

Sociology and Theology - Never the Twain Shall Meet?

by Michael A. Costello

Perhaps I could start by saying a few words about the discipline of sociology—about what it is and what it is not. Sociology, as one of the social sciences, is concerned with studying and explaining human behavior. It tends to focus, in particular, upon groups or aggregates of people rather than upon individuals. If a sociologist wanted to explain why country X has a high birth rate, for example, he might frame his explanation in terms of such concepts as cultural expectations about marriage and childbearing, the family as a social institution, the role and status of women in that country or religious norms about childbearing and contraceptive use. The important point for our purposes here is that sociology is *basically* concerned with explaining human behavior not with changing it or improving it. In other words, sociology should not be confused with social work or social action programs. This distinction is important for my purpose tonight because, as we shall see, sociology is rather more difficult to integrate with religious studies than is social work. Social work appears to trace its origins back to Jewish and Christian teachings but sociology emanates from a somewhat different tradition.

The modern-day founder of sociology is usually considered to be Auguste Comte. It was Comte, in fact, who first coined the term "sociology". Comte was an anticleric and a skeptic. He held a social evolutionary view of history that saw European societies as

moving away from what he called the "theological period" of history. Science, he thought, would soon replace religion as the ultimate source of human values and truth.¹

A number of other early so-called "classical" sociologists were similarly antagonistic towards religion. Karl Marx, for example, tended to depict religious institutions in one of two ways - either they were unimportant and trivial or they were positively evil. Marx's view of religion as a trivial matter is linked to his theory of economic determinism. According to this theory religious beliefs are purely "epiphenomenal" - that is, they are mere reflections of the stage of economic and technological evolution that the society happens to be passing through at the time. Thus, this theory views religion as a passive and rather unimportant factor in the social affairs of men. At other times Marx viewed religion in somewhat more negative terms, as was the case with his famous claim that "religion is the opiate of the people." By this Marx meant that religion served the interests of the rich by keeping poor people so content with dreams of an afterlife that they would never rise up in rebellion against their impoverished condition. Religious leaders, claimed Marx, were really not helping the common people—if anything, they were participating in their exploitation.²

Another classical sociologist with a basically atheistic view of the world was Emile Durkheim. This writer,

who, ironically enough, was the son of a Jewish rabbi, argued that organized religion is a purely human invention that is brought about in order to fulfill certain social needs. In his writings he focused, in particular, upon religion's role in promoting social cohesion or integration.³ We would all, of course, be willing to agree with the view that religion serves many social functions, but Durkheim was saying more than that. In effect he was claiming that if other social institutions - perhaps science or politics - could provide for these same social needs without ever mentioning the supernatural, religion might eventually fade from the human scene.

Perhaps another example would help clarify this idea of functionalism, an idea which is still very much a part of sociology as a body of knowledge. An anthropologist by the name of Malinowski, who did field work among the people of the Trobriand Islands about 50 years ago, also attempted to analyze the religion of these people in terms of its functions - or usefulness - for their society. One of Malinowski's more original comments had to do with the fishing rituals of the Trobriand Islanders. He had noticed that when the native fishermen were preparing to go out into the open (and somewhat dangerous) seas, they always offered sacrifices to their gods. By contrast, they ignored such religious rituals altogether before going fishing in the peaceful lagoons surrounding their islands. From this Malinowski reasoned that a main function of their religion - and perhaps of all religions - is to relieve anxiety and to motivate men in situations of risk. Without such supernatural reassurances we might be paralyzed in uncertain or dangerous times. The larger implication, though, is that religions exist, not only because there really is a supernatural to be dealt with and worshipped but only because of the frailty of our human condition. Given a new set of circumstances - say a fleet of large and motorized fishing boats that can't

be swamped by the open seas, the religious impulse could well be relegated to the background of human affairs.⁴

Other examples could be cited but I suppose that the point is clear enough by now. A very strong intellectual strain in the social sciences has taken an approach to religion that treats it as a sort of illusion (Sigmund Freud, in fact, once wrote a book about religion which he entitled *The Future of an Illusion*). Either religion is a sort of gigantic projection of the social and psychological needs of man, or it is a mere reflection of the current stage of societal evolution. In either case, though, it is something to be explained away as a merely human institution. Theologians and religious adherents might well be excused for not being in hurry to engage in a dialogue with specialists in the sociology of religion. There are, it might seem, no points of convergence at all between theology and sociology.

If I felt that this was indeed the case, though, I wouldn't be talking to you here tonight. I would like to suggest that our knowledge of what it means to be human in the world of today can be greatly expanded by attempts to exchange insights between the two disciplines of theology and sociology. Not being enough of a theologian to be able to say much about what theology has to offer to sociology, I would like to limit myself to making a few observations concerning what sociology can offer to the churches.

To start with, we might as well face the issue of religion as a human institution squarely in the face. The truth is, of course, that religion is a human institution, at least in part. A mature faith is one which recognizes that, though the church is guided by the Holy Spirit (I am speaking here as a religious believer rather than as a sociologist) it is also a human group that sometimes has human, all-too-human, failings. The critical stance

that sociology often takes toward religion can be useful to the churches if it can be interpreted as a call for institutional reform and improvement.

There is, of course, nothing new about calling for change in the church, but sociology's empirical foundation gives it a perspective that is lacking outside of the realm of the social sciences. For example, it is a rather commonplace observation that clergymen are sometimes reluctant to challenge the opinions of their parishioners, especially the more influential ones. But where the same idea is empirically measured and verified - as was done by Campbell and Pettigrew in their study of white ministers in the American southern community of Little Rock, Arkansas, during that city's civil rights crisis - it somehow seems to be more believable, as well as of more use for religious leaders and teachers. (The name of Campbell and Pettigrew's book, by the way, is *Christians in Racial Crises* and I recommend it highly to the seminarians who are with us tonight because the book's implications actually extended beyond racial problems in the United States.)⁵ To use another - and in this case more local - example, we have Bulatao's famous article on "Split-Level Christianity" in the Philippines or F. Landa Jocano's anthropological study of religious practices in barrio Malibog, Panay. Both of these distinguished authors argue that Catholicism in the Philippines has failed to completely supplant the basic core of pre-Christian animistic beliefs commonly held by Filipinos. The basic message of Christianity has not yet, according to Bulatao and Jocano, been popularly comprehended by (or should I say properly preached to?) the people.⁶

Sociology is not always critical, though. Much of modern sociology is concerned with what is called "social structure" - a phrase which is meant to refer to certain key elements of

groups, such as social norms and values, roles, social inequality, and the like. This approach, too, can be of help to the church, by deepening its understanding of social behavior as it occurs within and outside of religious institutions. To take but one example from a religious context, an American sociologist by the name of Blizzard has published an empirical study of Protestant ministers which he entitled "the minister's dilemma."⁷ Blizzard first attempted to clearly define the key elements of the social *role* of the minister. He identified five important aspects of the role. These were, first, "preacher" (i.e. giving sermons); secondly, "pastor" (i.e. counselor to his parishioners); "priest" (i.e. specialist in religious ritual); fourth, "teacher"; and fifth, "administrator". Blizzard then conducted a survey of ministers in which he asked his respondents to rank their five subroles in terms of three criteria: first, importance to their vocation; second, how well prepared they felt for the subrole; and, third, the amount of time they spent on each part of their job. The results might be interesting for the seminarians who are with us tonight for Blizzard found that the ministers were spending over half of their time on administrative matters such as parish financing, board meetings etc. Moreover, the respondents were doing this despite considering this aspect of their ministry to be the least important part of their vocation and feeling themselves to be less well prepared for administrative matters than for any aspect of their job. Following Blizzard's recommendations, a number of American seminaries have attempted to better prepare their students for the administrative tasks which, like it or not, lay ahead of them. Again by virtue of its objective and empirical approach to the study of human institutions, sociology was able to make a small, but perhaps significant, contribution to the church.

Sociological analysis of patterns in other areas of society, too, can be of

help to the church's ministry. A recent study of lower class families in Metropolitan Manila, for example, has obtained some disturbing statistics about marriage patterns among impoverished urban Filipinos. According to Donald Denise Decaesstecker, the author of this study, only 16 percent of the low-income couples in her sample had been married legally before starting to live together. In over a third of the cases the women had been tricked or forced into living with the men. More than half of these young couples had made "no plans at all" before starting to live together and only a quarter had even informed their parents before establishing the union. The picture that emerges from these statistics is one of young people who are more or less unthinkingly drifting into what is supposed to be the most important social relationship of their life. It thus come as no surprise to the reader when Decaesstecker presents other statistics to show that a large proportion of these marriage later experiences high levels of marital conflict and that many of these couples later separate. It seems to me that these findings show a crying need for the church's ministry, a need that I hope can be filled within the next generation.

Other examples could be cited but perhaps the point is clear by now. The basic thrust of sociology is concerned with knowledge rather than action. Nevertheless, this knowledge - whether it be population statistics of use for making decisions about parish boundaries, descriptive studies of the social structure of religious institutions, or even critical studies of cases where the church has failed to live up to its divinely-inspired ideals can be of great help to religious leaders and theologians. Knowledge cannot be evil, even if it comes from an anti-religious thinker such as a Marx or a Malinowski.

But is it not also possible that sociology is (to use a biblical phrase)

something of a "two-edged sword"? While its concepts and methods might be of some practical help to organized religion (survey methodology would be a good example) it might also be observed that the basic *assumptions* inherent in sociology represent a spirit of secularism and rationalism that could undermine the structure of Christianity. Some religious thinkers might well argue that a "dialogue" between theology and sociology might lead only to a sort of watered-down Christianity that is all too eager to give up the basic doctrines of its faith in order to fit in with the "spirit of the age."⁸ To use a concrete example, we can return to our earlier definition of sociology as a science that attempts to explain human behavior. There is - or appears to be - a hidden assumption in this statement. If human behavior can indeed be "explained" this would seem to mean that it is somehow "determined" by outside forces or subject to "laws". If this is so, then what has happened to the theological concept of "free will"? In turn, if there is no free will, then how can there be any concept of "sin"? Indeed, we may see many instances of modern thinkers who argue that criminals are not really to blame for their deeds. Their actions, it is often argued, are merely the outcome of a "poor environment", a "broken home", or a "disturbed personality".

But if you throw away the concept of personal sin, the next belief to be jettisoned will surely be belief in Christ Himself, for if there is no sin there is no need for a Redeemer. Or so it might seem.

The matter is a complicated one and will not be solved here tonight. But if I can give my own opinion, I think that such potential critics of dialogue between theology and the social sciences could be suffering, ironically, from a certain lack of faith. They believe in the doctrines of their church,

to be sure, but they are like the over protective mother who fears to let her son venture from the house lest he get into a fight with some tough kids in the local neighborhood. They are afraid, perhaps, that the doctrinal message might have a hard time fighting it out with the "tough guys" of secularism, empiricism and agnosticism that are so evident in the social sciences. But I say let them meet even if the result is part dialogue, part fight. Theology has much to offer and will not have to keep giving ground to science. If it is true that psychology has raised doubts about the existence of the soul, so also is it true that psychologists such as Carl Jung or Elizabeth Kubler-Ross have found strong evidence that man does indeed have a spiritual or supernatural core to his being. If it is history that has raised doubts about the accuracy of some of the passages of the Bible so also is it history that has shown the Jewish religion was absolutely unique within its own temporal and geographical setting—so unique and special, in fact, that one is led inevitably to the hypothesis of divine revelation.

If it is sociology that has shown us that much of human behavior is indeed predictable or determined by outside forces, so also is it sociology that is currently experiencing a renewed interest in man as an active and voluntary participant in his own destiny. David Matza, one of the major criminologists in the United States today, for example, has rejected what he calls the "hard determinism" of those who say that men are without free will. This writer observes that ¹⁰

since man occupies a position in a complex and loosely organized social system, since he is the object of unclear and often conflicting forces and since he himself is an integral part of his social system, he does possess some leeway of choice.

In short, as I said earlier, knowledge is not and cannot be an evil thing. Research in the social sciences must continue and dialogue between sociology and theology ought to grow larger, not smaller. Neither theology nor sociology will lose in the process. Both disciplines, I believe, will be the better for it.

FOOTNOTES

1 cf. Auguste Comte, "The Positive Philosophy," in *The Origins and Growth of Sociology*, ed. J.H. Abraham (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 123-144. The antireligious nature of Comte's work is shown nicely by the title of the later work, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*.

2 cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

3 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1974).

4 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Science, Magic and Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1954).

5 Ernest Campbell and Thomas Pettigrew, *Christians in Racial Crisis A Study of Little Rock's Ministry* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1959).

6 Jaime Bulatao, S.J., "Split-Level Christianity," in *Split Level Christianity: Christian Renewal of Philippines Values*, ed. Jaime Bulatao, S.J. and Vitaliano R. Gorospe (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1966); and F. Landa Jocano, "Conversion and Patterning of Religious Experience in Malitbog, Central Panay, Philippines," *Philippine Sociology Review* 13(1965): 96-119.

7 Samuel W. Blizzard, "The Minister's Dilemma," *Christian Century*

(April 25, 1956): 508-509. Cf. also Samuel W. Blizzard, "The Role of the Rural Parish Minister, The Protestant Seminaries, and the Sciences of Social Behavior," *Religious Education* 50(1955): 382-392; and Samuel W. Blizzard, "The Protestant Minister's Integrating Roles." *Religious Education* 53(1958): 374-380.

8 Donald Denise Decaesstecker, *Impoverished Urban Filipino Families* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1975).

9 Cf. Peter Berger's interesting interpretation of the theological libera-

lism of Tillich and Bultmann as "the progressive dismantling of the supernaturalist scaffolding of the Christian tradition." Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1969), pp. 9-12. Berger is both a sociologist and a theologian and makes interesting reading for those interested in the topic of integrating the two disciplines.

17 David Matza, *Delinquency and Drift* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), p. 11.