

all we at present know and which can only be described in apocalyptic language.

Who then, which of our institutions, confronted by all this will hear our Lord's injunction, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness—hunger and thirst to see right prevail? The answer is, those who take *torah* seriously—that God has created for man paradisaic bliss and will not let him go till that goal is achieved. Blessed, then, are those who in spite of so much that is hopeless have not lost hope in that eschatological Kingdom. Blessed are those who still have the courage to light the flame of faith. Blessed are those who are prepared to risk all, to suffer for righteousness, as they confront the powers of darkness. For the only ultimate threat to *torah* is when men no longer pray, pray with passion, 'Thy kingdom come'.

To be a Sociologist and a Catholic: A Reflection

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The total number of Catholic sociologists in Great Britain could fit comfortably at the back of the Clapham omnibus. Among the many exotic ideological species of sociologists, the feminists, the cat fanciers, and the vegetarians, it is reasonable to assume a believing Catholic could be found somewhere. Those found seem to occupy a peculiar ideological limbo, their religious and sociological gaze doomed to be misunderstood by Church and discipline alike. This tiny band of sociological hoppers forms a dispersed breed, invisible in their own Church, and for some, best kept so; within their discipline, they seem as a holy huddle on a tiny rock discernable in a sea of analytical uncertainty, odd, but interesting. Doubtless every occupation carries a burden, a witness to a calling out of improbable circumstances.

Although some sociologists wear their ideological beliefs heavily in public, most carry their burdens privately. Few biographies of sociologists have been written, and even fewer about those who are also Catholic. Sociologists are a reticent breed, and theologically they are

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unlikely to be able to say much about why they believe in Catholicism. Doubtless coming back to Catholicism was a surprise for some: maybe reading Althusser by candlelight, or an account of the ceremonies of the Dinka in bed, or spotting the moral similarities between the plight of Goffman's actor and Job in a pub, drove some unsteadily further along the road to Damascus. To be a Catholic and a sociologist is to occupy a place not necessarily of one's own choosing. To see the possibility of religious belief with a sociological eye is to be endowed with a peculiar charism, a witness to an unexpected gift of faith likely to attract scrutiny from theologians. Their attention is not always helpful. Indeed, at times Job's comforters seem, to sociologists, preferable to the ministrations of theologians entering their sacred patch.

There is a parasitic quality to the sociological enterprise. We nibble at the rinds of other disciplines, in my case history and bits of philosophy. Generally, historians and philosophers are open and look kindly on one's intrusions. The same cannot be said about theologians and liturgists. Maybe it was my annoyance in 1979 at the idea of having female altar servers that caused disquiet amongst those I knew; maybe it was the ineptitude of my efforts to give liturgical performance a sociological dimension that generated the hostility; or maybe their easy radical rhetoric was threatened. Whatever the reasons, I was left with a peculiar dislike of theologians and liturgists, and a feeling that many were arrogant and had little to say to me in my spiritual life. Reading von Balthasar's *The Glory of Lord* was almost like a conversion experience, pointing to what a theologian *could* say that could enlarge and also contain my sociological scruples about Catholicism. For many reasons it is difficult to be a Catholic and a sociologist.

The two disciplines argue about the location of the social in religious belief from differing intellectual lineages. In the case of sociology, or 'social physics' as Comte defined it, religion was supposed to be replaced by a new intellectual order founded on a belief in the superior insights of positivism. This imperialising approach towards religion has continued in sociological theory in the unblessed Trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Marx saw religion as an ideological illusion that disguised the 'real' basis of productive relationships under capitalism; Weber, a bit more equivocal, being tone deaf to religious sentiment, saw religious belief as precarious in the face of modern forms of rational authority; whilst Durkheim saw religion functioning as a collective expression of the social, mirrored especially in ritual. Sociology has not replaced religion as a certifier of meaning and morals, the positivist model has long been discarded (except by some theologians), and the discipline operates increasingly with a doubt about its methodological basis and limits.

The practice of sociology necessitates a marginality, the cultivation of a sense of alienation in the sociologist before the familiar contours of

the social he seeks to uncover. The discipline involves a certain bleakness, a style of disenchantment that displays a certain cynicism about the 'real' basis of social activities. The comfortable social arrangements used to effect the delivery of values and ideals become subject to a critical scrutiny that squeezes the spiritual and the aesthetic into analytical frames. This translation reduces the meaning in these social forms to sociological expectations, but, in so transferring, that which is meaningful is rendered precarious. The social in values and beliefs tends to intrude too far. This bias in sociology makes its practitioners too good at the game of dealing with the social and too prone to cultivating a disenchantment with settled orders. For that reason, some opt to believe in something other than mere analysis and to seek ways for the social to enhance beliefs. Disillusion with the limits of positivism generated the demand for the cultivation of a sociological imagination. This meant that the discipline was increasingly being called to moral account, and in the mid-sixties its theoretical purpose and direction changed, a shift that has profound theological implications.

A critically responsible sociology now deals with the defence of humanist values against technological intrusions. This has generated a style of praxis, a concern with commitment and a form of analytical engagement with a social world it now seeks to convert ideologically. This shift in sociological expectations of society and its study is of course best known through the impact of Marxism and feminism on its areas of theoretical and empirical concern. The collapse of belief in the twin towers of the discipline, functionalism and empiricism, in the mid-sixties, has effected a demise of the myth of a value-free sociology. Thus, forms of belief of sociologists themselves increasingly derive from and are engaged with the social world they analyse. Being so open to possible market places of belief, it is scarcely surprising that phenomena like the rise of a Moral Majority movement and of a biblical fundamentalism should have entered some sociological considerations. Sociologists, themselves, are also influenced by shifts in cultural fashions. Badges such as 'Lesbians for the defence of oily whales' can now be found alongside 'Jesus loves sociologists too'. But if an unapologetic public affiliation to Marxism, feminism or ecology is possible, if not regarded as conventional in sociological circles, on what basis could one exclude adherence to Christian beliefs in similar terms?

Sociology is a highly sophisticated instrument for analysing the social, but a worse than normal methodological crisis over its basis, and doubts about its theoretical approaches, has generated second thoughts in many areas. Nihilism, relativism, and ethnomethodology have all developed an agnosticism about how to arbitrate between beliefs. But this confrontation with the limits of what sociology can say about the social that also adds something significant has generated an increasing

awareness of the implications of hermeneutics for forms of interpretation of action. An ontological element has entered on the horizon of sociological concerns. It is an intellectual tragedy that theologians (with some exceptions) have notably failed to grasp these movements in sociological theory that have such considerable possibilities for the question of how to believe in God in the social world. Sociology has become more hesitant about writing off religious dimensions of the social. Indeed, its very agnosticism on the relationship between the two has re-opened the issue of Pascal's wager, as Hamnett has wryly observed.¹ Unexpectedly, it is the evangelicals who have suggested that sociologists place bets on God in public, a call exemplified in a recent work by David Lyon.²

In Lyon's book an astute account of trends in contemporary sociology is mixed in with some rather fundamentalist biblical sentiments to produce an eloquent plea for a Christian perspective on the human image the discipline implicitly uses in its analysis. The nature of this Christian sociological engagement is given a slightly equivocal reading in Chapter 9, where fervent undergraduates are warned against littering their essays with God talk. The plea that sociology and Christianity can form a relationship of mutual benefit, enhancing defences of justice and human values, is worthy, but could be greatly unpacked. The value of the book, however, lies in its call to sociologists to come clean about their religious beliefs, and not to be inhibited about stating where they belong. After all, adherents of other belief systems have come out, so why not sociologists who are Christian?

To some extent the book says little new: the connection between Catholicism and cultural anthropology has for long been noted as a hidden theological agenda in England, a fact known within drinking circles evangelicals are unlikely to patronise. There have been long-standing Catholic efforts to put sociology in its doctrinal place, going back to 1900 and before. But, taking Lyon's point, if sociologists are to be called on to exercise a Christian perspective to confront the implications of what is potentially spiritual and redemptive in the social, how is this calling to be pursued?

Most undergraduate sociology students will have read Weber's famous essay 'Science as a Vocation' and will be familiar with the demand he made for a calling to integrity, for the need for self-clarification, and for the duty to pursue the analysis of 'inconvenient facts'. In this essay Weber has a number of comments on theology, which he defined as 'an intellectual *rationalisation* of the possession of sacred values'. He went to considerable lengths to show that his argument was not incompatible with religious belief. His purpose was to defend the autonomy of a method, an integrity of practice apart from the value-orientations the discipline of sociology might bring to scientific

study. Weber's call for a value-free sociology has been subject to endless and often inconclusive debate, a controversy that might obscure a goal he held out for the discipline of ultimately helping the individual 'to give himself *an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct*'.³ A theological horizon can be included in this sociological quest.

Many areas sociology handles have theological overtones anyhow. The social basis of pain, the symbolic nature of blood and the healing effects of ritual are areas with religious implications one can choose to pursue. These areas also fit harmoniously with a Catholic view of the world. In addition, they force a sociologist to look at issues of ultimate meaning in debates that often seem far removed from religious rhetoric. A sociologist can be sensitive to the theological implications of the social—if he wishes. He can opt to pursue the spiritual basis of the meanings he has disclosed from within a sociological framework. But this moving of elements of the social into the transcendent gives him a suspicion of theological arguments that concede too much to the social and to the incarnational. Ideological and cultural grounding of theological propositions is a dangerous task, if pursued without reference to sociological qualification. If the engagement of a sociologist with his Catholicism is to be recognised by theologians, some account will have to be taken of how he views the world, lest his insights be even more ignored. The issue raised here is less about his desire to change the world than about how he comes to look at it, a gaze that has theological responsibilities.

Any research of a Catholic sociologist will have to be sold to his peers, and will need a public checkability even if his colleagues might not accept the religious presuppositions that shape the study in question. This is a complicated issue.⁴ There are no inherent reasons why aspects of Catholicism cannot be fitted into existing sociological concepts and debates: ceremonial forms of giving choirboys their surplices can be fitted into initiation rites; there is a flourishing literature on confession and disclosure, and on the sacred as a metaphor in areas of medical sociology.

Sociology is increasingly taking account of forms of self-realisation and emancipation, so that analysis carries an elective element, and a focus towards a future. This element of choice becomes linked to the value of insights that increase a self-awareness, a development of possible options amongst the actors. It is not difficult to give issues of emancipation an eschatological twist, to argue that social elements can be marked to convey a spiritual commitment or wish. Turning the social to spiritual account, seeing the social in terms of qualities that enhance rather than those that are purely reductionist, suggest that Catholics can capitalise on the relativism that afflicts contemporary sociology. Actions are increasingly seen as ambiguous. They can be given a reductionist interpretation in religion, but they can also be deemed to have qualities

of spiritual enhancement. For instance, a liturgical bow can be seen as a meaningful gesture, one that represents an emptying of self before God, or as a gesture that can be regarded as empty. Either approach can be placed in a sociological framework.⁵

Possibilities for affirming belief within the detail of the social, in actions, gestures, and performances, are often obscured by a theological rhetoric that relies on an existential legacy, on bland liberal readings of society, partly derived from radical circles and partly from philosophical positions inadequately related to sociological assumptions and criticisms. Liberal theologians often seem to think that a piece of uncertainty is a 'good thing'—confusing the *angst* and doubt they make a living out of in university circles with the more disabling social difficulties this generates for the ordinary faithful when matters are left to mere rhetoric. Failure to develop an adequate theological praxis for monitoring a type of theology grounded in the world has been one of many paradoxes of what has happened since Vatican II. Because sociology is a discipline academically recognised as having a subtle means of accounting for social formations, it obviously fills a theological gap and provides a form of praxis increasingly seen as missing in Catholicism in the 1980s. Sociological analysis of the social detail of liturgy, the sacraments et alia, has the merit of placing that which might seem marginal in a wider analytical context. By linking apparently trivial aspects of rite to the detail of other forms of ritual, arguments about how to make liturgy credible in contemporary cultures can proceed in a more systematic and authoritative manner. Contemporary theology seems nervous about the place of social detail in its reflections. Detail in the social is ambiguous: it might be trivial or serious; it cannot be ignored.

Binding the disparate into seams of analytical significance is one of the creative functions of good sociology. Linking elements together in patterns allows one to grasp the full cultural implications of what is theologically proclaimed and enables one to specify what aspects of culture, teaching and propositions are to be addressed. This is not to suggest that nothing was ever known about social aspects of theology before the Catholic sociologist came on the road. Pastoral monitoring always went on, some theologians do live in some kind of real world, and the church has had long-standing views on the cultural. Rather, it is to argue that because sociology as a discipline is concerned with *solely* monitoring the social, it is capable of linking up elements that might be otherwise neglected or treated as insignificant in Catholicism. Sociology could offer itself as an instrument for the cultivation of a greater and more subtle Catholic appreciation of God's relationship to the social. This would follow von Balthasar's view of theology, of supplying the means of meditating on patterns of revelation in the social, and of reflecting on the means of realising the will of God through

understanding and insight.⁶

A style of theology that opens the Church out to the world, and to the laity, that argues for the rights of 'local churches', and the desirability of culturally indigenous liturgical practices, generates an unavoidable sociological agenda to its considerations. Grounding theological arguments in the cultural and the ideological is to place arguments on the nature of belief in a sociological framework, or at least is likely to make its discourse more available to the discipline. Clearly, theological formulations have ultimately to be related to the cultural, for pastoral reasons, but the issue now raised is how far can and should these arguments be extended into a sociological realm? As sociology aids in the construction of ideological issues theologians wish to grapple with, such as Marxism and feminism, and as the discipline forms attitudes on the curricula of courses for an increasing number of professions, such as medicine and teaching, its arguments will have to be taken into account. Theologians have invaded the sociological realm, not the other way around, and this accounts for a certain bafflement on the part of some sociologists who are also Christian. Sociological responses to radical theological efforts to take feminism seriously, or to produce a liberation theology, have all been highly critical if not hostile, at least in the English-speaking world. An account of these sociological critiques would be difficult to construct, as so many areas would have to be covered. Equally problematic to define would be the 'theology' so disliked. All the time one is referring to a received image of aspects of 'theology' that might border on caricature. Nevertheless one can argue that sociology of religion has shown little interest, or indeed awareness, of feminist theology in Anglicanism or Catholicism, or efforts at indigenisation and pluralisation of rites. If a theology of relating Catholicism to the laity and their world had worked, and if the practice of simplifying and democratising the structures of the Church were successful, some discernable social movements ought to have occurred. This shift in theological thought should have made a mark on society. Sociology would notice such changes, and would become interested in studying their basis. But there is no evidence in Western sociology of religion of a change of attitude to Catholicism.

Church statistics of attendance in North America and Europe show significant falls, most markedly in countries that have modernised the most, such as Holland. Now, debates on secularisation would qualify these figures. Furthermore, it could be added that the democratisation of Church structures has generated an improvement in spirituality that these statistics cannot measure. Despite such qualifications, these raw statistics do pose a problem. If they had risen sharply since 1963, theologians would doubtless have cast qualifications to the wind, and regarded such an increase as a mandate for further changes. One suspects, however, the past

twenty years have seen a growth in consciousness of the relationship between the cultural and the Church that has been significant for the rhetoric it has produced, and less for the actual social marks it has made on society.

If the spirit of the Council was manifest in contemporary culture, re-groupings and new types of association reflecting the new thinking would have arisen that ought to have entered into the perspective of sociology of religion. Guilds, associations, and re-groupings of religious practice form the basis of approaches to the social history of Catholicism. If these had been manifest after Vatican II, sociology would have wanted to take these new phenomena into theoretical and methodological account. Bar the critical responses, too scattered to form a sociological critique, of some of the excesses of the post-conciliar period, there has been a remarkable silence in sociology on Catholicism which could be interpreted as indifference towards these efforts at modernisation. Any interest expressed has been in the resulting failures, which are perhaps easier for sociologists to interpret, such as patterns of secularisation.

But there has been an interest in two specific areas that suggest sociology does follow a market place and does see shifts in styles of Christianity. A vast literature has developed on the Moral Majority in the U.S.A. and the rise of house groups, and conservative evangelical sects in England. As early as 1972, the rise of conservative churches was noticed, and, as often, theologians failed to see this trend, being very much victims of their own liberal rhetoric about what sociologically ought to have happened.⁷ The growth of sociological interest in the 'new religious movements' has been phenomenal. Rex Davies has aptly described this as a new academic industry of the 1970s, noting in his bibliographical survey 351 books, articles and unpublished papers in sociology.⁸ By comparison, the amount written on the sociology of Catholicism is pitiful, as a check through *Sociological Abstracts*, or some standard texts in sociology of religion, would indicate. Yet this is not quite the whole story. There have been critical responses to changes in Catholicism and Anglicanism that have baffled theologians, mainly because they come from unexpectedly prominent quarters: an appreciation of the anthropological functions of the Friday fast from Mary Douglas, and the spirited defence of the Book of Common Prayer by David Martin. If sociology is to supply the basis of praxis theologians now seek in their engagement with the cultural, they will have to come to terms with a sociological perspective wholly at odds at many points with their 'liberal' assumptions.

Theologians could argue back that those sociologists who do comment might not be representative of their discipline; that their theological illiteracy accounts for their warped response; that sociology itself can hardly claim a spiritually privileged role in monitoring

revelations of the Holy Spirit. Thus, sociological ignorance of theological forms of reasoning often leads to sociologists proclaiming 'discoveries' of age-old spiritual dilemmas. Such claims, that sociologists confuse 'discovery' with invincible ignorance, have a ring of truth. Few sociologists are well read in primary biblical sources, or know why Rahner and von Balthasar disagreed, or could give a reasonable account of theological arguments on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Yet this lack of credentials, which causes some theologians to despise sociological interventions, has an ironic aspect. Most of the critical responses of sociologists to aspects of Vatican II have come from laymen and women, that very constituency in whose name theologians claim a mandate for their efforts at modernisation.

It could be argued that sociologists just need to do their homework better, that they have university libraries well stocked in theology and one or two friendly and constructive theologians can be found. Unfortunately, theology represents an unusually difficult discipline for sociology to enter. This is not because much of it is recondite, technical, and massive in scale, but that, compared to other disciplines sociology engages with, such as history, philosophy or medicine, theology comes over as an inchoate clutter. As a discipline it seems oddly weak at systematically monitoring shifts in its thought in accessible textbooks, so that a stranger could pick out easily differences between Barth and Bultmann, or could find a systematic account of the nature of Rahner's theological anthropology. Dictionaries are no substitute for interpretative overviews of an intellectual marketplace. By comparison textbooks abound in many areas of sociology, making access easy for the non-specialist. All disciplines proclaim particular forms of reasoning, that those outside, such as sociologists, whose interests are vast, have to take into account. Theologians have a distinctive tendency, however, to retreat defensively into works such as the *Summa Theologiae* if they find the sociological arguments sticky. There are limits to a sociological interest. After all, if a sociologist develops specialist competences in theology at a cost to his expertise in interpreting the social, then his particular contribution to theological debate becomes blurred. Ontological issues can be lived with, as in the case of hermeneutics, where sociologists have to bracket issues of Being such as those raised by Husserl and Heidegger. These are far too opaque for a grounded sociological interest in the transactions of the actor in modern society. Yet there is an increased overlap in sociological interests with philosophy, and relationships have developed in friendly collaboration around areas such as ethics, the interpretation of symbols, and of course hermeneutics.

The same cannot be said about relationships with theologians. There are many exceptions, but too often they come over, to sociologists

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attempting to deal with issues they raise, as arrogant and defensive. Peter Berger's contempt for many aspects of contemporary theology, in *The Heretical Imperative*, represents many bruised sociological feelings.⁹ Doubtless, there are many reasons for the antipathy between sociologists and theologians. Too often, one feels, theologians present radical opinions and a secular image of their subject to compensate for the marginality they feel in academic life. Whilst confessional positions abound in other disciplines, such as history and philosophy, they do not seem to be quite the correct thing to have in theology.

English theologians are an insecure breed, they carry heavily a tribal badge of bitterness and hostility to intruders. A lowly sociologist, bearing witness to his trade, addressing a theology or liturgy conference feels like a swine before rows of pearls. It is not the vagueness of some theological pronouncements—'change is a good thing'—that irritates; it is not their apparent security of place beside the Holy Spirit, as if taking sacred dictation, that annoys one about theologians as a trade; it is not even the egotistic way doubts are coined as insights, and trotted out oblivious of the social damage inflicted on the ordinary faithful, that generates a sociological scorn; all these one allows in charity. It is the failure of theologians, grounding their pronouncements in misreadings of the social, to discern the implications of their analysis for the mysterious and the indeterminate. It is their confusion of passing cultural practices with theological imperatives that generates a sociological bafflement. It is the inadvertent, incompetent and amateurish writing of much of theology into sociology that generates fury. Peter Berger's point still applies, that theologians with a conservative and orthodox approach to belief tend to be far more aware of the limits of sociology (and also more in tune with its methods) than their radical counterparts.

Religion is a personal matter. We know not why we are loved by God, but we come to believe it. Sociologists are generally laymen, lacking orders and lineages of prophecy. They are unused to the display of their theological entrails in public, the conspicuous practice of some theologians. They sit humbly in pews receiving the message in sermons wrapped in an authority to preach granted by the Holy Spirit. But because they sit on a margin in the congregation and receive, they are sensitive to where theological messages end up. The vast majority of Catholics could not care less what some theologians think. What is noticed and what comes down is what occurs on Sunday—almost everything feeds off into the liturgy. It might be vulgar to say, but it is to the ordinary faithful that messages from theologians are to be directed, a point noted with some interest by liberal Anglican theologians who realised Bishop Jenkins had stumbled on one or two congregations who were 'surprised' at his comments on the Resurrection.

There are theological arguments—about the role of grace, for

example—which sociologists can bracket without qualm. Unfortunately, there is an unavoidable theological dimension to sociological analyses of Catholicism that introduces an unintentional prescriptive element into the insights of the sociologist. Whether he likes it or not, the sociologist is drawn into defending a theological position. Theological pronouncements cannot be totally separated from the cultural universe within which they operate. Social impurities arise and can corrupt good theological intentions. These can result from a misreading of a cultural situation, a misplaced emphasis on a particular ideology, or a mistaken imputation of a mandate for a theological argument to a group who might not agree with such a reading of their intentions. Undesirable and unintended social consequences can occur, despite worthy theological intentions. Failures to deliver adequately a theological proposition can reflect a failure to get the sociology right. Because sociology so little monitors the Catholic Church we have often only a hazy idea of the nature of these unintended consequences. The possibility of cultural distortion is only beginning to be recognised. One example would be the link between the growth of liberation theology and the apparently coincidentally related rise of an evangelical fundamentalism in South America.

Sociological interventions are not always deflationary, reducing hopeful liberal theological rhetoric to analytical realities, and killing holy dreams with a thousand qualifications. But belief has to be grounded in the social for spiritual reasons. As von Balthasar has noted, 'holiness is something essentially social and thus saved from the caprice of the individual'.¹⁰ The social forms a basis for spiritual self-recognition, where the individual sees his charism in responses of others. But discernment of the social also offers a means of avoiding a distorting vision, and this is accomplished through an attention to detail. Clearly, there is an ecclesial dimension to this issue, an authority that scales the particular with the generality of belief. Scaling priorities is a task laden with spiritual risk, risk of getting the detail hopelessly out of proportion. Catholicism is already riddled with trivialities easily converted into scruples—the odd notion that the lace of a cotta is a worthy substitute for the length of a surplice. If we argue that a particular gift of the sociologist is signifying the apparently insignificant, a theologian might well suggest he humble himself even further. It might be said that, having attempted to liberate everybody else and running out of tribes to examine, the sociologist needs nearer forms of ritual that are analytically 'thick' with symbol and actions. Theologians might wish to brush aside this unexpected breed of pharisaical fetishists, whose interventions kill the spirit and cast social scruples on to the faithful. Indeed, they might be right, but scaling trivialities is part of the sociologist's lot. Doubtless, he can get his priorities wrong, but he has no monopoly over such a failure.

In orders of belief, that operate with intangibilities, trivialities are

cogs in performative cycles, whose functions are often unclear, but are also ambiguous.¹¹ Many advances within sociological theory have been based on grasping the implications of detail, and re-combining these into arguments of great analytical significance. One has only to think of Weber's linkage of double entry book-keeping with Calvinism as a way of sociologically accounting for the rise of Capitalism. The detail a sociologist proffers in accounts of liturgy could reflect an attempt to legitimise his own spiritual doubts. But it could also be the case that the detail he picks on could have profound spiritual and theological implications that have been neglected and that, once signified in a sociological argument, can be turned to advantage. The fool, the disturbed, the weak and insignificant, have all been unexpected prophets, as could be the sociologist.

Social facts, and the elements which make up the cultural, form a complex and opaque mixture for a sociologist, and one he is unlikely to take for granted easily. Because the social presents so many interpretative permutations, a sociologist is unlikely to discard these on to a sea of faith, and to write these complexities off in general deferences to the incarnate and the Holy Spirit. Cultural elements present complexities, and a sociologist might feel it to be a form of Docetism to cast these off as God's responsibility, as much as it would be for a composer to assume that his songs could be sung by others without notes or a score. The 'social' inspires sociological awe for its complexity, and the discipline of sociology is a witness to its intractable nature. It is there to be intellectually confronted, not to be ducked by easy references to biblical texts.

Von Balthasar gives a characteristically helpful insight into the secular calling of the layman. Although his remarks apply to vocations within secular institutes, they do have a significance for telling us about the nature of the calling of the sociologist. This is to pursue a spiritual life on a social edge, an analytical place on the rim of a culture that affirms its limits but also its possibilities. A sense of estrangement from the cultural arises less from the realisation of a philosophical ambition than from an occupational hazard that characterises the sociological enterprise. A sociologist is likely to be sensitive to the limits of an excessively incarnational theology, seeing it as coming too close in its formulations to the domain concerns of his discipline. For that reason, one has much sympathy with the apprehension of von Balthasar and Ratzinger, that aspects of contemporary theology—for example, the relativising of morals to the surrounding cultural norms and the ideological urge to make women priests—are 'too sociological'.¹² Sinking the issue of formulations of belief down into the narrow concerns of sociology is likely to generate a hostile response from a Catholic sociologist moving out past the limits of his discipline. Criticising trends

in aspects of contemporary theology often leads to sociologists being cast as unhelpful conservative villains whose treachery is all the worse as they represent a discipline that ought to be affirming, not denying, the basis of this shift by theologians.

The social is not an undifferentiated universe, but one we are called to shape and to use, marking its limits as pointers to the holy. An over-emphasis on the immanent and a neglect of the transcendent disables religious belief, for it is in the tensions, the signs of contradiction embedded in the polarity of the two, that religious belief prospers. Reductionist theories of religion and ritual are commonplace. More interesting is an emphasis on the degree to which ritual is a social resource, a possible gift of grace, a sacramental that, rightly used, can enhance belief, and can open out properties of the indeterminate. This is to express a wish to use the social to make a space for God's grace, in an opening that allows room for us to receive it. It is also a call for a current strand in hermeneutics to be recognised: the task of re-sacralising texts, symbols and actions.

Doubtless disagreements will exist about the importance and extent of this emphasis on re-sacralisation in hermeneutics that has considerable implications for the interpretation of texts and actions. The fact that such a demand is unexpectedly coming from within debates on the philosophy of social science is itself significant. It is surely more than clear that the rationalisation of rites and religious language has run out of steam, as many sociological critics of efforts at liturgical renewal since the sixties had predicted. Simply dispersing liturgical forms out to the cultural and engaging participation through a misguided use of lay ministries is to confuse the functional aspect of an action with the 'thickness' of meaning it embodies. The complex 'thick' properties of rite, elements so easily discarded in the liturgical documents of Vatican II as unsuitable in a modern world, are now being re-discovered for their values in mediating with the sacred. Theologians and liturgists might well have argued for the incredibility of the complex in action, symbol and performance of rite; such arguments did not come from sociology. Indeed, those sociologists who bothered to comment on the new liturgies found such propositions culturally incredible. Emphasis on the informal, on active participation and the democratising of ritual structures removed liturgy from effective sociological scrutiny.

There are sociological arguments indicating a change of liturgical direction, and these suggest future bases for more sensible relationships with theologians. It is clear that the translations of von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*, by emphasising the importance of aesthetics in theology, will clear a way forward for sociological participation in debate on liturgy. The theological qualities he is arguing for complement sociological interventions, and should make possible a fruitful working

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relationship. But if aesthetics is making a welcome return to theology, the implications for the interpretation of culture could be vast, and will take some decades to work through. This shift in theological interest could complement an important re-direction in sociological theory, just beginning to get under way. Gadamer and Ricoeur, in their approach to hermeneutics, have re-introduced Christian concerns with text and symbol back into the language of sociological theory. Both writers have an unavoidable ontological and theological agenda in their approach to hermeneutics, that the mainstream of sociological theory is going to find difficult to ignore.

Hitherto, hermeneutics has been largely concerned with the avoidance of misunderstanding in the interpretation of text. But since Ricoeur's famous article on text and action,¹³ a new direction of interest is gaining ground in sociological theory: how does one translate over to the language of sociology a hermeneutic interest in the interpretation of text. The implications of this shift are enormous, and especially for liturgy. All the constituent parts of the future debate operate routinely in liturgical enactment: ritual, action, word and symbol. Liturgical form, therefore, presents itself as a fruitful object for enquiry. The application of hermeneutics to the interpretation of action suggests a concern with an opening, with a form of play. This might lead to an unexpected reversal of the usual relationship of hermeneutics to biblical interpretation, where it seems to carry a reductionist quality. The application of hermeneutics to the interpretation of liturgical actions and gestures opens out possibilities of sacralisation and enhancement that will greatly aid in securing a credible form of rite for contemporary cultures.

There are very few theologians about with an adequate knowledge, capable of reading signs of change from within the discipline. We are not in the realm of instant analysis and solutions. What we are concerned with is to mark a possibility, a more specific strand to theology, that needs to be developed and thought through. Sadly, there are few signs that the point is being grasped. As an anthropological theology delivering Christian claims to an increasingly sceptical culture becomes more embedded in specifying the detail of its approach to the world, the nature of the 'local church', the status of women, and the limits of the indigenous in rite, as it is called to make more exact choices about the social, a sociological flank will have to be developed ultimately. Shibboleths about 'the royal priesthood of the laity' often appear as cerebral genuflections devoid of specific means of social manifestation. But the more that identifiable elements are sought for the nature of the meaning embodied in rites, the more the ambiguity of the cultural will become apparent, and the limits of the social will be marked. Any sociological contribution to theology will arise from the servicing of signs of contradiction, the marking of meanings that point to and also affirm the existence of the sacred.

Sociological visions of the world are prone to be bleak. A sociological gaze leaves its practitioners high on disillusion and low on hope. Apart from Sir Keith Joseph and random blasts of theologians, a Catholic sociologist is likely to be unblest with persecution. Like most writers or academics, his vision is spare and particular, an attempt to characterise forms of culture from an odd ledge on the world. From this holy perch, a Catholic sociologist is always doomed to be critical of facile efforts at escape from quicksands of the culture that suck down belief. Sociology is a knocking discipline, a series of negative insights from those denied the capacity to coin their own belief in an ideological market place. Sociologists are doomed to merely doubt, and rarely to affirm. But because it is an impotent vision, arising from an imperfect gift—the capacity to see to the point of disenchantment—any belief in Christ granted to a sociologist is a specific grace granted to the weak, those who come to theological pronouncements from below, who live by wallowing in the mire of the social, plucking at patterns of belief and entering them with particular doubts. One has to pray to continue to believe, to hope, and to see with a redemptive eye the limits of human nature in its engagements with the social. One has to pray to see more in the social, tangible manifestations of presence, elements that clothe the mundane, enhance its meaningfulness; to see the signs of contradiction that are a scandal to the logic of one's own discipline. This is to notice, in the social arrangements that lie behind belief, not mere enactment but a recognition of Christ acting in and on one's neighbour. To affirm that possibility of Christ's mark on the social is no mean task for the theologically unwashed—the lowly sociologist.

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- 4 W.G. Runciman, *A Treatise on Social Theory: The Methodology of Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
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- 6 Medard Kehl and Werner Loser eds., *The von Balthasar Reader*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1982, p. 357.
- 7 Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing. A Study in Sociology of Religion*, New York, Harper & Row, 1972.
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- 9 Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, London, Collins, 1980, preface, pp. ix–xv.
- 10 *The von Balthasar Reader*, op. cit., p. 377.
- 11 Kieran Flanagan, 'Liturgy, ambiguity and silence: the ritual management of real absence' *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, June 1985, pp. 193–223.
- 12 'The men who run the Vatican (3)', *The Tablet*, 14 September 1985, pp. 948–949.
- 13 Paul Ricoeur, 'The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text' in John Thompson, ed. and trans., *Paul Ricoeur Hermeneutics and the human sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 197–221.