Sublime Policing: Sociology and Milbank's City of God

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Sociology is a necessary evil on the academic landscape. It is the discipline we all like to hate. Somehow, sociology fits everywhere and yet belongs nowhere in particular. It does not have the finesse of philosophy, the vision of theology or the grace of classics, but as a mongrel child of the Enlightenment it plays about with their deepest insights. Sociology reflects modernity, but in a way that confirms an instinctive dislike of its basis. In the academic game of musical chairs, sociology is left standing, when the waltz ceases, and other disciplines sit awaiting the next score. Yet behind this facade of dislike, an odder and deeper crisis confronts sociology.

In the past two decades, philosophy, literary studies, history and classics have all become entwined in sociology which stands at the analytical crossroads directing a busy traffic in concepts up the high road of modernity. But as its rhetoric becomes woven into the humanities, the distinctive voice of sociology has become muted. Critical theory, embracing linguistics, post-structuralism, phenomenology and post-modernism, to name a few, now have squatter's rights within sociological theory. Textual exegesis forms the basis of much critical philosophy which sociology has to recognise, but is uncertain how to use. Whereas Dilthey laid the philosophical basis for the autonomy of the cultural sciences against the clutches of the natural sciences, an equivalent exercise has yet to be undertaken for sociology in relation to the competing demands of other disciplines also to speak of culture. Despite their sophistication, modern philosophers such as Rorty, MacIntyre, Derrida and Levinas yield slight sociological insights. There are two sides to the analytical coins to be spent in the cultural marketplace. Sociology makes its own purchases, and these are not the debased offerings of the 'thick', incapable of reading the classical texts of philosophy in all their nuances. Too often one gets thick philosophical works with a very thin amount of sociology sandwiched in the centre. Anyhow, sociology has its own problems in dealing with culture.

Recently, the issue of culture has moved into the centre of contemporary sociology. Prior to the past decade, culture was the

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reserve of the anthropological, the primitive and the exotic, classified and kept safe on the margin. Althusser and Poulantzas left the issue of culture wrapped in a structuralist paradigm. When fashions changed, Gramsci and Benjamin were resurrected to speak of its autonomy. But as culture was moved into the centre of sociological discourse, issues of judgement, aesthetics and ethics emerged especially in the writings of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu.[1] His approach to the symbolic basis of cultural reproduction relies heavily on theological metaphors to inform his approach to judgement and distinction. It is a debatable point as to how far he secures an autonomy for sociology against the rival claims of theology and philosophy. Nevertheless, issues of theology are emerging on the fringe of sociology in an unexpected manner. Understanding, reflexion and self are back on the sociological agenda in its approaches to culture.[2] A further sign of change is that the statue of that sociological sphinx, Max Weber is now turned away from Marx to face Nietzsche. His approach to power, modernity and the heroic was based on a deep hatred of Christianity, and to that degree, his resurrection places theology unexpectedly into the centre of sociological theory. There is also a lot of theological baggage attached to an equally important theorist of culture Walter Benjamin. These point sociology to beyond its narrow analytical concerns with modernity, in a theological direction that is as profound as it is unexpected.

Milbank's book is timely, significant and is likely to generate a vast and deserved debate. It is a brave, tough complex, dense and difficult work that should keep theologians, philosophers and sociologists wrestling with it, and with each other, for some time to come. In theory, sociologists should dislike this book intensely. It seeks to dethrone the discipline, arguing that it contains an implicit theology which is a fraudulent legacy of the Enlightenment. Through a dense exposition of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Blondel and Heidegger, to name a few, sociology is marked out as the villain which has secularised the sublime in a manner that has bedazzled theologians. In his ruthlessly pursued narrative, where analysis is used like a scythe, the sociological field gets flattened. A modified version is admitted under sufferance into Milbank's vision of a Church which encompasses all matters social.

Writing from within systematic theology, Milbank is concerned with the issue of public and private virtue. Modifying MacIntyre's Aristotelian concern with ethics, Milbank seeks to place a vision of Augustine's City of God in modern culture, so that violence is overcome and peace reigns. This is a holy end for a ruthless philosophical tour de force. His work is more than an exercise in urban sociology with

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celestial overtones. It is an unabashed tract of Christian apologetics whose unfashionable conclusions will disturb those who would detach belief from analysis.

Any cross disciplinary exercise will attract criticism for caricaturing the tenets of rivals. Milbank's origins are in theology, his expertise is in philosophy, and sociology is his target. A serious critical evaluation of this study would presuppose a rare working knowledge of all three disciplines. For this reason, criticisms of the work are likely to be specific and partial. Although sociology is only treated as an episode along the route, in Part II, where it is hitched to positivism, this strand does seem the weakest part of the book. To echo a striking phrase of John Orme Mills, there is an 'epistemological imperialism' abroad in this study.[3] Through sheer philosophical cleverness, he strikes home points by default, that are not always convincing.

The theological and philosophical denseness of the study makes sociological redress difficult. Sociology is lumped in with issues of politics, ethics, post-structuralists and post-modernists, so that its autonomy is denied. To some extent, this book is a collection of discreet essays, written in highly detailed sections, where the narrative flow gets clogged in some very fine philosophical tuning. Perhaps this is a price to pay for such subtle expositions of Hegel, Kant, Heidegger and Nietzsche, and for driving with such force through a number of philosophical thickets few sociologists stay to inspect.

The study is a peculiar mixture of piety and pungent philosophical analysis that yields some unexpected insights. It is a modern *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, a ruthless passage through a vast range of philosophy. Beneath the cleverness there is a subtext lurking, heavily coded, that makes one wonder where Milbank will go next. The answer is perhaps rather obvious. There is an unexpected grace of witness in this work, whose sophistication precludes its defence of peace and harmony from the callowness this stance might embody on a more simple evangelical terrain. One can agree with many of its targets: that the Enlightenment failed to produce an authentic moral consensus; that nihilism is a phoney option, a myth, that has emerged from post-modernism; that the vision of a holy city is a worthy pursuit, where a self-forgetting communality will operate with virtue and peace in harmonious public and private relationships; and that theology should re-enthroned in a Church that embodies and transcends all matters social. All these are wondrous things to wrest from the present inchoate state of philosophy. What is awesome about Milbank is that he is not afraid to attack. Thus, against Lyotard, he posits the need for a metanarrative for theology, one based on the foundations of a counter-ontology, that suggests an active strike

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against modernity, and not its passive incorporation in the manner of liberal theologians.

There is a redemptive cast that runs as a theological thread through this work. This is discernible in the stress on areas, such as sin and sacrifice, unfashionable to the liberal Protestant, who Milbank clearly despises. This dark side of the human condition leads Milbank to nail his own faith to the text at repeated intervals. Social life has theological implications. Thus, he asserts that 'mutual forgiveness and bearing of each other's burdens becomes the *modus vivendi* of the Church: an "atoning" way of life'.[4] But there are also some passages which suggest Milbank is less occupying a Church than a bathing hut on Dover Beach. The issue of ecclesial authority is seldom raised. A question is continually begged as to which Church does Milbank have in mind. The theology he uses is almost totally Catholic and this leads him to occupy some odd positions for an Anglican. The use of Pascal's wager which he imposes on contemporary philosophy could also be applied to his own dithering with matters ecclesial. At one point, he does seem to realise he has fallen more deeply into a Catholic camp than might seem desirable when he ruefully reflects, in a crucial chapter on politics and modern Catholic thought, that 'not without distress do I realize that some of my conclusions here coincide with those of reactionaries in the Vatican'.[5] The severe and effective criticisms Milbank makes of Boff, on liberation theology, causes one to wonder how Ratzinger will regard this unexpected theological friend in the Anglican court. This failure to find an ecclesial home lends an artificial cast to some of the problems he encounters. It is peculiar that a continual plea for forgiveness and healing, that runs as a theme through the book, seldom confronts the solutions offered in sacramental theology. This also is an area where sociology can be of considerable use in supporting his concerns.

There are many illuminating sections on theology and philosophy that clarify some very shadowy areas for the wandering sociological mind. The choice of Blondel is apt as the progenitor of a social theology best suited to deal with the nihilism that emerges like a fog from post-modernism. If the treatment of von Balthasar is disappointingly thin, his assessment of Rahner is penetrating. The human anthropology he advocated in his theology has seemed impenetrable to sociological intervention for reasons Milbank touches on, which one would have liked developed.

Heidegger has loomed as a great unread figure for many sociologists, but, who, nevertheless, has had a paralysing effect on its theory. Existentialism and phenomenology had a profound effect on the humanisation of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. Heidegger hovers

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around this change of direction and has to be taken into account in approaches to hermeneutics. Milbank supplies a splendidly accessible account of Heidegger in a notable chapter on ontological violence and the post-modern problematic. This forms the basis of his effort to establish a counter-ontology for Christianity, and represents a notable achievement that will generate much debate. The secular is portrayed as another form of 'religion', one with its own mythology, shaped against Christianity, but in a way that disguises its debts. This chapter 10 and the sections dealing with Marxism and Christianity display an admirable power of analysis.

Providing a critical response to this work from a sociological perspective is difficult, mainly because its relationships to philosophy and theology are so inchoate. Milbank presupposes this connection is more advanced than it seems. He tends to confuse the reception of sociology as perceived by theologians in modern culture with what sociologists themselves have tried to argue. This is despite a close and intelligent reading of quite a number of sociological and anthropological texts that relate to the study of religion. Common thinking has not even commenced on the terms of reference that should govern the relationships between the two disciplines, which will generate issues of considerable hermeneutic complexity. Because of the lack of such links, many of the philosophical and theological aspects of Milbank's analysis will seem like clouds high above the sociological fields, casting shadows of varying density over its capacity to analyse. Unfortunately, in his account, sociology is rendered a prisoner of a highly textual analysis. The capacity of sociology to intervene and to generate understandings of contemporary culture is needlessly diminished. Indeed, Milbank makes sociological enemies he does not need. He pushes with great philosophical violence at a number of open sociological doors.

Milbank demonstrates a significant competence in handling Weber, Luhmann and Durkheim in the three chapters devoted to what he conceives to be the pernicious influence of sociology in policing, and thus misrepresenting the sublime. There are many valuable aspects to his response to sociology. The chapter dealing with the efforts of Comte and Durkheim to escape a theological influence provides a valuable exploration of the French philosophical background to their writings. More mileage could have been made out of Comte's inversion of Catholicism in a Positivist religion which Lepenies has explored with such effect.[6] Milbank is quite clever at exposing theological cracks in sociological approaches to the social, whose treatment involves an element of deification and reification that inadvertently implicates

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sociology in a wager with the Divine. He is not the first to discover the ambiguity of Durkheim's legacy to sociology in its dealings with religion. He is a bit harsh on Weber in claiming that his sociology involved nothing but a spurious promotion of the secular culture of modernity.[7] Weber's attitude to religion was far more hesitant and complex than appears in Milbank's account.

A continual argument he makes is that a fixation of sociology on modernity places issues of Christianity on the margin. It suggests religion can only be understood in a technical sense, but, one whose foundational basis within the social sciences is open to suspicion. Presumably his point to theologians is that they do not need to enter this sociological gate, but should establish their own for passage into the social. Yet, at this point flaws arise in his argument. Milbank reads a functionalism into contemporary sociology of religion that does not exist in the dominant form that gives him so much metaphysical angst. It is perverse to argue that Talcott Parsons, mediating between Weber and Durkheim, is exemplary for sociology of religion.[8] There is a fatal confusion in this chapter between sociology of religion as conceived in its classical format, following Durkheim and Weber, and its specific concerns as a branch of the discipline dealing currently with religious sects, Fundamentalism and renewal. This failure to distinguish traditional and contemporary interests of sociology of religion is exemplified in Milbank's odd treatment of Peter Berger, described as a 'modern American sociologist'.

Berger has made his career policing the sublime, less against marauding sociologists, than against liberal Protestant theologians. In his pursuit of a rumour of angels, and his notion of 'signals of transcendence', Berger has directed his energies against reductionist definitions of the social that would close off a sense of the transcendent. He has re-centred religious belief into sociology in a way that marks a crucial break with Weber. More importantly, he has mapped out a sense of the sublime in terms of religious experience in a way that is connected to social transactions that do require a sociological intervention. There are ambiguities buried within modern culture that have theological roots which can be turned to sociological advantage. These are endemic in a manner that justify the necessity of a type of sociology that could be squared with Blumenberg's critique of secularisation.[9] Rather than finding some idea of a City of God, where antinomies are overcome, and the need for a critical sociology is abolished, Milbank should have explored how these signs of contradiction could be harnessed to holy advantage. Because sociology speaks from within the modern world, the emptiness it encounters,

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points to the price of religious disbelief. This is too an important witness to be abolished by a utopian vision of the City of God. Demolishing sociology on the basis of its concern with functionalism is to rejoice over a corpse sociologists, themselves, have long abandoned. Milbank's approach to sociology is too simple and too negative. Its present consensus can be converted to theological use. In his seminal work, *Theo-Drama,* von Balthasar has shown the way the question 'who am I' can be turned from sociological assumptions into theological speculations.[10]

Milbank's failure to confront the substance of contemporary sociology of religion is exemplified in his choice of biblical studies and liberation theology as examples of the distorting effect of sociological thought on theology in general. But these examples are misplaced. Some of the strongest critics of liberation theology have come from within sociology.[11] Sociology has cast its own marker on liberation theology, a point Gutierrez recognised, when he affirmed the need to place Marxist analysis within the context of the social sciences, if enlightened analysis is to proceed. Because liberation theology cannot provide concrete analyses, sociology has a negative function of remedying this deficiency. This gives it a distinctive and autonomous relationship with theology which Gutierrez, for instance, noted, when he observed that 'use of the social disciplines for a better understanding of the social situation implies great respect for the so-called human sciences and their proper spheres...'[12] Later, he makes a point that deserves further exploration that 'theology must take into account the contribution of the social sciences, but in its work it must always appeal to its own sources'.[13]

Again, sociology cannot be held responsible for its reception and misuse in biblical studies. Milbank's strictures against sociology would have been more persuasive, if he had examined the general methodological problems governing historical sociology. If Milbank had explored the range of research in anthropology and sociology of religion, rather than concentrate on some dominant figures, his conclusions on policing the sublime might have been more catholic.

Through philosophy, Milbank has made a deductive case against sociology's relationship to religion, but in a way that masks its own distinctive approach to theology. There is a reductionist strand in sociology towards belief, but that can point to an analytical pit in modernity whose only exit is ascent. Speaking of the distinctive task of sociology, Bourdieu commented on the 'wretchedness of man without God or any hope of grace—a wretchedness the sociologist merely reveals and brings to light, and for which he is made responsible, like all

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prophets of evil tidings. But you can kill the messenger: what he says is still true, and has still been heard'.[14] Acceptance of analytical limits in approaches to understanding of religion is far more apparent in Simmel's writings than Milbank seems to realise. This points to another sociological tradition in handling religion, one more open to its claims for authenticity than the form of closure exemplified in functionalist approaches.

Milbank is wrong to argue that Simmel illustrates the way the social sciences tend to 'promote "ontology of conflict" in radical antithesis to Christianity'.[15] Writing as a Jewish agnostic, Simmel had the most sympathetic attitude to religion in general and to Christianity in particular, of all the great sociologists. Writing during the First World War on the crisis of culture, and of its soul, by which he meant man's intellectual accomplishments, Simmel bleakly noted a turning away from Christianity as part of a failure to regulate priorities, where the relative and the provisional were elevated into ultimate values. If Christianity was affected by this crisis, Simmel felt this applied even more so to philosophy. In a point, with which Milbank would agree, Simmel noted that ' if the signs do not deceive us, our entire system of philosophy is beginning to become an empty shell'.[16]

In Luigi Sturzo, Milbank finds a Catholic sociologist who permeates the social with a notion of the supernatural. Religion is located in social forms and practices that bind.[17] At this point, Milbank makes an odd and arbitrary point that vitiates the possibility of arriving at a modus vivendi between sociology and theology. Instead of accepting the analytical limits of sociology, the methodological atheism that makes negative theology its particular brand, Milbank dismisses Sturzo's 'sociology of the supernatural'. Rather than accepting with Blondel, in relation to philosophy, that sociology can only approach theology through negative means, Milbank seeks to establish the issue of social understanding within the Church which is regarded as a truly universal society. Sturzo's endeavour becomes a 'social theology', one which Milbank fails to spell out coherently at the end of the book.

In the final chapter, where theology is treated as a social science, too many targets are pursued. Frankly his notion of 'ecclesiology' as 'sociology' is wrong headed and naive. The philosophical route through which he arrives at a social theology is persuasive, but not at the price of rejecting some form of sociology that has the method, the conceptual apparatus and capacity to discern the contours of change and the corruptions of the cultural that make disbelief possible. Like many philosophers, Milbank ends on a question that marks the beginning of a fascinating sociological problematic; how is Christian praxis to be

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restored to its freshness and originality, to give them a quality of strangeness that makes them of the world, but not in it?

1   For an accessible account of his significance, see Derek Robbins, *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu,* Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991.
2   See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
3   John Orme Mills, 'God, Man and Media: on a problem arising when theologians speak of the modern world', in David Martin, John Orme Mills and W.S.F.Pickering, eds, *Sociology and Theology. Alliance and Conflict,* Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980, p. 136.
4   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990 p.397.
5   *ibid.,* p.208.
6   Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology,* trans. R.J.Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
7   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, op cit.,* p.97.
8   *ibid.* p.109.
9   Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age,* trans. Robert M.Wallace, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985.
10   Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory,* vol.1, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988, see especially Part III B, pp. 493–54.
11   See for example, David Martin, *Tongues of Fire. The Explosion of Protestantism in South America,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.
12   Gustavo Gutierrez, 'Theology and the Social Sciences' in Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads. Democracy or Revolution?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p.219.
13   *ibid,* p.221.
14   Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words. Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p.15.
15   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, op.cit.,* p.81.
16   Georg Simmel, 'The Crisis of Culture' in P.A. Lawrence, *Georg Simmel: Sociologist and European,* London: Nelson, 1976, p.259.
17   John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, op.cit.,* p.225.

Enclaves, or Where is the Church?

John Milbank

It was not the purpose of *Theology and Social Theory* (whose argument has been so accurately précised by Fergus Kerr) to imagine the Church as Utopia. Nor to discover in its ramified and fissiparous history some single ideal exemplar. For this would have been to envisage the Church in spatial terms—as another place, which we might arrive at, or *as this* identifiable site, which we can still inhabit. How could either

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