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PRIFYSGOL CYMRU LLANBEDR PONT STEFFAN

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JIERAN FLANAGAN

1 Sociology, Culture and Religious Belief: Some Reflections

To walk through a Cathedral is to journey in a labyrinth, a site of medieval conundrums. Promenading around Gloucester Cathedral on an Autumn evening, one goes up the lighted nave, on by the South transept and up the steps to pass by the side of the choir. Going around the back of the main altar, one comes before arches leading into the Lady Chapel. The unlit East stained glass windows loom in their leaden frames transmitting ghostly contours. Entering the chapel, one notices on the right a small door to another chapel. The shape of a window, the brass candles on a little altar can just be discerned. Sitting there, one feels enraptured in time, totally cut off from the twentieth century, somehow at one with those who sat there before. Leaving the dark, one goes back through the arches, seeing the lights of the choir dimly reflecting on the roof. Going down, hearing the organ intoning, one sees the choir moving steadfastly into evensong, their red cassocks and long white surplices rustling as they pass, to fill the medieval stones with a sound enigmatically produced by inhabitants of a culture of postmodernity.

This timeless ritual betokens witness to better theological times. The ritual speaks of an era when rites had rightly places in theology and culture. Now such rites seem decentred in a culture dominated by modernity. But if theology has collapsed as a belief system, it cannot be said that the bog into which it has disappeared, modernity, inspires much trust. As Berman notes, as modernisation has expanded, there has been a flatness, a dullness, an increased sense of futility which obscures the vision and sense of danger felt by earlier thinkers.[1] A belief in what theology signifies has been replaced by a sense of paradox that modernity offers much and delivers little. A sense of dullness has descended on contemporary culture, combined with a feeling of decay and a realisation that one is lost on the cultural map, but that it does not matter.

Clearly, some who go to the Cathedral are true believers. They are the proper pilgrims rather than the improper flâneurs who stroll to stake claims on the building for the heritage industry. But these flâneurs, seeking only to connect, live lives of oblivious disconnection. In this culture of postmodernity, their curiosity is dimmed. Their apathy masks their plight. Not

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for these idle flâneurs, the pilgrim's progress of the Norman knight, Richard de Godefroi, who constructed a flawless miz-maze, which he crossed on his knees, covering a hundred miles a year, out of disgust with the world and as a penance in lieu of not getting to Jerusalem.[2] Modernity does confuse, even in its highest refinements in academic culture. Some have come from its cloisters to the Cathedral as pilgrims. For instance, Schwehn draws attention to the wonderings over modernity in *The Education of Henry Adams* that stemmed from 'an intellectual inability to find order in learning or experience coupled with a political failure to secure power over a world seemingly spun out of control'.[3] Many of Adams' worries were derived from the modernising nineteenth-century university, Harvard in his case. But his quest for knowledge seemed complete when he confronted French Gothic Cathedrals. They presented a 'shock of recognition'. They mirrored what he had forgotten.[4]

Unfortunately, sociologists going around a Cathedral are unlikely to remember, for it is does not represent their notion of culture or their biography. It has no site in their literature, or so it seems. But some sociologists are aware their discipline is tainted with a Faustian property. If told that Faust was saved by the bell, some sociologist would think of their favourite tavern, of last orders nearly missed, rather than first calls heard from childhood in the Cathedral.

In his tragedy, Faust, unenlightened and disillusioned, sinks into despondency in his study. He reflects that

> knowing that knowledge tricks us beyond measure, That man's conversion is beyond my reach,
> Knowing the emptiness of what I teach.[5]

He contemplates poisoning himself, but stops when he hears bells and a solemn choir that

> lames my lifting of the fatal glass?
> Do bells already tell with vibrant drone
> The solemn opening of the Easter Mass,
> and choirs with comfort's anthem now resume
> The angelic breaking of the darkened tomb,
> The token of a compact comes to pass?

Now dispossessed from faith, the bells and anthem reminded Faust of his 'soul's indenture'. One cannot help wondering whether Faust was a former choirboy, for he muses:

> This melody the bliss of childhood taught me,
> The song of innocence, the joy of spring;

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> And thoughts of youth, this solemn hour, have brought me
> In my last step a childlike wavering.[6]

Faust is the prototype of the sociologist dealing with modernity, where choice is endless, but equally elusive. His plight has been resurrected in recent sociological understandings of a culture of postmodernity.

As Newman might have said, sociologists also have souls. They are weary and want to come home. But they know too much to go back and not enough to go forward. They might echo the envy of Huysmans who wondered at the privileges of Trappist monks 'who do not even know what analysis is, but then they have not suffered the rotting effect of literature for years on end'.[7] The occasion of these comments was the envy and wonder Huysmans felt at the elderly Brother Simeon. He seemed innocent in his knowing and 'knows that of which all others are ignorant'.[8] This reflects a point of Weber that

> every genuinely devout religious faith brings about, directly or indirectly, that 'sacrifice of the intellect' in the interests of a trans-intellectual, distinctive religious quality of absolute surrender and utter trust which is expressed in the formula *credo non quod sed quia absurdum est.*[9]

The calling of the sociologist to know seems to preclude this 'sacrifice of the intellect'. Yet, as the Faust legend would suggest, there are limits to knowing, an inhibition that relates to a theological quest. Few sociologists think in terms of theology, so seldom face this dilemma. But what if they do reflect in a manner that seeks to marry theology to sociology, what tale is to be told? This invites the sociologist to think through issues of culture in terms of their theological implications. Such a peculiar project invites its own curiosity, for it is not part of the sociological tradition to use the discipline to write an *apologia pro vitae sua.* Such an exercise is as preposterous as it is presumptuous. The sociological vocation moves in an analytical rather than a theological direction. Rethinking what it means to believe, in this case Catholicism, through sociological means, portends to be doomed to analytical failure. Sociologists will regard the task as eccentric and theologians as unhelpful. The product risks falling between the two disciplines. Anyhow, if there is a theological tradition in sociology, it relates to Judaism, not to Catholicism. Furthermore, theologians have their own longstanding traditions of dealing with culture and will regard sociological interventions as reinventions of the wheel.

Any exercise in sociological reflexivity about religious belief risks producing themes, areas and concerns that seem as prejudicial as they are idiosyncratic, as unsubstantiated as they are untenable especially to

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progressive or liberal theologians, who will anathematise such a base exercise in apologetics. Such theologians might be aware, that for whatever domestic reasons, sociologists dealing with inequalities of distribution, of wealth and educational provision, present a pink face to society, but in dealing with mainstream theologies and misguided efforts to modernise, sociology offers a blue visage, a peculiar elective affinity with tradition and orthodoxy.

Sociologists do not live on analytical islands. Ultimately, they know, though it is not part of their discipline, that the bell tolls for them too and its peal in contemporary culture is dolorous. It communicates particularly to sociology effecting unexpected changes in its agenda.

Issues of risk, anxiety and de-spiritualisation now form part of sociological concerns in an agenda increasingly concerned with the quality of the meaning of life. Self and ethics loom large as conditions of trust become precarious. Anxiety emerges from intensified desires, a sense of being flooded with prospects in a culture that is increasingly becoming doom laden, nihilistic and emptying. A disbelief in consumer culture can be found amongst the young fed up with its price, the meaningless of life. An awareness that cripples is matched by a paralysis stemming from an incapacity to do much about it. The pessimism of sociology has passed into the wider culture and it refracts what the discipline discerns.

Everything seems to have become too malleable and in the pluralism that characterises postmodernity, any social convention can be commodified or overturned. To cope with these issues in postmodernity, sociology is increasingly falling back on metaphors that have a theological origin or root in its dealings with culture. It is not so much a matter of proving this change in use of metaphors that have theological overtones as noting their contemporary presence. Changes in sociological rhetoric point to shifts in sensibilities, in the ambitions entertained for dealing with culture. The application of sociology of knowledge to the domestic concerns of the discipline itself would indicate how contingent and shifting is its rhetoric and its expectations of what it seeks to understand.

As sociology is recasting its bearings, it is does so in a way that leads back to the earlier fin de siècle and the theological overhang to its activities, masked and forgotten. But as the modernity of Baudelaire, the sociology of culture of Simmel, and the mystical and angelic concerns of Benjamin have been rediscovered, so too have the theological packings surrounding their speculations. This theological aura attached to the ancestors of sociology of culture seems to pose an embarrassment, an aspect of their speculations that is best left unsignified. But the dilemmas which Marx, Weber and Nietzsche exposed have come to a fullness in contemporary culture.

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Other thinkers in the nineteenth century were also feeling angst over modernity. If Baudelaire is credited with coining the notion of modernity that has become so central to sociology of culture, then links to Huysmans and Wilde, the pioneers of decadence, need also to be recast. Inconveniently for sociology, when the going got tough, they all took out the fire insurance that matters: Catholicism. Few sociologists refer much to that Catholicism, as if it was an aberration of their disciplinary biography and not something embedded in the implications of their interest in modernity which secularity masked and which postmodernity unmasks.

But if this theological root is recognised, it resolves some odd and arbitrary divisions within sociology, that sustain its misrecognition of the possibilities of religious belief within contemporary culture. Up to recently, sociology of religion has been concerned with sects and secularisation, the edges of theological failure of the main Churches. Sociology has cultivated a studied disinterest in studying the belief systems, the theologies of these Churches.

But what if sociology did wish to seek to find the theologies embodied in the Cathedral, the belief system of Christianity manifested in its architecture, what would it find? How would it speak to theology which has its own self-understandings of culture? Might theology affirm this disposition of the sociological trade or has it generated a shambles in its own house? Might theology have gone native in a culture that caused sociology to flee to hear the bell that saved Faust? If so, might theology make a muffled sound, one even the most pious of sociologists mishears?

In the new introduction to *A Rumour of Angels*, Peter Berger, in 1990, noted that 'the theological scene today is far more dismal than it was twenty years ago' when he wrote the book. Now some religious traditions have been reinterpreted so as to legitimate secular purposes, those of feminists and environmentalists, who sound loudest their prophecies in the theological marketplace and whose ideological divinations present irreproachable mandates to the dampest of theologians.[10]

Some theologians read secular culture in the light of a Gospel mandate in a way that seems immune to sociological redress. Thus, Rowan Williams argued that theologians should give 'some sort of critical identification with whatever political groupings speak for a serious and humane resistance to consumer pluralism and the administered society'. He had in mind those involved 'in ecological issues, feminism, civil rights and "peace" networks that have provided a new political language and a sense of the urgency and possibility of human unity'.[11] But these are movements of resistance rather than analysis, and certainly provide little space for sociology, other than to comment on some of their dysfunctional consequences, as in the case

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of liberation theology which has been a recruiting sergeant for the working class of South America, depositing unnecessary numbers into the clutches of right-wing Evangelical groups.[12]

These radical theological ventures that endorse passing ideological fashions, fail to confront the implications of Berger's comment that *'the "wisdom of the world" today always has a sociological address'*.[13] Every theological accommodation to the world can be rendered to sociological account for its consequences, for sociology aids in coining that which theologians seek to sanctify. Because of the intimate link between sociology and modernity, theologians try to read the masks of culture without reference to their sociological faces. Too often theologians seem to misread these signs, hence Berger's jaundiced comments on efforts to relate to modern culture, that 'recent Christian theology is well populated with bewildered and understandably resentful widowers'.[14]

Any sociological account of theology has to look at how it is represented in the mass media. In this context, Catholic theologians have to cope with what Jennings has termed the effortless superiority of English Anglicanism.[15] The incompetence of the mass media in dealing with Catholic theology is exemplified by the nugatory obituary in *The Times* for the great Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is inconceivable that the Archdeacon of Plumstead would have been allocated less.[16]

In a secular post-Christian society, Catholicism has to compete for media attention with cults, therapy groups and New Age religions. Because Catholicism is a religion of tradition, habit and routine, many of its activities seem unnewsworthy. Unfortunately, vice rather than virtue makes news about ecclesial culture. As a result, a distorted image of Catholicism emerges in English society. Its activities only become newsworthy when they constitute 'bad news'. A priest, who abandons his orders for marriage will receive public scrutiny to the degree to which the many, loyal to their vocation, are deemed inscrutable for the purposes of media attention. In sociology and as in the mass media, the 'successful' orthodox Catholic has no image and no place, within the culture constituted in the marketplace. Orthodox Catholics are deemed 'devout' and therefore incorrigibly dim-witted, or conservative, meaning fundamentalist, or in someway disembodied from English culture. They are in English culture but do not belong to it. But if their public image seems beyond redemption in the mass media and in popular culture, what can sociology say to reverse matters, if it so desires? How can it rethink the place of theology in the cultural field?

Following Pierre Bourdieu, in reference to philosophy, one wishes to see sociology as fieldwork in theology.[17] This notion points to the need to

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attend to the site of operation, the context of reproduction of belief, the cultural setting for theology and liturgical praxis. His notion of the field of cultural production, the site for symbol brokers, intellectuals and those who constitute culture, points to a form of analysis that can be tentatively applied to theologians. How is their discipline to be defined and in relation to what site, academic or ecclesial, and with what implications for their understandings of culture?

Although well versed in philosophy, Bourdieu is often regarded as being hostile to its unsociological basis. His comment that French philosophers 'cling in the manner of fallen aristocrats to the external signs of their endangered grandeur' could also apply to some liberal theologians. But earlier Bourdieu asserted that

> far from leading to its destruction, a genuine sociological analysis of philosophy that replaces it in the field of cultural production and in historical social space is the only means of understanding philosophies and their succession and thus of *freeing philosophers from the unthought inscribed in their heritage.*[18]

In so claiming to free theologians from a history of the unthought (in relation to culture as conceived by sociologists) sociology might find itself being regarded as an instrument of revelation without grace. But the aim of sociology is more modest, of inducing into theology a reflexivity of the cultural implications of theological deliberations, lessening misattributions and enhancing a realisation of dysfunctions or unintended consequences that need to be understood.

This point arises in the confusion between modernisation and renewal in Catholicism since Vatican II that has had destructive effects, less due to the hostility of the surrounding culture and more to self-inflicted consequences only now being discerned. For instance, female religious orders were instructed to modernise their lifestyles, their habits, and their relationship to the world in the late sixties. The results were catastrophic, involving the virtual obliteration of many active orders of sisters and leading one prominent American sociologist, Andrew Greeley to describe the outcome as a form of collective suicide.[19]

Sociology has a dubious reputation in Catholicism for the unhelpful nature of its insights, customarily pessimistic in the wake of Vatican II. Responses can be hostile. Dismissing a gloomy sociological account of the demography of the priesthood in the United States, one bishop described the report as a 'great disservice' and added the future of the Church was shaped by 'God's design for his church – not by sociologists'.[20] Although recognising the significance of sociology of religion in other areas, John

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Paul II indicated that its concern with statistics and the surface of matters, precluded it getting to the interior.[21] But again, sociology is more than about facts. It is about the interpretation of social forms operating within a culture and the elements that enable or disable belief that are peculiar to the social circumstances of a particular era. If Church statistics point to weaknesses, such as the fall in vocations, then a sociologist is correct to question the cultural formulations that might contribute to such an unintended decline. This trend might be the will of God, but it is presumptuous folly to use ignorance of the cultural insights of sociology as a method for discerning this.

In this study, one would wish to echo Berger's comment that 'the difficulties of religious belief in the pluralistic situation are not unique – not due to some mysterious fall from grace – but can be accounted for by clearly identifiable social processes'.[22] The examination of these forms a central strand of this study as it seeks a sociological understanding of the link between theology and culture. It is not that theologians are unaware of culture; it is that they do not conceive of it within a sociological remit and therefore their notion of accountability for its consequences is markedly different.

In his priestly past in 1963, Charles Davis wrote a much cited critique of a Catholic theology insulated from modern life. Entitled 'Theology in Seminary Confinement', this admittedly 'almost entirely negative' essay decried the isolation of English theology from modern knowledge. Davis argued that Catholic theology has always been influenced by its environment of gestation, whether episcopal or monastic, but now he felt strongly that this seminary version was operating in an intellectual vacuum. In short, it was not at 'the creative centre of modern culture'.[23] As will be argued later, his expectations were misplaced.

Davis's criticisms were answered partly in the documents of Vatican II, where theological relationships to culture and to the world were changed dramatically from the assumptions governing the Catholic Church since the Council of Trent (1545–63). The modern world was no longer regarded as a dangerous distraction. This change gave comfort to liberals and modernists who had long felt that the Church had resisted the modern world for too long. For many, it seemed as if Catholicism was frozen in time and had become dogmatic and irrelevant. Change and renewal were deemed necessary, almost theological imperatives, for ecclesial survival. Liberal theologians felt there was much to be learnt from the world in this opening of ecclesiastical windows to modern culture. Air and life had re-entered the Church and the quest for relevance took on a self-evident, self-conforming quality in the mid-1960s. But these expectations were naïve

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In speaking of the place of the laity in the modern world, Vatican II failed to develop an adequate sociological means for consulting the faithful. The problem of the laity, that ran through so many of the documents of Vatican II, came from a clerical reading of their supposed position and this partly accounted for the confusions which followed. As von Balthasar asserted, the unrest which followed the Council came mainly from the clergy and religious.[24] A tension between the Church and the world was dissolved, so that paradox and signs of contradiction became indefensible. Somehow, the Church managed to endorse a mirror of the world that was inadequate as a means of telling the laity how to live in it. A condition of ecclesial anomie descended. Liberal theologians, influenced by existentialism, assumed that choice would generate a more informed, mature and authentic religion. Apart from exasperating an individualism which other parts of Vatican II sought to discount by affirming the communal nature of belief, theologians effected an embourgeoisement of the faith that marginalised the working class and sent the weak and indecisive to the wall.[25]

Since then, theology has become dominated by cultural issues it cannot seem to transcend or to control. The humanisation of theology has not been matched by a sanctification of culture. If anything the reverse, for modernity has made theology irrelevant in the cultural marketplace. Secularisation, a disengagement from the sacred, governs everyday reality. In its relationship to modern culture, theology seems to have lost its grip. The glue holding the Church has melted and the formula for a replacement seems unavailable. The 1980s was a uniquely grey period of theology. Despite dalliances with ideologies, little of substance has emerged.

In asserting pre-Nicence niceties, and abandoning its medieval cultural capital, after Vatican II, theology has become detached from its immediate ecclesial tradition, that prevailing just before the Council. English Catholic writers who pioneered efforts to engage with movements in France between 1900 and 1940 are now long forgotten. Many of these writers operated as gifted amateurs, who through lecture tours and royalties earned a precarious living. Few, if any had university posts. This meant that when Catholics were admitted to English academic culture, which was predominantly Anglican, only those sailing under liberal colours were likely to survive.

If theologians are to cope with contemporary culture, they have to find not only a point of connection but also a grammar with which to read its

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contours. Their efforts of late have not been very successful. For some theologians, feminism is *the* ideology to affirm in readings of culture, as it combines a quest for social justice with a synthesis that offers hope for a redeemed humanity.[26] There is a utopian cast to these formulations. The ordination of women in English Anglicanism, far from proclaiming a whole humanity, has split the Church of England into factions and sects, sinking Anglo-Catholicism and leaving the liberal and Evangelical wings to battle about new issues, such as homosexual clergy and lay presidencies of communion. The first anniversary of the ordination of women was marked in the mass media in a perfunctory manner that expressed a total indifference to the subject, illustrating pointedly the callowness of theological capitulation to passing ideological fashions. A more substantial means of reading culture has to be found.

In this failure to connect between theology and culture, a third of Catholic and Anglican Church attendance has come adrift since 1963. Now the disconnection between theology and culture is more pronounced. This institutional disconnection has been aptly characterised by Davie as believing but not belonging.[27]

Not only have adherents dropped in number, but also these Churches face a sense of irrelevance. The fruits of earlier efforts in the 1960s and the 1970s to be relevant have now gone sour. The creedally orthodox are a beleaguered minority as links with tradition are becoming more tenuous. The young, who lapsed into Eastern religions, new religious movements and sects in the 1960s, now use direct entry, bypassing traditional theologies altogether. Many, but not all the problems Churches now face have arisen over their self-defeating efforts to modernise and to engage with contemporary culture. The numbers cannot keep falling without the realisation that, since the 1960s, something seriously has gone wrong with the strategy for reading, understanding and engaging with culture.

Since Kelley's famous study, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, was published in 1972, it has been clear that evangelical Churches which make definite demands have been the hidden beneficiaries of the decline of liberalism.[28] In 1987, Roof and McKinney claimed that the study might have been called 'Why Liberal Churches Are Declining'.[29] They endorse Kelley's figures and point to a paradox, which sociologists have long noted, that since 1972, 'the large ecumenical bodies most comfortably allied with the culture were losing members'. Liberal Protestant Churches, with the highest socioeconomic status, that stressed individualism and pluralism in belief, that most affirmed American values, were in the 'throes of what can only be described as a serious religious depression'. Those who maintained a distance from culture, with distinctive life-styles, grew.[30]

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life-styles, grew.[30]

There is no evidence that the liberal Churches gained from their progressive readings of culture. In their study of American religious trends, Roof and McKinney noted the way liberal Churches gained 2.2 per cent compared to the 8.00 per cent they lost. This led to an observation, which they felt went against popular wisdom, that 'the challenge to liberal Protestantism comes not so much from the conservative faiths as from the growing secular drift of many of their not-so-highly-committed members'.[31] Thus, despite their rhetoric, their appeals to reasoned credibility and the necessity for change, it seems as if far from halting a process of secularisation through concession, they seem to be accelerating it. Commenting on the Roof and McKinney study, Berger suggests that liberal Churches have now become '*schools for secularity*'.[32]

By endorsing the doubts of contemporary culture, liberal theologians pre-empted their capacity to confront what Lindbeck has termed the 'acids of modernity' and to seek definite forms of belief in communal enclaves that would be supportive for others rather than purely individual concerns with rights.[33] The whole strategy conceived in Vatican II, to open to the world, was fatally misconceived, as it misunderstood the basis upon which belief was secured within modern culture. It had no sociological means of asking, let alone answering this question.

McSweeney's study of Catholicism since Vatican II gave an earlier sociological indication of what has been borne out in the Roof and McKinney study, about the counterproductive nature of the theological pursuit of relevance in dealing with culture. In his chapter devoted to 'the victory of progressive theology', where its claims to tolerance and diversity seemed to have been won, McSweeney noted astutely that

> theological pluralists rested their arguments about cultural diversity on the evidence of sociologists and anthropologists; they felt no need to create the sociological conditions which are necessary for consensus and without which any large group must divide and fragment.[34]

He went on to add that the vagueness of the notion of the culture so used without a regulating social mechanism has led to a condition of relativism.[35] Inadvertently, therefore, theologians in dealing with culture have thought themselves into a sociological field.

Any account of theology in a cultural setting has to attend to the historical and traditional circumstances surrounding its consumption and use. In the context of English society, one has to decipher the enigma of Anglicanism through slightly estranged Irish eyes. To a sociologist, and to others, English Anglicanism presents a property of mystery, less signifying the Divine, than a range of anomalies and contradictions that would

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sink any other organisation, sacred or profane. Anglicanism is linked to national identity in terms of its very Englishness – the Cathedrals, the village church at Granchester. English culture and sensibility seem defined in Anglican terms. Anglican ceremonials dignify state occasions; they are a focal point for loyalty; and they serve to legitimate the monarchy at its coronations. There is an element of mythology attached to this Englishness of Anglicanism, that makes it part of a reinvented twentieth-century tradition.[36] Colley's recent work on the British Nation shows the way the monarchy and patriotism became linked in a common Protestantism that regarded Catholicism as alien. As she suggests

> Protestantism was the dominant component of British religious life. Protestantism coloured the way that Britons approached and interpreted their material life. Protestantism determined how most Britons viewed their politics. And an uncompromising Protestantism was the foundation on which their state was explicitly and unapologetically based.[37]

In present society, English Catholics still have no ticket of exit from the pale into which history has deposited them since the Reformation. As strangers in the land, having to pass loyalty tests on a higher grade than others, Catholics live in a society still deeply Protestant in culture, a point exemplified in adherence to the Act of Succession. Since the Reformation and the overturning of a far more popular religion than has been hitherto realised,[38] Catholics have followed a process of assimilation into English Society. English-born Catholics have tried to conquer the notion that their Church is but the Italian mission to the Irish. Converts have pioneered a rapprochement with English sensibilities. Newman led the way. Cardinal Hume has given Catholicism a very definite Englishness. On the basis of Church attendance, it is the largest Christian group in the United Kingdom, yet it is still disenfranchised from its official and civic culture. Dispossessed from its own heritage, English Catholicism has always had an equivocal relationship to its surrounding culture. The Cathedrals it built stand alien and otherwise occupied; many of its monasteries that shaped English culture lie in ruins; and many of its customs have been transferred into what are often the mild civic demands of Anglicanism. The Reformation still represents an unacknowledged wound in English society. But no sociologist looking at English society can ignore this disjunction, for Anglicanism is an instrument of secularisation a movement away from the enchantment this study seeks to affirm that represents the solution to the link between theology and culture. This makes this study a slight exercise in fiction, for the present cultural landscape, its tradition and practice preclude a realisation of the solution it seeks.

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If, as Newman suggested 'the religion of a nation will ever partake of the peculiar faults of the national character',[39] Catholicism and Anglicanism confront a crisis in English society which sociology can but acknowledge, but cannot resolve. The back to basics campaign of the Tory party, launched in October 1993, however misconceived, caught a public mood of unease, malaise, and drift, a sense that trust had collapsed in a mass of indifference expressed in crime figures. Allied to this moral malaise was a collapse in confidence in public institutions, including the Established Church.

With the highest divorce rates in Europe and a religious practice rate that suggests a post-Christian society, the English feel a lack of moral direction, a drift which the Churches seem unable to stem. The situation of English society seems to embody Guardini's comment that 'without religion life becomes like a machine without oil; it runs hot; even if it functions, some part of it is always burning out'.[40] In such a society, the inhabitants have become spectators on the decline and disconnection from a tradition that would permit them a means of escape. A postmodern culture is increasingly post-Christian as Lindbeck has observed. A sense of bonding with a biblical culture is disappearing. Following an interest of this study, Lindbeck notes that forgetting rather than relearning the language of scripture is a major trend.[41]

In his striking Reith lectures, Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, reflected on the idea of religion as a form of social and moral ecology, a perspective he derived from Robert Bellah. In criticising a supposedly inevitable link between modernity and secularisation, where religion lost its social significance and became a matter of private consumption, Sacks sought to rehabilitate the notion of community by reference to tradition. He also noted the unexpected prophetic character of writers in sociology and philosophy, such as MacIntyre, Taylor, Bell and Bellah, who equated the loss of religious tradition with the erosion of an environment 'within which alone a cohesive intellectual, social, political and moral life is possible'.[42] His use of ecology as a means of making a conservative argument might have perplexed liberal theologians expecting otherwise. But Sacks is quite clear, that within contemporary culture the sources of ills are due to the failure to service the social ecology of religion. Sacks criticises liberal theologies for breaking down traditions. Thus he argued

> liberal theologies, by conceding too much to passing moral fashion, have lost that sense of timelessness and transcendence which I believe to lie at the heart of the religious experience. They have had to shift their ground too often to give credence to claims to moral authority.[43]

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If theologians have got lost in dealing with contemporary culture, why should sociologists care? They might have to, as sociology itself is uncovering aspects of culture that border on theological concerns. To clarify these, sociology might have to attend to what theologians *ought* to be saying.

There is an unsuspected resiting of sociological interests in theology that has not been given adequate focus, which this study explores further. Admittedly, these are straws in the wind, but they can be discerned and read in some unexpected quarters.

Thus, in the conclusion to a reflection on the implications of plastic sexuality for the transformation of intimacy in late modernity, Giddens suggested that

> a sexually addicted civilisation is one where death has become stripped of meaning; life politics at this point implies a renewal of spirituality. From this point of view, sexuality is not the antithesis of a civilisation dedicated to economic growth and technical control, but the embodiment of its failure.[44]

The issue of dehumanisation arises in a society whose culture is increasingly being penetrated by a spirit of calculation that despiritualises the ground of ideals and beliefs. The way many of these have become untenable disturbs sociological sensibilities as to what culture should be about. This worry is emerging increasingly as sociology, in the light of threats from postmodernity, is seeking to examine its own traditional understandings of culture. These are slightly different to what its tradition has hitherto affirmed. This reflects worries which sociology is starting to uncover in its own tradition as the issue of culture becomes recentred into its concerns.

In a recent work Scaff exposes Weber's debts to Nietzsche and more significantly to Georg Simmel. Scaff argues that Weber and Simmel shared a common interest in 'the metaphysics of modernity'. This indicates a concern with matters beyond the purely social, for Simmel regarded sociology as 'the instrument for coping with the unsettling fluidity of the world and the self'.[45] Scaff goes on to suggest that Simmel's 'special version of sociology might be understood as modern attempts to recover a lost unity to culture, to find a way of overcoming the paradoxical juxtaposition of life and form'.[46]

Unfortunately, sociology lacks the means to answer fully such a question about life and form without reference to the mysterious properties that transcend the paradox they pose. But if the site of belief can be found in culture, a field sociology can elect to occupy, equally the issue of disbelief can emerge from the same setting. Thus Scaff points to Weber's comment

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(to be understood in the context of Nietzsche's notion of the death of God) that 'today the routines of "everyday life" challenge religion and the "everyday" becomes "religious"'.[47] For sociology, the question of the self in relation to culture has become linked to issues of authenticity in the context of aesthetics and ethics. As Scaff aptly notes

> Weber's 'ghost of dead religious beliefs' haunts the 'culture of narcissism' of the critics at every turn. It inscribes the nightmare and cultural bad conscience otherwise known as the cultural contradictions of capitalist development.[48]

This points back to Faust's remembrance of what was, but which now cannot be.

The second strand, that points to a nascent rethinking in sociology about theological thoughts, relates to the increasing recognition the sociology of culture of Pierre Bourdieu poses as an alternative to the corrosive effects of postmodernism and postmodernity. In a philosophical form, postmodernity represents a deconstructive approach to culture, based either on power or linguistics. Derrida, Levinas and Foucault are the key figures identified with this very French movement that has come to dominate Anglo-American approaches to the humanities.[49] With the exception of Foucault, they have made remarkably little impact on sociology for it dealt with earlier post-structuralist Marxists, such as Althusser and Poultanzas in the mid and late seventies. Interest in Goffman was part of a sociological effort to offset the claims of structuralists and to effect what Touraine termed in his book the *Return of the Actor*.[50] But if the actor had been returned to the sociological stage, who is he to be? Is he a construct, a figment of the sociological imagination or is he an angst ridden flâneur, desperately seeking but not arriving, always rootless and ever restless. Again, in this shift, sociology seems to have stumbled on the edge of a theological question.

The third change relates to perceptions of the nature of culture and is linked to a realisation of the significance of reflexivity in sociology. Uncertainty derived from relativism, combined with an uncertainty of moral and political purpose after 1989, has caused sociology to recast moorings and to think introspectively about its language of purpose. The compass points for a mapping of culture have become unclear. A concern with risk and anxiety has emerged in a sociology of culture.[51]

It is not enough for sociology just to reflect passing cultural trends. Placing sociology within the nexus of culture in the marketplace can lead it to endorse everything, all commodities, idols and artifacts, indiscriminately, with a credulity. It also risks making sociology in the image and

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likeness of English cultural studies. Its status within sociology is low, for as Tester notes acidly, in his critique of the insubstantial nature of the mass media, 'cultural studies is a discipline that is morally cretinous because it is the bastard child of the media it claims to expose'.[52]

The notion of unmasking usually betrays a secular interest. In its ideological manifestation, culture is understood to disguise economic arrangements in a masking that sustains the hegemony of the ruling class. Power is enhanced in conditions where its basis is disguised. This masking amplifies the capacity to secure compliance by blurring or making indeterminate conditions of redress. In Bourdieu's writing, unmasking 'the real' basis of social arrangements is understood to have a freeing, emancipating aspect. Choice is believed to be enhanced when the ties that bind are disclosed and the structures which conceal are revealed. Thus, Bourdieu suggests that sociology unmasks

> self-deception, that collectively entertained and encouraged form of lying to oneself which, in every society, is at the basis of the most sacred values and, thereby, of all social existence. It teaches, with Marcel Mauss, that 'society always pays itself in the false coinage of its dreams'.[53]

But this unmasking is also the province of theology. It could be said that the ultimate deception is of the fool gazing at culture, who says in his heart there is no God. In *King Lear* (Act IV. Scene 1) the issue of seeing and not seeing emerges in Gloucester's exchange with the old man leading him. He states 'alack, sir, you cannot see your way', to which Gloucester replies 'I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw'. Gazing, seeing without signifying, the visions of the blind, and the discerning ignoring the transparent, these are all biblical themes that complicate theological exchange with culture. Suspicion and deceit mix with issues of a fullness of sight, blind to what grace permits to be discerned. Such utterances hijack sociology into the realm of mystery but they also point to the issue of a fullness of understanding and the limiting theological implications of what might have been understood. But what is distinctive to sociological sight?

Seeing and not seeing relate to conundrums between theology and sociology. The failure of theology to scrutinise the cultural consequences of its transactions has become increasingly understood within sociology. This was a point Weber understood. He pointed to the dangers religions face of neglecting to service and scrutinise their social apparatus, lest it unwittingly imports counterproductive cultural assumptions that might enfeeble its basis. As Käsler has noted in the context of Weber's exploration of the link between ascetic Calvinism and capitalism, aggregates of

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subjective meanings can be detached from their original religious contexts so that the former is destroyed by the inexorable growth of a spirit of calculation.[54] Accretions unrecognised can effect a cultural judgement. A failure of attention to culmination might signify a pattern misread. It is presumptuous to ignore the sliding and shifting elective affinities between belief and disbelief, for as Marshall indicates, these express the way form and spirit collide.[55]

Within contemporary culture are processes that seem to signify the impossibility of religious belief. These cultural processes relate to the power to commodify, to manufacture images, to erect icons and to mark culture with an intensity in the marketplace that enfeebles. Religious belief seems to have sunk, less due to secularisation than to a failure to discern contemporary culture and to find a means of connecting to it. There is a fatalism in the disembodiment theology feels that is linked to a sense of disenchantment, as the spirit of calculation enters cultural deliberations. As theology seeks to engage with culture, it increasingly renders itself to sociological account in programmes, in monitoring of statistics and in its own forms of self-recognition.

If sociology is increasingly feeling unsettled in its relationships to culture, how does it become aware of itself? There is a distinctive sociological property of self-awareness, not so much in how it knows, but in its sense of knowing about the social. It sees too much to have ideals, but is experienced enough to know it needs them. This conundrum of sociology, as its knowing exceeds its capacity to assimilate what is known, lends a peculiarly Faustian property to the discipline and its calling. As a discipline, sociology is the hero of the tragedy of culture, but with what theological consequences?

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