer limit sociology might be able to indicate grounds of faith hidden beneath the paradoxes of love and desire, power and greed. It can trace the genesis of the failed epiphanies of secular religions, such as Marxism. It can also follow up all the false idols and varieties of “Paradise News” offered by sex, travel, aesthetic ecstasy and leisure, as well as the contemporary efflorescence of credulity and ungovernable moral passion. All these are part of a proper preface to faith latent in the world around which even that world itself comments upon with occasional unease.

So far I have mainly offered a modest gloss on the thematic repertoire of *The Enchantment of Sociology*, and maybe it is time to increase the critical quotient. One criticism might be the limited appreciation Flanagan shows for what has already been done in the Anglo-American sociology of religion. This is partly because his Catholic perspective is fed by the Frankfurt School, as witness his remarks on the failed promise of modernity and postmodernity in a culture saturated in quantity and commodity, sex, money and the managed self. But this, like Habermas, is grandiose stuff and there are unpretentious essays in this area in British sociology that are passed over, such as Bryan Wilson’s work on the social sources of demoralisation.

Coming closer to theology proper, Flanagan slightly distorts what Berger and myself have to say about the demarcations between sociology and theology. Both of us recognise that there is significant trafficking in the march-lands of the two disciplines and in our writings we mingle modes from time to time, even at the price of raised eyebrows among our peers. But when Flanagan quotes me, for example, as saying that “a sociologist has no remit to talk about God” I mean simply that we cannot delimit and identify some variable in the ensemble of variables which represent divine action. To do so would be to specify God’s Name and Nature by way of a theological norm, as well as to identify His presence

and agency. Heaven forbids any such hubristic enterprise within the ambit of a social science. The most we can do as sociologists roving up against the frontier of theology is to suggest intimations of divinity in the crevices of our experience or in the implications of our gestures. This is precisely what Berger did in *A Rumour of Angels* and in his (forthcoming) *Redeeming Laughter*.

The difficulty is that some very complex issues attend on the sociological scrutiny of those rites and institutions whose *raison d'être* is the pursuit of love and the receipt of grace. Flanagan argues that if one does not understand and empathise with the religious rationale of such rites and institutions the scrutiny must be defective. That is true enough. But theology also affirms that grace is a sovereign power active in lives. In one way we can give some sort of lame account of this by recognising that lives are indeed changed by conversion and by participation in the benefits of the Passion and the proclamation of a kingdom of peace, righteousness and reconciliation. We can ask with George Steiner and Herbert Butterfield what it must mean for a civilization to be infiltrated by the repetition of the words of the gospel millions of times. It is true there can be no firm answer to such a question but it makes eminent good sense to ask it. What we cannot do, however, is to trace the operation of saving grace as if it were an identifiable thread in human history. If that were possible we could in principle devise accounts of grace in Yorkshire from (say) 1830–1875 or of the work of the Holy Spirit in Korea in the early years of this century. It would be like devising an account of the role of inspiration in German music in the time of the Romantic movement.

One oddity worth noting is that while grace appears beyond our remit sociology does use terms which are morally saturated, such as exploitation and corruption. The moment you use such words you presume a moral universe not given by science. However much we try, the language we use is riddled with implications about right and wrong and justification. And once we are speaking about corruption and justification we are again in the neighbourhood of theology.

When it comes to specifying what precisely is the matter with the recent Roman Catholic appropriation of liberal theology, Flanagan is really quite selective in his targets. Moral theology and dogmatic theology barely figure at all. The one exception is certainly important and involves a tacit agreement with Niklas Luhmann in questioning whether the Church was wise to jettison—or at least “mask”—hell. It is clear that hell must be cognate with love, as absence is cognate with presence, fear and trembling with justification. It is not clear what redemption is about if it has nothing to do with sin and hell. Flanagan might well have developed this issue since sociologists can map the contours of hell, and are virtually experts in the downward suction of moral obliquity (though only on this side of eternity). There is an undeveloped discipline latent here where a moral sociology, moral psychology and moral theology could map the interior of hell and set out precise costs as determined by moral accountancy. We may be among the redeemed but in the coinage of hell

we pay all the same down “to the uttermost farthing”.

Hell aside, Flanagan’s comments focus on ecclesiology, liturgiology and the battery of concepts and applications developed in the course of the Church’s engagement with modern culture. As mentioned above, what clearly exasperates Flanagan is the way so many theologies claiming to engage with culture only succeed in absorbing the atmospherics and velleities of liberal opinion. It almost appears as if they believe that we are redeemed by the enunciation of correct opinions and the politics of approved liberal gesture. They censor and torture themselves lest they are caught out in a compromising opinion. Purity of doctrine is demonstrated in a socio-political rhetoric and an adamant righteousness towards dissenters. Their religion is in the strict sense notional and consists in a world-denying indifference to what is actually the case, especially the opportunity costs of strictly limited options. Flanagan is frustrated by the arrogance with which they propagate a false image of the ways of the social world, and treat critics with disdain. Moreover, in the fields of ecclesiology and liturgy they are too often the partisans of disembodiment.

One example offered by Flanagan is the rhetoric of “inculturation” which he analyses with particular sensitivity. It took off from the correct observation that the giving of a message requires an accompanying resonance with cultural context. However, in the course of its development inculturation can come to mean a submission to context which abjures any judgement about “which culture it wishes to affirm and sanctify” (p.77). What happens, for example, when you insist on a radical adjustment to a culture like Japan, where your relativism and your stance of social criticism is rejected as a western intrusion? How far in post-missionary conditions do you unhinge and disorient those faithful converts who were attracted by the way your culture was different? Who decides what version of a local culture is “authentic” and therefore worthy of respect? To offer my own example—in Brazil the answer is that the intelligentsia in the high culture participate in the definition of what is “authentic”. But what exactly are the cultural components which constitute authenticity? There is something minatory in David Lehmann’s contention in *Struggle for the Spirit* that the novel radicalism of Pentecostals in Latin America is that they are the poor who throw off such definitions, and incidentally grow vertiginously. If they were ever to “inculturate” with the corrupt and violent machismo of Latin American society they would be finished. At the same time, liberation theologians accuse them of a characteristically Latin American corporatism and authoritarianism, so in that respect “inculturation” is hardly to be recommended. As Flanagan points out, judgement is unavoidable, but in these contexts liberal theologians still try to avoid it.

A great merit of Flanagan’s book is that it deals with matters *in medias res*, recognising that at the core of the disciplines of sociology and theology there are essentially different modalities. That difference is held constant even while we may rove in the extensive marches between their

distinctive territories. If his critique of liberal theology is over-generalised, nevertheless in his dealings with sociological texts his comments are careful, specific and nuanced. In short, he is critically attentive to what we as sociologists actually do.

In this last respect he differs very much from John Milbank in his *Theology and Social Theory*, likewise accorded an issue of *New Blackfriars*,² and it is worth a brief aside to highlight the differences. For all its architectonic brilliance, Milbank's book is less useful to practitioners and less convincing because he devised a metadiscourse far above the analyses we actually carry out. Milbank engaged in obliteration bombing in which the whole discipline was obscured in a pall of smoke. We needed liberation, not elimination. Once the whole exercise was over we were back with the old questions. Could Milbank *really* be suggesting that there were no politics of baptism, ordination and credal formation and of the episcopal or papal power to define and pronounce? Is there really no intelligible social geography of conversion or demographics of dechristianisation? The list of such questions could well be very long.

What is missing from Milbank's book and from Flanagan's is an analysis of the way in which the hostile ontologies properly located by Milbank in the foundations of the sociology of religion inform ordinary everyday practice. These ontologies work at this level through presumptions about the way in which religious phenomena rest in or derive from other layers, or else about the capacity of religion to be consequential. Our concepts are too easily used to tidy up the world, and our metaphors rescript the accounts of believers as if they were somnambulists who do not understand what they are doing. What Milbank calls "policing the sublime" needs to be examined in actual practice to see in what senses it is and is not true. Neither author tackles this task.³

But perhaps in complaining that Flanagan's book does not do this, one misses the main point of his exercise, which is directed not so much at relations between the disciplines of theology and sociology as at misappropriation of the latter by the former. It is, in fact, rather too easy to miss the main point because—as Flanagan says—the style is allusive, gnomic and idiosyncratic, and inclined to take short cuts. He claims that is because his is a unique enterprise, and about the uniqueness one is inclined to agree. The book needs to be read slowly two or three times, and only then does it begin to give up its riches.

1 Jeremiah 5:21; cf Mark 8:18.

2 Vol. 73 No. 861, June 1992.

3 I deal tangentially with these problems in my *Reflections on Sociology and Theology*, Oxford University Press, 1996 and more directly in *Betterment from on High: Pentecostal Lives in Chile and Brazil* (with B. Martin), forthcoming.