SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

It is my understanding that the seminar leaders are to make a brief presentation intended to stimulate thought and open up the discussion. Hence, I will attempt to provide some common background and language as a basis for discussion. The topic I am proposing for discussion is not so much the problem of authority in the American Church as the application and implications of the sociology of knowledge for that problem.

That there is a problem of authority in the American Church does not, I assume, need to be established here. It was five years ago next month that the encyclical *Humanae vitae* was issued. The reactions to it served to shift the focus of discussion from a question of moral theology to one of the exercise and function of authority in the Church. We are all aware that since that time some changes have been taking place in the understanding and functioning of authority in the Church. There has been a shift from the emphasis on the authority of commission or of office to the authority of the community;[1] a shift from legal and traditional authority to the more charismatic authority of leadership; a shift in the notion of authority as power to a notion of authority as a relationship.[2]

Such changes are very gradual, however, and do not indicate that the crisis in authority is being alleviated, but rather intensified. Possibil-

[1]William W. Meissner, *The Assault on Authority* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1971), p. 16.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 31. "A gradual shift has been taking place from the notion of authority as power to that of authority as a relationship. Authority would thus consist in the relationship between two or more persons by which one party lays claim to the cooperation or subservience of the other party, and the other party accepts this claim. Obviously, the relationship involves power, but the shift in emphasis also involves a shift in the concept of power from that of being a capacity resident in the power-bearing person to the concept of power as a relational phenomenon. Both the bearer of authority and the recipient of authority emerge as important contributors to the functioning of authority."

ities have been opened up and expectations raised that have not been fulfilled. The sociological study on the Catholic Priest in the United States commissioned by the American hierarchy and conducted by NORC under the direction of Andrew Greeley comes to this conclusion on the basis of evidence that need not be presented here.[3]

As Greeley also points out, the situation cannot be viewed merely as a political struggle to redistribute power or change the balance of power within an organization:

> What we are witnessing is not merely a disagreement between those who have power and those who do not, but a disagreement among those with opposing ideologies about the nature of the reality whose power structure is the subject of disagreement. Power conflicts that are rooted in ideological differences tend to be much more serious than power conflicts among those who share the same ideologies.[4]

It is precisely this thesis that I share and which leads me to suggest that the sociology of knowledge may be of some help in understanding and dealing with the problem of authority.

I. THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The sociology of knowledge is a relatively new sub-discipline and has been continually developing. Hence, the term, coined by Max Scheler in the 1920's, is not univocal but includes almost as many variations as it has had exponents.[5] Briefly (using Berger and Luckmann's outline sketch), it is from Marx that the sociology of

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[3]National Opinion Research Center Study, directed by Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1972), esp. pp. 152-54, 312; and Andrew M. Greeley, *Priests in the United States: Reflections on a Survey* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 105-109.

[4]NORC Study, *The Catholic Priest*, p. 154; Greeley, *Reflections*, p. 105.

[5]For a history of the development and the differences involved, see Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (enlarged ed.; New York: The Free Press, 1968), Chaps. XIV and XV; and, more briefly, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1967), Introduction, pp. 4-12.

knowledge derived its root proposition—that man's consciousness is determined by his social being—as well as some of its key concepts, e.g., "ideology" (ideas serving as weapons for social interests), "false consciousness" (thought that is alienated from the real social being of the thinker), "substructure" (roughly, human activity) and "superstructure" (the world produced by that activity). The historicism of Wilhelm Dilthey contributed an emphasis on the "situational determination" or social location of thought, and Max Scheler argued that society determines the conditions under which ideas appear in history but does not affect the content or nature of thought.

But it was Karl Mannheim, whose work on the sociology of knowledge is the most familiar to the English-speaking world, who broadened the notion and brought the sociology of knowledge to maturity by seeing society as determining not only the conditions of the appearance but also the content of human ideation, and extending the concept of "ideology" not only to the thought of one's opponent or to error, but to one's own thought and to truth as well. Sociology of knowledge, then, can be described as "the understanding that no human thought . . . is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context."[6] In general, then, the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises.

More recently, Berger and Luckmann have argued that the sociology of knowledge has been too preoccupied with what they call "theoretical thought." They say:

> The theoretical formulations of reality, whether they be scientific or philosophical or even mythological, do not exhaust what is "real" for the members of a society. Since this is so, the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people "know" as "reality" in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, commonsense "knowledge" rather than "ideas" must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge.[7]

The sociology of knowledge, then, for Berger and Luckmann is con-

[6] Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, p. 9.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

cerned with what they call the "social construction of reality."

In this brief survey, one other name deserves to be mentioned, that of Georges Gurvitch who has attempted to bring some system to this otherwise vague and amorphous discipline by distinguishing typologies of social frameworks (forms of sociality, groups and global societies), as well as types of knowledge (perceptual knowledge of the external world; knowledge of the Other, the We-groups, classes, and societies; common-sense knowledge; technical knowledge; political knowledge; scientific knowledge; philosophical knowledge), and suggesting hypotheses as to the functional correlations that might exist between them.[8] Gurvitch is not as well known in this country due to the relatively recent translation of his work.

This brief sketch suggests the variations of emphases and concepts within the sociology of knowledge but perhaps we can bring some order into this brief discussion by following Robert K. Merton's paradigm for the study of the sociology of knowledge. He suggests five basic questions with which the sociology of knowledge deals and the categories it employs in responding to them:

1. *Where* is the existential basis of mental productions located?
   a. *social bases*: social position, class, generation, occupational role, group structures, ethnic affiliation, etc.
   b. *cultural bases*: values, ethos, climate of opinion, *Zeitgeist*, etc.

2. *What* mental productions are being sociologically analyzed?
   a. *spheres of*: moral beliefs, ideologies, religious beliefs, social norms, technology, etc.
   b. *which aspects are analyzed*: their selection, level of abstraction, presuppositions, conceptual content, etc.

3. *How* are mental productions related to the existential basis?
   a. *causal or functional relations*: determination, cause, condition, correspondence, interaction, etc.
   b. *symbolic or organismic or meaningful relations*: consistency,

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[8]Georges Gurvitch, *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge*, trans. by Margaret A. Thompson and Kenneth A. Thompson, with Introduction by Kenneth A. Thompson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); and for an analysis of his work, Phillip Bosserman, *Dialectical Sociology* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1968).

harmony, coherence, unity, structural identities, etc.

    c. *ambiguous terms to designate relations*: correspondence, reflection, bound up with, etc.

4. *Why?* manifest and latent functions imputed to these existentially conditioned mental productions.

    a. to maintain power, promote stability, exploitation, provide motivation, canalize behavior, deflect hostility, etc.

5. *When* do the imputed relations of the existential base and knowledge obtain?

    a. historicist theories (confined to particular societies or cultures)

    b. general analytical theories.[9]

Merton's paradigm indicates the multiplicity of possible factors which must be considered in trying to establish the form of relationship between various kinds of knowledge and the social situation in which they are located. Awareness of such difficulties does not alleviate them, but neither does it prohibit the inquiry.

Much more, of course, could (and should) be said about the key concepts, questions and methods of the sociology of knowledge but perhaps that can be done in the process of the discussion. I would like now to suggest some possible applications and implications of this discipline to theology and, in particular, to the currently pressing problem of authority.

II. APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The fundamental assertion of the sociology of knowledge underlying my suggestion of its usefulness for us is that there is a dialectical relationship between a body of knowledge of a given society and the actual lived reality of that society. More specifically in this instance, theology is both a product of the social experience of the Church (a particular society) and a factor in the construction of that social reality. Consequently, a change in the actual social reality (of the authority structure of the Church, whether as a whole or on a local level) requires

[9]Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure,* pp. 514-15, somewhat abridged.

a corresponding change in the theoretical understanding of that reality (the theology of the magisterium, for example).

Thus when it was suggested by many moral theologians and by a majority of the commission appointed by the pope to study the question of birth control, the minority on that commission and Paul VI could not see how it was possible to change the teaching of the magisterium on the issue without destroying the teaching authority of the Church. Their understanding of that authority (their theology of the Church and of the magisterium) was such that it did not allow for change. Hence, even though the majority of the commission, from a moral, psychological and sociological perspective, thought that a change in the Church's official teaching on artificial contraception was warranted, the theology of the Church that the pope embraced did not allow him to change the teaching on this issue.

But the reverse is also true. For a change to take place in the theoretical understanding, a corresponding change must take place in the lived experience. Put succinctly, if one lives like a Renaissance prince, one will think like a Renaissance prince. To change the mode of thinking one must change the mode of living.

This is based on another assumption, not peculiar to the sociology of knowledge (really social psychology), and that is the relationship between individual consciousness and social consciousness. Once again, this, too, is a dialectical process. Talking about personal identity as a key element in subjective reality, Berger and Luckmann say:

> Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations. The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure. Conversely, the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it. Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men with specific identities.[10]

In the concrete, this means that what a bishop understands himself and his role and function to be depends on the social relations he maintains

[10]Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, p. 173.

with others, as well as the fact that these relations are shaped by the bishop's self-understanding. To attempt to restructure one without restructuring the other is not possible. It also implies that a reshaping of the consciousness of the bishop alone is not sufficient. The others with whom he maintains ongoing relationships must also be "re-educated."

This suggests a third fundamental insight stressed by Berger and Luckmann—the fact that theoretical knowledge (theology) must always be situated in the broader framework of what passes for "knowledge" in the society. Theoretical knowledge (theology) is only part of what any given society "knows." Meissner mentions this specifically in the discussion of religious authority:

> Culturally generated and derived attitudes toward the exercise of authority have important implications for the implementation and uses of authority within any formally organized structure. Thus, whatever the conception of authority one attributes to the religious organization, i.e., whatever the degree of one's commitment to the authoritarian ideal of religious authority and obedience, it must still be recognized that religious subjects who are born and raised in a democratic society and whose value orientation incorporates democratic ideals carry within them conscious and unconscious attitudes which must inevitably influence the way in which authority is exercised and responded to within the religious group.[11]

How a body of theoretical knowledge is related to the more general "commonsense knowledge," what everybody "knows" to be "reality" must be taken into consideration.

In summary, what I am suggesting is (1) that the problem of authority is not only to be considered on the level of practice, of exercise, of institutional structure, but also on the level of theoretical knowledge, both personal and social; and (2) that theology in general (and in this case the theology of the Church and the magisterium) can be viewed, as any other body of human knowledge can, as a product of society, as a process of signification and legitimation of the institutions of that society, and subject to all the conditions, limitations, and relativities of the societal base from which it originates and which it continues to support; and (3) that if we take greater cognizance of the dialec-

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[11] Meissner, *The Assault on Authority*, p. 26.

tical relationship between "knowledge" (theology) and the social reality we will not expect theology by itself to change the institutional structure, nor that the form and exercise of authority in the Church can change unless the theology of those concerned (not only bishops and pastors, but others as well) also changes.

I want to stress that I do not think theology is like all other forms of knowledge (there are obvious differences and some similarities), nor that it should be considered *only* from the point of view of the sociology of knowledge. But what can we learn if we do consider it in relation to its societal base? What is the relationship between the theology of the Church, the theology of the magisterium and the social and cultural situation out of which it developed and in which it is now functioning (or malfunctioning)? Can we discover and perhaps isolate the ideological component in theology? If so, might that not free theology from some of its biases and prejudices? And might that not help bridge the ideological gap of which Greeley spoke? Might not the relativization of the theology free us for greater institutional adaptation?

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