

FAITH  
AND  
THOUGHT

1977  
vol. 104  
No. 1

---

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the  
Christian Revelation and modern research

---

J.A. WALTER

SOCIOLOGY AND RELIGION — ARE THEY LOGICALLY COMPLEMENTARY?

Molecules do not listen or change their ways when chemists talk about them, but feed-back is never absent when sociologists talk about people. This is but one of the differences between physical science and sociology, a subject ably surveyed in this paper which examines whether sociological and other kinds of knowledge about man can be thought of as complementary.

The complementarity of scientific and religious statements has been frequently argued (e.g. MacKay 1965, 1967, 1974a,b). However, 'complementarity' philosophers do not claim that all forms of knowledge are complementary with religious statements. There is reason to suspect that, since God has created one world, forms of knowledge should have some coherence at least one with another, but the chaotic effects of sin suggest that all may not be totally coherent, especially in the world of man as opposed to the world of nature. It is therefore worth looking in some detail at the kinds of statements made about man and society by social scientists and examining the bearing of such statements on scientific, personal, and religious language. I will focus in particular on sociology, partly because it highlights many features of the social sciences generally,<sup>1</sup> and partly since it is the discipline with which I am most familiar.

MacKay's definition of complementarity goes as follows (1958: 114-5; 1974b:242):

Two (or more) descriptions may be called logically complementary when (a) They have a common reference, (b) Each is in principle exhaustive, (in the sense that none of the entities or events comprising the common reference need be left unaccounted for), yet (c) They make different assertions, because (d) The logical preconditions of definition and/or use (i.e. context)

---

I am indebted to Donald MacKay, Charles Martin & Godfrey Williams for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

of concepts or relationships in each are mutually exclusive, so that significant aspects referred to in one are necessarily omitted from the other.

To sum up my argument, I will maintain that (d) frequently does not distinguish sociological from other descriptions even if criteria (a) - (c) are met, and so sociological language cannot technically be described as logically complementary with other forms of language. This is important to understand if we are to begin to clarify the relation between sociological and religious statements about man. I arrive at this conclusion by examining the relation of sociological language to the oft-mentioned distinctions of observer vs. participant language, and normative vs. indicative ('ought' vs 'is') statements.

### *Observer Language and Participant Language*

*The logical limits of science:* Central to the analysis of scientific and personal/religious language as complementary is the identification of the one as the language of observers and the others as the language of participants. This is one of the ways in which scientific and personal/religious languages are claimed to be mutually exclusive in their use. Thus:

In a science you are keeping yourself out of the picture as much as you possibly can. In an arts subject you are throwing yourself into the picture as much as you possibly can. (Ingram 1965:85).

This distinction is logically necessary if science is to make statements of prediction. MacKay (1955:16) follows Popper in maintaining that the scientific attitude must be one of withdrawn detachment from the object of study:

The point is this, that if you have a predicting, calculating mechanism or human being, such a predicting mechanism cannot possibly predict exactly the future of any system which includes itself. The reason is that if you try to make it allow for the effect of its predictions on the system, it needs to know the prediction before it can calculate what effect this will have, and you simply set it chasing its own tail.

MacKay has drawn out some of the implications of this in his argument on logical indeterminacy - that predictive, causal, objective, scientific statements do not logically exclude freedom of choice (1967).

Thus what distinguishes scientific from other kinds of language is that the scientist takes the stance of the detached observer. Now all this has to do with the *logic* of science; when we come to look at the *practice* of science we find things a bit more blurred. MacKay is at pains to point out that detachment can be hard to achieve even when we are observing objects other than ourselves, but becomes even more problematic when we observe society (e.g. 1974a:34-6 1955:17). If the study of society is to be termed a social *science* then it must be a different kind of science from that which makes exact predictions. In several writings MacKay has pointed out the limits of science as a method of study when it comes to studying man (e.g. 1963:165-6), and it is essential that we are aware of these limitations in an age (perhaps now fast slipping away though?) in which science is hailed as the most important form of knowledge. Complementarity has usefully enforced linguistic apartheid in past decades when deterministic science was attempting a take-over bid. I suggest in this paper that we now need tools for *integrating* languages if we are to comprehend the nature of sociological talk, which I argue necessarily involves both scientific and value-laden elements.

*The sociologist as participant observer:* It is an oversimplification to split language up into participant language and observer language. MacKay (1955:15-16) notes an intermediary form:

...an observer relationship which is not one of impersonal detachment; it is what you might call the relationship of *observer-participant*. For example, think of a father watching the first steps of his small son. He is an observer, but he is not detached. At the sight of his son's tumbling his reaction is not to predict the path which the child's body will take but to leap forward and catch him. He is an observer-participant: he still acts and feels as part of the situation which he is observing.

This is in fact a good characterisation of some sociological perspectives - to observe and describe society leads one on to question whether what one is observing is desirable and, if not, how one may intervene in order to change it.

I will now elaborate on some of the ways in which the sociologist is an observer-participant. Remember, the aim of this review is that, if it can be shown that *both* observer and participant language is inevitable in empirical descriptions of society, then sociological descriptions are different from, yet have certain similarities with, both scientific (= pure observer)

and personal (= pure participant) statements – thus sociological language and these other languages are not completely mutually exclusive and so cannot qualify as strictly complementary.<sup>2</sup>

The sociologist studies society – something he is part of, involved in; something he has been socialised throughout his life into seeing in particular ways, ways which are bound up with his whole lifestyle and identity. His vested interests in believing society to be of such and such a form do not just involve his pocket but his whole personality. The sociologist is not a god transcending the world of human beings, and his attempts to lift himself out of society and be like God are bound to fail. Those, like the early 19th Century French sociologist Auguste Comte, who have tried to do just this appear to us as we look back at them to be very much creatures of their own times. So the sociologist cannot be a scientist if this means he has to cease being a participant and to extract himself from society so that he may observe without bias. On the other hand the sociologist wants to say something more than the novelist and the artist for he does not want merely to add to the pile of personal views about society.

This problem has not been solved by sociologists, and there are at present several schools of thought on the matter. What does seem clear though is that it will not be solved simply by putting sociology into one of the two slots of natural science or art.

What then characterises sociological views of man? Firstly, the sociologist should be aware that his analysis is not neutral but socially conditioned. This does not mean that his analysis is causally determined by his social position but that it was not, and never could have been, worked out in isolation from the social environment which constitutes his very being. The sociologist is

a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature (Horkheimer 1972:211).

The sociologist recognises that he is not an individual in society such that the two can be separated at will, but that he is a person-in-relation (Niebuhr 1956). Abstract the person from the relations and he ceases to exist. This distinguishes sociology from natural science if the scientist claims to be able to separate himself from his data; also from the artist who feels no need to be self-reflective about his position in society.

Secondly, the sociologist should not only be aware of the social influences on his sociological analysis, but should also attempt to monitor them actively and to clarify them. It is not his duty to eradicate them, for that is impossible, but to state what they are. In this respect he is like the logician who, rather than pretend he has no initial assumptions, states what they are at the outset. The similarity ends at this point though, for the sociologist's social position and interests, unlike the philosopher's assumptions, do not have a simple determinate effect on his subsequent argument. Nevertheless, the sociologist should state what his involvement in his subject is — it's rather like asking members of parliament to state what their financial interests are. It's not that an MP with financial stakes should not enter parliament, but that, if the electorate is competently to judge his political actions and claims, then these stakes should be made public. Thus the sociologist's theories may be judged not only in terms of their internal logic, but also in terms of what is known about his involvement in the subject. We should know the total context in which he does his work; for example, knowledge that he is against communism or that his research funds come from a particular government department may help us to understand why he chose to select certain data for comment and why he interpreted his data the way he did. By itself, this will not enable us to assess the truth of his conclusions, but it may enhance understanding and criticism of it.<sup>3</sup>

This sort of knowledge is important because it is most unlikely (contrast the natural sciences) that we can repeat the sociologist's study by going out and collecting exactly the same data. A prerequisite of the experimental method of natural science is that it should be repeatable and written up so that another scientist could repeat the experiment (though I suspect many scientific reports are not and could not be so written). The scientist abstracts from the infinite complexity of reality by trying to create a situation in which all the known variables bar one are kept constant, and this enables his experiment to be repeatable. The sociologist is not in such a position. Firstly the experimental method is very often not possible. One reason for this may be that the societal event to be studied, if put into an experimental situation, would be altered out of all recognition; an example would be a coronation — unless there is a real monarch being really crowned it would by definition not be a coronation. Indeed this is so with countless social events: rearing children, giving a lecture, making love, dying, praying, breaking the law, all of these if put into an artificial experimental situation which is not real to the participants, cease to bear any close relation to their reality in the real world.

Secondly, the experimental method involves some control over the subject matter, and often the sociologist does not have this right over fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> The experimental method involves the conscious manipulation of variables; usually the sociologist has no right to play around with people's lives in this way and he has to wait until the variables change of their own accord or he has to search till he finds another otherwise similar group for whom the variable has already changed: hence the value of historical and comparative cross-cultural studies. Thirdly, even were a particular experiment possible, the event studied may never happen again or it may not be possible to predict when it would happen again, and so it is not possible for another sociologist to repeat the study.

There are other ways in which the experimental method is of dubious value for sociology, but I hope to have made the point by now. This is that it is intrinsically difficult to check a sociologist's data; one never quite knows whether, if one had been in his position, one would have collected the same data, or whether the situation has now changed. One has therefore to read between the lines in order to assess the data — and to do this one has to know not only about his theoretical and philosophical assumptions but also his position *vis-a-vis* his subject matter, the reasons for his study, and his political and religious (including atheist or agnostic) commitments.

The social scientist's awareness of an explication of his involvement in his subject matter is not an esoteric contemplation of his intellectual navel by which he does penance for not being able to fulfil the conditions of natural science. It is an inherent part of the process by which intellectual work is made public, thereby enabling criticism from others which in its turn is the only way in which knowledge can be advanced. The position I am advocating is well put by Gouldner (1970:497) in his plea for a 'reflexive sociology' to replace the 'methodological dualism' by which many sociologists have attempted to ape the natural sciences:

Methodological Dualism entails a fantasy of the sociologist's Godlike invisibility and of his Olympian power to influence — or not influence — those around him, as he pleases. In contrast...a Reflexive Sociology believes that sociologists are really only mortal; that they inevitably change others and are changed by them, in planned and unanticipated ways, during their efforts to know them; and that knowing and changing are distinguishable but not separable processes. The aim of the Reflexive Sociologist, then, is not to remove

his influence on others but to know it, which requires that he must become aware of himself as both knower and as agent of change.

The natural scientist reduces the natural world to objects because he wishes to manipulate it in his experiments and control it in his applied technology.<sup>5</sup> If something can be conceived of as an object, determined by specifiable forces, then this gives the knower power over the object. This view of science has generally been supported by Christians on the grounds that it is part of the divine mandate to man to have dominion over the earth. The inappropriateness of this philosophy to the study of human society should be obvious, for our apparent ability to coerce nature in no way justifies coercion of our fellow humans. Indeed, the sociologist should see his fellow man not so much as an object which he studies but as a fellow being who is likewise attempting to understand his relation to society. The realisation of the sociologist that he is like other men in that his view of society is not unbiased or 'value-free', but is committed and involved, enables him to see others not as objects to be experimented *on* but as people to study *with*, what Gouldner (1970:490) calls 'brother sociologists'. Thus self-reflective awareness by the sociologist enables not only better criticism of his work by others, but also enables him to conduct his research in a spirit of humble cooperation rather than arrogant manipulation.

How does the sociologist become self-reflective? One way is through the comparative method. The sociologist is not free or able to consciously control and manipulate the social phenomena he wants to study, but he can 'tour around' the world in order to see how it looks from different positions. Perhaps the classic example of this is Max Weber's study of the relation between society, economy, and religion by comparing their inter-relations in ancient Judaism, Christianity, China, and India. Related to this is the historical method, in which the phenomenon is seen through the eyes of different societies as they have existed historically. A classic example here is Karl Marx's study of the connections between modes of production, relations of production, and forms of society, as they appeared progressively in Roman society, feudalism, and capitalism.

As he tours around, the sociologist begins to see how things look from various vantage points; then he can put the perceptions of different groups into some perspective — but this perspective is always his own. It is rather like surveying a piece of land from various vantage points with the intention of making a map but finding that the various readings do not exactly fit together.



The geographer, if he takes his readings correctly, finds that they are complementary; the sociologist, if he understands people correctly, very often finds their views are contradictory. Their different perspectives do not automatically fit together, so the sociological map can only be made if the sociologist uses some framework of his own with which to put his data into some coherent perspective. Some use a rather stronger framework than others; Marx, for example, fitted his historical data into a very powerful framework, whereas Weber was content with a looser framework. This meant that Weber did more justice to the complexity of society, but at the cost of having a few more loose ends than Marx. But some kind of framework is essential if sociology is not to degenerate into a splurge of unrelatable so-called facts.

This review of some of the ways in which the sociologist is involved in the very processes which he is observing, and of some of the ways in which sociology comes to terms with this situation, could be extended in several other directions. Suffice it to say for the time being that, although there are proven methods of systematically studying society (e.g. the cross-cultural method) which distinguish sociology from the other social sciences and from the personal viewpoints of individuals, nevertheless the sociologist is not and cannot be detached in the manner of the natural scientist. The social scientist has to be an amalgam of participant and observer, and his language reflects this; put another way, he often has to attend simultaneously to two or three of the several aspects of reality.

### *Facts and Values*

I have noted that the claim that scientific and religious or personal languages are complementary rests on the assertion that the one derives from the stance of the observer while the others derive from the stance of the participant. Another related distinction crucial to the complementarity of science and religion is that between facts and values, between statements of 'what is' and 'what ought to be'. Thus, one cannot logically derive 'ought' from 'is', and a key charge against humanists is that they often attempt to do just this (C. Martin 1973:90). Also one cannot derive empirical descriptions of 'what is' from what one believes to be the case on *a priori* grounds which was the logical mistake of Christians who opposed Copernican astronomy. Thus many conflicts over science and religion can be seen to be illusory once we have understood that normative and indicative statements should not be confused.

But things become more difficult to grasp when we consider statements about society rather than the natural world. Indicative ('is') statements derive from an observer stance, normative ('ought') statements from a participant stance. But as we have discussed above, the sociological perspective involves a mixture of these, and this means that empirical descriptions of society are normative as well as indicative since the observer is also a participant in the situation. As MacKay puts it (personal communication):

There is a normative as well as an indicative ingredient in any purported description of a social situation that is offered *in* that situation.

This then prompts the question of what is the relation between the indicative and normative ingredients of a sociological description? It is important to answer this, or else we may expect reincarnations of the spurious 'ought from is' and 'is from ought' howlers. I suggest that the relationship is twofold:

(1) Although empirical descriptions of society cannot be logically derived from normative commitments, they do rest on and are prompted by normative concerns. For example, it is often the belief that something has gone wrong with society that prompts a social scientist to start an investigation — there are other motivations but this identification of 'social pathology' is often an important one. The economist, for example, may study inflation because he believes it to be bad, the psychologist may study mental illness because he is confronted with people in distress and unable to cope with life, Marxist sociologists analyse the dynamics of capitalism because they believe man to be oppressed and alienated, and contemporary social scientists study poverty in order to find out who is below the poverty line. These moral concerns do not cease once the investigation is under way; normative aspects show up all the way along the line in the definitions of mental illness, poverty, etc. which the social scientist uses, and efforts to rid his studies of these normative ingredients end up importing new norms (see Taylor, Walton & Young 1973:ch.5 for a critique of the attempt to de-norm the discipline of criminology.)

Other sociologists choose their subject matter, not because they believe it to be going wrong, but out of genuine curiosity as to how the social world works (Berger 1966:36). But, as I discussed earlier, they too are part of this world, with vested interests and culturally conditioned views which affect their sociological investigations. Further, if their theories are to remain comprehensible, they have to use concepts in everyday use —

status, class, inequality, power, integration, adaptation, etc. which, however clearly defined, are still inherently normative.

However, sociologists have not always been prepared to admit the normative bases of their work. Sociology is a relatively new discipline and it needed to struggle in order to achieve recognition, most crucially in America from the 1930's to the 1950's, a period characterised by the enormously high prestige of the natural sciences, and it is not surprising that sociologists latched onto the methods of the natural sciences as the means to enable sociology to take off. In much the same way in the 19th Century, the earliest sociologists had borrowed the prestigious doctrine of evolution from biology — a doctrine which conveniently legitimated not only their anti-religious bias but also their commitment to *laissez-faire* capitalism, thus giving them an ear among the politicians. The modern variant of this is the belief among many sociologists that they should and do separate their sociology from their personal commitments — the belief that they can do and think and believe one thing as a sociologist and something else as a citizen or religious believer. This appears to be the position taken, for example, by Peter Berger in his *A Rumour of Angels* (1971), somewhat surprisingly perhaps in view of his sensitive earlier discussion (1966) on the relation between sociology and freedom. This position is now being increasingly criticised. Kolb (1961:6) has discussed how difficult psychologically it is to hold one set of values as a scientist and another set as a human being. Friedrichs (1970:ch.7) has shown the deficiency of the idea that one can play one role as a sociologist and another as a citizen without the two impinging on each other, for the very idea that one can split up the complex unity of a person's life into discrete 'roles' is an invention of sociologists themselves. The concept of role is maybe a useful way of simplifying and hence gaining some sociological understanding of the complexities of life in a complex society such as our own, and as such it has become a standard tool for many sociologists. But the person who believes in the necessity of splitting social scientific from personal roles cannot surely allow himself to take a sociological concept like 'role' and make it into a moral and philosophical concept directing and legitimating his activity as a person. Or, if he *can* transfer concepts from sociology to morality and philosophy at will like this, then this surely shows that there is a good deal more interplay between his life as a sociologist and the rest of his life than he would claim. Either way he is being inconsistent.

Even were the sociologist able to detach himself and his values from his study of society, society would still not detach itself from him. Society provides the wherewithal with which to study society; the sociologist studies the very thing that in one way or another gives him the money, the education and the hardware with which to do this, and one can hardly imagine that his education was neutral or that money comes with no strings attached. This is an entirely more complex situation than that in which the natural scientist finds himself, for he is not in the position where the very thing he is studying provides the funds for his study. Molecules don't commission research; society does. And if it be objected that sociological research which is funded independent of government or industry is free from this circularity, this is by no means so, for those of independent means derive their income from some form of economic activity and that activity cannot be neutral with regard to society. For the sociologist to claim that he is detached and unbiased suggests a diagnosis of near-total blindness which is most disturbing among someone entrusted with the empirical study of society.

(ii) Not only do descriptions of what is going on in society rest on normative assumptions, but these 'is' descriptions provoke questions of 'ought', either in the sociologist or in his lay audience. Indeed this is a valuable function of sociology — rather than smothering moral questions (as is sometimes thought by those who fear the spectre of determinism in sociology) sociology serves, or should serve, to prod us to ask moral questions. We tend collectively to invent our own mythical version of what society is like, and a function of empirical sociology is to show what society is really like (real in terms of the sociologist's normative starting point). Empirical sociological descriptions should make us exclaim 'Gosh, if *that's* what society's like, I wonder if it ought to be like that?'

Merely to describe what is happening in society is inherently critical, for it forces us to ask whether society should be that way; this is different from the scientist's description of nature — we would never dream of asking whether nature ought to be the way the scientist has found it to be! Thus, for the christian social scientist Ellul (1965:xxiv), "to bear witness to the fact of the technological society is the most revolutionary of all possible acts". The sociological description should trigger off a personal and ethical response.

It is only in the last few hundred years that people generally have begun to lose the assumption that things must always be the way they are now; it is only relatively recently in human history that we have engaged in political debate, that we have felt that there is some choice in the way our society is organised. And perhaps it is only even more recently that we have believed ourselves to have any choice in the kind of economy a country has. Sociology has become part of this process of enabling people to think, "Is the way things are now the best way they could be? What kind of modifications to society and its economy could actually be made? Do I have to live the way I have done up till now?" The relation between necessity and freedom, between how society is at present and how we ought to change it for the future, between theory and action (or 'praxis') is one of the continuing debates of sociology, but what cannot be doubted is that there is a close and intimate relation between the two.

That sociological findings trigger off an ethical or normative response has implications for sociological method in that the subject matter is liable to change as a result of the efforts of those who study it. Whatever sociologists discover about social processes is sooner or later communicated to a lay audience and this presents people with the opportunity to modify their behaviour in the light of what sociology has discovered. This is one reason why there are probably no discoverable, perpetual social laws akin to the laws of natural science. For whereas the natural scientist affects only the matter he is currently studying, the social scientist, through publication of his findings, can affect his subject matter in the future. As a hypothetical example, sociologists could discover that, say, second-born children do worse at school than do first-born, but this would not represent the discovery of an all-time law, for were parents to become aware of this finding they might become extra concerned about the prospects of their second-born offspring and give them extra tuition or other help, thus in time nullifying the sociologists' findings. Or, publication of a sociological finding could lead to the particular phenomenon becoming exaggerated. For example, it has been found that delinquency (as measured by committals to court) is associated with a disturbed family background; this finding is now so commonly known that children from good families tend not to get referred to court on the grounds that they are probably not 'really' delinquent and their homes will correct any wayward tendencies they may have. Thus the court figures show an even closer association between bad home background and delinquency.

Molecules never learn of what the chemist discovers about them; but people do hear of what the social scientist discovers. Indeed it would be wrong were they not to hear, for then knowledge would rest in the hands of an *élite* which would thus have a power which it could potentially misuse.<sup>6</sup> A nation for example in which social scientists advised the government in secret memoranda and in which their findings were not made public would be on the verge of 1984 where concentration of knowledge in the hands of an *élite* gives it the power to manipulate society at will.<sup>7</sup> Lest this sound absurd, it is worth remembering that anthropology has been in a similar position; written in the language of colonial administrators (also comprehensible to the new indigenous *élites*), anthropological findings rarely filter back to the tribesmen they concern and represent a body of knowledge which can be used by administrators, politicians, and planners to manipulate the people. The disinclination of the poorer and less powerful in our own society to read sociology — indeed, given the jargon, their inability to read it — gives a similar advantage to the administrators who have commissioned so much social research in Britain. Hopefully this imbalance in the distribution of knowledge is changing now that many minority and subordinate groups are organising themselves in self-help and liberation groups and are enlisting social scientists as advisers.

Sociology, if misused, can further the enslavement and manipulation of man; if made public, it can further human freedom. MacKay has pointed out in his argument on logical indeterminacy (1967; 1974a) that as soon as you tell a person that his behaviour can be explained by a causal theory, the situation is changed, the theory becomes out of date, and the person is free to modify his behaviour. Social science, if communicated, automatically changes the social situations it purports to know about; it gives people in those situations choices as to what they should do about their increased knowledge about these situations. Sociology thus makes us more responsible for it forces us to respond. It cannot tell us what we must do, for social science cannot supply the final purposes toward which we direct our lives. But it does increase knowledge about our situation and this puts us in a position of increased choice and responsibility. We become more aware of the consequences of our actions and of the costs which different courses of action involve (D. Martin 1973; Friedrichs 1970). This is not to say that people should evaluate actions purely in terms of the consequences, for there is still the question of how to evaluate various consequences. Sociology cannot tell us how to act, but it does increase our responsibility and it may increase our freedom.

However, there is another side to the story. Although there is no logical imperative that it *must*, it frequently happens that sociology *does* alter our values and concerns. Partly this is because it shows us that much of our life which we had previously assumed could be lived no other way is in other societies and other cultures lived in very different ways. We learn that what we had thought was a necessity is in fact a historically relative societal product, one which may be changed. Partly too, our values change because sociology shifts our focus away from the individual onto the level of society. For example, some students, intending to go into social work because they are concerned about poor people, deprived families, old folk, etc., enrol in a course of sociology. There they find they have to study very broad issues such as the nature of industrial society, and they begin to see that the problems of poverty, deprivation, or old age, are products of our kind of society, and that personal social work can achieve much less than they had supposed. Personal troubles become public issues (Mills 1970), and the values of individualistic social casework seem to evaporate, leaving the student jobless and unprepared (for example, theologically) for the unexpected entanglement with politics. This is not to say that the prospective social worker must react to sociology in this way, merely that it is one way (and a fairly common one) and it illustrates how one's values may be changed via a course in sociology. A rather different response is to be completely bored by the seeming irrelevance of vague sociological theories to the real life business of meeting people in need — but this response too involves a change in values in that the student henceforth places less value on academic qualifications and more value on experience. A third and perhaps more constructive response is that sociology can point out the limitations of social work without denying its validity, and this would alter the values of the student who had hitherto envisaged social work as *the* solution to all our problems.

### *Sociological Language and Religious Language*

I have tried to show that sociology involves a mixture of the observer and participant stances and that this produces some interesting inter-relations between factual and normative statements about society. The demonstration by previous authors of the complementarity of natural scientific and personal/religious statements has rested on distinctions between scientific and other languages *vis-à-vis* their presuppositions and contexts of use, roughly as follows:

SCIENTIFIC STATEMENTSPERSONAL/ARTISTIC/RELIGIOUS STATEMENTS

Objects	Persons
Detachment	Involvement
Observer	Participant
Facts	Values, beliefs, opinions
Neutrality	Commitment, meaning
Causality	Freedom

I have suggested that sociology has to use a mixture from both columns. To talk sociologically about society one has to talk about persons. And because persons as they act in society can be conscious, purposeful, rational and creative, they cannot be reduced to objects in the style of the natural sciences. To do this would lead us to conceive of society as a static set of forces moulding and coercing individual members, and although this picture may be true some of the time it leaves us with no way of understanding how society changes and has become the way it is now, no way of understanding how society is affected by the actions of its members. The social behaviour of human beings is not like a physical object in that it cannot be understood solely with the natural scientific concepts of causal determination and random variance (although human beings undoubtedly can be socially coerced and at times do behave randomly). Marxist and existential sociologists have realised this and have produced more adequate sociological models than could be derived from natural science. This is not in the least to advocate that sociology can or should only make personal statements, for society and social behaviour do show regularities and there is a great need for sociology to involve systematic empirical observations made with a carefulness equal to that of the natural sciences. Society consists of a complex and variable intertwining of social necessity and individual freedom interacting with each other, and for the sociologist to use solely the methods of the arts or solely the methods of science is to miss the nature of his subject matter.

This means that there are elements that sociological language has in common with both the language of science and the language of personal communication, personal commitment and religion. Thus, although there are differences between sociological and religious language, their preconditions and contexts of use show some similarities and so are not mutually exclusive in every respect; hence they are not logically complementary in the terms



of the definition of complementarity quoted at the beginning of this paper. I do not intend here to explore what relationship does exist between sociology and religion — it is enough for one paper to demonstrate that social science and religion are *not* logically complementary.

This conclusion is important. Many Christian students feel as threatened by sociology today as did their forebears by evolutionary theory and determinism in the natural sciences. There is a great need to clarify the relation between religious faith and sociological knowledge, and it is important to realise that the relation is not, strictly speaking, one of logical complementarity. (This conclusion that the two are not logically complementary has been arrived at in this paper by starting with the concepts previously used in the argument that natural science and religion are complementary. However, since I have arrived at a negative conclusion regarding the complementarity of sociology and religion, this conclusion could also be accepted by those who have reservations about the argument for the complementarity of natural science and religion.)

There is not space here to explore the relation further, but I personally believe that sociological and religious views do have different and definable terms of reference, and these are in urgent need of exploration (Lyon 1975 is a start). For example, sociology uses retrospective data and cannot begin to make exact predictions or to talk with any certainty about the future. This separates it not only from natural science but also from the vision and hope of religious faith, which looks forward and provides specific motives for action. Secondly, whereas the sociologist can only see society from within, the claim of those who believe in revelation from a transcendental God is that religious language involves knowledge about man and society from a totally outside perspective.

That sociology and religion are not logically complementary does not mean that they may not be compatible in some other way. Further there are valuable ways in which they can speak to each other. Religion can be constructively sceptical about some of the humanist assumptions of sociology and Christians have a part to play in the current debate within sociology as to theory and method. Sociology is undergoing what Kuhn (1962) would term a revolution in which several different theoretical paradigms are being discussed in the light of empirical evidence (Friedrichs 1970). On the other side of the coin, sociology raises theological issues. It reminds us that even revelation from a transcendental God has to be mediated culturally if we are to receive it, and this raises the question of whether some cultures

enable or hinder communication from God to man. Sociological statistics show correlations between belief in Christ and membership of racial and class groups — do the values and lifestyles of some groups hinder the spread of the Gospel, and if so does this mean we need to redeem or reform cultures and social structures as well as individuals? Our conceptions of God, like other forms of personal knowledge, vary from one culture and social group to another — should we be thinking more about what kinds of social groups embody the Kingdom of God? Our knowledge of God has changed over the centuries — how does the Holy Spirit work through historical change to bring us near to God anew in each era? Some have begun to think of the theological implications (e.g. Segundo 1974), but we have a long way to go yet in clarifying quite what sociology and religion may and may not say to each other.

## NOTES

- 1 Not all social science can be included in my argument; the behaviourist psychology of B.F. Skinner, for example, is more akin to natural science than to much of sociology.
- 2 The reader should note that there is some internal disagreement within sociology as to the nature of the subject and its subject matter; the position I advocate is thus one among several.
- 3 This procedure must be handled with care. The *reductio ad absurdum* is that one can debunk any work by uncovering the socio/economic/political interests of the author; but then the debunker can be debunked by the same procedure. Thus an infinite regress is set up in which no knowledge is possible, including the idea that one can debunk knowledge in this way, in which case one cannot be sure of the veracity of the original debunking. I therefore advocate this procedure be used with a degree of humility and fairness, lest it be turned back upon oneself.
- 4 Of course, sociologists *do* (often intentionally) affect other people when they publish. Rather than reducing the force of the present argument about the manipulation of people in experiments, this serves to highlight the peculiar ethical and logical dilemmas of publishing sociological findings, which I discuss later.
- 5 This does not apply to all science. Astronomy and ethology, for example, deviate from my rather simplified model of the experimental method in ways rather similar to sociology.

- 6 It is also arguable that in certain situations, e.g. concerning children, it would be wrong *were* they to hear. The ethical issues here could well do with the pondering of a few christian minds.
- 7 Against this, it is arguable that the complexity of society is increasing faster than our knowledge of it, and thus our ability to manipulate society is decreasing.

## REFERENCES

- BERGER, P.L. (1966) *Invitation to sociology*. Penguin.
- BERGER, P.L. (1971) *A rumour of angels*. Penguin.
- ELLUL, J. (1965) *The technological society*. New York: Free Press.
- GOULDNER, A. (1970) *The coming crisis of Western sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- HORKHEIMER, M. (1972) *Critical theory - selected essays*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- INGRAM, D. (1965) "Plan and purpose in the universe" in MacKay D.M. op. cit.
- KOLB, W.I. (1961) "Images of man and the sociology of religion" *J. for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 1(1)(Oct).
- KUHN, T. (1962) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago Univ. Press.
- LYON, D. (1975) *Christians and sociology*. Inter-Varsity Press.
- MACKAY, D.M. (1955) "Man as observer-predictor" pp. 15-28 in H. Westmann "Man in his relationships".
- MACKAY, D.M. (1958) "Complementarity II" *Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Vol.* 32:105-122.
- MACKAY, D.M. (1963) "Machines and societies" pp.153-167 in G. Wolstenholme "Man and his future".
- MACKAY, D.M., Ed. (1965) *Christianity in a mechanistic universe*.
- MACKAY, D.M. (1967) *Freedom of action in a mechanistic universe*, C.U.P.
- MACKAY, D.M. (1974a) *The clockwork image*. Inter-Varsity Press.
- MACKAY, D.M. (1974b) "'Complementarity' in scientific and theological thinking" *Zygon* 9 (3): 225-244.
- MARTIN, C. (1973) *How human can you get?* Inter-Varsity Press.
- MARTIN, D. (1973) "The nature of man: sociology and religion" *Christian* 1 (3): 233-240.
- MILLS, C.W. (1970) *The sociological imagination*. Penguin.
- NIEBUHR, R. (1956) *The self and the dramas of history*.
- SEGUNDO, J.L. (1974) *Our idea of God*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- TAYLOR, I., WALTON, P. & YOUNG, J. (1973) *The new criminology*.