

SOCIOLOGY CAN HELP THEOLOGY

SOCIOLOGY can help theology in at least two ways:

(a) in its old mission of reading God's Book and

(b) in its new task of interpreting the Signs of the Times.

I will survey these two areas, after pausing on the three preliminary concepts of Sociology, Theology and 'help' and before reviewing the ways and means in which collaboration between sociologists and theologians is currently developing.

Both sociology and theology are sciences, but each is so in a different way. Sociology is empirical, and secular; theology is speculative, and divine. Sociology abstracts from integral experience to focus on its formal object of social relations of individuals in society while theology assumes the whole of this integral experience as it concentrates on its formal object which is God and thus seeks the ultimate explanation of man's plight.¹

For our purposes we will describe sociology as 'the science that deals with social groups, their internal forms or modes of organisation and the relations between groups'.² Its raw material is, therefore, the observation of social relations.

Theology, on the other hand, is the science, or rather the *doctrina sacra* which studies 'that which God alone knows of Himself and which He has communicated to us through Revelation'.³ The first task of the theologian is to receive these elements of Faith in Faith. Theology thus becomes a participation in the knowledge of God, thanks to God's own intervention: *quaedam impressio divinae scientiae*.⁴

The difference between the levels at which the sciences operate requires a brief reference to the concept of 'help'. The help which I propose to review is that special kind which consists in the provision of empirical conclusions.

Sociology sees these isolated data not only partially but also in a determined perspective and it presents them to theology in this form. It is then up to theology to re-integrate them at the higher level of man's total experience as the latter is finally rooted in relations with God.

¹Schillebeeckx E.: *Social Compass*, 1963, p. 275.

²Johnson, H.: *Sociology*, p. 2.

³ST. I, q. 1, a 6.

⁴ST. I, q. 1, a 3, 2.

The two areas of this special kind of help which I have chosen to consider have been explored and exploited by the Angelic Doctor, though of course in his own way and according to the conditions then current in theology.

Did not Aquinas make use of the sciences then available in order to read God's Book and the Signs of his Times? The phrase *Usus philosophiae et aliarum scientiarum* in the *Sacra doctrina*⁵ describes the nature of the help offered by sociology to theology. The training in the sciences which he received from the great Albert had shown him the theologian's knack of making use of the partial truths discovered by empirical research in his quest for the whole and ultimate truth.

The science of sociology was not at hand to help St. Thomas. But it would be in his best tradition to 'use it', once it has emerged. The two areas which I have called God's Book and the Signs of the Times will illustrate this point.

I will consider the first under the two aspects of Biblical theology and of patrology.

In recent times various sciences have helped Biblical exegesis. The contributions of such empirical sciences as archaeology and geography, to the right understanding of the Bible have been considerable, if not decisive. But archaeology and geography have provided deeper insights into the relations of man to the land of the Bible; sociology, either explicitly or implicitly, had penetrated the crucial sector of the relations of man to man in Biblical times. The reconstruction of the *Sitz in Leben* or situation in life of the author is the key to the right understanding of the Psalms and other parts of Sacred Scripture. Since man is naturally social and since God has chosen to reveal Himself in and through the community which He called his people, the contribution of Sociology to Biblical theology consists in a reconstruction of the social context in which a particular part of Scripture was written. Sociology thus helps by providing theologians with the raw material of its findings and the precision tools of sociological concepts like structure, function, role, status and behaviour patterns.

The same kind of help is again available to theologians as they grope for the right interpretation of Tradition. As Scripture has to be seen in the light of Tradition, so Tradition itself has to be read in the light of the social context in which it took root and grew. It would be impossible to read the Angelic Doctor intelligently without an overview of the so-

⁵ ST. I, q. 1, a3 ad 2um.

cial context in which he was operating.⁶ And such a background can be provided by Sociology which, in combination with the closely allied discipline of cultural anthropology, provides such concepts like accommodation, assimilation, and value to analyse and interpret both the content of tradition and the social structure through which it is transmitted and perpetuated.

Seen in the light of Sociology, Tradition or 'culture' as Sociologists would call it, takes on a new imposing dimension. It is seen in sharper focus as a living, dynamic process. It ceases to be the drab chronicle of the cut and dry dicta of the Patres in order to become the epic of the best minds and hearts of the Church as they grappled with the basic problems of human existence and relations with God in the context of their own pasts and futures.

Reading God's word is a constant function of theology which thus looks back to the past in order to understand the ever present message of God. Interpreting the Signs of the Times is focusing its attention on the present in order to interpret God's future plans on the world. God speaks to us through the Bible, through Tradition and through the events of our times. I will consider this last area by referring to three closely related themes in to-day's theology, that is,

1. The quest for a theology of the world
2. The effort to make theology relevant
3. The dialogue between the Church and modern man.

1. As the Fathers of the Vatican Council groped their way through the labyrinth of pastoral problems during the first session, their debate was finally pinned down by Cardinal Suenens between the poles of the Church and the World. Paradoxically enough, his otherwise logical division between *Ecclesia ab intra et ad extra* soon fell to pieces as Council Fathers and theologians fought shy of references to the Church and the World. They preferred the phrase the 'Church in the World'. To them it was no longer a question of the Church conquering the World but rather one of the Church being present in the World.

This explains the attention which theologians are devoting to the theology of the World. 'In this twentieth Century with the extraordinary expansion of science and technology, man's mastery over the forces of nature and his planned regulation of the economy is pushing the desacralisation (begun in the Renaissance) to the limits of his awareness.'⁷

⁶ Lonergan expressly demanded this of his students.

⁷ Chenu *Doct* 157, p. 3.

This desacralisation of science and work, of reason and the emotions, of nature and history, of leisure pursuits and culture, of social justice and the State, is not just a historical development but also in direct accord with the Gospel. The Church will be present in the world to-day only if she discerns and assesses the values of this world.

The evolution of the world, through and in man, in brotherly love, is the very soil of the Kingdom. The dualism nature-grace is being replaced by the great pastoral and theological truth of grace in nature. Again sociology can help theology in discerning and describing how the process of the evolution of the world is taking place.

Man, and therefore *social* man, is 'subject' to grace, *capax dei* not only in his person but in his social relations.

These values and their evolution could be the evangelical Signs of the Times: 'interpellations by God across the current of events'. God makes a sign and creation awaits the revolution of the sons of God.⁸ It is up to theology to assess them but it can only discern them with precision if it is helped by sociology. For example:

(a) Sociology points to the modern phenomenon of industrialisation and urbanisation. Theologians refer to the continuous act of creation and thereby discover other aspects of God's creative mystery.

(b) Sociology points to the phenomenon of socialisation and theology interprets it as a hitherto unsuspected side of brotherly love and existence.

(c) Again, when sociology furnishes theologians with such findings as a probability-correlation between leakage and alienation from the Church, and, for example migration to the city or the change from farm to factory work, it sets theologians thinking. They discover that the mere condemnation of city life and factory work is a wrong interpretation of one dogma of faith and consequently they understand this dogma better by discovering that an authentic attitude of faith asks for loyal recognition and integration of such realities into a new deep religious attitude towards life. What is sociologically loss of function for the Church becomes the fore phase of a new sacramental emergence of the Church.

It is a Sign of the Times that we have matured into a greater confidence in the universal immanence of God's graceful action.⁹

⁸ Rom. 8, 19.

⁹ Schillebeeckx E.: *Social Compass*, 1963, p. 275.

2. By focusing on the quest for God's plan for the world, theologians make their work more relevant to modern man. In the process they discover that sociology can furnish them with objective and systematized data on social phenomena. Such hard facts help them judge what is relevant and what is futile and thus lead them to select those areas of research which really matter.

3. The coming of the *revision de vie*, now accepted as the original contribution of our own Twentieth Century to Christian spirituality, has helped us seek God's plan in daily life and, in the process, make our belief in God incessantly relevant. Again, sociology helps theologians describe, define, interpret the events and phenomena of our times. In the process, it prepares them for their dialogue with the world. It cannot but foster that admiration, sympathy, love and respect for the values and autonomy of God's social creation – all conditions for the successful dialogue between the Church and the World. It would be an oversimplification to say that the task of theologians consists in the fuller awareness of the Church while the main contribution of sociologists boils down to a deeper understanding of the World. The two are interpenetrating spheres: the Church herself has a sociological dimension which can be plumbed only by the sociological approach while the World itself has a meaning which can only be fathomed by theology.

These are only indications of the areas in which sociology can help theology. But they lead us to a brief review of the lines along which collaboration is actually developing.

The loss of membership and the passive attitude of its faithful shook the Church of the Twentieth Century and 'brought her back to reality',¹⁰ mostly thanks to the habit of observation. The first traces of this new habit are found in Germany where Nineteenth Century theologian Van Oettingen analysed the correlations between church membership and such phenomena as suicide, divorce, and birth rate. In the U.S., the empirical approach was adopted in the 1920's by E.S. Bounner while in France the breakthrough came with the work of Le Bras. The important fact was that, by the mid-Twentieth Century, the vicious circle of the social irrealism of the Church had been broken.

The idea that the Church must incessantly seek a dynamic equilibrium between the shedding of old patterns and adoption of new ones spread.¹¹ Indeed it became insitutionalized in an organization called FERES, the

¹⁰ Schreuder O.: *Social Compass*, 1965, p. 8.

¹¹ Goddijn H & W., *Social Compass*, 1965, p. 23 ff.

international federation of institutes of social and socio-religious research, whose members pursue the paths of dialogue, relevancy and ultimate reasoning in contemporary social realities. Its institutes are spread over the five continents and theologians would certainly find their theology more challenging and challenged if they stop to ponder on their reports on Church roles and structures, the relations of the Church and the local community and the World. Such an opportunity is being offered to them in the increasingly popular 'mixed' study sessions where theologians and sociologists come to grips with the 'Signs of the Times'.

The horizon seems to be bright, sociology is promising theology more effective help in reading God's book and in interpreting the same Signs of the Times. The two worlds are no longer separate: they have interpenetrated.

Because ultimate reality is 'not many but one'.

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