Anglican Sectarianism:

a rethinking of the dynamics of religion

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Why has Bruce Reed's book *The Dynamics of Religion* been a godsend for so many parsons?[1] In answering this question, I will offer a critical evaluation of Reed's study and will go on to consider certain developments in British religion which bear upon the way the church ought to think about itself.

When I first reviewed the book in April 1979, I said that 'this kind of book just had to be written soon. I mean that it expresses an understanding of religion which is the product of an Anglican middle-class, worship-orientated outlook which has discovered the fascination of theories about personality and interpersonal relationships in small groups.'[2] Since then, I have hardly been involved in any group of clergymen without the basic idea of Reed's thesis emerging in some shape or form. To an anthropologist, such a level of interest cannot pass unnoticed or without question.

In briefest outline, Reed's theory of religion is that man experiences two basically different states of mind during the course of each day or week. One exists when he stands on his own two feet against the world and engages in his work in an active and direct way. This is how we operate to earn our living, and Reed identifies it as the state of W-activity. Its opposite and complementary state is that of S-activity, in which the individual is given over to thinking about himself, is day-dreaming, or is caught up in music or worship. In the first case man is self-dependent and his senses are alerted to act upon the world, while in the second context he is other-dependent and is acted upon. Man is then said to switch or swing from the one state to the other under given conditions: in the terminology of *The Dynamics of Religion* he oscillates between being self-dependent and extradependent. The word 'process' refers to this overall scheme of oscillation. Such oscillation does not take place in isolation: it takes place in various groups, and it is on this count that the other key term, 'movement', comes into play. 'Movement' is the historical church, which provides the context for oscillation.

The psychological presupposition of this approach is that the individual needs periods of extradependence if he is to become strong enough to operate on a self-dependent basis. The measure of a successful religion is the degree to which it can enable an individual to

switch between these states, and this depends in large measure on the symbols it possesses and on the way it uses them. It is no accident that Reed's thesis finds its strength in a eucharistic context and comes to its severest test when discussing preaching. The eucharist provides that situation in which emotional response is easily triggered by the symbolic objects used, and which provides phases for the emotional state to pass through. One could well illustrate this by the standard anthropological concept of rites of passage. In the one eucharistic ritual the individual passes from the profane world outside church by entering the building, confessing his sins of the outside world, being absolved, and having his mind turned to higher things. This is where the period of exclusion from normal life takes place. It is a marginal state of being in which the individual is out of reach of everyday-life concerns and events. This is where he regresses to a state of extradependence on God, in which his mind plays with the various symbolic ideas offered by the eucharistic rites. After partaking of the sacred mysteries, he is prepared for re-entry to the world and is finally sent out into the world to live for the glory of God. This is the period of reincorporation into the world. I suppose one could add as an anthropological gloss that the coffee sessions which often take place at this point after the service, at least in middle-class congregations, are the real point of reincoporation into the world. The coffee is less holy than the wine, but it is shared in the fellowship, and it at least allows the talk to become more ordinary and worldly.

This kind of analysis works well for specific congregations, and almost requires a social-class group of a rather specific type. Reed's theory has been accepted by many priests because they see his account as a rather well-fitting description of their own church life. This speaks well of Reed as an observer of life, but it is no guarantee that his account of religion will work outside the favoured groupings. When it fails to deal with such religions, as I will now indicate it does, then the question arises as to whether that religion is deficient in its psychological techniques or whether Reed's thesis is simply group specific. I suggest that it is both group specific, and also social-class specific.

To propose a theory which will express the nature of religion at all times and places is a tall order for any man, and lays itself all too open to the kind of criticism I want to level against this oscillation theory. But I must say that, in bringing these criticisms to bear on Reed's work, I do not want to underestimate the insights he offers for the narrow range of Anglicanism which his book is really about.

Bruce Reed's theory of religion is, in a psychological form, almost identical to Emile Durkheim's sociological explanation of religiosity. Writing in 1912, this great French sociologist argued that man had a twofold nature, he was *homo duplex*. This duplicity was composed of a social self and a private self. Religious ideas were the result of reli-

gious experiences which took place in collective rituals. During these rites an individual felt quite transposed and shifted into a realm unlike that of his everyday life; he felt lifted out of himself and put in contact with a power that was quite superior and transcendent. This is the basis of Durkheim's famous argument that the idea of God is no more than the idea of society writ large, for what is called the experience of God is, essentially, an experience of the whole group acting together. Of course, Durkheim did not see this as reducing the perceived truth of religion, for as far as the practitioner is concerned, he really does experience something far greater and beyond himself. Society is, in truth, transcendent over the individual. It possesses an existence which precedes the life of the individual and which exists after his death; during his life it supports and nourishes him. So much for the social experience which underlies the social self.[3]

As he leaves the religious group activity and goes to live on his own, or with only a relatively few people, these feelings decline. And here we must remember that Durkheim was working on second-hand information concerning the Australian Aborigines, evidence which is now seriously questioned and which sustains little of the factual side of Durkheim's work. When he is in the isolated condition, the individual loses the sense of the transcendent power which had meant so much to him. One of the best analogies for this scheme is that of the battery. When plugged into the mains it gains power, but when taken away from the source it runs down. In fact this may not be too ridiculous an illustration, for there is a crude concept of power running through Durkheim's study which might indicate the nineteenth-century concern with machines and electricity, etc.

So, too, there is a crude concept of the person underlying Reed's theory, despite the apparent concern with the structure of the self and of the personality. What 'collective sentiment' or group experience was for Durkheim, is mirrored in Reed's notion of regression to extradependence. One of the best critics of Durkheim was the rather hard-headed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, and part of his criticism still speaks to our present author:

> But a little reflection is sufficient to show that even in primitive societies the heightening of the emotions and the lifting of the individual out of himself are by no means restricted to gatherings and crowd phenomena ...There can be no doubt that from many solitary experiences...there flows a great deal of religious inspiration. *Though most ceremonies are carried out in public, much religious revelation takes place in solitude.*[4]

The basic error of Reed's approach is to suppose that the positive and creative function of religion takes place in the extradependent mode. He stresses the necessity of switching between the two states, and sees an overemphasis on either as unhealthy, and yet this is precisely what he does with the group-worship context.

The theological error inherent in this view is that it focuses divine

activity within a small band of experience. Now Reed attempts to cover himself on this point by saying that he has not attempted to test his basic hypothesis concerning intra- and extradependency on religions outside Christianity, but he believes it holds for the Christian religion. He seeks to interpret the gospels in the light of this view but does not expect all theologians to accept his interpretation. I leave the task of textual judgement to others, and merely take up a more general and hardly escapable point concerning God.

If we are going to talk about God at all, then we had better be as clear as we can about what we want to say. If God is God, then he is creator of the world, he is in inextricable contact with that world, and he is free to act as he will. Karl Barth was right to say that, in religions, men bolt and bar the door against God, and any position which seeks to specify and delimit the mode of the divine operation is also subject to similar criticism. In the history of religions the idea of the 'holy', along with the concept of the 'sacred', often implies the restricting of religious feelings to specific sacred places or sacred times. In partial opposition to this, it was right for Harvey Cox to urge the idea of the freedom associated with the secular city in which such temples were irrelevant. Whenever ideas of God are virtually equated with qualities of religious experience, there is a potential for blasphemy against the creative and sustaining name of God.[5]

In recent years Professor John Bowker has done much to impress upon us the view of Christianity and of Christ which sees God in an intricate and open relation with man in a hundred and one ways. In close contact with the created world, man is capable of receiving 'inputs or cues' from God, as Bowker explains it in his vocabulary drawn from communications theory. The task of the Christian, it would then seem, is to learn how to receive these senses of God in the most efficient way. Indeed, part of the preaching ministry of the church should be to teach us how to read the world as God's world, and how to respond to him in it. Now part of this response may well take the form of an emotional dependence on God in worship, yet even this need not be restricted to a time and place. Recent empirical research seems to suggest that significant numbers of people who seldom attend church both experience a sense of some supernatural dimension of life, and often feel it as a permanent quality of daily living.[6]

The task of the church should be to teach discrimination in the reading of experience and the call to committed service in the light of the gospel message. It should not see its vocation as the place where special qualities of experience are cultivated. In fact, too many of Reed's intellectual models are drawn from approaches concerned with the psychologically ill or with child development. His approach offers a method of organizing religious life which will favour a certain kind of mentality or personality; and this may well be social-class

specific to a marked degree. The idea of dependence is doubtless an important one in Christianity, but it should not be associated too precisely with one form of experience. Dependence is a dimension of one's outlook on the world; it is an aspect of faith. In one sense Reed's book is yet another reminder that the present day is the day of experience. Although he does not deal with the issue of the charismatic movement, his concern with experience as a basis for proper functioning in life places him in a similar category as far as the anthropologist is concerned. On Reed's argument, the process of glossolalia would be a typical example of regression to extradependence, and yet recent research suggests that no particular and different mental state need be associated with the phenomenon.[7]

It goes without saying that experiences are intricately involved in the growth of religious ideas, and they certainly cannot be ignored. But one should be as ill disposed to see a theory of church life built upon a particular form of experience, as to see a doctrine rising from one or two biblical verses. From a more specifically psychological context, one might ask whether a sense of integrity of the personality does indeed necessitate a regular oscillation between the two states already mentioned? Is it not more likely, and certainly more consistent with the more complex model of man implicit in communication theories, that a view of man as an integrating centre of many experiences and ideas is what is required as a basis for understanding the role of liturgy and preaching?

* * * *

I must turn now to another question which pinpoints the restricted nature of the groups Reed is concerned with, and ask whether he does not run the risk of being hoist with his own petard. This is the distinction he makes between apostolic religion and folk religion. To begin with, Reed confuses the issue by defining apostolic religion both in terms of psychology, as that which 'seeks to provide opportunities for its followers to express their own inner solitariness in the corporate worship of God', and also doctrinally as that tradition embracing the basic tenets and customs of Anglicanism.[8]

Apostolic religion occurs in churches which enable their members to operate well psychologically within the rough framework of a gospel of love, acceptance, and the growth of ethically minded community. Folk religion, by contrast, is a mixed field of superstition, personal fetish, and the variety of meanings given to orthodox symbols and doctrines. It is customary, wishes to maintain the *status quo* against change, and cannot provide the basis for prophetic challenges to the social order and its many supposed injustices.

The question raised by this distinction between apostolic and folk religion is the question of sectarianism. Reed is symbolic of a trend

towards Anglican sectarianism in the Britain of today. The Church of England may no longer be the Tory Party at prayer, but in Reed's view it should be the home base for psychologically well adapted Englishmen to top up with personal power before setting out to conquer the week's work. He describes some sectarians as those who maintain the sense of extradependence even in their work context. He seems to regard any strong belief which questions the ordinary life of the 'world' as being rather pathological, and mission becomes a negative proselytism. It really would seem as though apostolic religion and its oscillation process is the recipe for the integrated and respected citizen.[9]

Presumed in all this is a certain degree of intellectual and emotional uniformity. Some years ago I wrote in this journal about the role of speaking in tongues in connection with certain social-class groups. Developing Basil Bernstein's theory of language, social class, and group structure, I argued that the charismatic movement dealt very largely with middle-class folk who needed a trigger to enable them to express emotional aspects of life and to develop a sense of community and fellowship instead of arid proprieties.[10] Rather similar arguments can be raised over Reed's thesis, inasmuch as it presumes a congregation operating upon a highly abstract and explicitly symbolic level of thought. Following the jargon, one could hypothesize that the oscillation theory of religion would be applicable to 'elaborate-code' users who need to be emotionally triggered in order to earth their higher thoughts in the realities of daily endeavour. It may well be the case that the reason why many clergy seem to find the thesis interesting, lies in the fact that it enables them to understand the processes underlying what they normally do out of custom. Implicit in the theory is an appeal to a certain type of person: one who wants a clear statement of what is happening in the processes which he manipulates or orders. In other words, the oscillation theory is an abstract explanation of the pragmatic event of the eucharist.

An objection may be raised against this assertion to the effect that there is nothing wrong in wanting to understand things. Quite so, and it would ill-behove an academic to be anti-intellectual. But the point is that this form of explanation restricts wider approaches, and also limits a theological view of the event. Reed's thesis offers a classic opportunity for a reductionist explanation of religion, because it could be argued that it does not matter what the content of the beliefs are, as long as the worshipper learns how to act towards them. Peter Berger, who is mentioned in passing by Reed, has already shown the way in his argument on the masochistic basis of human piety and devotion. In *The Social Reality of Religion* Berger shows with considerable skill how the desire to submit to a divine figure seems to contain strong elements of masochism. There is the case of Job, or

even the logic of an extreme Calvinism which trusts in God and submits to him ever more powerfully as his awesome nature is revealed. Reed's concept of regression to extradependence is but a weak version of Berger's masochistic tendency. In fact, Berger's entire argument concerning religion as a system of meaning and validation of life is more plausible than Reed's. It is certainly more sophisticated on the sociological front.[11]

The time has come to realize that explanations of religious behaviour cannot rest content with descriptions of processes apart from God. At least as far as Christian theologians are concerned, the basic form of an activity must be related to its content. The oscillation theory as such could work irrespective of the nature of the transcendent figure in relation to which the individual regresses. Submission to Allah in Islamic prayer, or the taking refuge in the Buddha and his teaching in the monkish community of Buddhism, are similar activities to any act of dependence on the Christian God. To talk of psychological processes is to talk of psychological processes. It is no more until some theological interpretation is brought to bear upon them, and this Reed does not do.

One could counter his basic outlook by arguing that it is wrong for Christians to seek a place apart from the ordinary world in which to charge their batteries to live in the darkness of life. It is precisely by seeing the entire world in its mundanity as the creation of God, that one learns to submit to him. Indeed, the principle of the incarnation could serve as a denial of Reed's thesis of regression to extra dependence. That this is so, is evident in those parts where Reed seeks to show how Jesus conforms to his theory. He has to argue that death and dying can be compared with the concept of regression to extradependence. The crucifixion is the act of extradependence and the resurrection becomes the state of intradependence.[12] So, to continue the analogy, the crucifixion parallels the weekly eucharist when the individual switches off from the world of daily affairs and becomes God-dependent, and the resurrection marks the daily life of practical affairs. Regeneration is the process of switching from the one stage to the other.

Theories are as good as the market available for them; so, too, are theologies. So it is that the present state of British religion should see a growing acceptance of this kind of psychological explanation of, and directions for, religiosity. By this I mean to say that it is quite likely that surburban churches will grow increasingly strong in numbers as Britain passes more solidly into its post-industrial phase. While it is notoriously dangerous for social scientists to engage in prophecy, and despite the fact that it is not a gift this writer would readily claim, it is as well to think of the consequences of the increasing shift to social and servicing occupations engaged in by British workers. It is now the case that just under a half of all workers are engaged in industrial and

productive labour, while just over a half are engaged in the service industries. In such a service society, one anticipates a growth of interest in persons and in personality. The structure of experience and the means of dealing with others become of increasing significance. People replace machines as the object of interest and concern, and there is an increasing sophistication in knowledge about people. It is to be expected that such concerns will emerge as much within the church as outside it, and, to the extent that its personnel operate in that service society, so the religious forms of life adopted within the fellowship will be people-focused. Now this need not be a bad thing, for the service and care of our neighbours is obviously of prime concern, but the nature and source of the motivation for this need scrutiny. American society has preceded Britain in this transition by some twenty years, and the high level of religious involvement in doctrinally vague institutions is a notorious problem for sociologists.

The oscillation theory is particularly usable in connection with an experience-orientated society concerned with the personal efficiency of its members. The theological issue is raised as to the function of the eucharist in the light of such needs as people bring with them to the rite. Perhaps the answer is that functions change as needs change, but it may be that a more constant basis is required, and that would have to be argued at length elsewhere. A serious issue which does follow from this is whether theology ought not to encourage one kind of experience rather than another. Sectarian groups are usually well aware of this, and cultivate a particular ethos rather than follow any trend that happens to occur in the broader society.

Those segments of society which are not given to this person-focused and experiential realm will not, however, be open to analysis and guidance by means of the oscillation theory. In groups which function on a hierarchically planned set of interactions, the central religious rite might be more useful if it consisted in more explicit teaching and less emotive and abstract oscillations. Indeed, many working-class movements have been strong when the emphasis is upon the formal relations between God and man, in creation and redemption, and upon definite acts of religious expression rather than upon an expression and sharing of intimate sets of awareness.[13] The mission of the churches must continue without depending upon a particular psychological scheme for moderating religious experience, otherwise it might be argued that evangelism for certain working-class groups would have to wait until increasing affluence had brought about a penetration of middle-class styles of life and a corresponding ethos given to a preoccupation with personality.

One benefit of the oscillation approach is that it indicates, in an indirect way, the importance of combining emotional and intellectual factors in the religious life of individuals. We could take this a little further, however, and say that the oscillation process is but one facet

of the overall problem of meaning in life. Most religious traditions and institutions are concerned with the problem of meaning, and of giving to people a picture of life and a way of living it that is both intelligible and satisfying.

What satisfies one group leaves another still questioning. So it is that intellectuals require a philosophical dimension to their view of the world, while many middle-class believers seem to want assurance that they can use without fear of blame the good things of life they already possess. Poor people, especially in third-world countries, need actual food and material things in order to confer meaning upon their life. This is the fact underlying theologies of liberation. So it is that meaning is a many-faceted term, and is mentioned in this way at this point in the argument to bring the discussion back to folk religion.

Theologians or other thinkers can forget that many people can be satisfied by ideas and practices which are not systematic, and which do not form an entire scheme of thought. Ideas and beliefs often exist in small clusters without much linking them. One suspects that this is true in most parts of the world, but it is especially the case in societies which are composed of mixed religious, political and ethnic groups. In such contexts it is unrealistic to expect conformity to one set of ideas, or even to ask that people should be interested in schemes of abstract thought. The liturgy of the church is one means of giving a basic sense of the faith to those who take part, without imposing complex schemes of well-argued points. It is the sectarian movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and the Unification Church that require knowledge of a distinctive scheme of doctrine. To say this is not to plead for the value of ignorance, or to suggest that, for example, Anglican congregations should continue in the largely deplorable state of doctrinal ignorance which is generally found in the church, with the exception of some well-instructed evangelical and Anglo-Catholic congregations. Rather, it is to spell out the *status quo* in many of the larger denominational groups and to say that the handy label of 'folk religion' may well stick to many of those who sit regularly in the pews of oscillating churches, just as they stick to infrequent attenders. In other words, the use of the term 'folk religion' may well say more about the one who uses it than about those described by it. The sole aim of my emphasizing this, to the point of tedium, is to ask Anglican clergy not to absolve themselves from that traditional duty of open acceptance of and care for the relatively unchurched. Once the 'us and them' attitude is struck through the labelling process involved in the term 'folk religion', it is easy to divide the flock into the faithful followers and the broader fringe. Pastors and priests must beware of their calling's snare, and one of these is the love of a following, and the admiration of the faithful. A congregation that is fixated on the eucharist, for example—

though the same could be said of preaching as well—is one that develops a specific status for its leader. Outside his ritual context he can find himself lost and unable to function well. All leaders need a following for success and sanity's sake, but dependence upon supporters is unhelpful in men called to show the love of God to the wider world as they meet it in their parish or place of ministry.

Jesus did not label the publicans and sinners as folk religionists. Folk religion, in the sense of a set of, or bits of, customary practices, is to be found in the Anglican Church in large measure. It consists in ringing bells at odd times, wearing surplices, beating the bounds, christening bells, and a hundred other conventions which are as far removed from the words of the Sermon on the Mount as is the bishop of Durham's throne from the cowshed of Jesus. We do not seek to overthrow these phenomena because of their cultural origin, and one need not strip-tease the cassock in order to preach the gospel, but one must get some simple priorities right. The judgement of the word of God upon our lives falls on all religiosity alike. There is no hiding in apostolic religion, and there is no escape in folk religion. The dynamic power of Almighty God sets about encountering man in myriad ways; and if heaven cannot contain him, how much less any theory that we can build. But these emotive and highly generalized sentiments will be of use only to the extent that we learn to see ourselves as responsive in faith in a world that is sacred everywhere and at all times, a world longing for the redeeming power of God in Christ. The secular piety needed for this outlook will be born only with difficulty from the oscillation process.

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NOTES

1 Bruce Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1978).
2 Douglas Davies, *Third Way*, vol.3, no.4, April 1979, p.25.
3 Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Allen and Unwin, London 1976).
4 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (Souvenir Press, London 1974) p.58, my italics.
5 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (SCM, London 1965).
6 John Bowker, *The Sense of God* (OUP, Oxford 1973); *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (OUP, Oxford 1978).
7 Gordon Stanley *et. al.*, 'Some Characteristics of Charismatic Experience: Glossolalia in Australia', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol.17, 1978, pp.269-77.
8 Reed, op. cit. p.112.
9 ibid. p.84.

10 Douglas Davies, 'Social Groups, Liturgy and Glossolalia', *The Churchman*, vol.90, no.3, 1976, pp.193-205.
11 Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1969).
12 Reed, op. cit. p.131.
13 As in the case of the Salvation Army and many evangelical and Tractarian churches in the nineteenth century.

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