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IDOLATRY AND THE PROPETIC TASK

Dr. Lyon seeks for a bridge between Sociology and Theology.

There are several signs that the traditional hostility between sociology and theology is mellowing into a mood of rapprochement — in some circles at least.<sup>1</sup> The work of Robin Gill is one of the key stimuli to this movement<sup>2</sup>, although Peter Berger and others in North America have been discussing the issues for some time.<sup>3</sup> The movement is not unconnected with efforts to produce liberation theology<sup>4</sup> and what Gregory Baum has called 'critical theology'.<sup>5</sup> From the sociological side, a new genre of committed and reflexive analysis and theory emerged during the 1970s dubbed by Robert Friedrichs 'the recovery of the prophetic mode',<sup>6</sup> this has stimulated dialogue.

Evangelicals, at least thus far, have not had a conspicuous presence in this kind of proto-dialogue, and it is not difficult to understand why. A certain defensiveness is present in much evangelical writing<sup>7</sup> and this tends to divert energies from constructive dialogue. The fear lest sociology should undermine christian faith may make dialogue appear as capitulation to an alien world-view. I am not for a moment asserting that this fear is baseless. Rather, I am advocating, that alongside a christian-critical attitude towards sociology, we should search for common ground as a basis of dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

*Idol Analysis*

The sociological study of modern 'idolatry' by Christians is no new activity. Vigo Demant, one of the leading figures in the Anglo-Catholic 'Christian Sociology' movement of the 1920-1940s argued that idol-analysis (although he did not call it that) was a central aim of the movement. Economic theorists in particular, he maintained, had a "perverted religious passion" for "the creation of their own brains".<sup>9</sup> This required analysis and exposure.<sup>10</sup> But even before the turn of the century, Scottish non-conformist Scott Matheson bemoaned the lack of active evangelical interest in the area of sociology ("the science of the reading public, just as theology was in Puritan times"<sup>11a</sup>), and the fact that the recognition of Mammon-worship had been left, by default, to the Froudes and Ruskins of Victorian England.

However, it is possible that the publication of two recent books may indicate a contemporary evangelical revitalization of this kind of discussion. Tony Walter's new book *A Long Way From Home* (Paternoster Press, 1980) is actually subtitled *A Sociological exploration of contemporary idolatry*. Following the insights of Jacques Ellul and Peter Berger, he discusses the current symbols which are the idols of today. His sweep is broad -- from the family to the ecology movement. On a wider -- Western civilisation -- canvas, Bob Goudzwaard discusses the 'false religion' of progress in *Capitalism and Progress* (Eerdmans, 1979). The 'god of progress' he says is near death, and the choices facing the West are between a new myth and the Creator-God of the Bible.

At this point, one may suggest an agenda which a would-be idol-analyst might follow in order to make a constructive contribution to socio-theological dialogue. Firstly, some clarification is needed concerning the causes, forms, and consequences of idolatry in the biblical account. Secondly, the correlations and connections of these features of idolatry with idolatry in its modern forms as studied by sociologists.

For example, while the cause of idolatry, the forsaking of the Creator, is fairly clear (Is. 44: 6-23), the form and consequences need systematic treatment. As to their form, Isaiah makes it plain that they may be anything within the created order which becomes an object of worship or devotion and source of meaning. In the New Testament, it is clearly stated that not only 'obvious' symbols such as calves may be idols, but also attributes and institutions such as sexuality and property-accumulation (Eph. 5: 5; Mt. 6: 21, 24). They are 'nothing' (that is, they have no 'intrinsic' sacredness or power Is. 2: 8; 1 Cor. 8: 4) but at the same time are subject to the controlling influence of demonic power (1 Cor. 10: 20). They may be the focus of identity -- people became like them (Ps. 5: 8) -- even though from a theistic perspective they are worthless due to their impersonal nature, and their failure to reveal, love, or forgive (Ps. 115; Jer. 2: 5). However, the consequences of idolatry are profound. It tends to enslave (Ps. 106: 36) and mislead (1 Cor. 12: 2) the idolater, so that blindness to true perception of reality results (Is. 44: 18; Hab. 2: 18; Jer. 10: 2,8). Intellectual idolatry (Rom. 1: 24,23)<sup>12</sup> it would seem, is just one kind of idolatry, in which linguistic symbols become the means of grasping and organizing the world.<sup>13</sup> The distortion of an understanding of reality is a general feature of idolatry, whether thing-symbols or linguistic symbols are involved. We shall return in a moment to this topic of 'distortion' (which is one way in which 'ideology' is understood) after glancing at the sociological analogues to idolatry.

The suggested agenda for a biblical theology of idolatry is pursued, may turn out to have more than one bearing on current sociology of religion. A superficial appraisal of the work of

Thomas Luckmann or Mary Douglas would suggest that this is indeed the case.<sup>14</sup> Luckmann, for example, argues, following the Durkheim<sup>15</sup>, that the construction of systems of symbolic meaning is intrinsic to the human condition. Symbols are taken from everyday life, and are assumed to point to a world beyond everyday experience, but do not have to be 'essentially religious' in nature.<sup>16</sup> Hans Mol, whose theory of religion runs in similar vein<sup>17</sup>, argues that religion is always bound up with the search for a stable social identity. While the faith of traditional churches does in many cases answer well to this particular human need, many today seek the 'sacralization of identity' elsewhere. And one must be careful not to underestimate the power of such natural or 'invisible' religion. Just as with 'common' religion<sup>18</sup>, there is a strong emotional attachment to the source of meaning located in the symbol.

#### *A Critical View*

If it is the case that many topics discussed by sociologists of religion have to do with what is biblically known as idolatry, then from a theological angle mere analysis is insufficient. The concern of the sociology of religion is to analyse religion in a sociological manner. Even though their analysis will inevitably be rooted in pre-theoretical (and in a sense theological) assumptions, sociologists who follow Durkheim tend to agree with his axiom that no religion is 'false', and so would be unwilling to disturb the believers. But from a Christian viewpoint, idolatry is not only destructive (because of its internal contradictions and its tendency to enslave, Ps. 16: 4) it is *wrong* (because it is a deviation from the worship of the Creator, who alone is the source of meaning (Rom. 1). The bridge for dialogue at this point, however, is more likely to be found in the cognitive distortion than in the moral wrongness of idolatry. It would appear that there is at least a surface-level resemblance between this and aspects of the controversy in sociology (of both marxist and non-marxist varieties) around the concept of ideology.

It is no accident that ideology has a pejorative tone to it. For, as Anthony Giddens has recently reminded us<sup>19</sup>, early anticipations of 'ideology' are found in Bacon's conception of the *idola*. His 'idols' were impediments to valid knowledge, and it is in this sense that ideology is frequently understood. (The other major sense of ideology, that of rationale for the activities of sectional interest groups also gives a critical ring to the term.) The problem for Giddens, as for Marx, Mannheim, and Habermas, is how to get round the obstacle of ideology (whatever it is) to truth, or true practice, and thus to an authentically critical position. It is no longer possible, in the present climate of the philosophy of science, simply to appeal to the 'objectivity' of scientific procedure.<sup>20</sup> Equally unsatisfactory, however, is the alternative

of the wholesale labelling of thought-and-action systems as 'ideologies', for reasons alluded to above.

The way forward, whatever else it may involve, certainly calls for theological honesty and sociological sophistication.<sup>21</sup> Theological honesty, for the evangelical, means firstly an uncompromising commitment to biblical revelation as the criterion of truth and wisdom. This would be a distinctive mark of any evangelical contribution. Equally distinctive, one hopes, would be a spirit of fairness in the treatment of idolatrous and ideological phenomena, and a willingness to admit personal and institutional vulnerability to precisely the same processes. When combined with a desire to allow biblical revelation to speak relevantly to contemporary practice, the way may still be open for dialogue.

#### *The Prophetic Task*

If idol-analysis, *via* the discussion of symbol-systems and ideology, is one bridge between sociology and theology, then the prophetic task must be another. As I have already argued, analysis is inadequate as an end in itself. Idols must also be exposed, and alternatives offered. In the Old Testament, the exposure of idols was inseparable from the prophetic task. The last great prophet, Jesus Christ, is himself the fulfillment of this tradition. Scott Matheson, complaining about commercial idolatry inside and outside the church, put it this way: we "should hail the spiritual authority that confronts the kings whom Mammon has crowned, and uses the whip of cords to drive out the profane traders that make God's House a house of merchandise."<sup>11b</sup>

But can the term 'prophetic' be applied to sociology? Friedrichs, referring to the critical mode of sociology, is happy with this usage. But Berger has advocated caution. Although his now elderly book *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* was taken to be a 'prophetic' attack on the church, he himself insisted that a prophet is a person through whom *God* speaks, and thus hesitated to call his work 'prophetic'.<sup>22</sup> And there are other difficulties as well.

Though sociology is inherently critical,<sup>23</sup> this does not necessarily mean that it is prophetic, even if it happens to comport well with a christian perspective. Mere exposure and denunciation of a particular form of idolatry is far from being fully prophetic in the biblical sense. As Klaus Bockmuehl has argued, the prophetic address is God's message against specific sin, with a warning of the consequences, followed by a call to repentance, all directed at the actual offenders.<sup>24</sup> This is clearly a matter for further discussion. Many would feel that this kind of 'prophecy' would take one far beyond the merely

sociological task of theoretical analysis. On the other hand, some would insist that sociology ought to aim at being prophetic in this fuller sense, and that this has implications of several kinds for the way in which sociology is done. These writers would argue for a clearer spelling out of christian/human alternatives to particular patterns of social action, and possibly the making of connection with some kind of political engagement as a necessary complement to sociological endeavour.<sup>25</sup>

But here again, caveats are in order. As Robin Gill has pointed out<sup>26</sup>, prophecy is a precarious pursuit in a situation where churches and church-people are themselves (at least partially) subject to social determination. Here again is an issue which deserves discussion. Moreover, as evangelicals are unlikely to be totally sympathetic to Gill's own conclusions (attractive as they are in some ways), it may call for some rather specific suggestions, perhaps following similar lines to those of Jim Wallis or Ron Sider.<sup>27</sup> Their own 'social analysis' is both rooted within a biblical perspective, and bears fruit in the practical life of socially-conscious urban communities.

#### *Future Directions*

So much for my agenda. The challenge of the dialogical task lies ahead. I suspect that there are severe limitations as well as potentialities for 'idolatry and the prophetic task' in the socio-theological dialogue. But it seems to me that the potentialities are worth pursuing. Idol-analysis, from a biblical perspective, may help explain the powerful hold of the symbols of natural religion over its adherents. As to traffic flowing in the other direction -- from sociology to theology, much may be gained (in humility at least) through an appreciation of the difficulties of making non-ideological prophetic statements. Much has been left unsaid.

One last point, and this cannot be overstressed: any evangelical contribution to dialogue of any sort is guided, in the last analysis, not by commitment to the Book, or to praxis, but by commitment to one who Himself is 'our wisdom', Jesus of Nazareth. Without Him, socio-theological dialogue is hollow, echoing words.

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- 16 R. Towler, ref.1, p.138.
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