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HOMELESS MINDS?

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'Homelessness', according to one major school of contemporary sociological thought, is the characteristic condition of late twentieth century industrial man and the fate of all those who are caught up in the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation. The metaphor comes from the title of a book by Peter Berger, who is probably the most important exponent of this view, and it describes the social-psychological state of persons who are subject to the highly differentiated processes of complex industrial societies such as their highly fragmented division of labour, their extensive bureaucratic organisation and their unprecedented diversity of life-styles. Because of this differentiation, people are said to experience difficulty in finding a stable or unified personal and social identity.¹

The categories which Berger and his associates developed for understanding these processes are derived partly from the classical sociologies of religion and organisation (especially those of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, and their concepts of institution, authority, and bureaucracy) and partly from a phenomenology which takes it to be axiomatic that society is a 'socially constructed reality'. As anyone who is familiar with Berger's work will know, this has interesting consequences for the study of religious phenomena, for instead of being compartmentalized and treated as a separate object of theory and research, religious institutions and ideas take their place alongside other institutions and symbol systems which are not overtly religious in the processes of meaning-creation and reality-construction.²

This is by no means a completely new departure, of course. Arguably, the most persuasive sociological theories of religion have always tended to subordinate the category 'religion' in its

specific, institutional sense and assume that religious and other cultural institutions are analytically equivalent. This is certainly true of the sociologies of religion found in Marx, Durkheim and Weber as well as of contemporary theories, including Berger's.

Contemporary empirical studies of religion are bound in the same direction *via* a somewhat different route. As social science developed as a discipline in higher education, there naturally developed the empirical study of practices, institutions and beliefs which by their own definition could be called 'religious'. This tradition is still alive and flourishing, particularly on the continent of Europe. However, interest has turned more recently towards what Towler calls 'common religion', or those beliefs and practices which, having some religious content, are outside the control of 'official religion' and whose significance will not usually be recognised by the churches.³ He would include a whole variety of (usually non-systematic) beliefs about God, the supernatural, the meaning of suffering, the efficacy of prayer, and so on. And indeed there is evidence that this religious undergrowth is active, perhaps increasingly so, despite the decline of institutional religion. Luckmann takes this approach a stage further, which brings back the empirical study of religion in an almost full circle to the idea that to study culture in general is to study religion and *vice versa*. Instead of contrasting 'official' with 'unofficial' religion, he contrasts *all* church-orientated religion with 'natural' or 'invisible' religion which need not necessarily contain any element or belief in the supernatural. In a rather similar way, Mol equates religion with the construction of meaning and identity and describes religion as the 'sacralization of identity'.⁴

At first sight, it might seem that such approaches make the idea of 'secularization' redundant. If there are no theoretical grounds for distinguishing between the sacred and the secular, between religious and non-religious, the category of secularity is hard to justify except perhaps in the description of the historically limited process of transfer of land and property from Church to State. On a closer view, however, there are signs that the theme of secularization has affinities with 'homelessness' or the differentiation theme, and that when they are brought together they help to clarify each other. The purpose of this paper is to map out some of these connections and their consequences in four stages. The first section shows how 'secularization' as conventionally described can be interpreted within the more general framework of differentiation or pluralization, and how the persistence as well as the decline of religion can be understood. In the second section, I draw attention to the parallels which seem to exist between the traditional categories of *sacred/profane* and the newer categories

of *private/public* as they occur in discussions of differentiation and identity. There then follows a section which describes some of the general consequences which the multiplication of modes of personal existence might have for personal and social identity in advanced industrial societies. The final section includes some speculation on the projections which have been made by authors such as Daniel Bell as to the future of religion (in the conventional sense) in the late 20th century. Bell, a leading American sociologist, predicts a widespread revival and the re-emergence of religion as a cornerstone of cultural legitimation. Others of course predict the continued decline of traditional values and the major religious symbol systems, especially in the industrialized countries of North America and Western Europe.

Secularization and Social Differentiation

There are probably few who would disagree with the proposition that in the development of industrial societies there has been a broad tendency for the church to become at least partly differentiated from other institutional spheres to which it was once more closely related, such as the state, social control, education, welfare, etc. Whether or not as a consequence, it is also generally accepted that there has been a process of institutional differentiation within the church and a parallel diversification of roles, allegiances and beliefs at the personal level. Even if it were possible, it is not my task here to provide a general account of these processes (a recent book by David Martin⁵ shows what an extensive project that would be). My objective is more limited: to try and illustrate how the 'sacred canopy' of religious legitimation can be replaced by other sources of meaning or identity and how this process is both limited and self-contradictory because it is rooted in social processes which necessarily consist of disharmonious elements. It would be quite appropriate to use the term secularization in this context to describe one element in society's neglect of or movement away from principles of order and interaction which are transcendental or at least 'extra-social'. But it would not adequately describe the complex totality of the processes whereby meanings, values and identities are formed, lost and re-formed.

I take 'identity' to be an active construction, not simply a mirror image of social structure or role as some social theorists would like it to be. Typically, it consists of ideas or themes which, although they may not provide a comprehensive or fully consistent framework for understanding self and society, still provide a means to understand the fragments of personal experience and collate them in meaningful ways. It is simple enough to illustrate the point. For instance, only a very small number of voters could give anything like a full account of the

social forces, the theories and the policies which divide the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties; but a majority of voters have no difficulty in placing themselves (i.e. articulating a social identity) in the party political spectrum. Religion supplies another example. In a National Opinion Poll Survey in 1970 asking people which denomination they were associated with, only 4% either claimed to be non-religious or did not know.⁶ Obviously, only a very small fraction of the remaining 96% were actually involved in the activities of the denominations to which they claimed allegiance. For results like this to be intelligible, there have to be routine identity-forming processes which operate outside the 'official' channels of socialization and education. As Roland Robertson declares, "in modern circumstances of great individuation it seems entirely unrealistic to speak positively of individuals assimilating large chunks of traditional values in a relatively unreflective manner".⁷ But the fact is that social identities are somehow still maintained. The question therefore remains: how do people still seem to arrive at reasonably stable modes of individual and collective existence even when monolithic values and symbols have been eroded (I take it that for all the talk of crisis we are not yet witnessing the breakdown of civilized society)?

An answer to this rhetorical question requires some understanding of the background to the theory of differentiation or pluralism as it is sometimes called. The theory as expounded by Berger rests on an assumption about the relative homogeneity of institutions in traditional society compared with the institutions of modern society. Quite simply, it starts from the idea that modern industrial societies are made up of various institutionally isolated sectors, whereas in traditional societies the various sectors (e.g. family, work, religion, art, government, etc.) could all be seen as aspects of a single, integrated whole. In a tribal society, for example, a place in the kinship system automatically gave you a place in the others.

In a highly differentiated, urban industrial society it clearly does not follow that one role is automatically linked to other roles in different institutions - so I may have an identity based on my occupational role as a bus-conductor which has no bearing on my role as a voter, father, or consumer. Or so the theory goes. The various isolated sectors of society require the individual to play disparate roles, thus imposing disparate identities. Most importantly, there is no single, coherent system of meaning in such a society to compare with the religious meaning systems of traditional societies. In other words, the family, church, education, the army, political parties and the media are all said to be less interwoven and interdependent, so that they fail to provide a coherent design or definition of reality.

Several things follow from this general analytical approach, including major consequences for the understanding of personal and social identity — how we define ourselves and how we relate to the rest of society.

Differentiation and Identity

Historically, one of the expressions of the differentiation process has been a distinction between public life and private life. This has become the primary framework in which the perennial problems of identity have to be resolved. It is the context for the identity crises and personal dilemmas which seem to characterise the 'homeless mind'. Not least, it is the battlefield in the struggle for a religious culture.⁸

The increasing divergence of institutional spheres gives each institution a large measure of autonomy. Social institutions, which generally have the form of bureaucratic organizations, seem to grow, develop and operate as it were according to rules which they write themselves. There is a strong sense, therefore, in which bureaucracies and institutions of the public sphere seem to set over against the individual as alien and immovable objects. This is what Berger calls the objective autonomy of social institutions.

What then of the individual? Is he merely the alienated object of this external objective reality which presses down on him in the forms of bureaucratic control? Obviously not entirely. The analysis of differentiation makes room for a different kind of social institution — private rather than public ones. What our society defines as the private sphere (especially marriage, family and friendship) can be seen as those institutions which provide for the subjective autonomy of the individual. Emotionally, intellectually and physically, the individual tends to invest a great deal in this sphere, which he can claim as being uniquely his or her own.

The general significance of this private/public distinction lies in the disharmony between them in a differentiated or pluralistic society. Since there is no single, overarching source of meaning in a pluralistic society, people have to search for significance in the various institutions in which they participate. In theory, any kind of institution or corporate experience can be the object of this search, but in practice, this search for meaning typically ends up in the private worlds of the home, marriage, family and friends. This is literally the process of the construction of a 'home world', a shelter from the chaos of meanings and identities in the public sphere. It is, or at least appears to be, less subject to arbitrary and uncontrollable outside influences. There is a sense in which

this 'private' sphere in modern society has characteristics of 'sacredness' analogous to the sphere of the sacred in pre-industrial societies. In particular, the distinction between 'private' and 'public' is so comprehensive that it allows almost any aspect of meaning and behaviour to be classified — and the absoluteness of the classification is precisely what persuaded Durkheim to use the sacred/profane distinction as the foundation for his theory of religion.

But, this construction of a home world, given the vulnerability of the 'private' sphere to misunderstanding, disruption and emotional overloading, is a hazardous and precarious business. Its very subjectivity makes it a doubtful candidate for elevation to sacred status.

Continuing with this general description, it is possible to state some of the implications for personal identity of a society organised (or disorganized) along these lines.

If one thinks of identity as an answer to the questions 'who am I?', 'where did I come from?', 'where am I going to?' then the sense of identity is a bringing together of the answers to these questions in a general plan which makes some sort of sense of the vast range of actual experiences — past, present and future. According to Berger's analysis modern identity has four characteristic features.⁹ In the first place it is relatively undetermined, complex and uncertain in its formation. That is, it is not something given but something which individuals plan for themselves. One way to think of this is to compare the rather predictable biography of the average person in traditional society with the modern person's, whose career or biography is like a migration through a whole series of different and detached social worlds (e.g. family, school, college, unemployment, variety of jobs, retirement). Berger says that this open-endedness of modern identity creates psychological strains and makes the modern individual peculiarly 'conversion-prone' because he is anxious to grasp at any plausible ready-made identity. A second feature, which follows from the importance of the private sphere in a highly differentiated society, is that the 'search for reality' is most likely to be in the subjective realm; the individual seeks a foothold in reality in himself rather than outside himself. It follows that modern man is more likely than traditional man to be afflicted by what might be called 'identity crisis' and relativistic values. However, it does not necessarily follow that modern identity is random and unreflective. In fact the third feature Berger notes is that it is reflective to a high degree. A 'plural' world, unlike a highly integrated world, forces an individual to make decisions and plans, to interpret the complexity rather than taking it for granted. We are very busy 'rationalizing', finding explanations and excuses for the way things are and the way we act. Finally, the

individual is the reference point in the search for meaning and coherence, and therefore the individual has first place in the hierarchy of values. Advanced industrial societies are overwhelmingly legitimated by the ideology of individualism: individual autonomy and individual rights. This phenomenon extends to religion, which has become the expression of private meaning par excellence.

A difficulty with this view which relies so heavily on the ideas of individualism and 'privatization' is that it begs the question of how society can possibly hang together. The classical sociological 'problem of order' reappears in a new form. In fact, trying to explain the cohesiveness of modern society is much harder than explaining its conflicts or its tendency to disintegrate. But order is undoubtedly maintained somehow.

The classical pluralist assumption is that order is maintained by the checks and balances which are built into the system, such that all the different actions and reactions tend to cancel out, thus preserving stability. However, this account is hardly satisfying. It manages to conjure order out of disorder, without proposing any real explanation. The alternative, which has been suggested by a number of people who would otherwise describe modern society as 'differentiated', is that there is a general coercive force in such a society which keeps it together as an integrated whole. Some would describe this force as bureaucracy, others may be as the state; Marxists would describe it as the dominant culture or ideology. For the moment, how it is described is less important than the actual existence of such a force. In fact what it implies is that social control in modern society is very strong and pervasive precisely because of the privatization of the modern individual. That is to say, the separation of the private from the public sphere puts institutions beyond the control of any individual and as often as not even beyond the power of organized groups to change or challenge. And it makes the private, individual sphere particularly vulnerable to manipulation and direction by powerful interests.

This particular observation anticipates a subsequent stage in the argument. Its merit is to guard against placing too much stress on the forces of differentiation and to draw attention to the countervailing forces which help to conserve order and identity. The immediate problem is: what evidence can be found empirically of the theoretically-postulated 'privatisation', 'individualism', 'crisis of identity' and so on — the retreat from totality views of society and comprehensive beliefs or ideologies?

Trends in Social Consciousness in Industrial Society

In this section I will avoid specific references to religious consciousness because the general discussion of meaning construction and identity formation must appeal to empirical research which makes reference to general self and social images which do not necessarily have a religious content. Nearly all of the studies referred to below sample on an occupational basis rather than any other because they assume that occupational experience or 'labour' in its most abstract sense is the key to social identity and consciousness. This is a sound assumption because industrial society by definition subordinates or harnesses religious, ethnic, class and other sectional interests to industrial production and accumulation - although I would not deny that religious commitment, national feeling, or class consciousness for example, may become salient under certain circumstances or that these may transcend the boundaries of the social division of labour.

Numerous empirical studies have been carried out in Britain and Europe since the 1950's to try and establish the varieties of social consciousness, 'images of society' or social identities which exist among the different social strata, and especially among the manual working class. One major study from Germany, in the late 1950's showed beyond doubt that within a single occupational group in fact, there may exist wide differences of social imagery which can neither be dismissed as the products of personality structure nor accounted for by contrasts in the work situation and in skill.¹⁰ However, although there were found to be differences in the number of strata or classes the workers chose to identify and differences in the ways in which these were evaluated there was an important common denominator in the diversity of attitudes and opinions; namely, an image of society as a *dichotomy* - 'us and them' or more precisely an awareness of the collective fate of the working class (i.e. those who do physical, value-creating work). Subsequent studies all confirmed this finding, at least for the next decade or so. And other evidence consistently pointed to a prevailing *hierarchical* image of society among white collar workers.

In these various studies, 'image of society' or 'social self-image' had the appearance of a comprehensive framework for interpreting complex social situations. Workers used it as a scanning device for locating and clarifying individual experiences in their social context. Whether the evidence pointed to a dichotomy or a hierarchy of social groups, the idea of a more or less cohesive society provided a reference point and a basis for identity.

More recent evidence shows that there has been some decline in the coherence of these 'images of society' as organising frameworks. It suggests that the influence of the dichotomous, us/them scheme has diminished and that individual experience is replacing collectivity as the dominant reference point in the social consciousness of workers. It is here that the link with the broad themes of differentiation, modernisation and 'abstraction' (to use Zijderveld's term) are to be seen most clearly.¹¹ In an increasingly differentiated world of work, consciousness of shared goals and collective achievement are found to have declined, leaving very little in the way of uniform structures of social thought. Particularly important seems to be the reduced significance of the physical aspects of work. Other factors are the changing role of the trade unions (which have ceased to be the chief mediators of marxist-socialist theory) and an increasingly uniform commodity consciousness. The attributes which are now appealed to by workers for their self interpretation are individualistic attributes which are just as likely to be based on roles in consumption as on performance at work.

The other side of this coin seems to be a resigned or sceptical attitude towards society and uncertainty and inconsistency in judgements about social questions.¹² These findings are plausibly an accurate reflection of the fragmentary and contradictory nature of individual's experience. Without a common occupational consciousness (pride in work) or a sense of the solidarity of all working people, the only significant remaining common factor of experience is the uncertainty itself. This, above all, is the factor which relativises individual experiences and fosters an identity based on private rather than public or occupational attributes. In short, the 'image of society' has all but disappeared because private experience on its own contains no principle by which to relate to society. These are the conclusions of certain recent studies, at least.

The result of my own research into images of society are not quite as negative as this. They fall somewhere between the two types: the definitely structured and fairly comprehensive view of the social world, albeit with a great number of minor variations; and the destructured awareness of social relationships, governed by indeterminacy and individualistic variation.¹³

The recurring theme in the images of society tradition of research is the problem of the fragmentary, even confused, nature of social imagery among those social groups who have been studied in detail. It appears that consistent, unambiguous and all-inclusive 'images of society' are increasingly harder to find and that interpretations of class inequality, for example, typically combine attitudes and beliefs about status, occupational attributes and income which together cannot provide a single, coherent action orientation. I referred earlier to evidence that judgements

about social questions are increasingly uncertain and inconsistent. It may be that this is simply a result of more sophisticated research techniques but in my view this is unlikely. The method of extended interviewing and observation remains the most appropriate in spite of its limitations. It is more likely that inconsistencies within and between people's accounts of their experience and social relationships is evidence of the increasingly difficulty of constructing a coherent social consciousness in a world of work in which the technical and social division of labour has become unimaginably complex. If this is so, the most important consequence for social consciousness is that awareness of collectivity (either occupational awareness or identification with a class) will be diminished. Only at times of crisis like large-scale redundancy or a major strike may the awareness of the collective fate of the working class be regained. There is, however, one further possibility which must be considered: the possibility that 'normative' values are 'handed down' by the dominant cultural institutions, including the media, education, and of course the church (unfortunately none of the studies referred to above have incorporated any systematic analysis of these processes).¹⁴

In recent historical perspective there have been two important trends in class and social consciousness which the majority of observers agree are beyond dispute, although their interpretation is a matter for debate. Firstly, there is the trend towards greater differentiation, towards social and cultural diversity which can be seen in the decline of bi-partisan politics, the rise of the 'counter-culture' and the expression of a wide range of interests and values in pressure groups and less organised social movements. This has sometimes been interpreted as a sign of the demise of 'traditional' classes and class attitudes. At other times it has been taken to indicate the emergence of a new class or classes based on something other than the ownership of property or the distribution of income and wealth. In the study of worker's consciousness, as we have seen, most current interpretations of this trend emphasise the fragmentation of culture and consciousness. They point to a general lack of coherence and consistency in beliefs, attitudes and images of society.

The second important trend which it is usually agreed can be traced to a watershed in the late 1960's, is the tendency for organised opinion in the form of 'official' accounts and mass media messages to emphasise the commonality of social and political interests. This therefore is a trend towards greater, not lesser, consistency and coherence. Thus Burns' conclusion to a survey of the historical development of public opinion is that, on the one hand, "political, social, economic and cultural interests, values and opinions have appeared to become more and more disparate" while on the other hand "the kind of opinions and attitudes and

values and, above all, information, conveyed by broadcasting and the press has tended to become more constrained and more internally consistent".¹⁵ If these are indeed the dominant tendencies in the organisation of public opinion in the past two decades we can assume that they have some general repercussions in social consciousness. For example, the 'organised disparity' which Burns refers to might be reflected in a heightened sense of identity and the narrowing range of opinion available to consumers of the mass media might be reflected in an increasing awareness of the 'national interest'. These are empirical questions which require further research before they can be fully answered. However, there are strong indications that the varieties of social consciousness which have been identified are subject to these conflicting tendencies. It follows that consciousness forming institutions like the church will experience a tension between increasing disparity or individualism and the need for organisation and predictability.

Differentiation and the Future of Religion

This leads me to a consideration of some possible consequences of the processes of social differentiation and identity 'crisis' for the future of religion in the late 20th century industrial societies. What follows is some sociologically-informed speculation along these lines. Being sociological (rather than theological) it is expressed in terms of social relationships and structures. It is nonetheless theologically highly relevant because questions about the dynamics of religious change are at the interface between the two disciplines.¹⁶

From the foregoing discussion, it seems fairly clear that there is a fundamental problem about the development of institutions and the development of personal experience and identity. On the one hand the differentiation of institutional spheres is bringing about the decline of traditional sources of cultural authority and legitimation. On the other, the multiplication of modes of individual existence is causing the proliferation of identities. In social system terms, these processes may literally reach a critical point or 'crisis' in which change has to occur because the system cannot cope with too high a degree of indeterminacy. Before this stage is reached (if it ever is) we can predict that present trends will continue. These are twofold, namely:

- (1) The continued decline of large-scale, universal and homogeneous religious frames of identity. In Bellah's words, society has "simply no room for a hierarchic dualistic religious symbol system of the classic historic type."¹⁷ As a consequence of the processes of industrialization, urbanization and modernisation, this decline has been fully enough documented by students of 'secularization' for me not to spend more time elaborating it.

(2) The development of relatively isolated, smaller and more cohesive frames of religious identity (the trend away from 'church' and 'denominational' religion towards so-called 'sect' religion, with the emphasis on groups and do-it-yourself styles of worship). Sociologically speaking, it seems likely that such groups will tend to 'sacralize' existing sources of identity, i.e. they will tend to occupy social niches defined by criteria of occupation, education, ethnicity, age, sex and so on rather than by purely religious criteria. In theory any of these things can become the focus for identity. At the local level, these groups would reflect the strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncracies of 'black' theology, 'liberation' theology, 'urban' theology or for that matter 'water-buffalo' theology.

These two trends are of course linked, and not just conceptually. There is a much more direct link which is well illustrated by the activities of, for instance, the moral crusaders and the Nationwide Festival of Light. When such groups plead for society to 'put the family back in its rightful place' or call for a Minister for the Family, they are trying to reinforce the universal, homogeneous framework of values by appealing to the most important of the 'private', sacred sources of identity, the embattled family, which is one of the last remaining frameworks of 'religious' identity (in the broad sense). In sociological terms, therefore, it is no accident that the family has such an important place in the thinking and policies of the moral campaigners.

Finally, I want to speculate about a possible third trend which shows some signs of emerging.

(3) I mentioned above that it is difficult to envisage the continuation of present trends indefinitely without a point of crisis being reached is less important than the fact that it must eventually occur. In the opinion of Daniel Bell, it is likely to be averted because "a long-submerged need on the part of people in the West for simple pieties (will) join with a rediscovered sense of community and discontent with dry and abstract science to fuel a new religious impulse."¹⁸ Bell claims to discern the roots of a religious reawakening in the fundamentalist churches in the United States and in people's desperate search for wonder and mystery in the world. However, described in this way, such developments are not necessarily distinct from the second trend I have just outlined, although Bell is more optimistic about the scale of the changes and the possibility of their combining to form an integrated movement.

My own view is that the logic of these processes is just as likely to encourage the re-instatement of large-scale, homogeneous frames of identity to make up for the lack of consensus about social values and social goals. There is no necessity for these

frameworks to be 'religious' in the strict sense of the word: they could be political ideologies, nationalism, economic philosophies, etc. However, given the place of religious symbols in the national cultural inheritance, it seems more than likely that such a 'revival' could be at least partly religious.

Herein lies a great danger. As a religious revival it would be artificially based on the mobilization of old slogans and folk memories. For the purpose of legitimation it would tend to be a 'national' or 'civil' religion in the service of the state, inclined towards universalism, and syncretism — in the non-theological sense. The distortion of religious identity and religious consciousness which would inevitably occur in this situation — which has antecedents in pre-war Germany and elsewhere — is a disturbing thought.

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- 3 P. Towler, A. Chamberlain, 'Common Religion' in M. Hill (ed.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 6, SCM, 1973, pp.1-28. Cf. also D. Martin's notion of a 'subterranean theology' in *A Sociology of English Religion*, 1967, pp.74-76.
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- 9 P. Berger *et al*, *op.cit.*, pp.73-75.
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- 13 See H. Davis, *Beyond Class Images: explorations in the structure of social consciousness*, Croom Helm, London, 1979.

- 14 But some of the groundwork on this has been done by N. Abercrombie and B.S. Turner in 'The Dominant Ideology Thesis' in *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.29, No.2, 1978.
- 15 T. Burns, 'The Organisation of Public Opinion' in J. Curran et al (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society*, OU/Edward Arnold, 1977, pp.67-68.
- 16 The last decade has seen some softening of the mutual hostility between the two disciplines. See for example R. Gill, *Theology and Social Structure*, Mowbrays, Oxford, 1977 and J. Orme Mills et al (eds.) *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and conflict*, London, (forthcoming). The present contribution seems to raise questions for theology which include: how are the theological and social determinants of religious thought correlated? How far should theology deliberately address itself to changes in social reality? What are the consequences of theology becoming an arcane discipline detached from its surrounding culture?
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- 18 D. Bell, 'The Return of the Sacred? The Argument on the future of religion', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.28, No.4, 1978.

