THE IMPACT OF SOCIOLOGY ON CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Sociology, I wish to insist, is not a unified science operating out of a unified methodology accepted by all sociologists. There are first of all the various fields of interest, sociology of religion, sociology of knowledge, sociology of institutions, etc., each of which is able to make important contributions to theology. A few of these will be mentioned in this paper, but I hope that the list will be lengthened by the sociologists who respond to my remarks. Then there are the diverse approaches to the study of the social reality. Visiting a department of sociology, we run into (i) positivistically inclined empiricists, (ii) functionalists, often the dominant group in the department, (iii) ethnomethodologists and others who apply a phenomenological method to the study of human interaction, and (iv) if we are lucky, critical sociologists for whom sociology is both a wisdom and a critique of present society. Sociology is as complex and conflictual as theology.[1]

I

To add to this confusion I wish to introduce the following distinction between sociologists. I distinguish between sociologists of whatever trend who use sociology to discover new truths and those who use sociology to clarify what we already know.

The first kind of sociologists like to propose hypotheses, gather data in an effort to verify these hypotheses and thus expand the range of demonstrable knowledge. These are the hard-nosed sociologists. For them sociology is mainly a science. While their work has been very useful and convinced large organizations to pay a great deal of money for it, I find it difficult to accept the result of such studies unless it clarifies my hunches and ties in with my wider reflection on society and its transformation. If these studies go wholly against the stream, I suspect them of having built into them a set of known or unknown presuppositions that account for the result and my unwillingness to accept it.

[1]G. Baum, "Sociology and Theology," *Concilium* No. 91 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1974), pp. 22-31. Cf. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

I am by no means the only skeptic in regard to the studies that seek to assimilate the social sciences as much as possible to the natural sciences. It is curious that even the hard-nosed sociologists, who ought to have confidence in their method, are often unwilling to accept the scientific results of empirical studies when they are at odds with their basic convictions. (In a recent article Andrew Greeley reports the unwillingness on the part of sociologists to take seriously the reliable results of his empirical study on the incidence of mystical experience in the population.)[2] Much more goes into hard-nosed sociology than observation and calculation: what also counts are the kinds of questions that are asked, the selection that is made of the material, the sensitivity with which one reads the data, and the intentionality by which the whole scientific effort is carried out.

The second kind of sociologists who clarify what we already know are closer to my own liking. They make us see connections, they allow us to pull together all kinds of stray observations which seemed unrelated, they create a new sensitivity in us so that we become better observers of the world in which we live, they enable us to assimilate the past in a new way, and they lay the foundation for action and involvement. This was in fact the approach that produced sociology in the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century a new world was being created.[3] Through growing industrialization in certain parts of Europe, culture and society underwent visible changes. We find rapid urban developments; we observe a new social mobility; people are torn away from their towns and villages and move into the new cities; two new classes are being created, the working class, unprotected by any legislation and living in miserable conditions in the cities, and the successful bourgeoisie, the owners of the industrial and commercial enterprises, who became the creators of a new urban culture, of new values, of a new style of government. This growing industrialization was accompanied in some places by changes in the political order. Democracy, or the ideal of democracy, made people aware that society was not a given to be received and protected, but a reality made by people and therefore

[2] A. Greeley and W. McCready, "Are We a Nation of Mystics?" *The New York Times Magazine* January 26, 1975, pp. 12ff.

[3] R. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books), pp. 21-46.

capable of being dismantled and transformed. Should it not be possible to devise a social order that is more rational, more egalitarian, more efficient, leaves more room for personal freedoms and grants men the opportunity to climb on the social scale? When these things were happening in various parts of Western Europe, perceptive people were aware that a new world was in the process of being made. There was a great difference between the old world they had inherited and the new world that was in the making. The reflection on these two worlds and the systematic comparison between the old and the new produced what was later to be called sociology.

Whether we turn to Tocqueville, Comte, Marx or Toennies, we find comparisons between the old and the new. These scholars tried to devise categories or models (ideal types, as they were later called by Max Weber) that would make them more observant of what had gone on in the past and what was happening in the present, that would enable them to systematize the difference between the old and the new and discover causal connections between the institutional changes and the transformation of culture. Sociology was created by this comparative method. It tried to clarify the difference which every perceptive person was aware of; it tried to devise terms of comparison that would allow people to sort out their own experience, render an account of their past and prepare themselves for the problems of the future.

While there are great differences among the sociologists mentioned above, they all agreed that the institutions in which people live have a profound effect on their consciousness and its cultural expressions. In various ways the sociologists tried to show how the transformation of the processes of production and of political organization changed people's awareness of themselves, their values and ideas. This, I suppose, is the basic sociological insight. The institutions to which we belong create a certain kind of consciousness in us. Some sociologists call this social determinism. They do not deny personal freedom and creativity, but they claim that the expressions of this freedom and creativity will inevitably bear the marks of the society in which they have been produced. Looking at a great painting we are able to tell the century or even the decade in which it was made and determine the part of the country where it originated. The social reality (the *Realfaktoren* as Max Scheler called them) creates consciousness and its cultural expressions (the *Idealfaktoren*). This special sociological insight is,

of course, only part of the story. For there are indeed moments in history when consciousness in turn affects the structures of society. The relation of mind and society is dialectical. But the second element of this dialectic in no way invalidates the first. The specifically sociological insight remains that institutions create consciousness and its cultural manifestations.

Here is a first conclusion regarding the impact of sociology on Catholic theology today. Contemporary Catholic theologians are open to sociology because they have experienced the old and the new in their own history and are bound to compare them and to relate them to one another. I do not think I am exaggerating here. Catholics have gone through a significant transformation of church life. What has changed in the Catholic Church through Vatican II is not only public policies in regard to ecumenism, mixed marriages, responsible parenthood, religious pluralism, social responsibility and collegiality: what has also changed is the Catholic self-understanding.

The older ones among us are able to read again the spiritual books that guided our lives fifteen or twenty years ago, the articles we then published, or possibly the text of the sermons we then preached. We have here empirical evidence for making a comparison between the old and the new. This empirical evidence is important. We cannot simply rely on our memory. To make it more comfortable for ourselves our memory often tries to soften the contradictions in our personal histories. We are in need of documentation to make a valid comparison. In our theological studies we are constantly confronted by the difference between the old and the new. Reading about the development of doctrine and the mutations of the Christian faith in the past seemed to us very theoretical: we then thought that we had acquired the definitive form of Catholicism. Now we know what religious transformations feel like. We realize that what is being changed is people's self-understanding so that the inherited religious symbols and the traditional religious language acquire a new meaning for them.

Thus we are bound to go on comparing the old and the new and thereby turn to questions that are of interest to the sociologists. We become sociologists without being aware of it–like Tocqueville and the other perceptive observers of social and cultural change in the nineteenth century. For we must explain to ourselves how it is possible to change as much as we did and yet affirm the continuity of Christian

truth. The theories that explain the development of doctrine in philosophical or psychological terms no longer seem convincing to us. We realize that social changes have produced the changes in the order of ideas. What happened was that the changes in the Church permitted us to participate in a new way in the culture and society of North America. Before, we belonged to a Catholic subculture in North America, drawing our intellectual life from the neo-Scholastic tradition of Europe and living in structures that protected the purity of this tradition and assured the survival of Catholicism in a hostile environment. After Vatican II with its new teaching on church and world, we were ready to enter the mainstream of North American life. Seminaries moved to the university campus; Catholic theology was being taught in secular religious studies departments; and the style of life theologians adopted was determined by their academic pursuits more than by the ecclesiastical tradition. We wanted to look like others and speak like others—not to be conformed to their image but rather to offer critical words and words of hope that could be heard. What has changed are the institutions in which we live and the education we require for theology.

I do not wish to insist that all this was due to Vatican II. Andrew Greeley has given good arguments for the view that these changes would have taken place in American Catholicism even without Vatican II. For it was the rise of a vast section of the Catholic population to higher education, to greater income and a higher social status that made the Catholic community in America leave the structures and the education characteristic of the immigrant church to enter the mainstream of American society. In his book, *The New Agenda*, Greeley contrasts the old and the new in terms of the immigrant church versus the religious aspirations of the middle class.[4] Vatican II facilitated these changes, but it did not represent the source of the impetus. (The question could well be raised to what extent the teachings of Vatican II themselves express the liberal aspirations of the widening Catholic middle class in the industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America.)

Because Catholic theologians have experienced the old and the new, they are bound to ask questions, difficult questions about the relation between the two. While they acknowledge the difference between the old and the new, they also want to protect the continuity of

[4] A. Greeley, *The New Agenda* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

church life through these changes and hold on to the uniqueness of the gospel. The traditional theories of doctrinal development that stress the unity and self-identity of truth do not leave sufficient room for the experience of the contemporary theologian. What has changed is not just doctrine but the perception of the gospel. Jesus Christ means something else to us today than it did fifteen years ago. At the same time, theologians repudiate the idea that their old perception was not truthful and that only the new one is faithful to divine revelation. No, both were true. There were obviously distortions in the old manner of perceiving the gospel, but there are probably also distortions in the present mode, distortions which are still hidden from us. Theologians find themselves asking the question of the sociologist: how can we account for the difference in truth and values in various cultures without falling into relativism.

Because sociologists take for granted that knowledge is socially grounded and hence varies with the social conditions in which people live, it is sometimes supposed that they must be relativists. I am sure that there are sociologists, not reflectively inclined, who are satisfied to establish how ideas are related to their social base and leave it at that. They then create the impression that truth and values depend purely and simply on the conditions of society. More reflective sociologists (Alvin Gouldner speaks of "reflexive sociology") realize that to establish the social foundations of ideas is only part of their task: they must also raise the question of the unity of truth and the abiding nature of values through social change. For if they do not undertake this sort of reflection, they not only undermine religion and philosophy, they invalidate sociology as well. For sociologists move into diverse cultures and societies trusting that they can apply their methods and their logic to study these; they have the confidence that conversation and observation are possible; they take for granted that there exists some common human bond between diverse peoples and ages that transcends culture and that could be strengthened by communication. Since a relativism of truth would undermine the very project of sociology, sociologists seek some sort of foundation for the unity of truth.

Karl Mannheim, one of my favourite sociologists, distinguished between "relationism" and "relativism."[5] Relationism refers to the partic-

[5]K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, no date), pp. 78-9, 85-7.

ular sociological insight that knowledge and forms of the mind are related to, and dependent on, the social conditions in which people live, while relativism designates the skeptical outlook on life that invalidates all abiding truth and values. Relationism in no way questions that within each society it is possible to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil; to accept the historicity of mind does not lead to skepticism. According to Mannheim, relativism is grounded in a social experience of hopelessness. It is found in successful classes or groups that have lost the sense of their own destiny; such people have learnt to shrug their shoulders. A rising class or a group that wants to free itself from oppressive structures does not remain agnostic about what is right or wrong. It is not surprising that relativism prevails among the intellectuals of Western society. But sociologists who want to protect the validity of their own scholarly enterprise must try to overcome the dominant skepticism.

Catholic theologians today are open to the concerns of sociology not only because they have experienced the contrast between the old and the new but also because they are confronted in their own church with the manifold image of truth. We always knew that religion varied from one culture to another even if we did not attach any theological importance to this. Italian Catholicism was different from the religion in which we participated at home. Every country has its own piety, its own religious style, its own ideas of holiness. But at one time we thought that it was possible to enclose these various religious trends into the same theological system. We thought that there was one theology for the entire Catholic world. Today this dream has been shattered. We feel increasingly dissatisfied with the theology that comes to us from other parts of the world. Part of our heritage is, I suppose, to get enthusiastic about the ideas and methods that come to us from overseas. Even Protestant theologians, more firmly rooted in the American experience and the American intellectual tradition than we, have sometimes succumbed to this sort of enthusiasm in regard to German theological thought. Catholics have displayed a good deal of such enthusiasm. We sometimes endorse the liberation theology that comes to us from Latin America, even though this theology, more than any other, understands itself as grounded in a particular cultural and political situation and derived from a sociological analysis of this situation. On its own terms, liberation theology in North America would make sense

only if it were based on an analysis of the complex reality of American society and its relation to the rest of the world. While we find some of this enthusiasm among Catholic theologians, we also find an increasing awareness that North American Catholics must develop their own theological reflection. (Let me add that the interesting and original theological reflection that has taken place in Quebec, within a very particular cultural and religious tradition, remains curiously unknown even among English-speaking Catholics in Canada.) We are confronted today with theological pluralism.

Let me add at this point that we have never paid sufficient attention to the plural character of religion within the Catholic Church and in particular to the nature of American religion. Sociologists from the days of Tocqueville on have realized that the Christian religion fulfills important functions in American society that differ from its European equivalents, even if the set of doctrines held should be the same. Catholic theologians have never paid any systematic attention to this difference. Because the Catholic Church in North America recited the same creed, celebrated the same sacraments and taught the same theology as it did in Europe, they thought that the meaning of these religious words and gestures were the same. It was again Andrew Greeley who, over the years, has insisted on the special character of American religion and the need to take this seriously in theological reflection and pastoral policy. He has been accompanied in this, albeit from a different perspective, by Rosemary Ruether.

The modern Catholic theologian is confronted with the problem of the one and the many in his/her own theology. Again he/she shares the concerns of the sociologist. For while social scientists recognize the great diversity among different societies and among the ideas and values prevalent in these societies, they presuppose nonetheless that they are able to study these cultures and come to some sort of valid understanding of them. I have mentioned above that reflective sociologists are very much aware that a meaningful encounter with other societies is only possible if one presumes some common bond between people. Sociological study is possible only if we trust that we are able to listen to others, interpret their actions and make some sense of them, and eventually establish a bridge of communication between them and us. What we presuppose here is some underlying sharing in what may be called human nature. When sociologists use this word—it is rarely enough—

they do not think of a definable human nature, the dimensions of which are known to philosophers (or the Holy Office). Sociologists think of human nature as still a-building. It is the common ground presupposed in the encounter with other cultures; and on this common ground it should be possible to widen the range of what can be shared. Despite the diversity of societies, reflective sociologists are concerned about our common humanity.

While there is often a certain reductionist trend in sociology that seeks to reduce human life to measurable dimensions or worse to a single measurable dimension, the classical sociologists regarded themselves as guardians of the human. The question they had in mind when they studied society was the discernment of those elements of society that damage the humanity of its members. Emile Durkheim invented the word *anomie* to signify the loneliness and the anguish which modern, urban, individualistic society inflicts on its people. He tried to detect the "pathological" trends in society which undermine the common social matrix that undergirds the well-being and moral integrity of the people. Max Weber analyzed the effect of modern bureaucracy (and the quest for an ever more efficient bureaucracy) on human life and spoke of "the iron cage"[6] in which we may all soon be caught. Modern technology and bureaucracy, 'technocracy' in the jargon of the sixties, would eventually result in "the disenchantment of the world."[7] Weber held that modern society would, in the long run, make human life flat, gray and pragmatic: the great human passions would disappear and man's humanity would be diminished.

After the time of Max Weber, the spirit of technocracy analyzed by him entered into the exercise of sociology itself, and some critical sociologists claim that when this happened sociological research and sociological literature contributed to the de-humanization of modern life. The reductionism mentioned above could easily attack the substance of the great events that create human life, birth, childhood, marriage, etc., and instead of sociology acting as guardian of the human, it could become an element of culture that undermined it. It is

[6]M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 181.

[7]M. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, ed. Gerth and Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 155.

not surprising that we have at this time a strong reaction against this technocratic trend among some sociologists. With the help of phenomenology, these sociologists try to show that the knowledge of the everyday world is primary and that all specialized, technical knowledge, including science and sociology, is derived from this primary knowledge and makes sense only when this relation is understood.[8] Scientific sociology is always an abstraction. Ethnomethodology tries to show how much the human reality is distorted by use of the scientific methodology. These efforts to make sociology again the guardian of the human are sometimes called "wild sociology," as in John O'Neil's beautiful little book *Making Sense Together.*[9] Wild sociology wants to enter the conversation by which people make sense out of a troubled world and find the ground for common action.

Sociologists, then, be it explicitly or implicitly, accept a common humanity in their studies. If they are reflective and critical sociologists, they are conscious of this and realize that their vision of what humanity is and is meant to be, enters into the very exercise of sociology and affects the conclusions of their research. Sociology should be value-free in the sense that sociologists must free themselves from bias and prejudice; but in a deeper sense the exercise of sociology is inseparable from human values, it is never value-free. The sociologist, then, like the modern Catholic theologian, is faced with the problem of the one and the many.

After showing that contemporary Catholic theologians are confronted by questions that incline them toward sociology, I wish to indicate two lines along which sociological thinking has made an impact on Catholic theology: the first has to do with the historicity of truth and the second with the historicity of error.

II

For sociologists truth is historical. Consciousness is historically constituted. All ideas reflect the social and political circumstances in

[8]The important author who introduced phenomenology into North American sociology is Alfred Schutz. Cf. his *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (English trans. [Northwestern University Press, 1967]).

[9]J. O'Neil, *Making Sense Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

which they are produced. As I have indicated above, this is the proper and specific insight of sociology. It follows from this that the history of ideas and the development of doctrine will have to be studied by taking into account the changing social reality. Karl Mannheim distinguished between two ways of studying the history of ideas.[10] According to the first way, the scholar tries to detect how one idea has emerged from the preceding one by a process that can be accounted for in philosophical or psychological terms. This has been the general approach adopted in the study of the Church's doctrinal development. Theologians have tried to trace the history of doctrine along the line of ecclesiastical teachers, thinkers and witnesses and understand the evolution of doctrine that took place largely in terms of intellectual development. This method abstracts from the social and political circumstances in which ideas emerge. Mannheim calls this purely intellectual approach to the history of ideas ideological because it disguises not only the social foundation of these ideas but also the place of the scholar in the society of the present.

The other method for studying the history of ideas demands that the scholar turn from the idea to the people, the class or the group who originated it and held it–Mannheim calls this the carrier (*Träger*) of the idea–and then examine the social conditions of this carrier and in particular the tensions which these conditions generate. If the people who hold a particular set of ideas, the carrier in other words, undergo significant sociopolitical changes, they will generate new thought out of the new situation and hence the passage from the old set of ideas to the new cannot be understood unless the sociopolitical changes of the carrier are taken into account. Ideas are instruments by which a people or a group deal with their real problems. Hence as these problems change, people will think new thoughts derived from previously held ideas in such a way that they, the people, shall again be able to deal effectively with their lives. Ideas change because changes have taken place in their carriers.

This principle is exemplified in the creation of sociology during the nineteenth century as well as in the passage from the old to the new in the consciousness of contemporary Catholic theologians. I made this point at the outset of this paper. The creation of a new industrial and

[10]Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 268.

democratic world in the nineteenth century provoked the reflections that eventually became sociology. And the passage of American Catholics from a subculture to the mainstream of American life has significantly modified theological thinking. The principle that ideas change because changes take place in their carriers is not a reductionist formula! It does not exclude intellectual creativity and freedom. It simply acknowledges that the work of creativity and freedom has a social foundation.

Allow me to illustrate the two different modes of studying the development of doctrine by the following diagrams. Diagram 1 indicates that the passage from one doctrine to the other is studied purely as intellectual history. Diagram 2 indicates that the development is studied by relating a doctrine to its carrier, taking account of the sociopolitical changes to which this carrier is subject, and understanding the doctrinal development as the expression of the carrier in its new situation.

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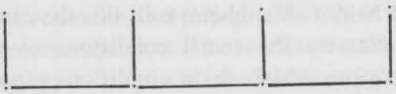
2.



Biblical scholars have often adopted the second mode of historical research. Their attention to *Sitz im Leben* made them aware of the social grounding of religious teaching and ready to understand the development of religious ideas in terms of the changing social and cultural dircumstances. Theologians have rarely applied this second mode in the study of doctrinal developments. The great exception remains Ernst Troeltsch who combined theological and sociological competences in the writing of his major work, deceptively entitled *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches.*[11] While this work is in many ways outdated, it is so singular that it still remains of great interest. Contemporary theologians are beginning to write articles and monographs analyzing the sociopolitical base of certain doctrinal shifts, but there is no

[11]E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

major sociologically oriented work so far, shedding light on the christological and trinitarian developments in the Christian Church.

The social foundation of ideas or the historicity of truth is implicitly recognized in ecumenical dialogue. For here Christian theologians of different traditions come together to study their doctrinal agreements and disagreements in the hope that a better understanding of the historical conditions under which these positions were defined will enlarge the common ground between the churches. Even religious doctrines are instruments by which churches, relying on the gospel, try to solve their actual, historical problems. The meaning of doctrinal controversy can only be understood if we take into account the *Sitz im Leben* of the various positions. What religious concern did the various groups want to protect? What element of the truth did they feel was being threatened? Or, on a more secular plane, what social or political necessity, interest, or preference influenced the formulation of doctrine? What hidden agenda was operative in these controversies? (What, for instance, is the sociology of knowledge of the famous controversies about grace and free will? Theologians are only beginning to ask such questions.) If these social foundations are clearly understood then the diverse positions may not appear as far apart as they did before; for behind the various emphases may well lie a common intention of remaining faithful to the gospel in very special, historical circumstances.

St. Augustine never realized that in his struggle against the Donatists he dealt with a marginalized people, ethnically apart from the dominant class, heirs of a different language, and enemies of the Roman Empire which had pushed them away from the fertile land in the plains to the inhospitable mountains. This oppressed group found it impossible to forgive bishops who under great political pressure had been willing to worship in the state religion of Rome. The Romanized Christians of the plain found this easier to forgive. How would St. Augustine have formulated his defense of sacramental efficacy whatever the personal dignity of the minister if he had realized that the passion of his opponents was rooted in political reality and that his own style of thinking was linked to his Roman culture?

In ecumenical dialogue theologians try to grasp the religious and social conditions of the churches, which have contributed to the divergent doctrines. In the early literature emanating from the World Council of Churches, these conditions used to be called "the non-theological

factors" of Christian disunity. According to the sociology of knowledge, this distinction between theological and non-theological factors is too neat. For the non-theological, social and political factors create a certain consciousness, the framework in which the gospel is experienced and expressed; and thus they flow into every formulation of doctrine. If this sociology-of-knowledge approach were consistently used in ecumenical discussion, one might be able to show that the divergent doctrinal positions were adopted by the churches who approached the gospel from a perspective determined by their own history and that therefore, the positions which at first appear contradictory may in fact be reconciled—without weakening or watering down the Christian message.

This approach raises the question of the unity of truth. How can we defend the truth of the gospel and still hold to the authenticity of its various historical formulations? This is the problem of "historicism," in which sociologists have been as interested as historians and philosophers. Since sociologists insist that all truth is historical, are they still able, we ask, to acknowledge that some truth transcends the culture in which and by which it was formulated? If the answer to this question were No, sociologists would have to abandon their science. Usually sociologists assume that if the truth is abstract enough, if it deals not with reality but with an ideal order, then such transcendence is possible. Such cultural transcendence is found in mathematics and it may also be found in the natural sciences. Yet even here some sociologists go on questioning under what social conditions science was first developed and what social conditions must obtain so that science achieves cultural power and generates an ever wider application to human life. Who knows? Perhaps modern science is so closely linked to the technological, bureaucratic society that what appears to us as its universality is rather the sign of the cultural victory of the West and hence represents a universality of power and aggression. But is there a truth transcending culture apart from mathematics and the natural sciences?

Sociology, as I mentioned above, presupposes the possibility of universal human communication and hence inevitably edges toward metaphysics. Karl Mannheim was very much aware of this.[12] In his sociology of knowledge he insisted that all truth was historical. But if

[12]Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 88-94.

we look at the critical edge of this truth and the orientation it induces in human life, then one might imagine a truth that is universal–even if it could never be possessed except perspectively. Mannheim thought that in every society people wrestle with the problems of their lives and learn to distinguish between truth and error, right and wrong: in this social quest truth appears as a critique of the current notions and the orientation of social and personal life. If we compare the various systems of values and ideas, we may find that they are quite different, but if we set them into their sociopolitical context, we see that they perform a similar function: they criticize oppressive trends and practices, they promote human life, they reach out for wider communication. It is not unreasonable to suppose that from a vantage point not yet available to us (and possibly never available to us) these various systems of truth and values are perspectives of a single truth. Mannheim held that unless sociologists acknowledged such a drift toward humanization and the presence of a universal dynamics in man, they would either undermine the entire work of sociology by a total relativism or else reify one historical system as the final and total truth. While the sociology of knowledge convinced Mannheim that all truth is historical, it also made him affirm the unity of truth in a common, relational orientation. Mannheim realized of course that this brought him to the edge of metaphysics but he preferred not to develop this line of thought.

Truth as critique and orientation appeals to theologians who seek an understanding of religious truth that allows them to affirm the self-identity of the gospel and its manifold historical formulations. As long as the notion of religious truth was drawn from neo-Scholasticism it was impossible to account for the passage from the old to the new and to reconcile the historicity of Christian doctrine with its transcendent unity. But if religious truth is critique of an existing culture and orientation toward renewed life than it is possible that one and the same message acquires different meanings in various historical circumstances. Theologians have turned to hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, to be able to read and reread the biblical message out of different sets of presuppositions and hence reconcile the unity with the plural form of the Christian gospel.

This is not the place to discuss theological hermeneutics. Since I am interested in the impact of sociology on theology I wish to make two remarks in this connection. First, the hermeneutical circle is also of

interest to the sociologists. In the important controversies between sociologists who try to assimilate sociology as much as possible to the natural sciences and sociologists who insist that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), including sociology, have a specific methodology, the latter have attempted to clarify the hermeneutics involved in the exercise of sociological research.[13] While natural sciences take for granted the separation of subject (the observer) and the object (the observed), except in some limiting cases, the human sciences, including sociology, acknowledge an interrelation of subject and object. Both the social scientist and the social action studied by him/her have been produced by the same history. The social scientist does not stand on neutral ground: he finds himself in a position which has been affected by the object he intends to study. In other words, he finds himself within the hermeneutical circle and before he can read correctly the empirical data he has collected, he must determine the precise place which he occupies in this circle. He must discover how the social action he studies has affected his own self-understanding and conversely, if he studies events more or less contemporary to him, how the world with which he is identified has affected the object of his research. From Wilhelm Dilthey and Ernst Troeltsch to the contemporary critical sociologists of North America (C. Wright Mills, Robert W. Friedrichs, Alvin Gouldner, John O'Neil to mention a few), the struggle of sociology against the illusory ideal of value-neutrality and the quest of sociology for a new kind of objectivity are expressed in a body of literature that deals basically with hermeneutics, even if this particular term is not used.[14]

My second remark has to do with a principle of interpretation used in sociological research that would be helpful in theological studies. Since sociologists hold that consciousness and its cultural expressions are created by the social reality (in the sense explained above), it is possible to understand a particular social event in two ways: first, there is the meaning which the social event has to the actors involved in it,

[13]Cf. G. Baum, "Science and Commitment: Historical Truth According to Ernst Troeltsch," *Journal of Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1 (1971), 259-77.

[14]The search for a new "objectivity" is found especially in the Frankfort School of social thought and its followers in North America. Cf. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973).

and secondly there is the meaning the event has, possibly unknown to the actors, as an expression of the wider social reality with which the actors are identified. Karl Mannheim calls this second "documentary meaning."[15] It is possible to study football in terms of the meaning which the players assign to the game, but it is also possible to study football as an expression of the socioeconomic reality to which the players and the spectators belong, an approach that might account for the extraordinary power football holds over the imagination of contemporary society. Since the social institutions in which we live create a certain mind-set or consciousness, more is expressed in people's self-expression than their personal intention: the society expresses something about itself in the words and gestures of its members, even if this remains unknown to them. When idealists talk of the *Geist* of a community that expresses itself in works of art and literature, we may object to the metaphysical implications of their language, but we have to admit that it accurately records the sociological reality.

If we apply this principle to the reading of biblical literature, then we must take into account two distinct meanings of a text, one the literal meaning which is intended by the author and the other the documentary meaning which expresses something of the sociologically defined community to which the author belongs. In other words, there is a hidden meaning in a biblical passage that transcends the literal sense. The same principle can be applied in ecclesiology to give more precise meaning to the reliance of Catholics, including the Catholic theologian, on the wisdom produced in and by the community. Catholics have stressed more than Protestants that in the search for the understanding of the gospel the theologian is not alone and that she should not surrender herself fully to her own insights unless she is supported in this by a significant section of the believing community. In other words, the believing community itself is involved in the discernment of Christian truth. This position makes good sociological sense. For if consciousness is created by society, then the ideas people have reflect the common institutions and the sociopolitical conditions in which they live. A reading of the gospel can be authentic only if it is shared by many. This explains moreover why the same religious development

[15]K. Mannheim, "On the Interpretation of 'Weltanschauung,'" *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 44.

takes place in a good number of people dispersed in the same society, even though there is no direct communication between them. Only if the theologian is confirmed by a significant movement in the church does she know that more expresses itself in her interpretation of the gospel than her own conscious insights: what she thinks also expresses something of the community's wrestling with its own conditions of life.

Theologians, I have said, try to solve the problems raised by the passage from the old to the new, and by the one and the many, through the application of hermeneutics to normative texts. There is, however, another way of dealing with these problems, a way derived from the sociology of religion, that does not contradict the preceding way but parallels and supplements it. Beginning with Emile Durkheim, many sociologists have come to understand religion as a set of symbols that offers people an interpretation of the whole of reality, that dominates their imagination and their hearts and orients their action in a certain way. Durkheim and some of his followers did not believe in God and hence there was a reductionist tendency in their brilliant analyses. They presented religion as the sacred canopy protecting society and hinted that its creation was due to nothing but society's quest for stability. Other sociologists used the same symbolic understanding of religion non-reductively. Robert Bellah distinguishes two trends in the sociological approach to the study of religion as symbol system—'symbolic reductionism' and 'symbolic realism.'[16] By symbolic realism he means the view that regards religious symbols not simply as a reflection of society and its aspirations but acknowledges them as possessing a creativity of their own (and hence as remaining open to a metaphysical interpretation.)

Christian theology is able to make use of the approach to religion derived from symbolic realism. For it is possible to regard divine revelation in Israel and Jesus Christ as the manifestation of God's hidden, gracious presence to human history (this is shared by much of modern theology) and look upon this revelation not primarily as truth addressed to the mind but as stories and symbols through which the believing community interprets reality, understands itself and its mission, and opens itself to the divine self-communication. It is possible, in other words, to regard divine revelation as symbolic.

[16]R. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 246-57.

The so-called Modernists, we recall, tried to look upon divine revelation as symbolic. They did this to overcome the rationalistic understanding of religious truth operative in the theology of their day. However, the Modernists did not derive their understanding of symbols from the incipient social sciences contemporary to them. For them symbols were signs addressed to the memory, recalling significant events of the past and hence exercising power on people's emotions. Symbols communicated religious sentiment. We note that the notion of symbols, derived from the sociology of religion, is quite different. Here religious symbols are the form of the imagination, through which people lay hold of reality, understand themselves, their origin and their destiny, and move forward in creating their history.

Does this symbolic understanding derived from sociology neglect the noetic component of divine revelation? This is usually the first question theologians ask. It seems to me that this approach does relegate this noetic component to a subordinate position. What divine revelation communicates directly is new consciousness. Through the story of Israel and the life and personality of Jesus the believing community comes to see reality in a certain way and by remaining faithful to this eventually recreate their history in keeping with the divine promises. God acts in their history through the revealed symbols. In order to protect these divinely revealed symbols and repudiate false interpretations, the Christian community tried to lay hold of these symbols in a conceptual way and thus produced a set of doctrines. But these doctrines by themselves do not mediate the divine revelation: they initiate people into divine salvation only if they are grasped in their connection with, and dependence on, the revealed symbols. By putting primary stress on the noetic component of the gospel, we have obscured the power of divine revelation, we have separated doctrines from the symbols they were meant to affirm and transformed them into conceptual information (usually quite unbelievable) about the divinity. By making use of the sociology of religion, the theologian is able to recover a broader, more action-oriented understanding of divine revelation and discover meaning and power in the Christian religion that has often been overlooked.

This is the approach we find in the writings of the sociologist Andrew Greeley.[17] While his writings are occasionally marred by out-

[17] A. Greeley, *What A Modern Catholic Believes About God?* (Chicago:

rageous generalizations and angry polemics against somebody else's position, his constructive effort to join theology and the sociology of religion in the interpretation of the Christian gospel for modern society has been original and successful—and deserves the serious attention of theologians. As I have written elsewhere, I regard this application of symbol analysis to the understanding of the gospel as the most fruitful trend in American theology.[18] Greeley has worked out his concept of symbol in line with the sociological studies of Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah and Clifford Geertz, and after he applied this concept in a theological way to the interpretation of the Christian religion, he found himself, possibly to his surprise, very close to Paul Tillich's theological use of the symbolic. Greeley often adopts the Tillichian formulation that the Christian symbols shed light on human life and history, that they disclose the basic ambiguity of existence and reveal the divine graciousness operative at the heart of it. Christian symbols make known the hidden structure of reality, they reveal the divine judgement on the world and the hidden divine life present to the world, grounding and orienting the forward movement of life and history. (This recalls my earlier remarks on truth as critique and orientation!)

The constructive theological work of Rosemary Ruether, the most important section of which exists so far only in manuscript form, also uses symbols as the central instrument for interpreting the meaning and power of religion. Her understanding of symbol, however, is derived not from the sociology of religion, even if it is not in contradiction with it, but from her original training in classics and the study of ancient religions.

How does the symbolic understanding of divine revelation help theologians to solve the problems raised by the one and the many and the passage from the old to the new? Symbols have many meanings. In different cultural and sociopolitical situations the Christian symbols speak different languages. Since these symbols reveal the ambiguity of life and since the face of evil changes in various societies, the symbols will produce new meanings as the societies undergo significant changes. We touch here upon the extraordinary creativity of religion. Andrew

Thomas More Press, 1971); *The Jesus Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); *The Sinai Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

[18]Greeley, *The New Agenda*, Foreword, pp. 11-34.

Greeley, following his sociological method, trusts that symbols are resourceful: they give rise to many meanings. When the Christian community finds itself in a new social and cultural situation, the inherited symbols associated with the inherited meaning may at first fail to make sense or fail to illumine the life in which people actually find themselves; but as Christians wrestle with their religious inheritance in the new situation, the identical symbols will produce new meaning: they will eventually shed critical light on the concrete form of life and bring people in touch with the divine mystery present to them and carrying them forward. In his *The New Agenda*, Greeley uses this approach to explain the shift from the old to the new in the recent American Catholic experience. In other writings of his he has applied this method to interpret the covenant story and the Jesus story to our times. What remains constant and unchanging in the Christian religion are the symbols revealed in Israel and in Jesus Christ; what changes is their meaning. The formal function of these symbols remains the same in all ages and societies, yet their actual meaning undergoes significant transformations. While Andrew Greeley does not treat this approach in a speculative manner, his method offers a new and original way of reconciling the unity of the gospel with its changing manifestations.

III

We now turn to another line, along which sociology has had an impact on Catholic theology. The first line had to do with the historicity of truth. The second one, which I wish to discuss in the remaining pages, has to do with the historicity of error.

Every age and every group of people produce their own form of blindness. This is an insight that is shared by those sociologists who have been willing to enter into dialogue with Karl Marx. Each group of people, through a largely unconscious process, creates an understanding of reality that legitimates its power and privileges. This, in Marxian language, is ideology. Ideology is the distortion of truth for the sake of social interest. We are all subject to some false consciousness. The sinfulness of the world, to use theological language, affects the very structure of human reason. This basic Marxian insight, which is so appealing to Augustinian theologians with their stress on the universality of sin, has been lifted from its original Marxian context and applied in a vari-

ety of ways in sociological approaches that have nothing to do with Marxism. Max Weber, who followed Marx neither in the view that economics is the primary social variable nor in his political eschatology, was quite willing to admit that the ideas of people and their religion always tend to fulfill a particular legitimating function in regard to their power and privileges. Max Weber did not reduce the meaning of ideas, culture and religion to this legitimating function, but he was willing to detect in them the ideological moment.

Let me add that a similar unconscious trend to produce false consciousness is also described in Freudian psychoanalysis. For there we are told that operative in our lives is the trend to build 'defenses.' To the extent that we are afraid and unwilling to deal with our instinctual conflicts and the unintegrated aspects of our personality, we build defenses—by a process of which we are unaware—that prevent us from seeing ourselves and the world as they really are. None of us is ever completely free of false consciousness even from this point of view. Even here we remain in need of ongoing *metanoia.*

In sociology and psychology, then, we find a significant intellectual movement that looks upon error in human life not as accidental; error is just as profoundly rooted in our history as truth—and often just as revealing.

What is the relationship of ideology and religion? For Marx, religion was purely and simply false consciousness, even though he also wrote that "religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress." "Religion," he continued, "is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions."[19] Sociologists of religion did not follow Marx in seeing religion almost exclusively as ideological defense of the existing power relations. In three famous chapters of his *The Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber examined the relation of religion and class and showed that religion always has had different layers and trends, some of which were conservative and some critical.[20] Weber readily admitted that there are situations where one and the same religion serves as the legitimation of the

[19] *Marx and Engels on Religion*, intr. by Reinhold Niebuhr (Schocken Books, 1964), p. 42.

[20] M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 80-137.

ruling class and the consolation of the lower classes. Since Weber's time a good deal of sociological research has been done on the social function of religion. While some sociologists put more emphasis on those aspects or trends of religion that legitimate the social and political *status quo*—religion as sacred canopy—others have focussed more on prophetic and innovative religion, following Max Weber, and brought out the radical potential in the religious traditions.

Theologians can no longer stand back from the ideological critique of the Christian religion, to which the sociologists have led them. The time has come that we too must acknowledge the historicity of error. In the past we tended to attribute to human weakness the failings of the Church and the failure of the Christian religion in some situations to ally itself with the historical movements for truth and justice. We were of course ready to admit that we and our ancestors were fools and sinners. But today we can no longer regard these failings and failures as unfortunate and regrettable accidents. We must ask whether they were produced by the discrepancies built into our institutions and the identification of religion with the interests of the dominant classes. The worst we have done is closely linked to the best we have inherited. This is, alas, the human condition.

The power of ideological distortion of the truth impressed itself on me many years ago when I studied the anti-Jewish trends present in the Christian religion and their link to the formation of Western culture. Christians became contemptuous of the Jewish people not because they, the Christians, were sinners and failed to live up to the Christian call to love; they learnt to despise the Jews and denigrate their religion because of the ideological framework in which the gospel was proclaimed. Woven into the most previous things we have are the distortions, produced by social interest, that eventually translate themselves into institutional forces of destruction. The defense of the Christian claims against the synagogal reading of the scriptures produced a Christian language that made the Jews appear as an inferior people and, as Rosemary Ruether has recently shown in her *Faith and Fratricide,*[21] eventually led to the negation of their social existence altogether. Contemporary theologians, I repeat, find it impossible to stand back from submitting their religion to an ideological critique. This is what I mean by the

[21] R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

historicity of error. Theologians believe, moreover, that it is ultimately the Spirit of God who leads them to engage in this critique.

How can ideological distortion or false consciousness be overcome? From a sociological point of view, false consciousness cannot be overcome by science or philosophy. New thinking alone will not do. Since the particular forms of blindness are rooted in the societal reality of the people struck by it, what is necessary is that they resituate themselves in regard to this society. What is needed is commitment and action. Ideas change when their "bearers" undergo significant societal changes.

From a theological point of view, we have to say that the process of conversion, commitment and action by which people are delivered from ideological distortion is summoned forth by God's Word and moved by God's Spirit. Hence theologians are quite willing to examine critically their own tradition, even if they find discrepancies built into its language and its institutions that seem to threaten the integrity of the whole. We have to be willing to feel the ground shake under us. Marx believed that by identification with the most oppressed class, true consciousness becomes available to people. This is surely an exaggeration. For wherever people are situated, they are in need of an ongoing critique. The Christian could say, in adaptation of the Marxian formula, that it is through identification in faith with the oppressed and crucified man Jesus that she begins to detect the structures of domination in the several institutions to which she belongs and thus moves toward overcoming the layers of false consciousness.

Let me add that this view of the historicity of error has introduced vehement controversies in the social sciences. The sociologists who defend the value-free nature of social science suppose that the error in sociological research is due to mistakes in measurement and failures in the use of logic. To gain more reliable results the social scientist must refine his measuring instruments and perfect his conceptual tools. Sociologists who repudiate the value-neutrality of social science add that error in sociological research may also be due to an ideological distortion of the researcher's consciousness. What may be required, as we suggested above, is that the scientist discover his actual place in the hermeneutical circle and this may demand a raising of consciousness. Today sociology departments are divided on this methodological issue.

Contemporary Catholic theology has opened itself to the historicity of error. Theologians on the whole have been willing to submit their

religion and even their theology to an ideological critique. I already mentioned the scholarly effort to discern and come to grips with the anti-Jewish ideology operative in the Christian tradition. Much work has also been done on the anti-feminist ideology of biblical religion, Judaism and Christianity. An outstanding example of this research is the volume, *Religion and Sexism*, a collection of several articles on the image of women during various periods of Western religion, edited by Rosemary Ruether.[22] These studies show that the images of women, drawn from several distinct traditions, were various forms legitimating the existing structures that subjugated women and excluded them from public life.

We can think of many other examples of ideological deformations affecting the Christian religion. The question has been raised whether the tradition of monocratic power in the Catholic Church, according to which all ecclesiastical institutions are hierarchically ordered and government is exercised on every level, including the highest, by a single man, is grounded in a divinely revealed disposition or whether it is an ideological trend through which the monocratic episcopate that evolved more or less accidentally in the early church was able to legitimate its claims and powers. This is an important question. For the experience of authority mediated to people through their religion has a profound effect on their social and political ideals. Sociologists have often pointed out the interaction between democratic structures of the Protestant churches and the democratic ideals of the political order. The question has been asked in Catholic theology whether the centralizing power of the papacy is a historical development guided by the Spirit, as it is usually supposed, or whether it is an ideological development that should be overcome. A growing number of Catholic theologians have adopted the latter view.[23]

In this context one should mention the issue raised by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch according to whom the so-called Protestant ethic has contributed to the creation of capitalism and remains its legitima-

[22]R. Ruether, ed. *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

[23]Cf. P. Misner, "Papal Primacy in a Pluriform Polity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11 (1974), 239-62.

tion.[24] The Protestant religion is here seen as creating hard-working, individualist, self-reliant men who appreciate free enterprise and honest competition as the basis of economic life. According to Weber and Troeltsch these ideals were at odds with the older Christian tradition which placed the community at the center of people's awareness and presented individual life as a participation, albeit at a rather fixed place, in the life of the community. Weber's and Troeltsch's thesis has been confirmed by sociologists working in North America: for instance, by Richard Niebuhr in the U.S.A.,[25] and S. D. Clark in Canada.[26] According to Bryan Wilson, the British sociologist, it has been the genius of Protestantism to supply every rising class with the religious motivation and inward power to climb on the social and economic scale.[27] According to Will Herberg and Andrew Greeley this ethos is not confined to Protestantism in America; it is equally shared by Catholics and Jews.[28] It would appear, then, that the religion we have inherited is the inward spirit of what is excellent in capitalism, summoning people to the virtues necessary to make the system work and proscribing as sin the outlook and attitudes that undermine it. We note that this theory was by no means first proposed by Marxist sociologists. On the contrary, it represents a central theme in the sociology of religion. Ernst Troeltsch believed that the churches that have become successful, in whatever age, have allied themselves with the dominant classes and created a fusion between cultural ideals and religious aspirations.[29] At the same time, Troeltsch held that Christianity would again and again produce

[24]M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* For a collection of articles discussing the Weber thesis, see S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Protestant Ethic and Modernization* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

[25]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

[26]S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1948).

[27]Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 42.

[28]W. Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew.* (New York: Doubleday, 1955); A. Greeley, "The Protestant Ethic: Time for a Moratorium," *Sociological Analysis* 25 (1964), 20-33.

[29]Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, p. 331.

critical religious movements that tend to undermine the dominant values and provide people with a new vision of social life. In our days Christian theologians have taken these studies seriously and try to examine to what extent our inherited church life is the legitimation of the prevalent economic system and its political consequences.

The "political theology" of Germany and "liberation theology" of Latin America are particularly sensitive to the historicity of error. According to these theological trends, in order to proclaim the gospel it is necessary to make a sociological analysis of evil and injustice in society, then criticize the inherited religion to the extent that it legitimates these ills, and finally, relying on new commitment and religious experience, formulate the Christian message as God's promise to deliver the people from the sinful and demonic forces that distort their humanity. I mentioned above that American Catholics are sometimes overenthusiastic in regard to theologies produced in other parts of the world and try to incorporate these into their own thinking without first examining how they can be applied in North America. If theologians want to develop a critical theology for North America they will have to turn to social studies to clarify the structure of evil on this continent. Under the impact of sociology, Catholic theology is turning more consistently to the discernment of ideology in religion and culture. It has been suggested that consciousness raising is the blameworthy invention of Paolo Freire; as a matter of fact the raising of consciousness is deeply rooted in the sociological tradition. Thanks to the influence of this sociological trend, there are a growing number of theologians who hold, with Edward Schillebeeckx, that unless we are committed to the emancipation or liberation of mankind, we are unable to free ourselves from ideology and formulate in a credible way the Christian message.[30]

The saving message of Jesus Christ intends to deliver people from false consciousness and appoints them to transform the world. This is not sociologically demonstrable, but this is what Christians believe. Jesus has come to deliver people from all of the enemies of life. This is the prophetic text with which Jesus introduced himself. "The Spirit of

[30]"In contemporary society, it is impossible to believe in a Christianity that is not at one with the movement to emancipate mankind." Edward Schillebeeckx, "Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment," *Concilium* 84 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1974), p. 55.

the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Cf., Lk 4:18-19). While this wide view of divine redemption has not been formulated with its political implications prior to the impact of sociology on theology, the foundations of this wide view are amply present in Scripture and the Catholic tradition. In Jesus Christ God has acted on behalf of all of humankind, in Jesus Christ God has united himself not only with one man but through him with the entire human family, in Jesus Christ God has revealed that there is a single destiny for all men and women, Christian and non-Christian alike. Jesus came to usher in a new age. Jesus is the instrument of God's kingdom which is promised to us at the end of time but which is anticipated by us in special moments of our history when we pass from sin to grace, from oppression to freedom, from blindness to sight. In the past, under the influence of individualistic cultural trends, we have often privatized the gospel, i.e., we have often understood the Christian message as if it were addressed only to individuals. Today, largely under the impact of sociological thinking, theologians are recovering their Christian foundation: they recognize that the gospel has meaning for persons as well as socicties. One of the tasks of contemporary religious thought is the de-privatization of the Christian message.

The impact of sociology on Catholic theology I have examined in these pages lies in the application of two principles, the historicity of truth and the historicity of error. These two principles must be jointly applied in theological research and reflection—and this is not always easy. It is very difficult to decide whether a certain aspect of the religious tradition should be interpreted as an authentic expression of the gospel in a given situation or as an ideological deformation of the truth. In his book *Infallible?*, Hans Küng presents two interpretations of the teaching of Vatican I on infallibility:[31] this teaching may either have been the only way in which the Church could affirm its reliance on divine guidance in a culture in which truth was regarded in highly rationalistic terms (historicity of truth) or it may have been an ideologi-

[31] H. Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 151-6.

cal distortion of the Christian message on divine guidance, prompted by the quest for more papal power and ecclesiastical security (historicity of error). Küng does not decide between these two theories of interpretation. A one-sided emphasis on the historicity of error would eventually undermine all sources of wisdom inherited from the past, and a one-sided stress on the historicity of truth would lead to a theological method that could reconcile with the gospel any and every development, however strange, in the life of the Church. Here again theologians are confronted by problems that also preoccupy sociologists. Shall they study societies mainly in terms of what they contribute to human well-being or rather in terms of the damage they do to people? Is there a set of criteria that enable sociologists to make such a decision in each concrete case? Or do they depend in this decision on a choice that is not derived from their science at all?

It is my view that sociologists (and the theologian) should approach the object of their study from a perspective that promises to make their work a contribution to the humanization of life. This raises many important issues which contemporary sociologists are no longer able to avoid. Social science, too, must serve the emancipation of the human race.

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