

# Sociology and theology reconsidered: religious sociology and the sociology of religion in Britain

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between theology and sociology on two levels. The first is in terms of the general disciplinary closure that has marked much of their coexistence, despite the many topics on which they potentially meet. The second level is more specific and concerns the tension in Britain between religious sociology, in which sociology is put to serve faith, and the secular sociology of religion, where religion is studied scientifically. This tension has been addressed before with respect to the history of sociology in France and the United States, but the British case, hitherto relatively unknown, illustrates the potential there was for a more fruitful relationship between sociology and theology in Britain that went undeveloped as the secular sociology of religion eventually replaced early religious sociology. The existence of religious sociology has been written out of the history of the discipline in Britain, such that when theology and sociology began a more serious engagement in the 1970s in Britain and elsewhere, particularly as biblical studies discovered sociology and as theologians and sociologists first met jointly, this earlier dialogue was entirely overlooked.

*Key words* history of sociology, sociology of religion, theology

## INTRODUCTION

For most of their coexistence, sociology and theology have erected barriers to engagement that constitute disciplinary closure. Thus, when the potential for more fruitful dialogue first developed in the 1970s, as biblical studies discovered sociology and as theologians and sociologists first began meeting, it appeared as if the engagement was novel. However, a vignette from the history of sociology in Britain is used here to illustrate earlier forms of dialogue and engagement. The contribution of 'religious sociology' (which might be defined as sociology in support of the ethical tenets of faith) to early British sociology was significant, and proffered promise of serious engagement between sociology and theology. However, as with the cases of France and the United States, where religious sociology also contributed significantly to sociology and the sociological treatment of religion in particular, the secular sociology of religion (where religion is approached scientifically) came to dominate. Theologians and sociologists in Britain working to improve their relationship in the 1970s and onwards were wholly ignorant of this earlier work. Rediscovering it here complements what we know of the tension between religious sociology and the sociology of religion in France and the USA, as well as demonstrates some of the general debates that have occurred in sociology about its proper relationship with theology. However, before we explore this tension in British sociology, it is necessary to begin by documenting the general disciplinary closure that marked their non-relationship for much of the 20th century.

## THEOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY COLLIDE

Any discussion of the relationship between theology and sociology has first to confront sociology's fixation with secularization. The secularization debate is a meeting place of sociology and theology that to sociologists renders theology redundant. The emptying pews, boarded-up windows, deconsecrated buildings and elderly and dying congregations in some churches suggests that sociology's prediction of imminent religious decline is partly right. One of the paradoxes of the sociology of religion, however, is that the secularization debate with which it seems obsessed only proves that religion remains relevant to sociology.

If one wanted to re-enchant sociology, as Flanagan once entitled his attempt to resist the disappearance of God from sociology, it is not necessary to argue that sociology's founders were actually closet believers (1996: 103), for the secularization of sociology reinforces the importance of religion within it. At first sight it appears ironic that religion is important enough for many sociologists of religion to want to continue to deny its importance, but this is not

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the paradox to which I refer. Religion retains its significance in sociology irrespective of whatever insignificance it might have in the lives of believers and non-believers because the importance religion has as a sociological process is independent of the number of its adherents. The statistics on decline in membership and observance among mainstream Churches get rummaged over constantly and questions are rightly posed about institutional differences across the denominations or between the world faiths, about cultural and political differences that reveal cross-national variations in growth and decline or differences over time, and what the 'real' social processes are for which religion is a surrogate and that mask the decline in belief in the transcendental. But we might ask instead what the significance is of belief and observance to those numbers who remain adherents, what it means to believe in a secular culture when belief is assailed and how those beliefs are managed in the face of this tension. More importantly, we might focus on the significance these believers have beyond their numbers in penetrating the public sphere, in bringing religion back into the public square.

Examples are numerous of how religion is affecting ethical debates about access to medical care and the desirability of certain forms of treatment. Geopolitics has given the 'war on terrorism' a religious dimension. The elision of culture and religion in many places ensures that ethnic minorities couch their demands for equality in religious terms and that the multicultural mosaic also represents a religious plurality that mono-religious cultures are having difficulty in adjusting to as some believers expect their beliefs to count in public affairs. In the United States, for example, where church and state are separate, there is an implicit requirement for public figures to articulate their private religious views, resulting in an easy penetration of the public sphere by politicians' religious beliefs: religious enlightenment is taken to be the right *to* believe and for those beliefs to count in public affairs. In Europe, church and state are closer with many state religions, and religious enlightenment is taken to be the right *not* to believe or to believe something entirely unorthodox. In these circumstances, religion has tended to be restricted to the private sphere. In France the reach of religious views in public is restricted, while Britain is more tolerant of public displays of religion. Some sociologists of religion have noted, however, that the British prefer their religion in moderation, disliking expressions of extreme religious commitment. As Steve Bruce once wrote (2003), only religion of the vaguest and most inoffensive kind is supported in the public square in Britain; excessive fervour is frowned upon or regulated. Yet others have argued that Britain is witnessing the deprivatization of religion (Chambers and Thompson, 2005) in which faith groups have increased their participation in public affairs, returning us to what Casanova (1994) called 'public religion', although Churches that enter the public sphere tend to do so proclaiming policies based on universalistic and secular arguments rather than sacred ones.

What matters most about this resurgence of public religion is not the scale of the participation by faith groups in state government, political affairs or civil society, which is still very insignificant, or the secular rhetoric on which it is based, but the expectation among believers now that their beliefs should count in the public sphere. Paradoxically, equality of religious practice and belief across the denominations and world faiths in a religiously plural society is easier to enact in settings where religion does not matter or not matter enough to make believers want to have their beliefs count. This suggests that for the small number of believers for whom religion *does* matter, the vociferousness of their demands that their beliefs count in the public sphere will intensify, while the rest for whom religion is an irrelevance look on irritated. The potential for religion to become a source of conflict in this situation will only increase its visibility and penetration of public space. The 7/7 bombings in London in 2005 have led to an increase in the importance sociologists (and policy-makers) attach to the meaning of religion among those who believe in a way that supports the argument about the sociological significance of religion as a social process beyond the numbers of its adherents.

This movement from the sociology of irreligion to the sociology of religiosity, as Keenan put it (2003: 27), reflects in a number of works by sociologists in the new millennium that document the revival of religion, such as Davie (2000), Hervieu-Léger (2000) and Lyons (2000). This is not a revival of traditional forms of observance so much as a recognition of what Mary Douglas once called those signs and channels of grace that are everywhere available as evidence of the sacramental nature of life (1970: 27). And it is in this context that a dialogue between sociology and theology is feasible.

#### THEOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY COLLUDE

It is because sociology and theology have collided on the social importance and significance of religion that theology can be thought of as a strange 'other'. But they were never really rivals, as claimed by Martin, Mills and Pickering (2003[1980]: 6), authors who were among the first to address the relationship in the contemporary period, for while it was the case that when religion held sway theologians, as interpreters of the Word, were the divines, sociologists never directly replaced theologians as imperialists of meaning, for theology had long since been fragmented to be replaced by moral philosophy as the discipline from which sociology emerged in the 19th century. The connections were too tenuous and distant to see each other as rivals over a shared intellectual terrain and except for a few devotees, most people did not take Comte seriously when he argued that sociology was the new religion. Some classical sociologists evidently knew their theology. Weber's writings on the Protestant Ethic showed a good understanding of Luther's

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notion of the 'calling' (Tester, 2000 has suggested Weber's work on the spirit of capitalism offers a rapprochement between theology and sociology) and his work on charisma displayed a knowledge of biblical prophecy (as noted by Gill, 1996: 3), although Durkheim's understanding of the variance in Catholic, Protestant and Jewish suicide rates was not much informed by knowledge of theological differences between them (again as noted in *ibid.*: 3). But in practice the two disciplines developed mostly in ignorance of each other.

Engagement is only possible where there is preparedness to listen and sociology's secularism resulted in a dialogue of the deaf. Ironically, however, the history of sociology in Britain illustrates there was more serious engagement at an earlier phase based around the role that religious sociology played in the development of British sociology, although this has been air-brushed out of the record to the extent that when the two disciplines rediscovered each other in the 1970s, people were ignorant of this earlier dialogue. The fate of religious sociology in Britain paralleled that in France and the United States, as the secular sociology of religion came to dominate the treatment of the subject. In Britain's case this meant that the fruitful lines of engagement established by religious sociology early in the discipline went ignored. It is to these concerns that we now turn.

Liberal Protestantism has always been socially reformist and committed to social progress. This reflected in significant philanthropy and campaigning for social reform but also in the desire to make Christianity relevant to modern society and as early as 1880 J. W. H. Stuckenberg penned a book in the USA with the title *Christian Sociology*. In 1890, two institutes of Christian sociology were established at theological colleges in the USA and Hartford Seminary began a summer school on Christian sociology. The theology journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*, a contender to be the oldest theological quarterly in the western hemisphere, originally included sociology in its subtitle and was coedited by Swift Holbrook, director of the Institute of Christian Sociology at Oberlin (for these early developments see Swatos, 1984, 1989). That this was being done in the USA reflected in part the early advance of sociology there – sociology was first taught in 1875 at Yale – but also the origins of US sociology in Christian social reformism (on which see Coser, 1978; Hofstadter, 1960; Swatos, 1984).

Three of the early presidents of the American Sociological Society, as it was called then, were raised in clerical homes and at least eight of the leading sociologists first began careers as Protestant ministers, including the most famous of them like Sumner and Thomas (Swatos, 1989: 363). Swatos (*ibid.*) disagrees with Coser (1978: 287) as to whether Albion Small had an earlier career as a minister – but he was a deacon in a Baptist church in Chicago for most of his adult life – although there is no doubt as to Small's religious commitment. 'In all seriousness and with careful weighing of my words', Small wrote, 'I register my belief that social science is the holiest sacrament

open to men' (quoted in Coser, 1978: 287). The irony is that in a society where church and state were separate, and religion given no national recognition, clergy in the United States sought to restore some of their spiritual influence, authority and social prestige through secular leadership of the reform movement (see Hofstadter, 1960: 198), whereas in Britain, with a state Church and respectful national obeisance to religion, the clergy were absorbed into the structures of prestige and honour and felt no need to pursue sociology as an alternative source of authority and influence, except a few on the margins of the Sociological Society (see Taylor, 1994). British sociology was thoroughly integrated into British society. The people who dominated it were described in Abrams's history of British sociology as Edwardian gentlemen, 'wealthy amateurs with careers elsewhere, academic deviants or very old men' (1968: 103; also see Halliday, 1968). The women – and women there were, like Beatrice Webb, Harriet Martineau and Sybella Branford (née Gurney) – were daughters of the Establishment with independent inherited wealth.

However, what is lost in the inventory of US Christian sociology is its brief flowering. In a 1927 survey on the autobiographical background of US sociologists, nearly a quarter of the 258 respondents had previously been in the ministry and another 18 had received training in divinity schools (see Coser, 1978: 287), but most lost their faith after embarking on a career in sociology; of the leading sociologists only Small retained his Christian commitment. The social gospel drew these figures to sociology, but then it became the Word. The secularism inherent in sociology also made it unfashionable for seminaries, theology colleges and journals to be associated with the term and it was quickly jettisoned. The institutes of Christian sociology lasted barely a year in some cases. The most religious of all early US sociologists, Albion Small, had a distaste for 'Christian sociology' and wrote a stinging review of Arthur Penty's book (1924), published in England, entitled *Towards a Christian Sociology* (see Swatos, 1989: 366). Other leading sociologists like Giddings and Ward also rejected the term; Giddings, a minister's son, ended up hostile to organized religion. Stuckenberg claimed to have invented it in his 1880 book and Lester Ward declined to review Stuckenberg's 1898 *Introduction to the Study of Sociology* as an 'uncongenial and disagreeable task', although Small did, without mentioning the phrase 'Christian sociology' (see Swatos, 1989: 368). Religion could be endorsed as a topic of scientific investigation by sociology but religiosity as a practice was not acceptable to the guardians of the discipline. The American Sociological Society's first engagement with the subject of religion was in 1909, when it organized a meeting on 'Religion in Modern Society', in an attempt to broach the subject 'scientifically'. The memorandum of the society's planning discussion contained the following injunction to the organizers: 'all those who should be invited . . . should be instructed that all reference to the Divine Authority of any particular religion is to be avoided' (quoted in Swatos, 1989: 370). For much of the 20th century

in the United States therefore, sociology and theology settled back into comfortable partition.

As professional sociology institutionalized in the USA, it became increasingly secular irrespective of the private beliefs of individual sociologists. However, the maintenance of religiosity among some US sociologists did not threaten the disciplinary closure with theology. Christians in US sociology who sought to manage the tension between their professional and private lives organized a rival sociology rather than engaged with theologians. As early as 1938 the American Catholic Sociological Society was established to challenge the secular mainstream American Sociological Society (see Kelly, 1999; Kivisto, 1989). The status anxiety felt by teachers of sociology in the many Catholic colleges and universities in the USA was reproduced within it. It began among a group of sociologists teaching at the Loyola Catholic University in Chicago, led by the Revd Ralph Gallagher, SJ, who had one of his papers rejected by the *American Sociological Review*, and with Gallagher as its first president the society established the *American Catholic Sociological Review* in 1940, which saw its purpose as publishing a distinctly Catholic sociology (Kivisto, 1989: 355). However, the ACSS did affiliate with the mainstream American Sociological Society, which suggests it was not isolationist. According to John Kane, a later president of the ACSS, Catholic sociologists wanted the association to be a bridge not a ghetto to mainstream secular sociology (noted by Kivisto, 1989: 358).

Paradoxically, the Catholic Church did not look benignly on sociology and the Catholic sociologists experienced marginality from both mainstream sociology and the Church, which made maintenance of a professional identity as a Catholic sociologist difficult. Andrew Greeley, a Catholic priest and leading sociologist of religion, once remarked that the Catholic Church held assumptions about mainstream secular sociology that made it hostile to the discipline (Greeley, 1989). Catholic sociologists thus found themselves caught between an institutional space controlled by the Catholic Church that offered employment and an intellectual space as sociologists that demanded professional integrity by separating their faith from their work. In 1970 the American Catholic Sociological Society eventually resolved this tension by becoming the association for the Sociology of Religion – its journal had already changed its name in 1963 to *Sociological Analysis* and then again in 1993 to *Sociology of Religion* – although the first non-Catholic president of the new association was not elected until 1975 and he noted that by then Catholics still dominated the association (Moberg, 1989: 418). Significantly, at the point when Catholic sociology was in transition from being an institutional expression of religious sociology to that of the secular sociology of religion, seeking to shed its denominational tag, the Christian Sociological Society was being established to maintain a separate institutional space for religious sociologists. For Protestants (and Catholic charismatics), a Christian

sociologists' prayer group had long been active. This eventually became the Christian Sociological Society in the 1970s. There is also the association of Christians Teaching Sociology, founded in 1976 with an evangelical and charismatic hue. Evangelical Christian sociologists like Tony Campolo spread their version of sociology in books with revealing titles, such as *Sociology Through the Eyes of Faith* (Fraser and Campolo, 1992), and his Christian history of classical sociological theory is entitled *Partly Right* (Campolo, 1995).

It is worth noting the comparison with France. While Davie (2004) has made a convincing case that the sociology of religion in Francophone countries has special dynamics because of French debates about *laïcité* (literally non-interference between religion and government), Dobbelaere (1989) has shown how the International Conference of Religious Sociology, established in 1948 in Leuven and which quickly became Catholic in ethos, had by 1989 made the same inevitable transformation into the secular International Society for the Sociology of Religion. This was partly because of the resistance of Catholic sociologists to control by the Catholic Church, which saw the conference as undertaking research solely to serve its interests, as well as the professional integrity of Catholic sociologists who wanted to link up with the mainstream discipline (Dobbelaere, 1989: 383). For all the exceptionalism of French sociology of religion, and the obvious differences with the American Catholic Sociological Society, the conference underwent a similar trajectory in managing the tension between religious sociology and the secular sociology of religion by abandoning denominationalism. Laicism in France proscribed the teaching of religion in state-funded universities, so the discipline developed differently in the state system compared to sociology in Catholic institutions. This meant an increasing separation of secular sociology from the theology faculties that were largely restricted to the Catholic-run, non-state universities, such that interest in working out its relationship with theology was missing from mainstream French sociology, being restricted to the ghettoized ICRS, which eventually integrated only by embracing sociology's secularism.

There are many ironies with the British situation. Britain never had the institutional space to teach Christian sociology separate from sociology in the main centres of learning in the universities, yet it survived longer within mainstream sociology than in the USA, allowing Swatos (1989: 366) to argue that Christian sociology was stronger in Britain than in North America despite the remarkable evidence of how religious sociologists in the USA self-organized in ways they did not in Britain. The absence of this institutional space in Britain meant that religious sociologists were forced to remain engaged with the mainstream discipline rather than hive off institutionally, such that British sociology was not so quickly secularized. This gave early British sociologists much greater interest in the relationship between sociology and theology than mainstream sociologists in France. The British case is thus worthy of serious consideration.



THEOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY COLLUDE:  
THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY IN BRITAIN

There is considerable consensus around the institutional origins of British sociology. Abrams (1968) places them in Fabianism, evolution theory and eugenics and Halliday very similarly in social reformism, 'race' and the city planning school known as civics (1968: 379–80); Halsey (2004) also notes its literary tradition (also see Lepenies, 1988). With an eye to the discipline's contemporary vulnerability, it can be noted that these sorts of intellectual concerns were a special interest of the British Establishment, which enthusiastically appropriated the new discipline. The Sociological Society was formed in 1903 and its first president was the Rt Hon. James Bryce, MP, later Lord Bryce; its second Lord Avebury. Sir Francis Younghusband and Earl Balfour were presidents in the 1920s. The provisional committee of the society in 1903 included another MP, C. M. Douglas, and the first Council when formally constituted in 1904 was chaired by Sir Edward W. Brabrook, and included as members Sir John Cockburn, late premier of South Australia and Sir John McDonnell, described as 'Master of the Supreme Court' and who was the Professor of Comparative Law at University College London. There were three Fellows of the Royal Society, one Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, two professors and two knights on the council. Membership of the society was set at a guinea, no mean sum in 1904. By 1922–3, with the Rt Hon. Earl Balfour as president, vice presidents included one earl of the realm, one knight, one Fellow of the Royal Society and three professors.

This was not just the loan of status and honour without serious interest in sociology. The society's publication *Sociological Papers*, which began in 1904, was proof-read by a Justice of the Peace (George Lewis), acknowledgement to which shows he continued with the task over successive annual issues. Contributions to its pages, and to those of its successor, the *Sociological Review*, came from academic sociologists as well as Edwardian gentlemen and aristocrats like Sir Francis Younghusband, the Rt Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett, the Hon. Justice Nair, Edward Cadbury, Sir J. George Scott, Sir Thomas Barclay and the Rt Hon. Sir Forbes Pollack, to name a few. Wealthy businessmen like Martin White endowed the first chair in sociology and supported the sociological work of people like Patrick Geddes, and Victor Branford's wealth was used in numerous ways to institutionalize sociology to the point where he and his wife are said to have been as important as the work of the academic sociologists whom they celebrated (on the Branfords see Scott and Husbands, forthcoming). This engagement is not inconsistent with the thematic interests that dominated early British sociology, such as eugenics, city planning and social work training, since the aristocrats and business leaders had the class interests and paternalism of their social position sufficient to make them concerned about crime, 'race degeneration', social

improvement in the cities and the amelioration of poverty, disease and prostitution.

Any listing of members of the British Establishment at this time would have to include Church of England clergy and a smattering were involved on the margins of the Sociological Society, like the Revd Lilley, rector of St Mary's Paddington, on the first council of the society, and the Revd Francis Aveling. Volumes of the proceedings of the society contained articles from the Revd W. D. Morris on crime, the Revd A. J. Carlyle on freedom and the Revd Caldecot on 'race' (Taylor, 1994: 443). The Revd Rowland-Jones was publishing on religion in the *Sociological Review* well into the 1920s (see Rowland-Jones, 1925). Canon Samuel Barnett's social work through Toynbee Hall was a major part of the institutional history of sociology in Britain, as was the Charity Organisation Society, the Christian Social Union and the Social Institutes Union, bringing academic writers like the Bosanquets, C. S. Loch and Edward J. Urwick, a son of the manse, into the domain of sociology (see Halliday, 1968: 379). Booth and Rowntree, Quaker social reformers – significantly therefore outside the Established Church – who had undertaken poverty studies that form a significant part of the history of sociological research (see Kent, 1985), eschewed any involvement in the Sociology Society in Britain (Abrams, 1968: 106–7), although Booth did chair some of its initial debates. On the other hand, the Established Church saw sociology as a kind of applied Christianity and supported it enthusiastically. The University of Liverpool's early courses in sociology were designed for junior clergy, among others, as preparation and training in social work (Abrams, 1968: 111–12). Sociology in Britain was, for a while at least, the Anglican Church on the streets, in the drinking dens and alongside the working girls.

Taylor (1994) has acknowledged the role of the clergy on the periphery of the society but argues that as early as 1909, the society was moving from religious sociology to the secular sociology of religion (ibid.: 443). The LSE syllabus taught by Hobhouse, another son of the manse and the first occupant of a chair in sociology in Britain, began to render religion as a social process to be studied scientifically rather than practices and observances that sociology might ethically underwrite. He attributes the resignation of Hobhouse as editor of *Sociological Review* in 1911 to disquiet about editorial policy over religious issues (ibid.: 443) – Halliday on the other hand attributes it to disagreement over eugenics and civics (1968: 388) – and the Anglican Church, he argues, was on its way passing through British sociology to organising its own version of Christian social ethics (1994: 444). However, the British experience does not match the US and French models closely, for Christian sociology was not so quickly hived off. Continued interest in religious sociology was mediated by two factors: the survival of religious belief among the early founders; and the impact of Christian socialism on British sociology. There was potential in this religious sociology for productive collusion between sociology and theology.

With respect to religious belief, it is necessary to first observe that British sociology was ahead of the US in considering the 'scientific study of religion' a respectable sociological topic. Religion was a very popular topic in early British sociology (in a way that the sociology of religion today is not). In a programmatic statement for the very first issue of *Sociological Papers* in 1904, V. V. Branford (1904: 13) cites an analysis of sociological literature done by French sociologists in *Année Sociologique*, which reveals sociology's fascination with religion, in Britain in particular. Of books and periodicals published up to 1902, 161 were classified as concerned with religion, 114 with juridical and moral sociology, 56 with 'general sociology', 73 with economics and 35 with crime. Of those writing on religion, 29 had originated in France, 75 in Germany, in Italy 15, in the USA 12 and in 'England' 29; of 'English' sociological literature, religion was by far the most popular topic, with juridical and moral sociology coming closest at 7. This interest was reproduced in several ways. For example, A. W. Crawley wrote a piece on the origins and functions of religion in only the second volume of *Sociological Papers* in 1906, presented as a talk to the society the year before (Crawley, 1906), and the early issues of *Sociological Review* had running features on 'Living Religion', with the society hosting a conference in conjunction with the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London as late as 1925 on living religions in the British Empire. Branford published his contribution to the conference as a separate paper in the *Sociological Review* (V. V. Branford, 1928) and later as a book entitled *Living Religions*. M. R. Robinson (1916) penned a piece in the 1916–17 volume on the functions of the priest. As if to summarize engagement with the topic, and to reflect one of the sources from which interest in it came, the Revd W. Rowland-Jones (1925) wrote a paper entitled 'Sociology and the Church of England'.

There is clear evidence here of religion being seen at the very beginning as a sociological category to be used scientifically as part of the explanation of social life in dispassionate and secular ways. The Comteans in the society took seriously the distinction between temporal and spiritual powers and saw it as one of the purposes of sociology to elucidate Comte's original distinction and to show the outworking of these fields in British society at the beginning of the 20th century. However, religious sociologists utilized their sociological interest in service of their faith. For example, Rowland-Jones (1925: 131) urged the Church to greater involvement in social betterment, willing social scientists and theologians to combine in raising 'sociological questions' in the campaign for social improvement. A lot of this work was riddled with ethical concerns, particularly the idea that sociology had potential to ethically underpin religion, and Christian civilization generally, which pulled people like Christopher Dawson, the Catholic social historian, John M. Robertson and Bernard Bosanquet into the orbit of the Sociological Society. Thus, there was interpenetration of personnel between the society and various London ethical societies and religious groups, which ensured that

the pages of *Sociological Review* tended to reflect the diverse, and occasionally odd, religious views of the Sociological Society's founders and early contributors (on British ethical societies see McKillop, 1986).

Victor Branford's second wife, Sybella, was Christian, the daughter of an Anglican priest, and very active in the Sociological Society, and both wrote frequently in its journals; Victor Branford's first book was a biography of St Columba. Two of Victor's brothers were Anglican clergymen and members of the society, but not Victor, who never made an explicit statement of belief and appears never to have practised; his wife went to church in Hastings on her own. While their adopted sons were baptized Anglican, the Branfords married under the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church since Victor was a divorcee; Sybella's personal beliefs were liberal enough at the time to permit her in conscience to do so. Victor was very interested in eastern religions and along with Geddes in Baha'ism and theosophy – hence the living religions of the British Empire rather than Torquay – and his wife and he were very attracted by the ideas of guild socialism and social credit theory, on which Sybella in particular wrote at length in *Sociological Review*. This endeared them also to the romanticism of Ruskin's medieval organicist views. Rowland-Jones's analysis of sociology and the Church of England would thus hardly have been recognized by congregations in Torquay, for he hoped that sociology might help religion recapture the organic connection between church, community and people of medieval Catholicism (what the Catholic Le Play – cited often in *Sociological Review* by many different authors – called place, work and folk; Le Play's writings were very popular in Britain and the premises of the Sociological Society later became renamed Le Play House). Rowland-Jones linked sociology's critique of modernity, particularly its criticism of capitalist individualism, with the anti-modernism of the Catholic Church and the High Anglican tradition in the hope that sociological research might hasten the return to medieval Catholic society in England: a era '[when] every morning the ringing of the church bells falling on the ears of work-folk and fieldsmen, beginning their labours, reminds every member of the family of his dependence upon his brother and his God' (Rowland-Jones, 1925: 132). He called for a wedding of religion and sociology, for sociology to become a kind of 'idealistic Catholicism' (ibid.: 135) by its emphasis on the inseparability of place, work and folk and the embedding of church, community and people against the dangers of unfettered capitalist markets and rampant individualism and selfishness. The 'scientific study of religion' by sociology was thus replete with ethical values, for 'the aspirations of the practical sociologist, whether he admits it or not, are largely the ideals of the medieval Catholic' (ibid.: 134).

There were, however, two different sorts of ethical code replete in early British religious sociology. One was the anti-modernism of medieval organicism, the other Christian socialism. Christian socialists were keen supporters

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of sociology (see Norman, 1976, 1987) and the Anglo-Catholic Maurice B. Reckitt (on whom see Peart-Binns, 1988) founded a journal of Christian sociology called *Christendom* that ran between 1931 and 1950. There were 'Anglo-Catholic Summer Schools in Sociology' organized in the 1920s, whose lecturers were expected to be Protestant (Taylor, 1994: 448), and in 1931 the Catholic Union for Social Sciences in Milan was in contact with the Sociological Society about advertising its prize for work on Christian social thought, which dutifully appeared in *Sociological Review*. Reckitt knew the Branfords well and together they published in A. R. Orage's *The New Age*, which ran between 1894 and 1922 and which began as a publication of the Christian socialist movement, although it later shifted emphasis to guild socialism and social credit theory, which alienated the Fabians (who went on to found the rival *New Statesmen*) but not the Christian socialists and thus further integrated the interests of the Branfords with Christian socialism. Catholics like Belloc and Chesterton were contributors, as was Arthur Penty. Reckitt was a strong supporter of social credit theory and through C. H. Douglas he helped to reinforce the views of the Branfords. Christian socialism brought the likes of R. H. Tawney, then working at the LSE under Edward Urwick, into the orbit of the Sociological Society.

However, the Christian socialists tended to have two concerns that took their interest in sociology in different directions. The first was for social betterment, which headed off into a kind of politicised Christian sociology, concerned with social problems. Thus Anglican clergy in the pages of *Sociological Review* berated the more conservative members of the Established Church who thought sociology too political (Rowland-Jones, 1925: 131). In this concern for social betterment, the Christian socialists were in sympathy with the liberal Anglicans grouped around the Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship that was active from 1920 until 1929 (on which see Taylor, 1994: 446–7), that dealt with sociological themes like education, gender, crime, education, and the home, as well as discussions about capitalism, property and individualism. Radical critics tended to find the Conference tepid and platitudinous. While Taylor (*ibid.*: 446) notes there were no 'academic sociologists' involved on the 350-strong council, there was cross-over in membership with the Sociological Society. The impact of this brand of Christian socialism on the development of British sociology was greatest when sociology was motivated by the amelioration of social ills and thus is restricted to its earliest years.

The second concern of Christian socialism was towards heralding the new Christendom. Based around Reckitt and his journal *Christendom* and with roots in the Church Socialist League (Norman, 1976: 319), sociology was thought to help realize the new Jerusalem by disclosing, when linked to theology, social patterns that would be sources of revelation and understanding about the revival of Christendom. Taylor (1994: 448) makes the

essential point when he argues that as academic sociology developed in Britain in the 1930s, the Christian sociologists disconnected themselves from the mainstream as it secularized; indeed, the development of a separate journal in 1931 is tantamount to formal acknowledgement of the partition. By this time, the *Sociological Review* carried two papers by Howard Becker (1932a, 1932b) delivering standard sociological fare on secularization. While religious sociology in France and the USA secularized in order to come into the fold, in Britain it eventually separated in order to maintain its faith commitments.

During the early years, however, all these strains came together in the persons of the Branfords. Anglo-Catholic social betterment, medieval organicism, Christian socialism and the search for a new Christendom were diverse bye-ways that led to Christian sociology and the Branfords' eclectic set of interests and concerns momentarily linked them at a crossroad to the Sociological Society. In reviews of Christian sociology books and in articles addressing theology and sociology, Victor and Sybella separately assessed the potential for fruitful engagement, but they objected strongly to the separatism of religious sociology. In a review of the American Charles Ellwood's book *The Re-evaluation of Religion: A Sociological View*, Victor Branford (1922) supported the call for 'scientifically grounded religion', as did Sybella (Branford (1924) when jointly reviewing Penty's book *Towards a Christian Sociology* and A. H. Moss's *Studies in the Christian Gospel for Society* (the latter having been recommended by the Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship as essential reading for possible social science courses in theological colleges; see Taylor, 1994: 446). For all her wish to see religion exposed to sociological rigour and method, Sybella objected to the separatism of Christian sociologists: 'such books as these we should prefer to describe as Christian social doctrine, or by some other phrase, in order to avoid confusion' (1924: 268). Penty was criticized for not being sufficiently grounded in the methods of the new sociology and Moss as insufficiently read in sociology. More significantly, she lampooned the very idea of Christian sociology, a phrase 'curious on the ear of the ordinary student of sociology', such that one might expect 'let us say, a "Buddhist biology" or a "Mahometan chemistry"' (ibid.: 269). Only by stretching language could sociology be termed Christian.

The Branfords supported collaboration between 'practical religion' and sociology in analysing the social condition but rejected a possible synthesis in the form of Christian sociology. This was the theme of a talk Sybella gave to the Sociological Society at Le Play House in 1921 entitled 'Theology and Sociology', and published posthumously in the *Sociological Review* under that title as part of the society's tribute to her (see S. Branford, 1927). With echoes of Comte, Sybella complained at the lack of guidance 'from the spiritual powers' in these 'dark and troublous times', and objected that theology was too abstract and insufficiently grounded in the methods of sociology, but

she urged a 'closer union between theologians and sociologists' (ibid.: 223). The grounds for this urgency were fourfold. They should collaborate in dealing with the big moral issues and the practical concerns of modern times; these practical and moral issues are best dealt with by sociology and theology in collaboration; the two disciplines are alike ethically, in how they conceive of the 'ideals of man and human society' (ibid.: 225); and they are alike in how they structure the world into temporal and spiritual powers, with sociology concerned with the former, theology the latter. She hoped that the Sociological Society would inaugurate a series of conferences with theologians to address the 'burning questions of the day' and to 'form a campaign for the provision of a more vitalising environment and voluntary transfer of much surplus wealth to common purposes' (ibid.: 227).

The 'working alliance between theologian and sociologist' that Sybella called for never materialized in Britain until the Blackfriars meetings in Oxford in 1978. The Church saw sociology as too political, Christian sociology separated itself and became isolated, and mainstream sociology eventually secularized and saw Christian sociology as normative, 'as not really sociology' as Edward Norman once put it (1976: 320). They colluded around a common set of concerns, but did not combine, such that when theologians and sociologists did take each other seriously in the 1970s, it appeared as if the engagement was new. We now turn to the forms of this modern engagement.

### THEOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY COMBINE

The earliest programmatic statement in Britain of sociology's relevance to theology was Robin Gill's *The Social Context of Theology* (1975) and *Theology and Social Structure* (1978), and the sociological imagination proved a revelation in theology and biblical studies. The sociological work of biblical scholars has focused on several areas (see Coleman, 1999 for a different classification). Among the most popular is locating the first Christian communities in Graeco-Roman Mediterranean culture as an explanation of Christianity's foothold and growth (for example: Elser, 1994; Grant, 1977; Kee, 1980; Malherbe, 1983; Meeks, 1983; Schutz, 1982; Stambaugh and Balch, 1986; Theissen, 1978). Another is the application of sociology to gain insight into the hermeneutical problem of the meaning of texts by charting the social context in which they were produced. In this vein there have been sociological studies of the Old Testament as a whole (Gottwald, 1979; Mayes, 1989) and the New (Best, 1983; Edwards, 1983; Fenn, 1992; Holmberg, 1990; Kee, 1989; Scroggs, 1986; Tidball, 1983), as well as of specific gospels (Elser, 1987; Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992, 1997; Neyrey, 1991; Overman, 1990) and other key texts (Elliot, 1981; Theissen, 1982). An extension of this interest in the hermeneutics of scripture and its social world has been to draw attention

to particular themes in the Bible and their cultural practice in biblical times, such as gender and the family (Ozick and Balch, 1997), honour and shame (Peristany and Pitt-Rivers, 1992), healing (Pilch, 1985), property (Haan, 1988), justice (Crosby, 1988; Grassi, 2003), and peace and violence (Hendrickx, 1986). A third area is the use of social theory to deconstruct the process of textual interpretation as part of postmodern penetration of theology (and sociology), such as Patte (1995), or more generally to analyse the social and cultural changes wrought by postmodernism as they impact on religion, such as Milbank (1990). Theologians have also produced collections of readings to introduce sociology (for example, Gill, 1987, 1996) and reflected on how sociology affects the theology curriculum (Francis, 1999).

This sociological imagination has given theologians confidence to critique society in the light of their theological insights and religious faith. The church historian Martin Marty coined the term 'public theology' (1981) to describe a Church that engages actively in social affairs. In such a place theology often confronts sociology and its more secular insights on the social world (for the clash in how they approach the issue of homosexuality for example, see Brewer, 2003). Milbank (1990) wrote a defence of theology against 'secular reason' in disciplines like sociology, particularly ridiculing the sociology of religion for its reductionism, leading to a vociferous debate (extracts are collated in Gill, 1996: 429–70), with a strong defence of sociology from the Christian sociologist David Martin (1997) and the Catholic sociologist Kieran Flanagan (1992b; also see Flanagan and Jupp, 1996). Milbank's idea that there is a nascent theology in sociology, that for all its secular reason it is theological in its aims, has recently been readdressed by Catholic sociologist Margaret Archer (see Archer, Collier and Porpora, 2004) and the sociologist of culture W. J. F. Keenan (2003). He uses the work of Evdokimov and Bauman to suggest that postmodernism in sociology entails a return to the sacred, a re-enchantment of the social world, in that the critique of rationalism now opens up all options, making all boundaries porous, thus excluding 'the secular pessimist's doleful conviction that we are always and everywhere on the road to hell in a handcart' (2003: 22), although this is a conceptual rather than empirical claim and like many postmodernists he neglects to remember that relativism itself must now be considered relative and postmodernism might just as easily not presage the end of secularism.

However, postmodern deconstruction is not the only common ground between the two disciplines. Analysing the social context of early Christianity is a respectable topic within the sociology of religion – Rodney Stark, for example, uses it to advance his rational choice theory of religion and the sociology of religion journal *Social Compass* devoted an entire issue to it in 1992 – and some sociologists criticize biblical scholars for their limited understanding of the discipline (Blasi, 1988, 1996; Bryant, 1997; Stark, 1996). Interest in the growth of early Christianity is not limited to sociologists of



religion, for Runciman (2004) has recently used this as a case study to support his controversial ideas about cultural selection acting as a process analogous to natural selection. His approach is very much in the mould of Weber, who plundered both the history of primitive Christianity and the New Testament for insight to develop his general approach to sociology (on which see Ouedraogo, 1999). Anthropological analysis of some of tenets of Judaism was made famous by Mary Douglas (for example, 1966, 1999); sociologists of religion have been interested in the culture and religious beliefs of ancient Israel too (see Wilson, 1980).

Much of this common ground, however, has been occupied without the institutional networks to support mutual engagement and prevent talk at cross-purposes. Key individuals use their own institutional niches in mainstream universities for forays. The Revd Canon Martyn Percy, for example, directs the Lincoln Theological Institute for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Sheffield from which he address the connections between the two disciplines, most recently writing a 'theology of culture' (2005), but there are no private Christian colleges and universities in Britain to provide stimulus. The Blackfriars Symposium in Theology and Sociology, known as such because the meetings took place in Blackfriars Dominican house of study in Oxford (on the origins of the symposium see Martin, Mills and Pickering, 2003[1980]: 7–9), began in January 1978 and in its first – and only – joint publication described the common ground between the two as not yet having dispelled mistrust (ibid.: 7). While its initial proceedings were published under the title *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict* (2003[1980]), the symposium ended 10 years later and never published again; it may or may not be significant that the symposium terminated after a paper by Milbank, soon to publish his self-confident denunciation of sociology, although its disputes were described by one member as gentle (see Gill, 1996: 1). However, some participants wished to continue the dialogue and have published programmatic statements of their own (see the theologian Gill, 1987, 1996 and the sociologist Martin, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the Christian input into early US sociology, the subject developed quickly there as a secular one, as in France, so that those sociologists who maintained their religiosity were placed mostly in a side-flow, although a few like Peter Berger managed successfully to negotiate the mainstream. The vast number of educational establishments in the United States with a religious ethos ensured religious sociologists had an institutional space to keep Christian sociology alive but this kind of sociology was marginalized. Because they felt professional incongruity as sociologists (rather than as

Christians), religious sociologists in the United States directed their attention to working out an engagement with mainstream secular sociology rather than theology, and with the exception of Protestant evangelical sociologists, they have tried to denude their sociology of institutional markers of faith, as the French Catholic sociologists eventually did. They did not look to theology to help buttress their Christianity within sociology and when theologians began serious engagement with sociology in the 1970s, US sociologists were slow to respond. By contrast, Christian sociology in Britain lasted until the early 1950s but only got in the way of effective engagement between sociology and theology. Christian sociology was isolationist and separatist and unlike in the USA, it declined to be a bridge to mainstream sociology. Central figures in the early Sociological Society refused to countenance such ghettoization and thus religious sociologists continued to engage with the mainstream discipline, in the process of which they reflected on possible relationships between theology and sociology. When Sybella Branford argued in a talk to the British Sociological Society in 1921 that theology might learn from the methods of sociology and sociology from the ethical and substantive concerns of theology, she did not expect that it would take more than half a century to achieve.

The history of this (non-)engagement in Britain is revealing for what it discloses about the history of British sociology and this article suggests that a more thorough account of 'religious sociology' in Britain is needed to match what we know about the impact of Christian belief on the history of US sociology and on the sociology of religion in France. That religious beliefs fairly common in 1900–10 should impact British sociology strikes us as noteworthy now only because of the extent to which the discipline has secularized, but there is a sociological tale to be told in how this came about.

#### NOTES

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