

Religion is a social phenomenon. Our beliefs are not received directly from heaven. They are mediated through others and shaped by our social context. The family in which we grow, the church in which our faith is nurtured, the events which give us key religious experiences and the broader social contacts all impact our understanding and practice of Christianity.

Not convinced? Take four city based ministers of large churches: an Anglican, a Methodist, a Baptist and a Pentecostal. One grew up in a northern mill town, attended a provincial university, speaks warmly of a conversion experience. One grew up in a poor inner city area and got into trouble as a teenager with the police. He was dramatically converted in his late teens. One gradually grew in his faith through his Christian parents, went to grammar school and attended one of the older universities where his faith was rethought for an adult world. One went to Oxbridge and joined the Guards before entering the ministry. Can you fit the individual stories to the different denominations? Almost certainly you can. Why? Because faith is more than a matter of doctrine and pure religious experience. It always comes to us transmitted through social channels and always functions in a sociological way.

Understanding the Claims of Sociology

Sociology is a discipline which enables us to gain a systematic understanding of social relationships, from the most simple to the most complex, and to help us understand why changes occur in them. Even in simple face-to-face relationships we are affected and shaped by influences around us. No relationship occurs in a social vacuum. Beyond the level of face-to-face relationships we are involved in a complex network of overlapping roles and expectations. Society, explicitly or implicitly, agrees to handle the regular and repeated questions we all face in particular ways. This gives rise to what are called social

institutions, like the institution of marriage and the institutions of politics, education and law and order. To the sociologists religious behaviour fits their understanding of a social institution.

Strictly speaking, sociology only ever offers a partial explanation of human behaviour. The best sociologists admit that reality is complex and capable of multiple explanations. Sociologists are trying to draw the map which abstracts the relational dimension from the other layers of explanation which are possible.

It is now recognised that the earlier quest for an 'objective' or 'neutral' sociology is not achievable. Most sociologists therefore approach their task from a particular perspective and recognise that a framework, such as a Marxist or a feminist perspective, is useful. This means that in recent years Christians have been given permission to adopt a Christian perspective in their sociological quest. Other sociologists who are not committed to a particular school might be eclectic in their approach.

Whilst complete objectivity may be unobtainable, it is always important that people are honest about their starting points and submit their findings to the testing of other scholars in an open process of enquiry. If the perspective from which the sociological undertaking is conducted is inadequate, then their whole findings will fall. If the presuppositions on which the findings are built are adequate, then other questions of adequacy and interpretation will still arise.

The Benefits and Liabilities of Sociology of Religion

- *Benefits*

- The sociological perspective can inject a note of realism into our understanding of the faith. Too often Christians seem to deal with abstract people or theological minds rather than flesh and blood people who live in concrete social realities.

- A sociological mind can help us to discern the difference between the revealed will of God and the particular way in which his will has been

applied and put into effect in different cultures. So, while the importance of being a member of the church is beyond dispute from a New Testament viewpoint, the particular way in which the church organises its life - its authority structures, its programme, its liturgy and services, and its relationship to the wider community - may well owe more to its social history or contemporary social location than to a New Testament blueprint of church.

- Sociology helps to understand not just the local congregation but the grand picture. It helps us to gain an objective handle on the fluctuating fortunes and place of religion within our society. When we get too involved in the Christian sub-culture we often suffer from a distorted picture of reality.

- Sociology as a wider discipline helps to sensitise us to the problems of wider society and helps to inform a Christian response to them.

- *Liabilities*

Sociologists can sometimes be over zealous about their discipline and present their perspective not as a partial explanation of behaviour but rather as the total explanation. This leads to religion not being helpfully 'explained' but unhelpfully 'explained away'. Such reductionism is intellectually indefensible. Two points need to be borne in mind:

First, it should not surprise us that God usually works through normal human channels, including the network of social relations of which we are a part. The doctrines both of creation and incarnation should lead us to expect that God works through the physical and accommodates himself to the human. An understanding of those human dimensions can therefore prove helpful, not least in discerning when human beings get in the way of God's own working.

Secondly, to provide a sociological explanation of religious behaviour, or even religious belief, leaves open the question of the validity of that religious behaviour or belief which must be determined on other

grounds. I might, for example, be able to explain the rise of a cult of worshippers of 'Little Green Men from Mars' in terms of those people's social upbringing. But even if I can successfully do so it does not answer the question as to whether there are little green men from Mars or not.

Key Issues

Sociology of Religion is a dynamic discipline, currently enjoying a vibrant life. The topics which are currently uppermost on the agenda include:

- the social construction of religion
- religion as a rational choice
- the relation between religion and class
- the relationship between religion and gender
- the concept of secularisation: the impact of modernisation on religion
- spirituality outside the church: the rise of the new spiritual outlets
- cults, sects and new religious movements
- fundamentalism, evangelicalism and liberalism
- religion and post-modernity
- globalisation, McDonaldisation and the nature of the church

Key Figures

Steve Bruce, Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, is a prolific writer and strong advocate of the secularisation paradigm. He builds on the earlier work of Brian Wilson, David Martin, and Roy Wallace.

Grace Davie, Reader in Sociology at the University of Exeter. Davie gives a more nuanced and sympathetic interpretation of religion in Britain than Bruce and argues that the nation has become unchurched rather than unbelieving; summed up in the phrase 'believing without belonging'. Davie also paints the picture of religion in Britain on the broader canvas of European history and culture.

Malcolm Hamilton, Senior Lecturer at the University of Reading has published the best recent text book on the major theories in the sociology of religion *The Sociology of Religion*, [Routledge].

Paul Hellas, Professor of Religion and Modernity, Lancaster University, has published a major work on the New Age Movement and edited, especially with his colleague Linda Woodhead, significant collections of articles and surveys on contemporary religion. They have made a contribution to the understanding of the loss of faith in religious institutions and the 'turn to self' evident in much new spirituality.

Andrew Walker, Professor of Theology, Culture and Education at King's College, London, has written much helpful material about charismatic Christianity and the new churches which have grown out of Restorationism.

Other great names to watch out for are American. They include Nancy Ammerman, Peter L Berger, James Davison Hunter, Donald Miller, Wade Clark Roof, Robert Wuthnow. David Lyon, a British sociologist now serving as a professor in Canada, continues to make an important contribution in this area even though it is not his primary academic specialism.

For Further Reading

David Fraser and Tony Campolo, *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith* (Apollos) an elementary and fun introduction to the relationship between the general discipline of sociology and Christian faith.

Richard Perkins, *Looking Both Ways: Exploring the interface between sociology and Christianity* (Baker) as above, a good basic introduction not specifically focussed on the discipline of sociology of religion.

If you can get hold of them from a second hand shop, look at David Lyon's *Christians and Sociology* (IVP) or his *Sociology and the Human Image* (IVP).

Sociology of Religion

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