

# J.-K. Huysmans : The First Post-Modernist Saint?

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## 1. *The man himself.*

An incapacity to read French led me to the discovery of the significance of J.-K. Huysmans. In his book *A Time to Keep Silence*, Patrick Leigh Fermor used Huysmans' term 'les paratonnerres de la société' to refer to the monastic calling, the time spent in 'silent factories' reducing 'the moral overdraft of mankind'.<sup>1</sup> One would expect monks to act as tuning forks for the holy, but hardly in this dramatic fashion, which seemed more the preserve of liberal theologians with advanced views. The phrase resonated in this sociological imagination. It seemed to be an answer to a long-standing effort to link sociology to an understanding of liturgical performance, where the actors endeavour to attune those present to signals of transcendence emerging from the absent. Huysmans appeared to be awarding monks a striking success in their social activities in attracting Divine attention. Apart from needing to find out the context of the phrase, a puzzle arose as to who was J.-K. Huysmans.

Initial inquiries were perplexing. Huysmans was infamous for his work *A Rebours*, the classical pioneering study of the art of decadence. This was the book that so influenced Wilde in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, and which elicited the lofty *mot* at his trial that he never spoke of the morality of an author. Further inquiry indicated that Huysmans had become bored with decadence and had returned to Catholicism. An account of his return was given in his book, *En Route*. The paths of both authors crossed oddly in the present day, for the only copy of this work that could be located by the interlibrary loan service at Bristol University was at Reading. His dalliance with vice in *A Rebours* was well known; his return to virtue in *En Route* seems to have been overlooked.

Huysmans was born in Paris in 1847. After a career as a proponent of impressionism in French art and as the author of a series of naturalist writings in the manner of Zola, he became later one of the most interesting and significant converts to Catholicism in nineteenth century France. His reversion to Catholicism was far stranger than anything in fiction. In so far as sainthood is characterised by heroic virtue, Huysmans seems a fitting candidate. His shifts from a fretful boredom with the vacuity of modernity to a need to experience dark Satanic rites, that led him on to Catholicism, are difficult to understand except as the effects of a gratuitous grace. Unlike others, who took out after-life insurance on their deathbed, such as Wittgenstein and Baudelaire,

Huysmans came back to Catholicism in the prime of his life. All his writings after his return centred on the need to explore and to understand this shift in his life. His interests in a theology of substitution suffering, his very successful attempts to popularise the monastic ideal, his fascination with medieval symbolism in liturgy and his concern with sin and evil, all may seem unfashionable in contemporary Catholicism.

It would be easy to dismiss Huysmans as a romantic, a *flâneur* gone holy who fell below the social surface of cosmopolitan exchange, who lapsed from life's struggle and retreated into the little safe world of Catholicism, the best of rest homes for aged sophisticates. He tried to establish a monastery for artists and writers, a venture that did not succeed. Returning to Paris, his belief in a theology of substitution-suffering was put into practice. Any notion that Huysmans played with his Catholicism as he had fiddled with decadence is unpersuasive in the light of his passing. He contracted cancer of the throat and mouth and regarded the suffering he endured as a form of purification. According to Baldick, he refused morphine to relieve the pain and did not wish to be cured. After great agony, the chronicler of diletantism died in 1907.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *Returning to Catholicism.*

It is very likely that Huysmans, like Péguy, would have despised the soul-destroying nature of sociology. A mute inglorious discipline, sociology is an illegitimate child of the Enlightenment, the product of an effort to marry the humanities to science. Riddled with bad faith, sociology hardly stands as an intellectual child of God. Sociology presents itself as an orphan seeking accommodation with other disciplines to establish some living relationship with life. All intellectuals occupy disciplinary houses with rooms for rent. Each room provides an analytical view carved out by earlier inhabitants, who wished to see more and better too.

Efforts to see God can depend on the room one has been allocated. Even if some seem better fitted to gaze on the holy than others, one has to settle to view from one's discipline of intellectual birth. Other rooms do seem more desirable. We envy theology with its more spacious apartment and those oddly damaged gothic window frames which its inhabitants keep chipping at to see the wasteland better. The philosophical apartment also seems attractive, with its finely engraved mirrors that reflect and bedazzle the occupants, who converse with ease, but little grace. Sadly, sociology seems to occupy a garret reserved for rentiers from other disciplines, those too intellectually poor to get accommodation elsewhere. Yet, the modest situation of sociology up in the roof has advantages. It can get a fuller view of the pilgrims' progress, of those who cannot find room in the inn. Some passages are more interesting than others. Huysmans' is a case in point.

In the late 1970s, two Marxist writers, Poulantzas and Althusser, dominated English sociology and provided a focus for belief for many lost in academic life after the ideals of the late 1960s withered.

Structuralism offered a credible means of absolving doubt. It cast an objective imperialism over society in a manner that held a corrosive subjectivism at bay. It offered a means of marginalising the actor, of making him the product of objective social forces of class and ideology. All accounts were outcomes of predeterminate groupings and relationships within capitalism. The making of history could be ignored. A blind faith permitted all cultural and social uncertainties to be absolved in the mechanical advance of structures in economic formations which a Marxist science could uncover and whose progress it could mark.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this structuralist dream ticket faded amongst English intellectuals. Nicos Poulantzas and Althusser both came to tragic ends. The magic key that would open doors to structures of rationality got lost and clouds of uncertainty descended. A realisation dawned that there were many vacant and unexplored rooms about the house all of which were marked with 'subjective meanings'. Indeed, there seemed to be more rooms than keys, which in some cases were not needed. The doors were open already to admit any relative, disciplinary or otherwise. A chaos descended on the house, dooming the gloomy to doubt. In this climate of uncertainty, everything became post everything else. We have post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-liberalism, and even post-Enlightenment thought. The gods of science seemed to have failed sociology.

There was an ironic aspect to Althusser's sad fate, that his struggle had now moved on to one with the last post—Catholicism. An article in *The Guardian*, in 1988, told us unexpectedly of the tragedy of a man torn apart between Catholicism and communism. His effort to find a means of reconciling both had caused him to fall apart. Webster tells us that Althusser has written a manuscript giving an account of his journey into intellectual madness that arose from his effort to surmount contradictions. If he has fallen back into Catholicism, his lapse is understandable, even if unwelcome to those who followed him into battle. What outsiders might fail to understand is that he now struggles on another field few seem to want to survey.<sup>4</sup> His plight makes efforts to understand the social less anonymous and less disinterested than the image of sociology might indicate.

Sociological theory is presented in a cut-up form, where all concepts are sliced up thinly enough for undergraduate digestion. A bit of anomie is mixed with some flavourings of alienation, and a spot of disenchantment is added to provide a theoretical stew fit for young sociological palates. The trouble with these pre-packaged meals is that they disguise their origins and distract attention from the intellectual and cultural context in which these theories were conceived. As we come to know more about the roots of sociology, it is clear that its genesis in France was far more embedded in Catholicism than many might like to think. As Lepennies has shown in his recent fine work, Comte never

quite shook off his Catholic interests. To Nietzsche, he was a closet Catholic.<sup>5</sup> Comte's *Catechism of Positive Religion* banished God from sociology, but seemed to have borrowed everything else from Catholicism, including instructions on how to pray, a spirited defence of guardian angels and guidelines for making the sign of the cross.<sup>6</sup> The French stamp on sociology has left it sticky with Catholic fingerprints the modern secular mind fails to see. Failure to attend to the intellectual climate that led to a demise of positivism in France before the First World War makes Althusser's struggles with Catholicism unnecessarily peculiar.

In his study of the reorientation of European social thought between 1890 and 1914, H. Stuart Hughes pointed to the unexpected renaissance of Catholicism in intellectual circles in Paris. The children of positivism revolted in the Ecole Normale and demanded a fuller truth of their own—Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> Maritain, Claudel and Péguy were notable examples of converts who made a mark on this era. Within French literature, and perhaps strands of philosophy, these figures are well known, but in sociology they are largely unknown. In so far as a religious dimension might be accepted in discussions of the origins of sociology, Jewish influences might be noted in the writings of Durkheim, Simmel and Marx. Any claims for a Catholic influence shaping early sociological debates seem to have vanished from view. Religious aspects to sociology only become known to the degree to which they are to be discounted. Ideological commitment might be acceptable but adherence to a religious belief is treated with suspicion in British sociology. Yet, modern sociology is less godless than it might seem and it has never quite expelled the Holy Ghost in the machine. There is an implicit theology floating around in sociology, perhaps not of the type theologians might expect or wish to find, but one that could make a crucial contribution towards shaping the future of Catholicism in advanced industrialised societies. There are limits to sociological scepticism which few of its practitioners wish to confront. Present dilemmas are re-plays of former battles that lie in the origins of sociology. We have been at the bridge into theology before.

Perhaps the best account of disillusion with the efforts of positivism to substitute a social science for religious faith appears in the novel *Jean Barois* by Martin du Gard. This reflection on the tensions surrounding the Dreyfus case, and the intellectual ferment of late nineteenth century Paris, provides an invaluable account of an effort to flee a formative childhood Catholicism and to convert sociology, or scientific thought, into an all-embracing humanist system of belief suitable for the modern mind. The attempt to escape fails. Barois confronts a generation gap in 1900, with a new breed of students, disillusioned with science and seeking in Catholicism a faith that will inspire actions. The return Barois makes to Catholicism at the end of the book is represented as the capitulation of a sick man, one who foresaw in his earlier years that he would play

traitor to his ideals and abandon his intellectual independence. After his death, his daughter finds a note written when he was younger discounting any deathbed conversion he might make when he became too weak to resist. His daughter had become a nun and this had damaged him. His collapse back into Catholicism at the end reflected a quandary he could never resolve. He could not kill his childhood grip on faith but also he could not find the intellectual means of breaking free into another creed that would satisfy. The book is an early and influential account of fate and social determinism. It also captures well the tragedy of culture and the incapacity of sociology to resolve it.<sup>8</sup>

The notion still lingers that those who live by sociology, philosophy, or, indeed, theology, and who return to Catholicism, are fatigued with critical intellectual struggle. As Weber noted, 'to the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he has to bring his "intellectual sacrifice"—that is inevitable'.<sup>9</sup> Escaping into Catholicism carries the notion of a dignified retreat, an understandable retirement from the battlefield. But for those who find sociology a dreary study of dubiety, where doubt deepens, entrapped in the dank hand of destiny, there comes a limit to this darkness, this pessimism that blinkers the sociological gaze. Living in sociology seems like a self-imposed exile in a room with a view, one filled with notices about sights and new openings, but where no visions come in the night.

Reasons for conversion to Catholicism are complex and diverse. One sometimes ends up as a Catholic in mid-life, occupying a position as inexplicable as it is perplexing.<sup>10</sup> Reversion to Catholicism is less a capitulation than an advance into an irksome terrain. It can represent a movement whose results are far rougher than the artificial war games fought in the vain small worlds that litter the conference circuit. Weber never dismissed religion, and indeed gave its study his fullest sociological attention. His approach to rationality operated with an element of belief that a charismatic leadership could offer a possible solution to the disenchantment wrought by the iron rule of bureaucracy. A set of keys could be found in the non-rational that would open the cage door. Being dumb to religious resonances, Weber could not believe that which he could not hear.

After the collapse of Marxist structuralism in the early eighties, Gramsci rose into prominence. He seemed to provide a softer touch, where culture and subjective elements could be given a less deterministic reading. This provided a temporary solution to a growing problem, of how to secure belief, political or ideological, in the cultural conditions of capitalism. The purpose of belief became even more perplexing, as more and more ideological and theoretical movements seemed to move to the

margin, to be stamped with the term 'post'. But in a post-liberal, structuralist, modern Enlightenment world what does lie past the post? Feminism, cults, fundamentalism, the green movement all offer options, confessional positions for the engaged seeking to proclaim the need to believe and to sell their wares in a liberal market place where agnosticism rules. In the field of cultural studies, which draws in disciplines such as literature, the mass media, philosophy and sociology, to name a few, another cult figure has been sought to supply the ideological flavour of the year. The present fixation on relativism in the cultural sciences presents one option: nihilism. Nietzsche and Heidegger have become the supermen of the hour, offering endless openings in this climate of post-modernity—for further openings that keep the conversation going.<sup>11</sup> In some ways, the plight of contemporary sociology, impaled in these dilemmas, grubbing around for analytical seeds in the remains of the Frankfurt School, seems to suggest we have been here before.

Walter Benjamin also has emerged as a prime candidate for dominating the immediate future for debate in the humanities. But with Benjamin comes a need to attend to the writings of Charles Baudelaire, a figure difficult to dismiss. After all, Benjamin wrote a biography of him. Baudelaire, prose writer and poet, whose writings ranged from a study of the dandy to a charming essay on the philosophy of toys, is another figure who hovers on the edge of sociology. He coined the term 'modernity'.<sup>12</sup> Yet to some, he represents damaged goods. On his death bed, he did the dastardly thing—he received the last rites of the Catholic Church before departing.<sup>13</sup> Like Althusser, he played with dangerous concepts and in a way that led him back to where he started. And this brings us back also to Huysmans.

### *3. The describer of masses, black and white.*

It would be foolish to claim Huysmans as a proto-sociologist, yet he bears many of the marks of the discipline and the necessary traits of pessimism to qualify as a sociologist. Huysmans had written 'to me the past seems horrible, the present grey and desolate, and the future utterly appalling'.<sup>14</sup> He had an unusually retentive memory and a genius for detail. His exacting social descriptions of all facets of the underlife of Paris gave him the status of a naturalist sufficient to admit him to Zola's circle. Combining the life of a civil servant with some journalism, Huysmans was also noted as a discerning art critic and an early defender of impressionism. Becoming bored with mere description and the production of engravings of everyday life, Huysmans revolted against naturalism, to produce a work of genius, *A Rebours*. There is a clinical exactitude in this account of the management of decadence and the art of servicing the pleasures of the self taken to their artistic limit. Its central character staves off boredom in a life where artifice is made the mark of human genius. This account of a retreat into indulgence, where every whim was to be satisfied and nothing was to impede the pursuit of self-



gratification, was considered wholly original and became deeply influential on later writers such as Wilde. The retreat into decaying pleasure, where indulgence mattered most, was conveyed in impressive and amusing detail in a way that reminds a sociologist of the writings of Georg Simmel or Erving Goffman. Huysmans wrote a Catholic version of decadence. The end of the book displayed a nascent theological worry, where the hero faces a return to Paris to risk being drowned in mediocrity. Having opened the floodgates of decadence and modernity, the hero cries 'Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe...'.<sup>15</sup> This was a cry for belief, but, like St Augustine, not yet. At this point in his life, Huysmans regarded Catholicism with contempt as a means of resolving his pessimism. It was an unworthy form of escape. Huysmans expressed his view of those who reverted to Catholicism more pungently than Weber. Writing in 1882, he considered 'Christian dogma to be absurd, the clergy intolerant, and religion "a consolation for none but the feeble-minded"'.<sup>16</sup>

The cry for help at the end of *A Rebours* excited critical interest. For one perceptive critic it seemed to draw comparisons with Baudelaire. In a review of *A Rebours*, the novelist Barbey d'Aurevilly noted that after *Les Fleurs du mal* came out, he invited Baudelaire 'to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross' and noted that Huysmans had inherited the need to make a similar choice.<sup>17</sup> To rouse himself from a creeping boredom with naturalism, Huysmans sought escape into the deeper meanings offered by Satanism and so he forked off down the road of decadence to travel as far as he could go.

Increasingly, Huysmans presented his soul in his novels, and this becomes apparent in *Là-Bas*.<sup>18</sup> This is an account of an effort to write the life of Giles de Rais, a fifteenth century Satanist and sadist who exulted in disembowelling children. In the course of writing this history, Durtal (a fictitious front for the author) feels the need to attend a black mass and part of the interest of the novel rests on his efforts to find and attend the 'real thing'. The characters he encountered in this journey into the occult were revoltingly odd, dedicated perverts well practised in the black arts. An intimate knowledge of demonic activities in late nineteenth century France is displayed in the book, which unsettles and begs a question as to how far Huysmans himself was involved in the Satanic at this stage of his pilgrimage. The final chapters of the book are devoted to an account of a black mass, which seemed an excuse for ritual debauchery and blasphemy that nowadays would excite the attentions of the liturgical correspondent of *The Sun*. As a horror book, *Là-Bas* is less a work of suspense than an account of a growing nausea that develops from an initial curiosity with the demonic to a fear of being possessed by forces of pure evil.

After writing this, Huysmans felt so disturbed and spiritually sick, that he started to sit in the back of churches in Paris, especially at twilight when he was not noticed. The plainchant had an attracting effect

on him, softening up his hitherto hostile attitudes to Christianity. The need to believe and to find release from a life devoted to the study of decadence had become desperate. The movement of Huysmans into Catholicism represented less a retreat than a flight, one discussed graphically in *En Route*. Huysmans did not want a lukewarm Catholicism but wished to embrace it totally. To cure his spiritual illnesses, he wanted to become chaste. He also wished to write a white book after the black one. To whiten himself, he felt the need for some 'chlorine for my soul'.<sup>19</sup> This became the focus of the remaining part of his life.

Unlike others, he reversed in his life the usual journey of an intellectual: he moved from an abiding concern with the depths of experience into a quest for the deepest innocence, one he found and valued in the monks and nuns he came to know later. He envied those who did not have to struggle to believe and who mirrored the holy in what they saw. Speaking of a famous lay monk at La Trappe, Huysmans wrote that the simple were privileged: 'they do not even know what analysis is, but then they have not suffered the rotting effect of literature for years on end'.<sup>20</sup> His view of innocence was not based on a facile romanticism, but on the need to recover a second naïveté, much in the manner discussed by Paul Ricoeur.<sup>21</sup> This involves using hermeneutics to develop a capacity to discern sacred symbols and to grasp their meanings hidden in a modern world far removed from their original period of gestation. To Huysmans, 'everything in this world is symbolic, everything must serve in some way as a spiritual looking-glass'.<sup>22</sup> This need to see transparent aspects of the holy is reflected in his approach to liturgy. As was to be expected from a naturalist of life, Huysmans displayed an artistic ability in his capacity to capture the detail of liturgical enactments. More importantly, he supplied a sense of the dualities of meanings liturgies use in dealing with the holy that gives them an ambiguous facet often misunderstood.

Erving Goffman, the famous observer of the detail of the underside of social life, noted that every 'religious ceremony creates the possibility of a black mass'.<sup>23</sup> It is doubtful if the opposite sides of religious ceremony have ever been so well captured as in Huysmans' accounts of a black and of a white mass. Given that there is debate as to whether he did attend a black mass, the detail he presents is quite remarkable—and unpleasant. The Satanic aspects are only too well conveyed. The 'choirboys' were there for other purposes besides attendance at an unholy parody of a mass. At the end, the hidden agenda of the whole ceremony emerged in the enactment of all manner of sexual perversions.<sup>24</sup> These points are noted simply to draw a contrast with his experience of a mass in Chartres Cathedral. If read without reference to its black counterpart, this 'white' account could be regarded as an exercise in pious cant.

The description of the opening sequence of the mass is similar, of an



elderly priest being led out by one choirboy (a junior seminarian). The account which follows could not be more different. There can be few more moving accounts of a mass in all its detail. Huysmans was overcome by the quality of the choirboy's serving, and he wrote that this was the first time he understood 'what innocent childhood meant—the little sinless soul purely white'.<sup>25</sup> He saw for the first time what was past the limits of the natural and found a transparency of holiness in the actions of the choirboy that enabled him to understand the ultimate nature of art, life and beauty that was represented in the mass as a whole. It might be thought that Huysmans confused sentiment with sanctity, yet his passage from experience and decadence into innocence and truth suggests otherwise. The change in his life, that led him from sensuality and an all too familiar knowledge of the underlife of Paris, to an interest in holiness that increasingly gripped him, is apparent in the rhetoric of his letters as he came to redefine his purpose in life.<sup>26</sup> His effort to wrest innocence from experience bore similarities to elements marking aspects of Péguy's return to Catholicism. It should not be forgotten that the choirboys singing the Magnificat at Christmas vespers at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris effected the conversion of Paul Claudel to Catholicism.<sup>27</sup>

#### *4. Beyond the limits of modernity.*

Having abandoned conventional literature, Huysmans was placed on one margin by members of the literary circles he used to frequent; having studied Satanism a bit too well, he was placed on another margin by Catholics puzzled and suspicious at his return to the fold. He was an outsider, an enigma to all except the few who knew him well. A desperate urge came over him to become a monk. This 'claustral nostalgia' was felt continually, but, as he realised, he was too much of a monk to be a novelist, and too much of a novelist to be a monk, a fate visited on some sociologists.<sup>28</sup> His Catholicism had set him on the road to worldly failure. Late in life he got a minor religious prize, and received his scapular as a Benedictine oblate. The quest for a monastic vocation formed the basis of his last novel.<sup>29</sup> After that, he felt he had little else to say to the world, at least through fiction.

To read any of the main five novels of Huysmans in a random order would be a great mistake. Each has an intrinsic interest, but each flows deeper into his fictitious front, Durtal, and so they come to represent the journey of a soul out of the limits of modernity into a limitless spirituality. There was an inevitability to his undramatic conversion to Catholicism. No sudden flashes of grace came, only an awareness that he had become a Catholic, a process as inevitable as the digestion of food. Reflecting on the oddity of his conversion, Huysmans declared that 'it was through a glimpse of the supernatural of evil that I first obtained insight into the supernatural of good. The one derived from the other. With his hooked paw, the Devil drew me towards God'.<sup>30</sup>

The history of Catholicism is riddled with figures surprised by a grace that does not scruple over their place in the learned arts. Huysmans was one amongst many who made a spectacular fall into Catholicism. He was not the first nor was he the last prodigal intellectual to recast his bearings and to move off in an unexpected manner. Nor was he a sociologist who graced and favoured lecture rooms with his analytical conundrums about life at the edge. There is little evidence that he was deeply interested in modern philosophy and he did not seem to know enough about positivism to be disillusioned by it. Yet in his life there are disturbing resonances, marks on his journey, that suggest an uncanny similarity with the present plight of sociology. Its dissatisfaction with the human condition borders on the bleak and the need to seek meanings past the post looms uncomfortably large. Its adherents might be ripe for unexpected conversion as they delve deeper into the limits of modernity.

Post-modernism is less a school of thought than a condition of perplexity before a culture which has been deified to deal death to God and to rid man of the burden of choice. But the deed so done imposes new demands. Reflecting on his approach to aesthetics, Bernstein notes that 'for Adorno, post-modernity is just modernity at the limit. Because that limit has still to be trespassed beyond, and yet we are unable to rest within modernity, we balance at the limit'.<sup>31</sup> There is an inescapable theological aspect to this wager with limits of understanding that haunts debates on modernity. The wager involves actions and accountability for their meaningful outcomes and to that degree links sociology to theological and philosophical issues in an unavoidable manner. There is a need to complete meanings, but this cannot be accomplished within the limits of sociology. As a discipline it can expose limits of the social world, but it cannot resolve their basis. This dilemma finds expression in the philosophy of Maurice Blondel over the necessity of belief in something past the limits. Nihilism is not a solution, only a temporary means of escape. In Blondel's account, the actor 'affirms nothingness only because he needs a reality more solid than that which he finds unsatisfactory'. The absence of belief is a belief and this poses an inescapable dilemma to the dilettante who 'claims to eliminate the whole problem of life; but in fact he poses the problem'.<sup>32</sup>

It is, perhaps, in Jewish rather than Christian circles that this crisis of modernity is being understood in terms of its theological implications. A persuasive case has been made about the extent of Jewish motifs in Benjamin's writings, as in Marx, Simmel, Freud, Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt school.<sup>33</sup> Debates on critical theory have been more shaped by Jewish considerations than many realise and these give a theological contour to the issues critical theory raises in a way that has been masked in contemporary sociology. The Jewish and Catholic facets to sociological theory have been strangely concealed in recent debates on the future directions of the discipline. Few theologians have grasped the implications of this hidden religious agenda in sociology. In a recent and

important work Beckford has indicated reasons for the marginalisation of religion in sociology as it grapples with modernity and other social issues. Part of the reason for sociological theory becoming detached from an interest in religion relates to the narrow concerns of sociology of religion with the question of its failure, with sects and secularisation.<sup>34</sup> The result is that wider questions of meaning as they bear on religion have an alien and barren quality within sociological speculation. There are exceptions, such as Peter Berger, the sociologist theologians most like to read, but least want to understand. He has always warned of the perils of modernity and its fragmenting effect on religious belief. But matters are now being reversed. It is modernity that is increasingly being conceived as posing a danger to the understanding of culture. A failure to grasp this point lies within the crisis of contemporary sociology that has disabled its capacity to engage with crucial issues in society. Dangers modernity poses for critical theory have been most deeply expressed by Habermas.

Theologians have failed to attend to this crisis within sociology as it gets caught in debates on post-modernism. The reasons for this failure to understand are complex and are due to factors other than Catholics having the misfortune to have theology departments claiming to mediate between the humanities and the Church. The marginalisation of the study of theology in the universities has led to distorted understandings of modern culture, where the symptoms, expressed most extravagantly in feminism, have become confused with the cure. An implicit theology is emerging in the humanities, in this crisis over modernity, that might seem to give joy to traditionalists at having their suspicions about modernism confirmed from some unexpected quarters.

For Jews, modernity and the holocaust are becoming linked in recent writings. The gravedigger of culture seems to have colluded in the burial of their race in the concentration camp, where the silence of God deeply hurts. The easeful demands of modernity reduce the actor to a spectator on the sufferings of others. At some point the issue emerges as to how much emptiness it is socially responsible to suffer, especially when others bear the price of indifference. There is a barren trivialising aspect to modern academic life, where detail is fractured and where the hermeneutic circle acts less as a means of escape than a gordian knot that imprisons. As universities have expanded, they also seem to have become marginalised, acting as reverent critical commentators, discoursing on what they do not create, and removing criticism from the realm of experience.

The connection between the crisis over modernity in the academy and the need to find God somewhere past the last theoretical post has been pursued with eloquence by another Jewish writer, George Steiner. Aesthetics and the quest for a filled meaning beyond the narrowing speculations of contemporary philosophy lie at the root of his work. He writes with a witness unusual for a philosopher that 'what I affirm is the

intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed, overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable'.<sup>35</sup> Secondary parasitic readings of culture make art a question that belongs to the spectator, who passively receives in a way that denies the depth of the message conveyed and the life it transmits. Modernity establishes the capacity to squeeze transcendence out of beauty, to make it a vehicle for crass speculation by the uncreative. The capacity to negate becomes the prize and the need to wager is marginalised and ultimately denied. Steiner writes against this facile code. His essay argues for a 'wager on transcendence. It argues that there is in the art-act and its reception, that there is in the experience of meaningful form, a presumption of presence'.<sup>36</sup>

Steiner's quest is one Huysmans might have understood. Working on the edge, he had to make a wager with the ultimate. The painful pilgrim's progress of Huysmans suggests he arrived at a room with a view that hardly represented the coward's lot. He escaped from impressionism and naturalism to seek the deeper beauty of holiness. By taking the ultimate risk, of leaving the door open, he found God. There was no need to shut the door and use the pistol.

\* For his diligent attention to the nuances of the French language, I must thank most warmly my colleague Ian Hamnett.

- 1 Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time to Keep Silence*, London: Penguin, 1988, p. 34.
- 2 Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, pp. 329—357.
- 3 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London: Penguin Books, 1969. For an incisive critique of Althusser's writings, see E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & other essays*, London: Merlin Books, 1978, pp. 193—406.
- 4 Paul Webster, 'Victim of a broken mind', *The Guardian*, 8th October 1988. I must thank my colleague Dr Rohit Barot for drawing this article to my attention.
- 5 Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 23.
- 6 Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans., Richard Congreve, Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973.
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- 8 Roger Martin du Gard, *Jean Barois*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, London: The Bodley Head, 1950. See also: Robert Gibson, *Roger Martin du Gard*, London: Bowes & Bowes, 1961; and Rejean Robidoux, *Roger Martin du Gard et la Religion*, no city of publication listed: Aubier, 1964.
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## Making the Connections: The global agenda of feminist theology

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What is the connection between the cross-cultural phenomenon of the gender subordination of women which has led to domestic violence, genital mutilation, Indian widow-burning, Chinese foot-binding etc., and, on the other hand, the contemporary 'received' Christian theological tradition on women? This was the fundamental question underlying the reflections and discussions at the 1989 Maryknoll Summer School on the 'Global Agenda of Feminist Theology'<sup>1</sup>

This is not a report on that Summer School; rather, it is a presentation