The Contribution of Sociology to the Catholic Church[1]

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I

Attitudes towards sociology displayed by some leading authorities in the Catholic church today are, to put it mildly, ambivalent. They vary from suspicion and sometimes overt hostility to feelings of relative pleasure depending on whether or not the findings of sociological research can be used to support their pastoral intuitions. Pope Paul, for instance, has been reported as claiming that the turbulence and dissent in the Roman Catholic church today 'tends to be produced with a new method, that of the sociological survey'.[2] At the same time that he made this remark he was sponsoring one of the largest socio-religious surveys to date within his own diocese of Rome. In England, in his address to the Church Leaders' Conference in 1972, Cardinal Heenan viewed with alarm the number of university students now opting for courses in sociology and what he saw as the almost certain consequence of requests for fresh surveys.[3] He continued by doubting the value in planning future pastoral strategy of such surveys as that recently completed for the Church in West Germany. In the same year he was accepting one of the 'findings' of an extremely unrepresentative survey[4] carried out by the Laity Commission on behalf of the hierarchy, that priests working in parishes should make themselves more available to their parishioners. Yet he was not reported as welcoming another 'finding' in the same survey that the laity accepted the principle of optional celibacy for priests. Thus it would appear that some church leaders are selective in their acceptance of sociological findings.

We would now like to suggest there are at least four reasons for the suspicion of sociology. In the first place it is quite possible that sociology is connected in the minds of many with revolutionary social change. The student unrest of the late 1960s which was thought to be seeking such change occurred in universities such as Berkeley, Nanterre and the London School of Economics, all with strong faculties of sociology. Secondly, we suggest that there is a revulsion on the part of some church leaders at the very attempt of sociology to analyse religious phenomena

[1]This article is a slightly modified version of the editorial chapter in G. Dann and M. P. Hornsby-Smith (eds.), *Towards the Whole Truth*, which is to be published shortly by members of the Surrey Unit for Socio-Religious Studies.
[2]'Pope Blames Sociology for Dissent in Church', *The Times*, 4th December 1969, p. 7. No evidence for this extraordinary hypothesis was offered.
[3]Cardinal J. C. Heenan, *The Roman Catholic Church Today and Tomorrow*, The Tablet, 16th September, 1972, 892-5. See also D. L. Edwards, *The British Churches Turn to the Future*, S.C.M. Press, 1973, espec. pp. 25-30.
[4]R. Brech, *The Church: Joint Venture of Priests and Laity*, Laity Commission, 1972.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1975.tb02204.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the same techniques that it employs in its investigation and study of the various non-religious institutions of society. Thirdly, most religious surveys either directly or indirectly touch on the problem of authority in the Church at some point. It is possible to discern from these surveys that more and more Catholics are reacting against the traditional model of the Church. Not unnaturally, these surveys are sometimes viewed with suspicion and alarm. Fourthly, sociology is frequently accused (*after* a discovery) of only demonstrating the obvious. (This is so clearly erroneous[5] that its repeated assertion borders on the malicious.)

Suspicion of sociology by some church leaders in England may be more pronounced than in other countries. While there is a long tradition of reputable socio-religious research on the Continent, in the United States, and more recently in areas of the Third World, in England the Newman Demographic Survey collapsed due to the withdrawal of support a decade ago. Moreover, in spite of the growing number of researches by Catholic sociologists in this country,[6] there is still no institute for socio-religious research comparable to those elsewhere. In the current climate of opinion the Catholic church in England is unlikely to sponsor an independent national research institute. In the face of such discouragement it is clear that the immediate future for socio-religious research will depend on the local initiatives of groups of Catholic sociologists with the encouragement of individual bishops and theologians.

In this article, therefore, we will attempt to make out a case that the general ambivalence towards sociology in the Catholic church is based very largely on a misunderstanding of the nature of sociology, and argue that the findings of sociological research can be of service to the Church in contributing to a fuller understanding of the social world it aims to serve.

II

It is true, of course, that sociology is a critical discipline and that sociologists are trained to search for aspects of reality behind superficial social appearances and to analyse the nature of power and patterns of influence wielded by particular social groups. This critical element derives from the insights in the classical writings of the founding fathers of sociology, especially Marx, Durkheim and Weber.[7]

Thus from Marx one learns the importance of economic factors (e.g. church investment policies) and the way in which institutionalised religion (e.g. Christianity) may serve as an ideology to legitimate the existing social structure and the continued dominance of particular social

[5]Examples include the discovery of informal norms in small work groups in the Hawthorne studies; the failure of expansion of educational provision to promote equality of opportunity; the persistence of poverty in the affluent society and the refutation of the claim that 'we are all middle class now'; *relative* deprivation and the perception of social injustice, etc.

[6]See, for example, C. K. Ward, *Priests and People*, Liverpool University Press, 1961; J. Brothers, *Church and School*, Liverpool University Press, 1964; J. Hickey, *Urban Catholics*, Chapman, 1967.

[7]See, for example, L. W. Sherman, *Uses of the Masters*, The American Sociologist, 9 (Nov.) 1974, 176-181; A. Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: A Study of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*, C.U.P., 1971.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1975.tb02204.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

elites (e.g. in contemporary Latin America). From Durkheim one learns, for example, to explore the integrative functions of religion, its contribution to the cohesion of its adherents, the functions of ritual and so on. From Weber's great work on *The Protestant Ethic* one learns the importance of religious beliefs and values as *independent* variables in social action. In his other writings can be found the classical analyses of authority and bureaucracy; here are the tools for the study of the Church as an organisation. It is also from Weber that contemporary sociology has derived its recognition of the importance of the subjective meanings people attach to social behaviour (e.g. religious practice).

Finally all three founding fathers were concerned in their different ways with the traumatic effects of the Industrial Revolution: Marx with his critique of capitalism; Durkheim with his analysis of the division of labour and the consequent change in the nature of social solidarity; and Weber with the concern for the process of rationalisation which permeated his life's work. There seems little doubt that the Church has so far very largely failed to understand and adapt to the process of industrialisation and the needs of industrial society.

We would conclude, therefore, by admitting that the findings of sociological research are frequently uncomfortable to established interests and institutions but argue that the enhanced self-knowledge and understanding which is achieved is necessary for any controlled and purposeful adaptation and change. The contemporary world is in a state of flux and the Vatican Council called for a response to the changing demands of the times.[8] We believe sociological research and insights can make their due contribution to this response by reducing self-deception and ensuring that the strategies of a missionary church are based on a more informed analysis of the different needs of various social groups. Where, however, the Church authorities reject or ignore the proper contribution of sociology, not only do they retard the missionary work of the Church but they also contribute to the image of the Church as a massive institution which is manifesting the classical dysfunctions of a bureaucracy, resistance to change, maintenance of the existing structures by incumbent interest groups and the development of ideologies for legitimating this stance.

We would interpret some of the comments attributed to Pope Paul and Cardinal Heenan in this vein. In the *Times* report mentioned above, the Pope was quoted as saying that sociological studies ' "can generate a moral uncertainty, socially very dangerous". The Pope said that sociological data must not be judged on their own merit but subjected to "other and higher criteria, such as the essential doctrine of the

[8]Thus in *Gaudium Et Spes*: '. . . the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics . . .' (Section 4) in W. M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, Chapman, 1966, 201-2. We believe sociological research to be essential to any attempt to 'recognize and understand the world in which we live'.

faith, pastoral guidance and the sentiments of the Gospel" '. Cardinal Heenan in the speech referred to above said that 'it is not easy to give a realistic account of the Catholic church in Britain today. . . . We simply do not know the state of the Church. The state of any church is known only to God'. Of course we would not deny this but we would challenge it as an adequate reason for rejecting whatever contribution sociology can make to our understanding of that state.

Fears of the critical contribution of sociology can thus be explained sociologically but they make no sense theologically. Sociological knowledge, and for that matter any other form of knowledge, presents no threat to the Church to which Christ made His promise: 'And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time'.

Our purpose in this article, therefore, is to urge an openness to that partial view of the whole truth which sociological research can offer, for 'the truth will make you free' from ignorance and prejudice. Without this contribution from sociology, our knowledge and understanding of patterns of religious belief and practice will be even more limited; hence the contribution of sociology *towards* the whole truth.

III

But in our view sociology is more than a critical discipline. In the Durkheimian tradition it recognises the existence of societal forces and constraints and their outcomes in the 'social facts' of different types and rates of behaviour (e.g. suicide rates, religious practice, marriage patterns, education provision, etc.). Furthermore these different types of behaviour are highly structured and it is one task of the sociologist to explore the inter-relationships between different institutional areas. In his research there is a constant interplay between fact and theory.

Thus it is of interest to the sociologist to investigate, for example, the implications for patterns of religious beliefs, attitudes and practice of widening opportunities for secondary and higher education. Relevant variables might well be ethnic origin (e.g. in England, Irish or Polish immigrants of one or more generations or indigenous English), family structure and the experiences of social and geographical mobility, and changing occupational experiences (e.g. from agricultural to factory employment). We would accept that the inter-relationship between these and any other relevant variables which might be discovered as a result of painstaking enquiry would be extremely complex. The sociologist would, however, endeavour to explore these inter-relationships using a variety of research methods (e.g. historical documents, interviews, questionnaires, participant observation and so on), devising appropriate indicators for the variables, refining techniques for measuring them, and as far as possible testing hypotheses concerning the nature of these inter-relationships between the chosen variables and publishing the findings in such a way that they are intrinsically open to challenge and replication by other research workers.

To this extent we see sociology as 'a science of society' and we see the critical analysis and evaluation of such research by the community of professional sociologists as providing the surest guarantee of its com-

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1975.tb02204.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

petence. In so far as research is incompetent, badly formulated, poorly executed and erroneously analysed, it is the task of other sociologists to demonstrate these weaknesses and we would maintain that, by and large, this does occur.

We would therefore argue that increasingly sophisticated research techniques are leading to enhanced knowledge and understanding of even complex religious phenomena and that to ignore the contribution which this research can make would be folly on the part of a teaching church. We would also claim that the sociological community provides the surest safeguard against such distortions or biases which are likely to result from the values and prejudices which the researcher might have. In recent years sociologists have come to recognise this problem and typically to face it by making their values explicit in their published work. Again, it remains for the scientific community, by its due processes of criticism and evaluation, to assess the consequences of the researcher's values to his findings and analysis and to initiate appropriate corrective procedures including reinterpretation of his published findings or further research investigations.

We do not, therefore, accept the sceptical and dismissive view that sociological research is ambiguous and misleading; rather we believe that structures of assessment of competence and patterns of rewards in the community of scholars serve to reduce such ambiguity and misinterpretation as can be attributed to incompetence, and also to identify those areas still legitimately the subject of dispute among scholars. Furthermore, we cannot accept the view that some matters are so intrinsically complex (e.g. religious attitudes or beliefs) that the sociologist can make no useful contribution to their analysis and understanding. This would seem to ignore the great strides which have been made in socio-religious research from the early days of Le Bras and Boulard with their primary concern with religious practice, to the five dimensions of religiosity developed by Glock and Stark, and the refined analysis of Pin, Houtart and Remy on religious motivation and affiliation.

As sociologists we cannot accept that theologians or church leaders can properly comment on the *sociological* competence of such sociological research though we would, of course, recognise that the theologian may criticise, for example operational definitions and interpretations of church structures or patterns of belief, and that Church leaders may legitimately condemn certain types of belief, attitudes or practice identified by the sociologist. We would suggest that the former is an instance where fruitful co-operation between the theologian and the sociologist may lead to better sociological conceptualisation and that in the latter case the church leader would be in a better position to adapt his pastoral strategies as a consequence of the findings of research.

Thus we would argue that sociology offers a valuable, if partial, perspective in the search for truth and understanding. It does this in a patterned, disciplined and regulated way which offers a high measure of self-correction and its findings can make a modest contribution to the pastoral mission of the Church. While it can offer only a partial view of reality it would in our view be foolish to ignore it.

IV

A few examples should serve to illustrate how sociological research has been of service to the Church in recent years. In 1966, Carrier produced a book on vocations among seminarians. A sample of 76 students from 26 different countries was interviewed at the Gregorian University in Rome together with a further sample of 96 seminarians interviewed at the same time in Naples, Anagni, Paris and Malta. One of the many findings of pastoral interest and concern was that, of the twelve reasons offered as presenting an obstacle to becoming a priest, the role of celibacy clearly headed the list in all five research areas. When one realises that nearly all prior and subsequent research has reported the same finding then it should have been apparent that this had definite policy implications for the Church in terms of *future* manpower.

However the problem of celibacy, this time linked more with the wider question of authority in the Church, is affecting the *present* manpower too. Between 1967 and 1971 surveys conducted in at least twenty-six countries highlighted problems of celibacy, authority, loneliness, identity, and the role and function of the priest. Here was a case where a certain 'malaise' or crisis had been demonstrated to exist among the priesthood of all five continents. The failure to deal adequately with this problem at synodal level or to tackle the question of the declining number of vocations could not be blamed on the sociologists of these countries.

The two examples above of studies conducted among seminarians and priests illustrate the rather negative role that sociology has played in the formulation of Church policy in that the trends that it indicated were largely ignored. However, there have been studies where policy changes have been implemented due to sociological research. A case in point is that of the many religious orders and congregations that have adapted to renewal as a result of self-study. The largest example of this is CMSW survey carried out in the United States among 400 congregations of sisters. Surveys among lay people have also been carried out, and these have in many cases resulted in the greater voicing of lay opinion at the consultative level of diocesan and national synods. The vexed question of popular forms of religion is being tackled and where this problem is serious, hopefully dialogue will take place between leaders of cults and the Catholic hierarchy. The updating of training of lay catechists has also been the result of sociological enquiry. With increased leisure activities some sociological studies are now turning their attention to the greater question of the connection between religion and tourism. The list is not complete but it should give some idea of the positive role that sociology has played in the formation of pastoral strategy.

V

In the remainder of this article we would like to comment briefly on a number of areas where we believe sociological research would be of value to the Church. We would reiterate our earlier assertion that, in

the main, the Church has failed to adapt its structures (e.g. parishes, dioceses, seminaries, etc.) and its pastoral strategies (based for example on 'a "bourgeois" clergy (which) is serving a congregation that is itself becoming more and more middle class') to the needs of industrial society.

In the first place sociological research can generate better *knowledge* of factual data and the identification of areas of special need (e.g. the consequences of a declining and aging clerical workforce). Secondly, research can contribute to greater *understanding*. An adequate knowledge and understanding of the facts is a necessary preliminary to any sound policy formulation and decision making. Thirdly, sociological research can contribute to the *evaluation* of various strategies for the achievement of specified goals.

While we would reject the simple identification of sociology with statistical data collection, it is nevertheless extraordinary that current estimates of the Roman Catholic population in England and Wales range from 4 million to 6 million. Furthermore, while there has been a decline in the number of confirmations, marriages and baptisms which might have been expected on the basis of the existing Catholic population and in the number of conversions, one must still realise that many of these figures may be as inaccurate as those for the Catholic population as a whole and that therefore the lapsation rates calculated from these figures, may also be distorted.[9] We would suggest that demographic data about the age, sex, family structure, marital status and religious affiliation, ethnic group, social and geographical mobility and regional location would all seem to be relevant variables in the pursuit of any long-term strategy of school or church building. Other examples of the need for basic statistical data would include those for ecclesiastical manpower and the teaching staff of Catholic schools.

A very large proportion of the financial and skilled manpower resources of the Catholic community are invested in the separate system of Catholic schools, yet it is still unclear what it is that creates a 'good' Catholic school. There have been no major studies of school 'atmosphere' which enable the question 'what are the distinctive features of a Catholic school climate?' to be answered and subsequent policy decisions to be taken to promote such an atmosphere. What little research there is suggests that ritualism, anti-intellectualism and sex-typing may be prominent features in Catholic schools. Other important research goals with respect to the Catholic school and its relationship with other institutions such as the parish, are the pastoral care of Catholic students in non-Catholic schools and in specialised colleges, the religious education of people after school-leaving age, including the whole field of adult catechetics, the possibilities of the development of ecumenical schools,[10] the identification of the special needs of the teenager, teacher-pupil relationships and authority structures in Catholic schools, and the importance of the peer group for Christian education. Finally, extensive

[9]For recent estimates see A. E. C. W. Spencer, *Demography of Catholicism*, The Month, *8* (4), April 1975, 100-105.
[10]These three areas were identified in the section on Education in *The Church 2000: Interim Report of the Joint Working Party Set Up to Discuss the Preparation of National Pastoral Strategy for England and Wales*, 1973, p. 34.

research would be necessary to determine whether 'the existing strategy and distribution of resources, both of manpower and finance, is the best of all possible arrangements. The relative distribution of effort between primary and secondary schools, university and college chaplaincies, catechetical centres and provision for adults, the youth service, chaplaincies in local authority schools, and so on, is a matter of empirical investigation'.

It has recently been suggested 'that the shortage of priests is forcing the Church to a thorough renewal of structures and strategies'. These are largely in the hands of the hierarchy and clergy. For this reason we would underline the urgency for studies of the Church leadership. However, the development of the theology of 'The People of God' has led inevitably to a greater participation by the laity in the life of the Church. The consequent modification of patterns of decision-making and their implications should also be the object of sociological enquiry. The role of the priest, his ability to adapt to the changing needs of the times and his relationship to the laity are clearly of major importance in the process of renewal in the Church.

At the first National Conference of Priests no fewer than seven separate surveys were requested, including a study of the place of celibacy in priestly life, an enquiry into the reasons for priests leaving the ministry and a comprehensive survey of the priests of England and Wales. In the event only one survey was carried out, a study of the conditions in which priests are living in this country. Technically the survey suffered from the absence of competent and continuous professional involvement and the response rate achieved was less than one third. More important, it has been pointed out that while 'the concern about retirement and pensions is extremely sensible . . . the depressing thing is that the Report envisages a priest who lives in his presbytery and works in his parish; it does not envisage a priest who lives in his parish'.[11] In other words there has been no serious study by the Church authorities of the social needs of the 'People of God' in England and a reappraisal in the light of these needs of the changing role of the priest in the future and consequent restructuring of his training.

The recent attempt to outline appropriate pastoral strategies for the remaining years of the century is to be warmly welcomed. While some measure of sociological awareness of the changing world permeates *The Church 2000,* this interim report has been rightly criticised for ignoring the implications of a major decline in the number of vocations for the priesthood and the need for a 'drastic reshaping of our ministerial structures'. It has been argued that it is necessary to look more closely at the *real* needs of contemporary England before introducing innovatory structures in the pursuit of redefined goals. We believe that sociological research could contribute by identifying more clearly what these 'real needs' are and by monitoring and evaluating new or alternative strategies which might be tried.

Figures quoted in *The Church 2000* indicate that under one third

[11]H. McCabe, 'Comment', *New Blackfriars, 54,* July 1973, 290-1. See also M. Richards, 'Priorities', *The Clergy Review, 58* (8), August 1973, 577-9.

of Catholics in England and Wales attend Sunday Mass yet there has been no serious study of the effectiveness of recent liturgical innovations or of different methods of preaching or teaching, or of the process of disaffection with the Church which many observers believe is well under way before the end of school education even in Catholic secondary schools. The lack of concern for these 'lost sheep' and the processes which give rise to their disaffection is appalling. We believe that sociological research could contribute greatly to our understanding of these processes and factors which generate them and thus enable corrective strategies in schools, parishes and elsewhere to be initiated. The needs of young school-leavers and young couples, especially in the childbearing and early childrearing years of the life cycle, are particularly worthy of study. In three fifths of marriages solemnised in the Church in 1970 one partner was not a Catholic. The implications of this fact for the religious practice of the Catholic partner and the education and practice of the children have never, to our knowledge, been systematically studied.

Another area of useful pastoral research concerns marital breakdown. While most priests are aware of their duty to instruct young engaged couples, not so many, one feels, are conscious of the high probability of marital breakdown connected with teenage marriages and the first twelve years of married life. This has pastoral implications in the spheres of screening, counselling, visiting and preaching. (A member of our Surrey Unit for Socio-Religious Studies has just concluded a report on marital breakdown among Catholics for the Canon Law Society of England and Wales).

There is a welcome shift of emphasis in the renewal of the Church in England today from a defensive concern to preserve the faith of a largely immigrant population and consolidate its position in the life of the nation, to a growing awareness of her mission to spread the 'good news of Christ' to the '75 per cent of the population who are outside any church and who receive little attention'. This is reflected in Winter's challenging book *Mission or Maintenance*[12] which urges the development of new pastoral structures based on the proposition that 'the Church must build itself up as a community with a fourfold programme. It must be a community of worship, charity, witness and apostolate'. We would agree with the comment in *The Church 2000* that the notion of 'community' must be treated with caution. What is meant by 'community', theologically? It is far from clear. The interim report simply adds that 'it sums up a complex and shifting idea, of which the most important element is a sense of belonging'. There is also no agreement among sociologists about the concept of community and Hillery has analysed no fewer than ninety-four definitions. We would suggest that the basing of proposals for pastoral strategies on the vague and cosy aim of promoting 'community' is no substitute for the careful and explicit formulation of aims and the identification of appropriate strategies for the pursuit of them. *The Church 2000* clearly opens

[12]M. Winter, *Mission or Maintenance: A Study in New Pastoral Structures*, Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1973.

the way to new strategies based on 'flexibility and willingness to adapt to new situations', not necessarily based on the traditional parish or specific buildings. Wherever possible we would urge the proper monitoring in evaluation research of exploratory strategies but also more fundamental research into the spiritual needs of the *whole* population (not just church-going and non-attending Catholics) and the ways in which these might best be ministered to, without making any assumptions about the need for existing Church buildings or for clergy based on the traditional parish. An awareness of the potentially inhibiting and constraining power of these and other existing institutions in the contemporary world seems to us to be a significant basis for posing the question *Mission or Maintenance.*

VI

Our aim in this article has been to explore the contribution which sociology can make to the mission of the Church. We have been concerned in particular with the Roman Catholic church in contemporary England and Wales but we believe that our argument has relevance for other denominations not only in this country but also for the churches in other industrialised countries and in those developing nations undergoing the traumatic changes associated with world-wide industrialisation and urbanisation.

We have argued that a great deal of the suspicion of sociology in the Church is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the discipline. We have defended the contribution which a critical sociology can make in promoting adaptation to changing conditions and outlined our view of an empirically based discipline subject to the controls and standards of the professional community of sociologists. Sociology, in this view, offers an important, if partial, perspective of social reality. Since the members of the Church live in social groups which structure their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, and since the Church in its visible dimension is a social institution, sociology can offer relevant (if partial) insights about the patterns of religious knowledge, feelings and behaviour, their interrelationships with other sociological variables and their social causes.

We believe that a proper understanding of this 'social dimension' is important if the Church is to devise strategies appropriate to the needs of the contemporary world. Thus in the final sections of this article we have tried to indicate how previous sociological surveys have been or might have been of value and to suggest a number of areas where sociological research is called for in the future. Such research will contribute to the *formulation of policies* and strategies not only by generating better *knowledge* of relevant facts and the identification of areas of special need, but also through its contribution to our *understanding* of the dominant social forces at work in a modern, industrial, urban, mobile, affluent society. Finally sociology can make a major contribution to flexible and adaptable policy formulation in the *evaluation* of new or alternative pastoral strategies. In these ways sociology can contribute *Towards the Whole Truth.*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1975.tb02204.x Published online by Cambridge University Press