

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

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HOW IRONIC THAT Comte, the father of sociology, saw his new science of society as one means of eliminating the 'irrational' and 'backward' influences of religion in human life! In less than one hundred years not only has a peace-treaty been agreed upon by both fields of human concern, but there is a positive movement by those involved with religion to use the new skills, insights, and perspectives of sociology. At present, the cordial relations between the two are based upon the sociologists' recognition that in spite of impressive studies and sophisticated techniques, much is left unexplained about religion, and upon the religionists' urgent need to comprehend the convulsive changes which have torn asunder the fabric of modern life.¹

When a sociologist begins to study religion, he starts with a fundamental assumption that the Church cannot exist as a separate and distinct unit from the society in which it is located. Although those religiously involved find the Church the most important and pivotal focus of life, the sociologist views religion as only one part of the wider social system. As such, it is affected by all changes in the system – economic, political, social and intellectual. Another implication of the sociological view is that religion must compete with other institutions at all levels: to obtain the interest, support and commitment of members; to persuade others of the validity of its philosophical and ethical beliefs in the marketplace of ideas; and in making its influence, authority and jurisdiction important.

¹ The classical sociologists always located religion as one of the most fundamental areas in society. One view is that sociology used to consider the effects of religion upon behaviour, but not how religious behaviour is socially determined. The fringes of the field are not easy to demarcate: religious concepts are important in the sociology of knowledge, historical sociology and other areas. For a current discussion of these concerns, see Brothers, Joan (ed.), *Readings in the Sociology of Religion* (London, 1967). A useful definition of the sociology of religion is given by Yinger: 'The sociology of religion is nonvaluative, objective and abstract. It studies empirical phenomena to try to isolate generalization concerning the interconnections of religious behaviour and other social behaviour'. Yinger sees religion as the datum and sociology the method of approach. Milton, J., *Sociology looks at Religion* (New York, 1961), p 135.

In short, the sociologist sees religion as one of many roads to salvation: the Church as one among many in performing essential human functions.

Having thus located religion in a less favourable and dominant position within the social context than it is usually accorded by religionists, the sociologist then tackles three specific questions: 1) What are the functions, processes and patterns of religious behaviour in a given social context? 2) How do the manifestations of religion reflect a response to the changes which occur within the social context? and 3) How do the religious developments affect the rest of the social environment? The sociological approach is rooted in the complexities, dynamics and realities of on-going social processes and how these are expressed in and upon religious forms.

Thus, typical sociological questions are these: what processes of urbanization will most challenge existing church organization? How are the needs of changing populations in given parishes being met within the Church? outside the Church? What is the effect of different family patterns, levels of educational attainment, economic standards, social class or increased mobility upon participation in religious programmes? What is the relationship between Church and state? Between the Church and the intellectual interests of the educated elite in a particular society? Between the Church and dominant economic leaders?

To reply to such questions scientifically – and in spite of current misuse of sociological terms and the superficial interpretation of research, sociology is a science – requires very careful and thorough empirical study. The methodology of sociology includes many techniques, tools, and scientific procedures which must be used with precision and skill: statistical analysis, surveys and panels, interviews, participant observation, systems analysis, sociometric tests, and related tests. It is useful to ask the pastor about his relations in the neighbourhood, but it is also imperative to study the parish finances, to read the town council meeting minutes in which church affairs were discussed, to document the attendance figures and other kinds of parishioner support over a period of years. A scientific response also demands that the sociologist interpret the immediate situation within a wider theoretical perspective. To know yearly attendance figures is only the first step: these must be explained in view of more diverse patterns of church participation, in the light of our growing sophistication about the behaviours of persons under certain conditions. The final effects of such examination and

scientific exploration should be to increase our understanding of the social environment in which religious operate; to explain particular kinds of behavioural responses made to events and conditions existing within the Church; to make more vivid the effect of the church response to the conditions; and, hopefully, to increase our understanding of the dynamic exchange between religion, persons, society and the Church.

Needless to say, such understanding does not come easily and requires patient, careful and thorough study. To many working directly in church concerns, such examination appears tedious and the sociological perspective difficult. But sociology is not the science of quick answers and simple solutions. Human beings are incredibly complex units, and the social forms which illustrate their patterns of behaviour are likewise difficult and involved structures.¹

Let me illustrate this sociological perspective by comparing one prominent religious image against sociological reality – the concept of the pilgrim church. It is assumed by many enthusiasts that the church organization has become so rigid and immobile that it cannot meet the challenges of the present hour. These enthusiasts would replace the outmoded institution with a new type of religious community, based upon feelings of love and fellowship, shared spirituality, and dedicated to the maintenance of the freedom and spontaneity presently inhibited by the organization. Instead of formal rules and regulations in a bureaucratic organization, the Church they envisage would be intimate, personal and satisfying.

The concept of the Church as a community based only upon feelings and emotional bonds is strongly rejected by Greeley:

Frequently, especially in amateur theologizing and sociologizing about the Church, one would gain the impression that the Church as a community is somehow opposed to the Church as a structure or institution, as though the ideal would be to have a christian community without structure. It rarely occurs to such commentators that a church without structure is a non-existent community, because all human groups, even the most simple, quickly evolve established patterns of behaviour and agreed-upon norms to regulate the patterns of behaviour. In other words, even the most elementary community has structure and laws. Those who

¹ Brothers notes: 'Some of the limitations in religious sociology have been the result of a desire for the findings to be immediately available for pastoral decisions'. *Op. cit.*, p 171.

wish to eliminate law and organization in the Church, and replace them with affection and love, show little understanding of man or of society.¹

Greeley's point is very important because it touches upon a misconception which is growing in popularity. Other organizations besides the Church are likewise challenged: i.e. universities, economic units, medical institutions. The term, 'the establishment' implies a foundation, structure and permanence which the reformer or revolutionary is anxious to break down. But man always develops structures and patterns of social behaviour in every situation in which he interacts with others. Often, such structures are informal, unobserved – often, they are unconscious. But rules organize and guide human association everywhere.²

In spite of its lack of reality and sociological naivete, why is the image of the unstructured community – the pilgrim church without an organizational anchor, so attractive to many today? It is because it is a response to many of the most powerful forces of modern life: growing impersonality in large scale organizations, the increase in size and scale of almost all human enterprises, the accelerating rate of change in almost every area, and the conglomerates of power which surround the naked individual at every turn. The person, alone and uncertain, seeks some kind of support through an emotional identification with others, usually in the small, face-to-face social groups which predominated over human interaction in earlier ages. But such a return may well be an expensive form of nostalgia in the urbanized world. Jean Floud writes:

The suggestion that the remedy for the anomie of modern society lies in the cultivation and propagation of primary groups, which supposedly act as the nurseries, so to speak, of the higher norms of abstract morality which must govern conduct in the larger society, has virtually gone unchallenged since its prototype was first formulated in Germany in the 1880's . . . Our understanding of the bonds which hold large scale societies together is still rudimentary.³

¹ Greeley, A., *The Crucible of Change* (New York, 1968), p 52.

² The work of the symbolic interaction theorists in sociology tries to deal with these unconscious patterns and regulations of behaviour in normal, daily situations. The clearest and most readable discussion of this is found in: Goffmann, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, a sociological classic available in paperback.

³ Floud, Jean, 'Karl Mannheim', in *Founding Fathers of Social Science*, Raison, T. (ed.), (London, 1969), pp 212–13.

The fact is that large-scale organization is necessary for efficient functioning under modern conditions. However, this does not mean that we must be restricted to traditional and unimaginative patterns. In discussing economic organizations, for example, two social scientists have concluded:

The formal, hierarchical organization is an instrument of great effectiveness; it offers great economies over unorganized effort; it achieves great unity and compliance. But its deficiencies include great waste of human potential for innovation and creativity and great psychological cost to the members, many of whom spend their lives in organizations without caring much either for the system (except its intrinsic rewards and accidental interpersonal relationships) or for the goal toward which the system's effort is directed. The modification of hierarchical organization to meet these criticisms is one of the great needs of human life.¹

The utopian image of an emotional community based upon the fellowship of love without any structural foundations also emphasizes the Church without conflict. But disagreement, lack of consensus and conflict are inherent features of human interaction, and not unwelcome ingredients in social relations. Sociologists note that conflict is one of the most important means of introducing change, or bringing about reforms, and of clarifying goals. It is an important part of the adaptive process by which any social system meets the problems of its dynamic environment, thus helping it to survive. An historical analysis of the Church in past eras would clearly document the presence of conflict at all times, generally much more violent and dangerous than the current mild concerns. In almost every case, the resolution of conflict led to an adjustment within the Church that encouraged further development.²

The value of conflict is important in understanding another religious value: integration. It is generally accepted that one of the primary functions of religion is to lead to personal and social integration, by which we generally mean the process of unifying and classifying one's ideas and values into a consistent formation. The lack of integration may lead to chaos and confusion, but the value of integration has often been 'over-sold'. Hitler produced a

¹ Katz, D., and Kahn, R., *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York, 1966), p 222.

² The best discussion of the positive effects of conflict in sociological theory may be found in: Coser, Lewis, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, 1956).

well-integrated german society, as did Stalin and Mao, by the ruthless suppression of any disagreement. Some of the most prejudiced, exclusive and cruel communities which have existed have been well-integrated. Then, too, the integration of the person and that of society as a whole are not identical. The person may have a very clear and consistent value system amidst total social breakdown, or vice-versa. The point is, that a healthy spiritual community – a pilgrim church, in the realistic sense – must not achieve integration by the suppression of differences, by ignoring change and by erecting barricades against the world. Rather, it must be a conscious and deliberate act based upon knowledge of the alternatives, and freely chosen in the light of religious understanding.

Another translation of integration has often been simple orthodoxy. But one of the dilemmas of religion is that it is too easy to resist change in order to preserve a consistent and integrated dogma. As Yinger has pointed out, 'There is less pressure on privileged people to revise their received religions than on the underprivileged'.¹ The pilgrim Church is constantly meeting change and must deal directly with new conditions.

The sociologist is also interested in the image of the pilgrim which we evoke with the Church. For the images of persons are as important, in many cases, as reality: what a person thinks he is doing does affect his behaviour. One methodological device to deal with images is that of the ideal-type: a synthesis of the common characteristics of the term that highlights its particular qualities. Thus, the image of a pilgrim is that of a traveller, slowly trudging toward his far-off, cherished goal. This pilgrim image implies: 1) a traveller does not have a fixed address: he is not located in a place, but constantly moving. 2) A traveller is continually meeting new people and situations. He is frequently a stranger and the marginal person or outsider. 3) In spite of the distractions and difficulties of his passage, he has a clear view of his destination.²

Each part of this ideal image has a sociological foundation. Thus, 1) the traveller is what the sociologist calls a cosmopolitan. He is a man who is comfortable with the specialization, sophistication and dynamics of the modern world. His loyalties are to the wider associations than his village, his profession or interest group. He

¹ Yinger, *op. cit.*, p 111.

² The question of mobility becomes central to the concept of pilgrim. For a realistic discussion of mobility, see: Cox, Harvey, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965). He concludes (p 58): 'High mobility is no assurance of salvation, but neither is it an obstacle to faith'.

welcomes change, is sensitive to the effects of modernization, and does not fear the future. 2) The traveller as a marginal man or stranger has been discussed by Simmel, who sees in him the unity of nearness and farness: he must be near enough to interact with others but far enough away to bring qualities of objectivity, reserve and impersonality to forms of interaction. But the stranger can contribute much to a group, and the pilgrim likewise can transfer human energy which is usually devoted to the stable concerns of developing security, tradition and continuity to other features of association. 3) The pilgrim's clear view of his destination is based upon a coherent system of beliefs. He is able to make sense, so to speak, out of the changes about him and find some order in the confusion. His religious focus gives him a road-map that enables him to visit new territories, walk among strangeness with confidence, and explore the uncharted paths of humanity.

The sociologist would find this ideal image of the pilgrim a realistic symbol and an appropriate one for modern man; it releases religion from the outmoded ties of location – from the village and restrictive community – but it does not leave him in an emotional cloud without any ties in human reality. The Church which seeks to incorporate such an image must regard truth as an on-going, constant search. It is alive to the dynamic social environment, prepared to meet the challenges of change, and welcomes all who wish to journey towards salvation.