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DAVID LYON

Sociology and Secularization

Mr. David Lyon, who works in the Postgraduate School of Studies in Social Sciences, University of Bradford, traces the history of present attitudes in sociology. He looks into the antagonisms which have developed between world-views of Christians and sociologists respectively and makes suggestions about how Christians should act.

Is sociology a help or a hindrance to the Christian Faith? Some Christians shun it as a spawning ground for 'radical' cynics, while others envelop themselves in penitent sackcloth and ashes as they acknowledge social sin after social sin which sociology has exposed. These are curiously negative and yet contradictory attitudes to a widely accepted and crucially important academic discipline. There are probably several reasons for this state of affairs, with personal temperament and upbringing playing an important part. We shall concentrate here, however, on 'historical' factors which, in our current a-historical climate, are often misunderstood.

In an attempt to unravel some of the twisted threads, these reflections are based on a series of propositions, as follows: Church history apart, sociology is the area where one is most likely to encounter the concept of secularization. Sometimes (or at least implicitly), sociology appears as a 'good thing'. Sociology itself grew out of and still perpetuates a secularized world-view. Thus at certain points it is at presuppositional variance with a Christian position. Yet the weaks spots of

contemporary Christianity are often precisely those to which sociology can speak helpfully, and truly. An understanding of the biblical view of knowledge throws light on this apparent paradox, and informs a positive Christian attitude.

The concept of secularization has a variety of meanings. As David Martin has noted, it is often the tool of counter-religious ideologies; in particular Marxism, Optimistic Rationalism, and Existentialism.[1] Sociology has been influenced by all three. However, Bryan Wilson has a definition which is adequate here: "The process whereby (explicitly) religious thinking, practice, and institutions lose social significance."[2] From a Christian point of view, and using this definition, secularization could be seen both as a 'good' and a 'bad' thing. It is possible that religious traditions, maintained in the name of Christ, yet based on a distortion of Scripture, would be dropped in a time of secularization. An example of this might be the use of the idea of "Christian contentment" to divert Christians from engaging in Social reform. Equally likely, however, is the loss of some fundamental Christian insight, such as the notion of 'vocation' in work, to the detriment of society at large.

Thus Christians can conscientiously hold an ambivalent attitude towards secularization since, in the sense of our definition, it need not always be a bad thing. But we must explore the idea a little more if we are to have a fuller Christian understanding of secularization. I deliberately slipped the word 'explicitly' into Wilson's definition, in order to make this point. The consistent teaching of the Bible is that all men are religious in the sense that they feel bound to some ultimate concern, or seek a 'total' explanation of the cosmos, but that they are divided at root-level as to what their religion should be. Thus those who do not acknowledge and worship "the Immortal God" are said to have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie" and consequently "worship and serve created things rather than the Creator".[3] In other words, to leave the living God out of account is to have a fundamental imbalance and dislocation in one's thinking, and this must, logically, affect one's whole outlook. So to make our definition more precise, the secularization of

Western culture is the loss of social significance of (what was taken to be) Christian thinking, practice, and institutions. If we are to take the biblical teaching seriously, we must understand that these have been 'replaced' by secular religion; the 'truth', we recall, is 'exchanged for a lie'. This, of course, need not take a traditionally 'religious', or cultic form, and, given our current pluralism and lack of direction, is likely to be only inconsistently and implicitly held and practised.

Although it is likely that men have always been socially self-conscious, and this is very evident in the writing of, for example, Amos or Plato, sociology as a discipline in its own right, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The modern discipline emerged during the period of decisive secularization of thought in the late nineteenth century. The history of the 'classical sociologists' demonstrates this thesis, namely that the sociological perspective grew out of non-Christian thought. But we must pause and ask ourselves exactly what we mean by this. Is it either fair or useful to make this kind of differentiation between Christian and non-Christian thought, in the area of sociology?

Following the Apostle Paul's teaching in his letter to the church at Rome, we must argue that a man's 'world-view' is always rooted in a religious orientation directed to, or away from, God. In a 'world-view' is included one's definition of reality and purpose, and some prescriptions of behaviour. Moreover, conceptual frameworks, within which the thinker (in this case the sociologist) works, are informed by his world-view, and so they, too, must be directed towards or away from God. That rather clinical description may be logical enough: in practice, however, things are not so clear-cut. Still in chapter one of *Romans*, Paul writes that all men know God in a limited sense (v. 19) but that they deliberately suppress the truth that they know (v. 18). This means that the non-Christian sociologist may have true knowledge of social reality, but lacks the God-given perspective from which to interpret that reality. He may, for example, 'observe' the demise of the so-called 'extended family',[5] but imply in his 'observation' a denial that there are any 'extended family' responsibilities. And it is futile to claim, when every

existing sociological category is value-loaded, and sociological 'findings' are often used for social welfare and reform, that the sociologist has nothing to say about 'responsibilities'. Sociology should be accepted in its own right, and with its distinctive categories. Sociologists do not need to pretend it is either a precise science or an 'art' in the sense of classical humanities. But we shall come to that later.

But are we suggesting that the Christian sociologist is somehow 'superior' to his non-Christian counterpart? Far from it! Although his premises may be consonant with Scripture, he can only 'know in part'[6] while he is here, because his faculties are still affected by the warping action of sin.[7] That is certainly no basis for academic arrogance! The Christian does, however, refer to God as his ultimate source of authority, whereas the non-Christian cannot do this. Instead, the unbelieving sociologist will often claim an unwarranted authority to suggest what 'ought' to be in society. This is not always explicit. What most frequently happens is that the sociologist defines the area which may be discussed, thus precluding consideration of topics which the Christian may deem indispensable. In that way, an aura of authority may be given to sociological utterances which, incidentally, gives weight to the idea that sociology itself can become a 'religious' world-view. So Peter Worsley, reviewing a sociological 'reader', claims that the editor's view rests "on the elitist notion of sociology as a (the?) science which will bring an 'international community of the wise' into being".[8]

The idea of sociology as a 'religious way of life' also appears in a recent article in the *British Journal of Sociology*.[9] This fascinating speculation by R. J. Martin describes the 'cultic aspects of sociology' in an illuminating way. His contention is that sociological orientations have been viewed as 'ways of knowing' rather than 'ways of life', but that in fact much light can be thrown on the sociological pursuit by seeing it as an occupation. More specifically, speaking of it as a 'religious occupation', he notices that sociology exhibits certain features including piety ('the sense of what properly goes with

what'), mystique ('unrecognised knowledge', that is, 'implicit presuppositions'), prayer, and even conversion. By 'prayer', he understands the means of conveying the mystique ('professional conversations, specific methodological technique'), and by 'conversion', being 'born again' into a new perception of mystique. Even taken with the proverbial pinch of salt, there is much to reflect upon in these parallel pictures! One might add a comment of Professor Andreski on the sociologist as holy man, or preacher. He points out that these latter-day prophets, while they possess the psychological make-up of the dogmatic preacher, are all too often lacking in what used to be a basic requirement of a prophet — a moral code.[10a] And this fits well with the thesis outlined here: that a crucial aspect of the history of sociology is its emergence during a period of secularization, when the whole basis of thought and ethics was being radically questioned.

Both the biblical witness, and sociological self-consciousness, then, suggest that there could be religious aspects of sociology, and that sociology can be seen as a secularized world-view. We shall now take a look at some of the historical origins of one or two pioneers in sociology, and see whether they offer corroboration of what we have discussed so far.

Secularization and 'classical' sociology

To say that knowledge in modern societies is incomparably more 'secular' than in previous periods is to utter a truism, but it is still instructive to probe this statement in search of deeper meaning. Those who would remind us of the more 'secular' state of knowledge and science may imagine that science is now somehow 'a-religious', having dispensed with all metaphysical assumptions. Susan Budd, however, has remarked that:

> Most people now trust and believe in 'science' without understanding in the same way that they might once have assumed that 'religion can explain it' or 'god must have had a reason'. They believe in the superior powers of science in part because it *has* enabled men

> to control the world, but in part because of a myth in our culture about the power of science which is socially supported in much the same way as for example, witchcraft is for the Azande, and part of the myth is about the clash between religion and science which was resolved in favour of science. [10b]

This latter myth of which she speaks had its origin at the same time as sociology began as a serious self-conscious discipline. Moreover, we can see that sociology grew up in a mutually-supportive relationship with the 'science-victory' myth.

The 'religion-science' clash, as far as we are concerned with it here (that is, in the context of the secularization of knowledge) took place in the last third of the nineteenth century. Secularization of values and social structures had been steadily increasing throughout the rapidly industrializing Victorian era, but it was not until the 1870's that thought became openly and decisively secular. There was dissatisfaction with much religious (that is 'church') life the objectives of which seemed irrelevant to urbanized industrial life. Moreover Christian cosmogony seemed sterile in comparison with the new evolutionary ideas which had made such an impact since Darwin. Theologians and churchmen seemed to suffer some kind of nerve-failure when, at the same time, assaults came from another quarter — that of the (German) 'higher critical school'. There was, indeed, a real 'crisis of faith' as Christianity was apparently beleaguered from without and corroded from within.

The main issues that emerged in earnest public debate, crudely simplified, may be touched upon here. The great question was "If supernatural religion is false, then what will replace it?", and, following from this, others: "What, then, is the basis of science?" and "What is the basis of morality?". These very questions were reflected in the history of early sociology, which was not simply concerned with religion as a feature of social life (although this was obviously a central issue with Marx, Comte, Weber, Durkheim *et al*), but rather as something intrinsic to the human condition — something 'necessary'. When discredited in one form, religion needed a surrogate. As Roland

Robertson, a sociologist of religion, writes: "The idea that sociologists of this period dealt in *religious* issues arises because they sought to replace a conventional-Christian position by another position".[11] This idea of sociologists trying to replace religion is one that is very often ignored today, but it is one that must be remembered if we are to understand the relationship between secularization and what I am calling 'classical' sociology. Linked with this was the attempt to establish a 'religionless morality', in which, once again, sociology had a part to play. It will suffice here to point out that the disciplines that we would describe collectively today as 'social sciences' were, more often than not, known as 'moral sciences' at the end of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps the thought of Marx and Comte is the most readily susceptible to an 'alternative religion' analysis, and much work has, of course, been devoted to this theme. Seeing them as 'founding fathers' of sociology, however, commentators tend to concentrate on their social 'scientific' work at the expense of their 'religious' outlooks, thus artificially isolating them from their nineteenth century setting. There is, though, a sense in which both their 'systems' were based on their 'religions'. Comte's opponents mocked his 'Religion of Humanity', in which mankind replaced God as the object of worship, and said that it was simply "Catholicism minus Christianity". Comte maintained that, on the contrary, it was "Christianity plus Science", meaning that it was a 'scientific religion'. Comte's 'god' was the 'Great Being', or in other words, all who have in the past laboured for the improvement of mankind. He sought, in his sociology, to realise his ideal society in which industry would be triumphant, all would have opportunity for mental development and for work, and wars and internal revolutions would cease. His sociology was, then, a doctrine of progress, "a secularized successor to theology as the mistress of the sciences."[12] One can see how false it is, therefore, to separate Comte's sociology and his religion. The two are interdependent.

With Marx, on the other hand, the issue has been somewhat clouded by a century of debate over 'what he really said', and the more obvious political repercussions of his thought. Marx

the social scientist undoubtedly rejected the possibility of supernatural religion as such, as well as the specific institutional forms that he encountered, but remained preoccupied with precisely the kinds of questions raised by a religious commitment for the rest of his life. His sociology, (although he probably did not call it that) was an all-embracing system of life, with an assumed 'ideal' man and an assumed 'ideal' society. This he called 'human' or 'communist' society. As his system offered a 'total' explanation of the world's events, and a 'hope' for the future, it is not surprising that it has been called a "messianic religion". [13] This sociology was (albeit unconsciously) designed to compensate for the rejection of traditional religious forms. Once again, the 'social science' cannot properly be divorced from the 'religion'.

But there is another, perhaps more neglected, founding father of sociology, to whom I shall draw attention, namely, Herbert Spencer. Comte's sociology had been noticed and taught by several devoted followers since the mid-nineteenth century, even though Comte himself remained a nationalistic Frenchman. Marx's sociology was not appreciated in England until at the earliest the pre-First World War period, though he received more attention in the 1930's. Spencer, on the other hand, was the first English-speaking person of any consequence to use the word 'sociology' to describe his work, and his influence is far greater than is commonly acknowledged in undergraduate textbooks. [14] The major sociological school known variously as 'functionalism' or 'structural functionalism' owes much of its methodological direction to Spencer. [15] He was certainly well known during his lifetime in Victorian England, and other famous contemporaries had a high opinion of his work. His system, however, was soon dismissed as an irrelevant dogma of a passing age.

Spencer's work, as in the other examples, represents a rejection of Christianity. He was born into a family which, though Nonconformist in name, had departed from the faith of the fathers. His own father travelled the road from Evangelicalism, through Quakerism, to unbelief. In an essay entitled "The genesis of of science", written in 1854, Herbert Spencer simply dismissed

" every metaphysical doctrine at variance with ordinary credence ". By the 1860's he had been welcomed as a co-fighter against the so-called ' theological party '. T. H. Huxley (Darwin's ' bulldog ') wrote to him, likening his own work to hemp-yarn and Spencer's to rope: " Work away, then, excellent ropemaker, and make us more ropes to hold on against the devil and his parsons ". [16] When he published his *First Principles* in 1862, it was seen both by himself and the public as a contribution to the religious controversy which had become public in 1859 with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Mansel's *Limits of Religious Thought.*

The conclusions reached in the *First Principles* were foundational for his later work (including *The Study of Sociology* and *The Principles of Sociology*) which was published in the 1870's. Spencer contended that an incomprehensible God could not be the object of rational discourse, and that reason could only deal with things finite and relative. On these grounds, however, he then denied the reality of supernatural religion or the possibility of a self-revealing God, thus making ' reason ' the final arbiter, and ruling out discussion of those kinds of religious issues by definition. Thus ' religion ' was placed beyond rational defence and criticism, and became an ostensibly ' taboo ' subject in sociology, as far as its veracity was concerned. But Spencer could not ignore the manifestations of religious life in society, and recognised that there must be some ' need ' for religion in man. He therefore gave it a pragmatic defence, much in the style of William James. Although he held that all dogmatic religious positions (atheism, theism, and pantheism) are inconsistent and unacceptable, he did think that beyond phenomena there is an " Unknowable Power ". But again by definition, the Unknowable neither communicated or related in any way to mankind. Spencer's own system of thought was therefore quite closed.

The key to an understanding of Spencer's work is the idea of evolution " by which he meant the process of increasing differentiation (that is to say, specialization of functions) and integration (by which he meant mutual interdependence of the structurally differentiated functions)." [17] In other words, he saw

society as an organism, with its social structure arising from its social functions. His *Principles of Sociology* is largely taken up with the increasing specialization of functions and the accompanying differentiation of structures which characterise "cultural evolution". But behind all this apparently solid 'scientific' jargon, there was an undeniable metaphysical (or 'religious') belief in the mysterious force guiding cultural evolution in a progressive direction. A quotation from the *First Principles* makes this clear:

> Based as the life of a society is on the animals and vegetal products and dependent as these are on the light and heat of the sun, it follows that the changes wrought by men as socially organized, are effects of forces having a common origin with those which produce all the other orders of change . . . to this same reservoir are traceable those subtler and more complex manifestations of energy which humanity as socially embodied, evolves. [18]

Thus Spencer built into his work certain assumptions which are antithetical to Christian ones. A whole system of social thought was erected on this foundation which, especially in the hands of American sociologists, went under the name of 'science'.

Those indebted to Spencer include Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Merton, Talcott-Parsons, and a host of others. They have perpetuated his views — always with the underlying (sometimes implicit) non-Christian assumptions. The sociologists of the 1940's, in particular, used a version of Spencer's functionalism as an analytical tool and produced the famous 'grand theories' of society which are under attack today. The notion of a 'value-neutral' science of society is now scornfully denounced as 'scientism'. This is hardly to be wondered at, as this so-called sociology managed, in the 1940's and 1950's, to turn its back on the most pressing issues of the age in the name of 'science'. (An American sociologist has shown that, in the heyday of structural-functionalism and 'scientific' sociology the lowest ebb of interest in race coincided with the greatest

intensification of black agitation for equality.[19]) Disenchantment with the scientistic attitude, which stemmed partly from Spencer's system, has led to the contemporary (much-publicised) crisis of Western sociology. It would be a mistake, though, to underestimate Spencer's (indirect) influence on modern sociology, as scientism and progressive evolutionism are still conspicuous features of the subject as taught in our universities. Often, however, they are so 'taken-for-granted' that sociologists may be quite unaware of their implicit beliefs.

There is little point in trying to build an argument on the sandy foundation of an individual case but, as I have shown, Spencer was an important figure in the development of modern sociology. Along with others, he contributed to an unchristian consensus of social thought. This was opposed by various groups who argued for a 'Christian sociology' at different times from the late nineteenth century on,[20] but the dominant consensus has always tried to be 'a-Christian', or 'a-religious'.

So we have argued that modern sociology grew out of a secularized world-view, and that, mainly by restricting the area of discourse, it has perpetuated elements of that world-view. The so-called 'science of society' is always rooted in some metaphysical assumptions (such as the innate goodness of man, or the inevitability of progress) which have to be accepted by some kind of intuitive faith. Arising in a climate which was opposed to biblical Christianity, sociology has developed a distinct position apart from Christian assumptions. This sociology, in time, claimed to be able to predict what would happen to society, given certain conditions, and to provide a basis for social action. Thus, as sociology (or 'moral philosophy' or 'moral science' as it was often known at first) was taught, and found practical outlet in social work, education, and so on, the non-Christian world-view which produced it was disseminated into diverse areas of society.

Sociological and Christian world-views

The sociological outlook can be seen as a 'world-view'. We

have already glanced at this kind of idea in Martin's ' sociology as cultic occupation '. Subjectively, one can understand that it is a ' world-view ' to some by undertaking a course in sociology. Once equipped with the ' sociological imagination ', it is extremely difficult to remember how one saw the world previous to sociological enlightenment. It is often presented very convincingly as a total explanation of the way society functions, and, moreover, why it functions in a particular way. As a world-view, sociology does present a challenge to the Christian faith.

Although it is possible to speak both of Christian and sociological world-views, it would also be fair to say that, at the present time, both world-views, as such, are in a state of disarray. One does not have to look very far to see that there are serious anxieties both within the ranks of those who call themselves Christians, and those who call themselves sociologists. (To say nothing of those who would dare to be both !) There is a mutual uncertainty and insecurity, as both seem unsure of their own, and the other's status and authority. A Christian, for example, may complain of the sociologist's ' obsession ' with the connection between environment and action, [21] and the sociologist may make oblique swipes at the Christian in statements like: " Sociology is concerned with studying the nature of social systems, not with passing moral judgments about what it finds." [22] Why is this ? We shall try to understand, in a simplified way, some of the causes of crisis in sociology in general, and in Christianity specifically as it is affected by sociology.

Sociology is uncertain about the right means to acquire its knowledge. Steven Box, introducing the reader to his book, [23] openly admits that sociologists " either collect facts and never get round to relating these to theories, or, like me, they start with theoretical perspectives and then attempt to illustrate them." This really sums up the situation. It is, of course, a ' youthful ' discipline, although it is popular all over the world. It has struggled to gain acceptance in the face of opposition from those who would dismiss it as an elaboration of the patently obvious, or on the other hand as a form of blueprint for totalitarian manipulation. It has been dogged since its classical days with

a debate as to whether or not it is a science and this identity crisis has yielded much confusion. Nowadays, far from there being any one single entity which is recognisably 'sociology', there are numerous 'sociologies', all growing from different ideological soils.

Sociology also lacks a 'mandate'. The physical sciences can be thought of as attempts to control and channel nature, but the use of this concept produces difficulties if applied to sociology ! If this parallel were made, sociology would be expected to provide guidance for society, that is, in a sort of 'priestly' role.[24] With sociology in its present state, at least, this alignment with the 'powers-that-be' would be nothing short of a nightmare. Yet numerous sociologists still hanker after this kind of role.[25] Maybe this is not such a bad thing, in the sense that they thereby recognise the need for a coherent set of shared values and norms as prerequisites for a stable society, but while they both veil their own values and norms, and disregard a Christian world-view, there can be little hope for the utility of this form of social science. It has been shown, too, that even those who claim to take sides with the underdog, the underprivileged, apparently making a clear value-stance, may in fact be supporting an 'Establishment' sociology.[26] And an 'Establishment' sociology, which justifies a paternalistic welfare-state control agency, is also inimical to Christian belief.

In short, the questions of the nature and uses of sociology are still bugging its practitioners in a critical way. Very often, the subject matter of sociology (society !) is lost sight of in a maze of new 'approaches', to the confusion and frustration of both those 'inside', and 'outside'. But we shall leave sociology for a moment, and glance at the reaction of some Christians to the rise of the sociological perspective.

As already suggested, many Christians are profoundly suspicious of sociology, and especially its popular image which has percolated down through the popular Christian press. This may be due to the apparent threat of sociology's uncovering unintended consequences of particular teachings, or, more likely,

the link between sociology and socialism, of which the latter is often rejected without consideration. It is true, anyway, that what Peter Berger calls the "debunking motif" of sociology enjoys a successful career of unsettling Bible-believers. Sociology is seen (often justly) as an attempt to explain away religious belief and practice in terms of its socially integrating function, or as ideology. The 'ideology' is not likely to be 'designed', but rather to emerge in a muddled way, and then subsequently to function to maintain the status quo. No wonder the sociological perspective is intimidating to the Christian undergraduate, and so many professing Christians either drop out of sociology courses or else become disillusioned with their faith.

The real trouble, from the Christian point of view, is that no one seems to have any answers. Frequently basing what they think on second-hand information, the Christians have only an oddly unbalanced view of the true nature of the sociological 'explanation', and no hint of a 'Christian attitude'. But why are there 'no answers'? I believe that the answer can be found back in our look at nineteenth century secularization. The paucity of Christian dialogue with non-Christian thought has an embarrassingly long history. 'Liberal' thinkers put Evangelicals to shame here. Whether 'Christian Socialists' or 'Incarnational theologians' they have at least attempted to apply 'Christian minds' to the problems of social life and sociological theory. 'Social gospels' and 'secular cities' are motes to be removed from the eyes of others after the beam of insulated uninvolvement has been shifted from the Evangelical eye.

We have already touched on the 'myth' of the 'victory' of science in the religion-science clash of mid-Victorian England; we shall now explore the idea a little further. The myth, (or, more accurately, fiction) is simply that faith was annihilated, and that, in compensation, science would be able (eventually) to answer all human questions. (The latter half of the myth is perpetuated by the *Reader's Digest* and *Time-Life* mentality.) What actually happened was that there was a 'victory' (in the educated periodical press at least), but the scientific coup was executed without Christians fully realizing what was happening. The

church, as such, was still happily worshipping (the period was one of expansion and church-building in many denominations), but was blind to cultural movements outside her doors. Hardly anyone realized that some assumptions of the Christian Faith had been undermined and replaced by the kind of naturalistic 'closed systems' that characterised new disciplines such as sociology and psychology. The real tragedy was that nobody noticed what was going on at this deep and fundamental level until it was too late, and dazed articles like "What has happened to original sin?" began to appear in the Victorian periodical press. [27]

Of course, there were eruptions of unbelief which Christians tried to counter in debate, but all too often the debates were between those who had completely abandoned their 'faith' and others who held to a creed which had been drained of any kind of Christian-biblical content. Thus unbelievers were never faced with serious opposition. Either their antagonists had retained their 'Christianity' for sentimental reasons, and were quite happy to drop any beliefs which appeared to conflict with 'scientific' findings, or else they were so bound up with 'church' life and issues that they had no weapons with which to fight. These latter had no grasp of the crucial biblical assumptions necessary to understand the situation and resist 'unbelief', and so the 'victory' was largely by default. [28] There was a 'crisis of faith' for many Victorians, but the actual battles that raged tended to be between 'liberals and conservatives' within the church, or 'agnostics and vague theists' outside. Among those Christians, in other words, who still claimed to hold to Evangelical or Reformed Christian belief there was a lack of cultural awareness, intellectual engagement, and social understanding. Hardly anyone was contending for the Faith from a Christian world-view stance. [29]

In spite of the assertions of sociologists such as Comte or Spencer, that civilization had progressed beyond the religious or theological stage in its evolutionary development, religion proved to be a resilient factor in social life. Indeed, sociologists Weber and Durkheim, and later Troeltsch [30] found religious life to be

one of the most fruitful sources for social inquiry. The 'Christian world-view' which they 'observed' was not, however, one of which most Christians would be particularly proud! Nevertheless, it is instructive for Christians to see exactly what sort of 'public image' they have.

Nowadays, both Christianity and sociology seem to be accepting each other's presence uneasily. Sociology still finds that it must accommodate religion within its scope (the sociology of religion is a fast-growing industry), and there is always a new book or article appearing on "the persistence of religion" or on some aspect of religious behaviour.[31] Christians, too, are taking note of developments in sociology, often in a genuine attempt to come to terms with the position of the church in its contemporary urban-industrial setting. The Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, has recently published his *Built as a City*,[32] which deals with the city church. John Benington previously produced *Culture, Class and Christian Belief*,[33] which is a brave attempt to relate sociological insight to working-class evangelism, but which, sadly, ends with a very muddled 'Christian belief'. But these are only isolated efforts, and neither gets much nearer to a radical solution to the paradox outlined at the beginning of this essay. The paradox is that sociology is often built on an 'unchristian' basis, or at least that it precludes discussion of issues which Christians would wish to include within the scope of sociology, and so can be a 'secularized world-view'; and on the other hand that Christianity is blind to certain sociological issues, and needs a biblically-directed world-view.

Balaam's sociological ass

The story of Balaam's ass provides an example of a parallel situation to help us out of the dilemma posed by a sociology which needs Christian insight, and a Christianity which needs sociological understanding. Balaam, like that other reluctant worthy, Jonah, needed a hefty jolt from an unexpected quarter before he complied with the wishes of God. He was too easily persuaded to compromise God's message, when he should have

known better. It took a heated conversation with his ass, a most improbable advisor, to bring him to his senses. As a result, God's directives were clearly and unequivocally spelt out. [34a] Now, while we must recognise that the sociological 'world-view' has a different presuppositional base from a Christian 'world-view', it may, nevertheless, have a 'prophetic' role *vis-à-vis* the church, like the ass. We may not be expecting a challenge from godless sociology, but there may well be something in sociology of which Christians should take heed. This comes, I suggest, on two levels, which are inter-related. These are what we shall call 'evangelism' and 'world-view'. The former has to do with the theology of redemption, and the latter, with creation and providence. [34b]

This is not the place to give details of how sociology 'speaks' to contemporary Christianity, so we shall limit ourselves to one or two examples. Just to touch on 'evangelism' first of all, perhaps the most obvious use of sociology is in the area of language. If Christians are truly to "hold out the word of life" to our "crooked and depraved generation", [35] then we must hold out words that our generation understands. There is no communication between two people who understand the same basic term in different ways. [36] Some 'evangelism' may therefore be missing the mark altogether. This inevitably spills over into analysis of class. Is the class language or attitude of the local church preventing certain sections of the population from ever crossing the threshold ? This is the kind of issue that is poignantly raised by the sociological study of evangelism. [33, 36, 37]

Closely related to evangelism, but in a sense 'following' from it, is the question of world-views. Involved in this is the Christian understanding of society, social relations, and social institutions. There may be some confusion at this point, simply because Christians have been content for so long to allow non-Christian assumptions social dominance by default that we have forgotten what it is to exercise the 'mind of Christ'. [38] To give an example, then. Our culture puts a tremendous emphasis on 'economic growth', and values this more than any other end. The social consequences of valuing economic growth instead of (surely fundamentally Christian) economic stewardship have beeu

disastrously inhuman. But apparently no Christian voices have been raised against the social evils of economic growth, and no Christians have developed a socially human theory of economic stewardship, let alone put it into practice.[39, 40] In saying this, we have moved from sociology 'speaking' to Christians, to Christians 'speaking' to sociology, but this is only to be expected. The Christian who is a sociologist studying some aspect of the social consequences of an 'economic growth' - directed policy should inevitably come to question the very notion of economic growth, and to look for radical alternatives. (That is, alternatives which are consistent with his Christian 'roots'.)

Examples could be multiplied. We desperately need a biblically-informed theory of social change, one which can cope with a constantly moving society, unencumbered with static notions of society. We need to examine institutions such as the so-called 'Welfare State' to see whether they have in fact ameliorated social life, or whether the main effect has been an erosion of real social responsibility. The idea of 'community' is enjoying a vogue in Christian as well as non-Christian circles, but what is a community? Is it a notion which can be justified on biblical grounds, and if so, is its manifestation primarily geographical or attitudinal? It is sociology which raises these kinds of questions, but who is to answer them? Unless Christians speak up on these issues, words like stewardship, responsibility (or duty), love, and forgiveness are not likely to feature in the sociology of the future.

We might go further, however, and argue that the sociological perspective may be reminding us about the very nature of man, the 'Christian view' of which has been compromised for so long with Humanistic individualism. If the 'image of God' has so much to do with our 'common humanity', as the Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer suggests, then this should have an extensive influence on our sociological thinking. He writes:

> When God in his grace preserves man's humanness from demonization, from complete disintegration in mutual enmity, He does this in the relationships of society.

> It is and remains one of the most striking features of the actuality of fallen man that we see relationships between man and fellow-man function in the midst of the corrupting power of sin, which certainly is directed especially against society and against my feeling of responsibility towards the other. Cf. Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4: 9). This social sense is not a superadditum, but pertains according to God's intention to the most essential components of humanness. [41]

Sociology, if Berkouwer is right, becomes the study of God's Providence, or his 'Common Grace', working through social relationships, and of the effect of sin on those relationships. And 'prescriptive' sociology becomes the recommendation of biblically-informed ways of preserving certain social relationships in order that man's life may be more human.

Conclusion

We have argued, then, that current sociological thought is often at presuppositional variance with a Christian world-view. However, the 'Christian world-view' is seldom seriously worked out, with the result that attitudes to sociology are varied and confused. Hence the need for Christians to understand the social implications of Christian belief, and develop 'Christian minds' in the area of sociology. It is not the study of sociology that is to be avoided, but rather the unthinking acceptance of certain sociological axioms which are inconsistent with Christian belief. (Such are cultural relativism in family studies and the the idea of 'ethical neutrality' in social research.) Man, we have shown, suppresses truth that is nevertheless there, and some truth often finds its way into sociological theory and description. Christians must humbly acknowledge this fact, while also working to inform their own sociological position with Christian insights. Sociology need no longer be a vehicle of secularization (understood now as a 'bad' thing); rather, Christians could develop sociological thought which harmonises with biblical teaching. This applies mainly in the area of

'Common Grace' or 'Creation theology', but has implications, obviously, for direct 'evangelism' in which the local church is perennially engaged. Sociology, therefore, although at first sight it may not appear to be 'prophetic',[42] has much to say to modern Christianity. Christians must listen and react appropriately. Remember Balaam! Simply clobbering the ass will get us nowhere.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Various editions).
5. The 'extended family' is that which goes beyond the so-called 'nuclear' family of parents and siblings. It would include grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, assuming some sort of mutual interdependence.
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7. *Romans* 7: 24 (N.I.V.).
8. P. Worsley, "Sociological Babel", a review of J. Rex, *Approaches to Sociology* in *The Guardian*, 13 June, 1974.
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10. (a) S. Andreski, *Social Science as Sorcery*, 1972, Dentson; (b) S. Budd, *Sociologists and Religion*, Collier-MacMillan, 1973, p. 143.
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15. S. Andreski, *Herbert Spencer: Structure, Function and Evolution*, 1971.
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17. S. Andreski, ref. 15, p. 8.
18. H. Spencer, *First Principles*, 1958 edn. (N.Y.), p. 203.
19. Simpson, cited in Freidrich's, *A Sociology of Sociology*, Free Press, 1970, p. 72.
20. e.g. early articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* (form 1895) or *Christendom: a Journal of Christian Sociology*, published 1931–50.
21. D. MacLeod, "God's image in man" *Banner of Truth*, Nov. 1973, p. 9.
22. S. Cotgrove, *The Science of Society*, 1967.
23. S. Box, *Deviance, Reality and Society*, 1972.
24. For a discussion of the 'prophetic' and 'priestly' mode in sociology, see 19.
25. e.g. A. Etzioni in *The Active Society* and in Rex, see above, note 6.
26. c.f. A. Gouldner's critique of Becker in "The sociologist as partisan" in *For Sociology*, Allen Lane, 1973.

27. J. Hogarth, "What has happened to original sin?" *MacMillan's Magazine*, Oct. 1880.
28. A Christian in the 1860's, for example, stood up in a public meeting, and said: "The Bible teaches us nothing about science. It was not written to teach us science. It was sent to appeal to our affections, not to our intellectual nature." From this JOURNAL, 1866, **1**, 206.
29. There are exceptions to this of course. I have been trying to sketch only the general picture here. J. Reddie, founder of the VICTORIA INSTITUTE, seemed to have a 'Christian world-view' position. Men like Muller, Shaftesbury, and Spurgeon showed considerable Christian social awareness. And there were several non-Evangelicals who saw the issues very clearly, and tried to work out their own answers.
30. E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 1931.
31. e.g. A. Greely, *The Persistence of Religion*, S.C.M., 1973, or Pickering, "The persistence of rites of passage" *B.J.S.* March 1974.
32. D. Sheppard, *Built as a City*, Hodder, 1974.
33. J. Benington, *Culture, Class, and Christian Belief*, Scripture Union, 1973.
34. (a) *Numbers* 22–24; (b) "This must not be understood as an advocacy of a sacred/secular dualism which is, of course, inimical to the whole tenor of this essay. Biblically, the two 'levels' cannot be separated, but recent confusion over phrases like 'the redemption of society' makes a distinction between talk of individual rebirth and social-structural renewal necessary."
35. *Philippians* 2: 15–16 (N.I.V.).
36. This is brought out in chapter 4 of D. Moberg, *The Great Reversal*, S.U., 1973.
37. J. A. Walter, "The Class-bound church", *Christian Graduate*, June 1973.
38. This is argued helpfully by H. Blamires in *The Christian Mind*, S.P.C.K., 1963.
39. E. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, Blond & Blond 1973, (Abacus 1974), highlights several important issues of which Christians should take note.
40. B. Goudzewaard, *Economic Stewardship versus Capitalist Religion*, C.S.U.
41. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: the image of God*, 1972, p. 181.
42. I am aware of the potential theological difficulties of using the word 'prophetic' as I have done. I am really using it in a popular sense, though nevertheless making it refer to a messenger used by God.