

SOCIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: RESPONSE (I) TO GREGORY BAUM

In discussing the impact of sociology on theology, Professor Baum has chosen to concentrate on contributions from the sociology of knowledge. As developed by classical authors like Scheler and Mannheim, this subdiscipline of sociology has investigated the effects of self-interest, cultural background, and ideological commitment upon a group's perception of reality. Recent American research, particularly the work of Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger, has expanded the scope of the sociology of knowledge to include the entire process by which a human community builds and maintains its everyday world, with particular emphasis on the equally everyday universe of meaning and value constructed by the community and internalized by its members. Recent German research, much of it Marxist in orientation, has enormously developed the critique of ideology first outlined by Scheler and Mannheim. For an American Catholicism trying to maintain critical contact with its cultural context, all this material provides valuable protection against uncritical cultural conformity.

Baum has developed his paper around three points: the social matrix of consciousness, the historicity of truth, and the historicity of error. I have organized my comments around the same three points. Some of the comments are critical; some suggest further areas of interaction between sociology and theology.

THE SOCIAL MATRIX OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Because knowledge exists in human knowers and human knowers exist in society, human knowledge is socially grounded. Knowledge shared in a community is particularly influenced by social factors operative in that community or in the larger culture within which that community is located. As the social matrix of knowledge changes, men's perceptions and priorities are likely to change. This interaction between culture and consciousness is, of course, dialectical: ideas have social consequences as well as social causes. Yet theologians, who are inclined to overestimate the power of ideas, have much to learn from an intrinsically debunking discipline like sociology about the social factors operative in Christianity's past history and present problems.

To Baum's remarks on the impact of post-Enlightenment industrialization and urbanization on Western Christianity's contemporary cultural context, I would have little to add. I also agree with his sketch of recent changes in the social matrix of American Catholicism, now increasingly affluent and increasingly accepted as a respectable-American way of being religious. To illustrate the kind of specific changes a sociologist might investigate, however, I would call attention to three recent developments in American Catholicism which significantly affect that community's social matrix of consciousness. These developments point to a horizontal pluralism within the American Catholic community which further complicates the problem of historical continuity and change which Baum has stressed. They call for interdisciplinary research on the part of theologically sophisticated sociologists and sociologically informed theologians.

(1) THE EMERGENCE OF A THEOLOGICAL ELITE

All complex communities include not just one elite group but several such groups, with different but sometimes overlapping competencies.¹ Within the past twenty years, professional theologians have emerged as a distinct elite group within the American Catholic community. They are sometimes courted and sometimes cursed. On occasion they are treated outrageously and on occasion they behave outrageously. They are not, like the bishops, official teachers in the community. Yet they currently constitute a different but very real magisterium within American Catholicism. No matter how closely they cooperate with the hierarchy, they exercise influence that is sociologically distinct from the official magisterium of the bishops and separately institutionalized in terms of American academic patterns and American channels of communication. This is a significant development within the American Catholic community. Its social causes and above all its social consequences should be investigated.

¹Cf. S. Keller, "Elites," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, pp. 26-9.

(2) SOCIALLY SEGMENTED DE-ALIENATION
AMONG AMERICAN CATHOLICS

In Peter Berger's sociology of knowledge, alienation is "the process whereby the dialectical relationship between the individual and his world is lost to consciousness."² Alienation, in this sense, confuses social reality with the reality of the natural world. Alienated men continue to regard as real the institutions, roles, and social identities they and their fellowmen have constructed, but they cease to regard them as their reality. Social realities become "alien" to the men who, paradoxically, continue to create them. In alienation men no longer take responsibility for these realities and no longer entertain the possibility of changing them. De-alienation, on the other hand, is the process of overcoming such false consciousness. In de-alienation men regain conscious possession of the world they are producing. They must accept responsibility for that world and freely choose to conserve it or change it. As alienation is a powerful but indiscriminate force for social stability, de-alienation is a powerful and sometimes overwhelming force for social criticism and social change. I would characterize the American Catholic experience in recent years as one of extensive but socially segmented religious de-alienation. Realities once regarded by almost all as "given," unchangeable, and proceeding directly from the hand of God are now regarded by some as human creations open to criticism and change. For years religious educators have been insisting that Christ was not just God but also a man, that the Bible had human authors as well as a divine author, that the Church was an historical human community as well as a divine institution. Now that much once regarded as unchangeable within American Catholicism has actually changed, such de-alienating premises have finally won acceptance among some—but only among some—segments of the American Catholic community. The younger members of the community, for instance, often react casually to conclusions of biblical criticism and proposals for institutional reform that strike their elders as blatant tampering with what God himself has established and God alone can change. Educational background and economic status probably also affect the social distribution

²P. Berger, *Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), p. 85.

of such de-alienation. To the perennial tension between official orthodoxy and popular Catholicism has now been added a new tension: the tension between those who take for granted the human origin of the social reality that is the Church and those who view that reality as deriving exclusively from the hand of God. De-alienation has occurred with a vengeance, but very unevenly. It is socially segmented. This situation constitutes another significant development in American Catholicism whose social causes and consequences require further investigation.

(3) CONSCIENTIOUS MARGINALITY AMONG AMERICAN CATHOLICS

The American Catholic community has always included saints and sinners, pillars of the Church and nominal adherents. But what I call conscientious marginality is new in American Catholicism. By conscientious marginality I mean selective adherence to official Catholicism that is justified by an appeal to conscience.³ Without ceasing to be "practicing" Catholics, more and more members of the American Catholic community accept some Catholic beliefs while rejecting others, observe some Catholic behavioral norms while disregarding others, and work partially but not entirely within the institutional limits of Catholicism. "In good conscience," Catholic couples practice birth control, Catholic priests put their breviaries on the shelf, and priests and people alike feel comfortable with privately edited versions of the official Catholic credal system. There may not be significantly more deviance in American Catholicism today than twenty years ago, but what deviance exists is more overt, leads less often to severing all relationships with the institutional Church, and is more often justified by an appeal to conscience. At least this is the impression I have had in recent years. I would like to have this impression tested by some empirical research. And I would like to have both sociologists and theologians analyze the social causes and consequences of the phenomenon insofar as it can be empirically explored.

³Karl Rahner discusses some similar developments in German Catholicism in *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

HISTORICITY OF TRUTH

Professor Baum continues his investigation of the social matrix of Catholic consciousness in his remarks on the historicity of truth. Sociologists of knowledge like Mannheim can help Christian theologians analyzing doctrinal development, ecumenical differences, and the problem of continuity-in-change in Christian tradition. Theological ideas are not autonomous entities which grow by way of logical generation. They are the products of human beings living in a religious community exposed to multiple and changing cultural influences—economic, political, and intellectual. Theological hermeneutics, trying to discover the unity-in-diversity of Christian tradition, must approach its subject matter concretely, pay attention to all the significant influences on the Word of God in human history, and remember that every interpreter of Christian tradition himself stands within the hermeneutic circle of perspective interpretation. Baum's comments on this complicated hermeneutic process are timely and helpful.

I am less satisfied with Baum's discussion of truth as critique of the current culture and orientation toward renewed life. Certainly good theology, reflecting upon and giving direction to the faith response of the Christian community in history, should produce cultural criticism and proposals for cultural reform. But can the problem of continuity in the history of the transmission of the gospel and the unity-in-diversity of Christian proclamation be adequately resolved in terms of Baum's notion of truth as critique and orientation? I do not think so. Human truth is always incomplete, always in quest of fuller truth, always ordered to realization in action. But it is also assertive, concerned with content as well as orientation, criteria as well as critique. I do not understand how Baum's notion of truth as critique and orientation does justice to this dimension of truth as it operates in the Christian community living in history. For the truth of the Christian gospel is effective only if it is expressed, and expressed in propositional form. I agree that all expressions of the Christian message—precisely to the extent they are effective—are limited, inadequate, and culturally influenced. Changing times require reinterpretation and reformulation, and this hermeneutic enterprise can never be mechanically programed. Only experience in community and further critical reflection can ultimately verify whether some proposed interpretations are both faithful and

relevant formulations of the Christian gospel. But all such interpretations are themselves expressed in propositional form and must be verified or falsified in terms of their propositional expression. The historicity of truth notwithstanding, it seems to me that such evaluation must include the criterion of content as well as orientation to life and criticism of whatever in culture opposes life. Indeed, Baum himself seems to introduce considerations of content at various points in his discussion. Insistence on the divine graciousness present and operative in man's world, for instance, is an assertion and not just an orientation. Similarly, Christianity's concrete norms for criticizing whatever in culture opposes life constitute specific assertions; they express priorities with which a pious Aztec, for example, would strongly disagree. In other words, specifying the *function* fulfilled by formulations of religious truth in the believing community is important, but it leaves unfinished the critical task of evaluating the *content* of the individual propositions which concretely embody the community's orientation to life and opposition to whatever opposes life. Do such propositions in fact express the Christian message? Does their meaning correspond to the reality which Christian faith confesses? I do not think these questions arise only in the context of what Baum refers to as a neo-scholastic notion of religious truth. I think they are questions with which even the most historically sophisticated hermeneutic must somehow come to terms. Therefore an emphasis on truth as orientation and critique strikes me as an inadequate solution to the problem of the self-identity of the gospel in its manifold historical formulations.

I also have difficulty with Baum's discussion of Christian symbolism. He seems to be suggesting that continuity in the process of Christian tradition is provided by revealed symbols, while diversity in that process is explained by the community's response to changing historical conditions and different cultural contexts. The symbols remain, but their meaning changes as they are interpreted and reinterpreted for different ages and different peoples. The unity of the gospel, therefore, lies in the unity of its symbol system and not in the unity of its doctrinal explication. Christian symbols, in turn, are forms of the imagination, mediating divine reality but producing a plurality of meanings or doctrinal expressions as they are interpreted noetically in different contexts. Something is right here, and something is wrong. Meanings do change through interpretation in new contexts, because

effective meaning is concrete, embodied in symbols, relevant to a specific age and audience. But good interpretation is also faithful interpretation: there is continuity in meaning as well as newness. As Gadamer remarks, good interpretation says a thing differently only in order to say the same thing. Similarly, good religious symbols possess remarkable staying power and lend themselves to fruitful reinterpretation century after century, but each reinterpretation in some way changes the symbol itself, while some reinterpretations kill the symbol and lead to the emergence of new symbols—without necessarily destroying the unity of the gospel or the continuity of Christian tradition. What I am saying, in other words, is that symbol and meaning should not be separated: human symbols are meaningful and effective human meaning is embodied in symbols. A change in the symbol affects the meaning, while a reinterpretation of the meaning changes what the symbol actually communicates. This is what the Post-Bultmannians emphasize when they speak not of symbols but of “events” of symbolic communication. Such events are effective precisely because they are concrete: meaning is communicated to a specific audience on a specific occasion, but meaning embodied in symbols that effect what they express.⁴ Baum’s description of symbols as forms of the imagination, it seems to me, artificially separates form and content: in concrete human communication, form and content exist together and change together. Thus I do not understand how Professor Baum’s discussion of symbols resolves the problem of the unity of the gospel and the continuity of Christian tradition.

HISTORICITY OF ERROR

Baum’s discussion of what he calls the historicity of error contains a number of helpful comments. Ideological distortion is a pervasive thing and certainly colors the perceptions and influences the decisions of church officials and the theologians of the Christian community. An ongoing critique of ideology is a painful but necessary process for the Christian community, just as it is for every human community. Furthermore, as Baum points out, ideological distortion is peculiarly resistant to merely rational reflection. Often, only by changing a person’s social

⁴Cf. G. Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 225-35.

experience can the influence of past social experience upon his perceptions and actions be brought to consciousness and controlled. This is particularly important when religion is used to legitimate economic and political programs that serve the interests of only one segment of society: both reactionary and revolutionary proposals are hard to criticize once holy water has been sprinkled on them. To Baum's call for a more thorough critique of the various ideologies operating in American Catholicism, I would simply add two comments.

I would first of all stress that ideology is a wide-spread human phenomenon and not limited to the dominant classes. Each ideology tends to generate a counter-ideology, and no interest group within a community is without its ideological bias. For Christians, I think, any analysis couched in terms of class conflict is ultimately inadequate. All men are sinners, even the world's victims, and all men can be made whole again, even the world's oppressors. Christians tend to support the oppressed against their oppressors, and that is good. Yet Christians must also be careful not to support the ideological distortions of the oppressed, for it is precisely such ideological distortions that have in the past so often made liberated groups into oppressors themselves.

My other comment is simply a reference to Clifford Geertz's essay on "Ideology as a Cultural System."⁵ Geertz argues for the legitimacy of "ideological" symbols that express a group's shared meanings and values. Such "apologetic" symbols do not merely describe or refer: they advocate and assert. In a confusing world where all meanings and values are challenged and all commitments encounter competing commitments, "ideology" in this non-pejorative sense is not only legitimate but necessary. Criticism, of course, is still in order. Ideological distortions affecting a group's perceptions and decisions should be unmasked. But making people conscious of the influence of their commitments on their perception of reality is not the same thing as asking people to operate independently of the meanings and values to which they are committed. Neither is it the same thing as asking them to formulate their symbolic universe of meaning and value with the cool detachment of a professional analyst. At least as a first step, it is simply asking them to acknowledge and defend the meanings and values which previously

⁵C. Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 193-233.

influenced their decisions without necessarily being either acknowledged or defended. Mannheim's quest for a perspective beyond all ideology can perhaps be successful only to this extent. Geertz's comments, I think, apply to the critique of ideology within the Christian community as well as outside it.

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(Since Americans are preparing to celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of the American experience beginning in the colonial period, it is desirable for thoughtful citizens to present a perspective on the nation and its future. A recent book published by the Campaign for Human Development is I believe an excellent example of this kind of analysis. Its title is *Money in America: How Money is Made, How it is Used, How it is Hoarded, How it is Given, How it is Taken, How it is Lost, and How it is Won*. It highlights the value of individualism and profit, the value of material society and it puts them in question. This kind of analysis is the kind of "value-free" that, as Baum has suggested, the idea that sociology is value-free or totally objective is an illusion. The sociologist must be fair and thorough in all his research but as Baum writes, the "social sciences have not found an ideal ground to be truly impartial within the hermeneutical circle and before he can reach objectively the social world he has collected he must determine the proper place which he occupies in this world." In other words, the sociologist himself is part of the very society which seeks to be judged and evaluated. I believe that this insight regarding the final situation is today shared by many, despite the strong methodological views which oppose the method of the social sciences with the method of the natural sciences.

In reality, as Baum points out, it is this insight that gave birth to sociology in the first place. Society would change, grounded in some

¹ Campaign for Human Development, *Money in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1973.