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## CHAPTER TWO

# cathedrals to cults: the evolving forms of the religious life

Steve Bruce

### Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to identify what strikes me as the prevailing ethos of religious belief and behaviour in modern societies (by which I mean specifically the industrial democracies of western and northern Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand), and consider to what extent that ethos offers warrant for talking about 'postmodern' as distinct from 'modern' religion. A more fulsomely argued and illustrated version of this account can be found in my *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Bruce, 1996).

It is not false humility to note that there is little new in what follows. Most of the specific propositions are so well known that they have names (the Niebuhr thesis, for example). In so far as there is novelty in this account, it is in claiming that the well-known organization typology of church, sect, denomination and cult can be applied to describe economically a process of social evolution.

I will begin with some quotations which exemplify the start and finish of the process I want to understand. They concern the nature of truth and authority and the social relationships that are associated with divergent attitudes to the status of the truth. The first is from Bishop Augustine of Hippo, by no means the most intolerant of the Church Fathers

There is an unjust persecution which the ungodly operate against the Church of Christ; and a just persecution which the Churches of Christ make use of towards the ungodly. . . . The Church persecutes out of love, the ungodly out of cruelty. (Kamen, 1967, p. 14)

As a dissenter from the orthodoxy of his time one might have expected Martin Luther to take a more charitable view of diversity, but he heavily constrained his claims for freedom of conscience which, he argued: 'cannot be absolute freedom because no one can be free from the obligations of truth' (Kamen, 1967, p. 30).

My third quotation is from a statement written by Tissington Tatlow for the British Student Christian Movement (SCM) in 1910. Since the SCM's foundation at the end of the previous century, Tatlow, a young Church of Ireland evangelical, had been intimately involved in trying to make it acceptable to the British churches beyond its evangelical base. He and other activists had frequently been put on the spot by suspicious bishops asking what the movement stood for. The following statement of the 'interdenominational' position (consciously contrasted with an 'undenominational position') became the foundation of the 1910 World Missionary Conference (WMC) in Edinburgh and was the credo on which the entire ecumenical movement was to develop. Tatlow described the SCM as follows:

The Student Christian Movement is interdenominational in that while it unites persons of different religious denominations in a single organization for certain definite aims and activities, it recognises their allegiance to any of the various Christian Bodies into which the Body of Christ is divided. It believes that loyalty to their own denomination is the first duty of Christian students and welcomes them into the fellowship of the Movement as those whose privilege it is to bring into it, as their contribution, all that they as members of their own religious body have discovered or will discover of Christian truth. (Tatlow, 1933, p. 400)

It is worth noting a few things about this statement. First, it is pragmatic. It was produced, not out of idle philosophizing, but out of the need to find ways in which organizations which had previously competed with or avoided each other could co-operate in their common interests in evangelizing in universities and in the world at large. Secondly, it was produced by people who were keenly aware of religious diversity. Tatlow and his fellow SCM activists and the promoters of the 1910 WMC were people who were involved in foreign missions and hence who were keenly aware of the minority status of their own beliefs and of the great plurality of religions. Thirdly, by not defining the limits to the Body of Christ or specifying 'Christian truth', the statement implicitly opens the way to its supporters accepting an ever greater range of beliefs as all being in some sense valid. Fourthly, and most importantly, implicit in it is what was later to become explicit: *relativism and perennialism*.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of Tatlow's draft was the notion that in the dark cloud of apparent contradiction could be found the silver lining of fundamental

unity. Where previously, in what was known as 'non-denominational' work, co-operation required that differences be tactfully overlooked, now they were to be celebrated while the law of non-contradiction was suspended. Where the Bishop of Hippo would, out of love, of course, persecute those who differed with him, the Bishops of the major Christian churches that formed the ecumenical movement would endorse everything from high Catholicism through the evangelicalism of the Salvation Army to the pantheism of American native religion.

My fourth quotation comes from Sir George Trevelyan, doyen of British New Age spirituality, who concluded one account of his beliefs with the words: 'This is what things look like to me. If it doesn't seem like that to you, you don't have to accept what I say. Only accept what rings true to your own Inner Self' (in Greer, 1995, p. 159).

### A Vocabulary

With concerns as broad as those of this essay, there is an ever-present danger of unsupported generalization masking insupportable interpretations of the historical record. To somewhat reduce this danger, I want to introduce a vocabulary which allows me to specify briefly but clearly and consistently my concerns. Roy Wallis built on the previous work of Ernst Troeltsch, Howard Becker, Bryan Wilson, Benton Johnson and Roland Robertson in clarifying the distinctions between the four most commonly used terms for religious organizations – church and sect, cult and denomination – to offer a simple but useful analytical device, as shown in figure 2.1. Wallis notes that most of the important differences in how people organize their religious lives can be identified if we look at just two issues: (a) Does the religion see itself as having a unique grasp of salvational knowledge? and (b) Is the religion seen by others as respectable or deviant?

Figure 2.1 A typology of ideological organizations

|                        |                               |                     |         |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Internal<br>Conception | Uniquely<br>Legitimate        | External Conception |         |
|                        |                               | Respectable         | Deviant |
|                        | Pluralistically<br>Legitimate | CHURCH              | SECT    |
|                        |                               | DENOMINATION        | CULT    |

Source: Wallis, 1976, p. 13.

Many Mormons believe that their organization offers the only way to God. Hence they try to persuade people to become Mormons. For Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is *uniquely legitimate*. The Roman Catholic Church has historically taken a similar view (though, like the Mormon Church, it is now moderating its claims in certain contexts). Members of the Exclusive or 'Closed' Brethren also take the view that they and they alone have the Way. But there is considerable difference in the popularity, acceptability and prestige of the Catholic Church, the Mormons and the Exclusive Brethren. One can clearly see the difference in the way the media treat them. It is common for radio and television documentaries to be highly critical of the tight way in which the Brethren socialize their children to become the next generation of the Brethren. It is rare to see similar arguments being made about Catholic schooling or about the Catholic Church's insistence that the children of mixed marriages be raised as Catholics. Hence we would say the Catholics are a 'church' but the Brethren are a 'sect'. The position of the Mormons allows me to stress one aspect of the Wallis model which, although not central to this essay, is interesting: its social relativity. He is not looking for the unchanging essence of any phenomenon but the reality of its life in this or that place. The Mormons began as a highly deviant (and much persecuted) sect. In many parts of the world, they remain a deviant sect. But in Utah, they have achieved such numerical superiority as to be able to act as if they formed a 'church'.

Consider the bottom half of the table. What the denomination – the Methodists would be an example – and the cult have in common is that they do not claim a unique possession of the truth. They think they have something to offer, that you might be better off being a Methodist than a Baptist, but they recognize other organizations as being every bit as valid as themselves. They think of themselves in the terms of Tatlow's interdenominational basis for the ecumenical movement. Similarly, the vast majority of purveyors of cultic wisdom and esoteric practice do not expect or seek the monogamous commitment of their followers. Indeed the relationship between purveyor and consumer is so loose that terms such as member, adherent and follower are usually inappropriate in the cultic milieu. Cults see themselves as simply one of many guides on the single but very broad road to enlightenment.

Again what separates them is the top line: the extent to which they have succeeded in establishing themselves in their society. The Methodists are a respectable part of our social and cultural landscape; cults are not.

It is worth adding here that not only will specific religious organizations vary in their form with time and place but in any one setting they may offer different presentations to different audiences, both as a

recruiting tactic and as a necessary accommodation to the responses of followers. For example, the leadership and core members of the Church of Scientology tend to see their religion as uniquely legitimate, but this is down-played in initial contacts with the public. During the recruitment process, the sectarian qualities become clearer but none the less many consumers persist in 'taking away' some Scientology expertise and incorporating it in their own ideological packages rather than becoming committed members of the Church of Scientology.

### Secularization

The point of introducing these distinctions is to offer a very simple way of describing the major changes in the religious climate of the Western world. We can observe the possibility and popularity of the four forms of religion in different sorts of society. I am not suggesting that sects were unknown prior to the Reformation, and that denominations and cults were unknown prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century; would that history were so simple! Even within the massive consensus of the Holy Roman Empire one had Christian humanists (of whom the young Erasmus would be a good example) who searched for some common values to unite the range of religious expression they confronted. However, I am suggesting that there is a crucial difference in the number, size and popularity of the exemplars of the various forms. Further, I am suggesting that close inspection of what may at first sight appear to be cases out of time and place will often reinforce the point.

The key to the shift between these four forms is *modernization*. With no suggestion of claiming the intellectual status of Max Weber, I want to be clear that I am using the term in the manner of the sadly often misunderstood Protestant ethic thesis (Weber, 1976). By modernization, I refer to a *historically and geographically specific* package of major social, political and economic changes that came with urbanization and industrialization in western Europe, and to the form of consciousness associated with those changes (see Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974). I am not at this point making any universal claims or offering observations about societies that have more recently been affected by some of those changes. The extent to which the patterns may be repeated will depend on the extent to which new circumstances match the old.

Modernization makes the church form of religion impossible. The church requires either cultural homogeneity or an elite sufficiently powerful to enforce conformity. Societies expand to encompass ever larger numbers of religious, ethnic and linguistic groups and improved communication brings increased knowledge of that diversity. Modernization also undermines the hierarchical and rigid social structures which permit the

maintenance of monocultures. What at first sight might appear to be paradoxical changes combine to encourage and legitimate diversity.

First, as Durkheim notes in his distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, the increased division of labour and growth of economies creates ever greater social diversity and social distance (Durkheim, 1964). The feudal estate and closed village become the town and the city. The medieval old town of Edinburgh, where people of very different 'stations' lived on different floors of the same tenement and threw their excrement into the same street, was replaced with the New Town, inhabited by the bourgeoisie and their servants, separated from the trades and the factories. Increasingly, different social circumstances created increasingly different cultures, and that expressed itself in religious diversity as different social groups reworked the dominant religious tradition in ways that made sense from their position in the world.

At the same time, as Gellner (1983) in his theory of nationalism persuasively argues, modernization produced a basic egalitarianism. A division of labour need not undermine a hierarchical society (the caste system of India is profoundly hierarchical and the castes are defined by their occupations) but economic development also brought change and the expectation of further change. And it brought occupational mobility. People no longer did the job they always did because their family always did that job. Occupational mobility made it hard for people to internalize visions of themselves that suppose permanent inferiority. One cannot have people improving themselves and their class position while thinking of themselves as fixed in a station or a degree or a caste in an unchanging hierarchical world. Modern societies are thus inherently egalitarian.

Economic expansion increased contact with strangers. Profound inequalities of status are tolerable and can work well when the ranking system is well known and widely accepted as legitimate. Soldiers can move from one regiment to another and still know their place because there is a uniform ranking system and one's rank is displayed on one's uniform. Economic innovation and expansion means constant change in the nature of occupations, and increased mobility, both of which in their different ways mean that we have trouble placing people. There is no way of ensuring that we know whether we are superior or subordinate to this or that new person.

The separation of work and home, of the public and the private, further makes for equality. 'Serf' and 'peasant' were not job descriptions; they were enveloping social, legal and political statuses. One cannot be a serf during working hours and an autonomous individual for the evenings and at weekends. A temporary work-role is not a full identity and though work-roles may be ranked in a hierarchy, they can no longer structure the whole worldview. In the absence of a shared belief system which

would sanction inequality and subjection (and the decline of religion usually removes that), egalitarianism becomes the default position.

The precondition of employability, dignity, full moral citizenship and an acceptable social identity is a certain level of education, which must include literacy – and literacy in a single language common throughout the economy. Once this was recognized, socialization became standardized and placed in the hands of a central agency; not a family, clan or guild but a society-wide education system. It required a single cultural and linguistic medium through which people could be instructed.

Gellner is not, of course, saying that in modern societies everyone is equal. His point is that the profound and fixed division of rights one finds in traditional and feudal societies is incompatible with economic development. Modernization and the development of the capitalist economy require the end of the old world.

The fundamental egalitarianism that came with modernization meant that, at the political level, the costs of coercing religious conformity were no longer acceptable: the state was no longer willing to accept the price in social conflict and adopted a position of neutrality on the competing claims of various religious bodies. In some settings, the neutrality was explicit (as in the Constitution of the United States); in others, it was implicit (as in the fudge which left the Established Churches of England and Scotland with notional advantages over their competitors but removed their real privileges). At the level of individual consciousness, it made it ever more difficult (though, of course, still possible) to dismiss religious views at odds with one's own as being of entirely no account.

Let us go back and pick up another thread of change to follow. In some countries, where the Lutheran influence predominated, the religious upheavals of the Reformation were largely contained within the church form. In others, religious dissent, accelerated by the social changes of the early modern period, created a profusion of 'sects', most of which initially tried to establish themselves as the church. It was only after failing to achieve power, either through becoming the majority religion or by effecting a minority coup, that many of them discovered the principle of toleration and evolved into denominations (Bruce and Wright, 1995).

At the same time as external relations with other religious organizations and with the state were giving the sect good reason to moderate its claims, there were a variety of internal pressures in the same direction. This is the well-known Niebuhr thesis (1962). For millenarian sects, the failure of the world to end is one problem that must be faced. For almost all sects the position of the children of the sectarians calls into question the initial hard demarcation between the saved and the unregenerate. It is natural for sectarians to suppose that their children, who have been raised in the faith, are not quite the same as the children of outsiders.

Gradually the strict membership tests are relaxed. Survival for any length of time brings assets (buildings, publishing houses, and capital) which require to be managed. The creation of a bureaucratic structure in turn brings officials whose interests are to a degree at odds with the original radical impetus of the sect. The asceticism of the sect may well result in upward social mobility. Even if there is no independent 'Protestant ethic' effect, most sects have endured in circumstances of general economic growth. Increasing prosperity means that the sacrifices inherent in asceticism are proportionately ever larger. When coupled with the lower levels of commitment found among those generations which have inherited their sectarianism rather than acquired it through choice, the result is a gradual relaxation of Puritanism and a gradual accommodation to the ways of the world.

Of course there is nothing inevitable about this general trend. Wilson (1990, 1993) explores a variety of ways in which certain sects have avoided the erosion of their initial radical sectarianism. To give just one example, the moderating effects of increased prosperity can be blunted if, as is the case with the Seventh Day Adventists, that prosperity is channelled and controlled by the sect itself, and can thus serve as a device for maintaining commitment (Bull and Lockhart, 1989). However, we cannot look at the sect's deployment of commitment mechanisms in isolation from the sect's surrounding environment. The sectarian form of religion is demanding and it is potentially disruptive because it challenges other belief systems and modes of behaviour (religious and secular). To the extent that a nation-state or a society is prepared to allow its people social space in which to create their own subcultures, the sect form can prosper (as one sees with fundamentalism in America). However, the distance between its beliefs and those of most people in the modern world is so great that few outsiders will be attracted and its success will depend on socializing its children in the faith. The sect's potential for conflict ensures that it is marginalized in modern democracies.

Those such as Jeffrey Hadden (1987) who point to the recent new Christian right in the United States as refutation might note the movement's record. On what John Garvey calls its defensive agenda – the assertion of the right to be treated as other minorities – it has had some very limited successes (Garvey, 1993). For example, the Courts have decided that the separation of church and state does not prevent evangelical students using school classrooms for private after-hours meetings. But it has signally failed on its offensive agenda. The Supreme Court has maintained the 'no nothing' line on state endorsement of particular religious beliefs and practices and has rejected decisively the claim that the Biblical creation account of the origins of the world should be taught wherever a secular evolutionary account is given in schools.

That the sectarian form of religion is demanding of its members and requires a social structure loose enough to allow effective subcultures, means that its influence in the modern world is limited. That the mass media frequently print or broadcast 'scare stories' about the growth of fundamentalism (often inspired by a failure to appreciate that Iran is very unlike Britain or America) is not evidence to the contrary. It is evidence of the failure of commentators to appreciate that the numerical decline of the denominational form of religion leaves the sectarians as an ever greater part of the ever smaller number of believers.

Thus far in what must be a massively simplified view of the history of religion in the West, we have seen first the church form faced with competition from the sect and then both churches and sects tending to become denominations. Where does the cult come into this account? First with the new religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s and then with the New Age religion of the 1980s, we have seen a flowering of alternative religions, some re-workings for the Western mind of traditional Eastern religions, others spiritualized versions of lay psychotherapies that are the bastard children of Freud and Jung. In terms of numbers, new religious movements and New Age religiosity are insignificant. Field sports are more popular than alternative religions. There are more train spotters than white witches, magicians, and pagans. However, the cult form of religion is, I would argue, emblematic.

First, there is the point that the decline in the main religious traditions leaves every larger numbers of people free to experiment; free because they are not personally tied to an older form and free because the decline of that older form reduces its ability to stigmatize cultic alternatives as 'deviant'. Secondly, there is the core belief of New Age religion in the divinity of the self. Grounded in some variant of the Hindu and Buddhist view that the apparent diversity of matter disguises a fundamental unity and hence that 'all is one', it argues that we should no longer seek God outside ourselves but within. For we are both all God's children and all God. I want to suggest that this substantive proposition is, like the interdenominational position of the liberal denominations and the ecumenical movement, both an article of faith and a necessary adjustment to the fact of minority status. Just as most conservative schismatic sects came to love the principle of toleration once they had failed to achieve a position of power in which they could enforce conformity to their own beliefs, so the purveyors of the cultic world have found a happy match of principle and expedience in eclecticism and relativism.

Finally, the cultic milieu is emblematic of modern religion in openly laying claim to what for the last half-century has been an implicit principle of much involvement in traditional religion: the right of the sovereign individual to determine what is truth and what is falsity.

Individualism used to mean the freedom to dissent; now it means the right to determine, not simply what one likes to do, but what is the case. It has grown from being a political and behavioural principle to being an ontological device.

Just to clarify the argument, I will briefly deal with two common objections to this sociological gloss of history. It is certainly true that something like the profusion of religious beliefs we now see in the New Age milieu could also be found during the English Civil War and Commonwealth periods. However, the range of beliefs was considerably narrower; they were all Protestant Christian. But more important for the sociologist is the fact that most of the alternatives available during the Commonwealth were *competing sects*, each certain of its unique grasp of the truth and of the falsity of the positions of the Church of England. In the New Age we see a cultic milieu, a world in which individuals select from a diverse range of beliefs and supernaturalisms, very few of the purveyors of which claim to be uniquely legitimate. Even if the promoting organization is supported by an inner circle of full-time officials who claim a unique grasp of the truth, such claims are routinely rejected by the consumers of their product and the awareness that such a fate can hardly be avoided is daily reflected in them moderating their claims for public consumption. Whatever those in the inner circle of Transcendental Meditators privately think, their newspaper advertisements stress that 'no change of belief is required'. To put it simply, we have previously had alternatives but they have been competing sects, not co-operating and complementary cults.

Similarly, early premodern spokesmen for toleration will usually turn out on close inspection to have in mind a considerably narrower range of what is permissible than the average liberal Christian. Those Congregationalists and Presbyterians of the English Civil War period who argued for toleration (and there were many who opposed it) wished it to include themselves and the state church but did not allow Roman Catholics or Quakers the privilege.

### Is this Postmodern?

At first sight, these basic patterns seem to offer confirmation of certain versions of a 'postmodernity' story in that we see a decline in the strength of tradition and an increase in the extent to which individuals select their own idiosyncratic versions of available religious traditions. Those people who remain in denominations are increasingly selective about what parts of their organization's teachings they will accept (as one sees with the contraceptive practice of most Roman Catholics<sup>2</sup>), and feel free to add their own even heretical innovations (for example, surveys have shown an increasing number of Christians believing in reincarnation).

Against this one can place the endurance of sectarian forms of religion. Indeed, in most Western societies, what is often described loosely as the decline of the churches is more accurately the decline of the mainstream churches. If one is looking for stability and even slight growth, one finds it in the forms of religion that are least 'postmodern'.

But the relative growth of sectarian forms of religion could be reconciled to a vision of postmodernity if one noted the considerable movement *between* conservative Protestant sects. The recent growth of independent Christian fellowships (the so-called 'house church movement') has depended a great deal on defections from older forms of Protestant dissent (in particular, the Baptist churches). In my research on religious behaviour in Belfast, I found many couples who practised a form of the 'seeker-ship' that was much described in the literature on the new religious movements of the 1970s. One might be raised in the Baptist Church, but then move to an Independent Methodist congregation, and later to a gospel hall before settling on the Pentecostal Church of God.

This looks like an example of the consumerist orientation to religious belief noted by those keen on interpreting the world through the lenses of 'postmodernity' but it is possible to distinguish this behaviour from the apparently similar sampling of revelations and therapies that characterizes the cultic milieu. We need to distinguish between aggregate behaviour and individual motivation and consciousness. The sectarian seeker remains within the classic sectarian mode of supposing, at each stopping place, that this is the one unique, divinely ordained truth. The sectarian seeker is not a relativist nor a radical Unitarian who insists that the diversity of matter is fundamentally united in cosmic consciousness. Though the seeking career of many sectarians shows that they exercise choice, they see their choosing as being guided by an external authority (the will of God) and deny their own part in the process.

We might suppose that, like the serial monogamist, the serial sectarian will remember the number of times that he has thought he has found the true church of God, gradually become aware of his own role in selection, and move towards the relativism of the denomination and cult. This is an empirical issue. What I would say is that denying the authorship of one's actions and playing down the extent of change have very different consequences from asserting the divine self, celebrating change, and asserting either relativism or perennialism.

### The Origins of Individualism

Many accounts of secularization, especially those of critics who wish to pastiche the approach, concentrate on the supposed clash of ideas between science and religion. As the above brief summary will indicate, I believe the competing ideas of science to be far less of a threat to religion

than cultural diversity, which in turn makes me interested in the patterns of social relations which determine how competing ideas are handled. The irony is that Christianity dug its own grave. Innovations pressed to rejuvenate the Church undermined it. David Martin in his usual elegant but elliptical style has written that: 'The logic of Protestantism is clearly in favour of the voluntary principle, to a degree that eventually makes it sociologically unrealistic' (1978, p. 1). The religion created by the Reformation was extremely vulnerable to fragmentation because it removed the institution of the church as a source of authority between God and man. If by reading the scriptures everyone was able to discern God's will, how would subsequent disputes be resolved? Being a theist who believed in one God, one Holy Spirit which dwelt in all of God's creation, and one Bible, the Protestant could hope that the righteous would come to agree, but history proved that hope false.

The Reformation did not arise out of nothing and I could have started this account at an earlier point to show the social, political and economic changes that encouraged the Reformation. But if we take it as our starting point we can see the tremendous effects it had in laying the foundations for 'modernity'. To repeat the point of the last paragraph, it inadvertently fragmented the dominant religious culture and created the competition which, in tolerant and egalitarian societies, would lead to relativism and perennialism. By insisting that all people had a responsibility for their own spiritual state, the Reformation also contributed directly to the growth of individualism. It required ordinary people to become better informed about their religion, and in producing the means to service that need (printing, the spread of literacy, and the use of the vernacular), it further encouraged the trend. It also contributed to the rationalization of the world, hence to the growth of modern science and technology, and thus inadvertently contributed to the erosion of religion.

But asserting the centrality of the Reformation in this way leaves us with something of a problem. A historian of ideological innovation (Kamen (1967) would be a fine example) might well look at what the post-modernists claim to be a novel condition and point out that the origins of the phenomenon are located four hundred years earlier. The sociologist and social historian would note that, incipient though individualism (and the relativism it requires) might have been, it did not flower until the end of the nineteenth century and bloom until after the 1939-45 war. Why not?

Although the details are complex, an underlying explanation for this lag can be found in inertia, lack of democracy, social homogeneity, and the authority of rationality. First, we should note the inertia given in the fact that each generation was socialized into the beliefs of the previous, not the next. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were raised in a 'Catholic' world

and only moved so far from its thinking. Zwingli showed his continuity with the previous order when he said:

Why should the Christian magistrate not destroy statues and abolish the mass? . . . This does not mean that he has to cut the priests' throats if it is possible to avoid such a cruel action. But if not we would not hesitate to imitate the harshest examples. (Kamen, 1967, p. 46)

The history of eighteenth-century Scottish dissenting Presbyterianism, as it reluctantly shifted from a principled commitment to a state-established and enforced church to the principle of voluntarism, was decorated with heresy trials as those individuals who moved too fast were expelled, only to see their damnable heresy become first the practice and then the principle of the next generation. But the broadening of possibilities seems logarithmic rather than linear.

Secondly, the lack of democracy and egalitarianism was a key inhibitor. As long as people were not free to make many choices about this world, they were unlikely to feel free to make many about the next.

Thirdly, although not asserting any simple connection between social conditions and ideology, I am supposing that there is some sort of relationship between diversity of experiences of the mundane world and diversity of visions of the supernatural. A straightforward linear relationship is unlikely because of the ability of particular social groups to recruit others to their vision. The Victorian British bourgeoisie worked hard to socialize the rough urban working class into respectability via evangelical Protestantism but even so far as they succeeded they did not prevent 'Nonconformity' being divided into competing sects (nor, interestingly, did they prevent it spawning radical political movements and alternative institutions). To take the very long view, I would argue that the general and accelerating increase in the division of labour produced an ever greater variety of life circumstances. While initially this was expressed through 'classes', it eventually made the quite narrow visions of those groupings precarious. To reverse the point, the relative lack of economic and social diversity in previous centuries was a major inhibition on the individualism implicit in Protestantism.

To stress the social bases of belief is neither to ignore nor to neglect the influence of ideas and culture in their own right. While the rationality of science and technology is rightly offered as a general threat to the plausibility of supernatural belief systems, there is one way in which the enormous success of rationality inhibited the fragmentation of religious tradition into solipsism, and that is by maintaining the idea that there could be authoritative knowledge. For the scientists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was just one world, accessible

by one approach. If two sets of research findings were in contradiction, then at least one set was wrong. In so far as the findings of natural science contradicted the beliefs of the churches, technological consciousness reduced a sense of mystery and uniqueness, and technology provided solutions for problems for which people had previously sought religious recourse, rationality was indeed a threat to religion, but until recently the authority of science did provide a bulwark against an individualistic ontology.

In terms of social relations, one sees the authority of rationality in the rise of professions which used their knowledge as the basis for power. I can only allude to the argument here but it seems clear that there has recently been an erosion in the authority of science and of the professions. Most of us still go to properly accredited medical professions for cures for our ailments but there is no longer the widespread certainty that 'the doctor knows best'. Our current scepticism about science is no better founded than our previous credulity but it is widespread.

One does not want to exaggerate the importance of one's own discipline but it does seem that sociology has been implicated in this weakening of faith in the possibility of authoritative knowledge. Part cause and part symptom, one element of sociological thought has now passed into the taken-for-granted knowledge of Westerners. We all practise a debunking sociology of knowledge that imputes interests to those who claim to be disinterested. The English prostitute Mandy Rice-Davies's famous response to a client's denial of her claims – 'Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?' – has become firmly embedded in the way we respond to any assertion or claim. Though the term 'hermeneutic' is still foreign to most people, the general notion that different sorts of people will see the world in different ways has become deeply embedded in our culture.

As a sign of just how far we have moved from the confidence in our ability, by rational inspection, to discover the truth, let me quote from the essay of a good final-year sociology student who concluded a discussion of the problems of source bias by saying: 'In an ideal world there would always be a balance of sources to present everyone's view.' She did not write: 'In an ideal world we would research our way past bias to the truth.' No, the best we can hope for now is equality of opportunity to assert our prejudices.

### Conclusion

In this extremely broad sociological interpretation of the religious history of modern societies, I have tried to express the major changes with some conceptual consistency by using the reformulation of 'church',

'sect', 'denomination' and 'cult' proposed by the late Roy Wallis. I have tried to show why the church form of religion is challenged first by sects and why both forms then evolve into the denomination. The church form may survive where ethnic or national conflict places a premium on ethnic solidarity and thus retards fragmentation. The sect form may endure where the social circumstances allow the creation and maintenance of a cultural hegemonic sub-society. The social space left by the decline in the popularity of the major tradition allows entry to large numbers of alternative religions, organized, if that is not too strong a word, in a 'cultic milieu'. That is the European pattern; the North American and Australasian is slightly different. There, because the countries have been formed by waves of immigration there is less of a hegemonic culture and much greater space for experimentation with culture and lifestyles, even while the Christian tradition remains strong. Either way, the denomination and the cult share in common their pluralistic legitimacy and their relativism (implicit in one, explicit in the other). Indeed, as the previously dominant Christian culture weakens it becomes ever harder to distinguish denominations and cults sociologically (though one may do so by the source of their ideas: Christian for the former; Hindu/Buddhist or secular psychotherapy for the latter) because cults are no longer terribly deviant.

As much misplaced argument about the secularization approach to religious change shows, the above argument is readily misunderstood and it should be stressed that this is a context-specific model. As I have noted, there are circumstances in which religion retains its church form and in which sects survive and prosper, and I have delineated these in detail elsewhere (Bruce, 1996). In this account I am making no universal causal claims. I am not suggesting, for example, that an increased division of labour always brings cultural diversity. It does so only in democracies or where the oligarchy is prepared to tolerate it (the position of Stalin's USSR with regard to those aspects of the culture of ethnic minorities that did not threaten the power of the Communist Party, for example). Social diversity is far more likely to produce religious fragmentation in Protestant cultures than in Roman Catholic ones, where the result is rather the division of the population into an enduringly Catholic bloc (though with class differences over exactly what it means to be a Catholic) and a secular bloc. What I am saying, as Weber said, is that in the circumstances of the countries of Protestant western Europe and those new worlds most influenced by the old, the individualism inherent in the Reformation produced a series of changes which culminated in our present religious culture: a culture in which, as Peter Berger put it, individuals create their God rather than the other way round (Berger, 1980).

Given the vastly different things that can be meant when people use the notion of 'postmodernity' there seems little point in arguing about whether orientations to religion that range from selective attention to a denomination's teaching to an explicitly individualistic ontology offer support for the claim that we are now in a 'postmodern' era. In so far as my observations about religious change lead me to a view on that debate, my conclusion is that 'postmodernity' in this context is unnecessary and, given the tendentious theoretical baggage associated with the term, best avoided. What I have sought to do is demonstrate that the major patterns of change can be explained by the operation of those characteristics which Weber, Gellner and Berger regarded as the essence of modernity.

### Notes

- 1 Precisely because the innovation was implicit there was no open discussion of whether what was meant was that divergent positions were equally valuable because no system existed for adjudicating which was true (relativism), or that divergence was merely a surface appearance which masked an underlying unity (perennialism). Only the most radical Unitarian universalists would have argued for the latter. Perhaps the best way of describing it is to say that an under-stated relativism was adopted as an interactional device and it gradually became a rarely stated perennialism through the course of the twentieth century.
- 2 The description of the Roman Catholic Church as a denomination might seem surprising but it follows from the distinctions made above concerning (a) area variations and (b) tensions between officials and laity. In parts of the world where it continues to enjoy hegemony the Catholic Church acts like a 'church' in the sociological sense. In places where it is a minority faith (the US is a clear case) it acts like a denomination. Furthermore (in parallel with the point about Scientology being a sect in the eyes of its professional officials but a cult in the eyes of most consumers of its product), most Roman Catholics in industrial societies act as though their religion was of the denominational, rather than the churchly, type.

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