THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IN BRITAIN: A HYBRID CASE

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The sociology of religion in Britain – just like the sociology of religion everywhere – owes its origins to the founders of sociology itself: Marx, Weber and Durkheim, a generation of thinkers who, despite their very different conclusions about the matter, regarded the study of religion as central to the sociological task. Their influence can still be felt at the turn of the millennium. Almost every undergraduate course in the sociology of religion will at some point acquaint its students with the principal ideas of the founding fathers, and work on their legacy continues to form a significant element in the corpus of sociological thinking in modern Britain.

What happened in the next generation depends very largely on where you look: or to put the same point more directly, developments on each side of the Atlantic were very different. Each situation, moreover, reflects its own environment. In the United States where religious institutions remained relatively buoyant and religious practice was the norm for significant sections of the population, a generation of sociologists emerged anxious to document and to understand both the nature of religious *activity* and its role in modern societies. How this role was perceived and how it might evolve prompted contrasting theoretical formulations – from the normative functionalism of Parsons to the social construction theories of Berger and Luckmann. Here were two different bodies of theory, articulated by American sociologists, but read and absorbed by their British equivalents.

In the early post-war period a very different evolution was taking place in continental Europe, notably amongst French speaking scholars. This has been admirably documented in an earlier contribution to this journal (Willaime, 1999) in an article which explores the practical motivations of the Catholic sociologists during and after World War II – notably Le Bras and Boulard. Prompted above all by the fall in Catholic practice, these researchers launched a whole series of empirical enquiries with the intention of discovering what exactly characterised the religion of the French people, or "lived religion" as it became known. An impressive body of data emerged. The transformation of this primarily Catholic research into a fully-fledged sociology of religion or religions is the principal theme of Willaime's account. It is a fascinating story but very different indeed from what was happening on the other side of the English Channel.

The important point to grasp is the following: the sociology of religion in continental Europe is conditioned by its context, just like its counterpart in the United States. The sociology of religion in Britain lies somewhere between the two – low levels of practice are the norm as they are in most of Europe, but the British sociologist is (a) more influenced by pluralism than the French speakers (notably with respect to new religious movements) and (b) more likely to access the American literature than the French. Hence a kind of hybrid: the circumstances are primarily European; the literature is coloured if not dominated by American as well as British publications. Material in languages other than English is unlikely to be read by the majority of British scholars.[1]

An additional, almost parenthetical point follows from this, a factor already alluded to in Willaime's article: that is the place of translation in this increasingly cross-cultural endeavour. Willaime emphasises the fact that the arrival of Weberian thinking in French sociology in the early post-war period offered significant alternatives to those trying to understand changes in the religious life of France. Weber's work (or to be more accurate parts of his work) became available in English somewhat earlier (*General Economic History*, 1927, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* 1930). It follows, surely, that a careful mapping of the dates of translations of key texts between German, French and English would reveal interesting combinations of theoretical resource in different European and indeed American societies. What was available to whom in the development of theoretical thinking is not something that should be taken for granted; it could and should be subject to empirical investigation.[2]

Bearing the specificities of the British situation in mind, what are the principal preoccupations of the sociologists of religion working in this country in the post-war period and how have they gone about their task? These are the central questions of the paragraphs that follow. In deciding what should or should not be included, I have chosen to emphasise the later rather than the earlier post-war decades. More regrettably, I have had to omit much excellent work in cognate disciplines – i. e. history, anthropology, psychology, political science and, with some exceptions, religious studies.

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1   British sociologists are almost all monolingual, far more so than their European counterparts.

2   This is a paradoxical point to make in a multi-lingual Swiss journal, but one that is central to the understanding of how sociology has developed in both its European and Anglo-saxon forms.

1. The secularisation paradigm and its subsequent mutation

For a variety of reasons, the indicators of religious life in Britain were reasonably stable in the immediate post-war decade (Hastings, 1986; Davie, 1994a), stabilities which were not to last. As the relatively conservative fifties gave way to a far more turbulent decade, British sociologists became increasingly convinced of the decline in significance of both religion and religious institutions.[3] The 1960s generated entirely new ways of thinking; not only secular but increasingly confident assumptions dominated public discourse in a decade in which an expanding economy and full employment promised good things for everyone. Evidence for secularisation, associated with a shaking-off of the past, could be found at every level of society; it was, it followed, part of the sociological task to document this process.

How, exactly, secularisation should be understood led, however, to very different understandings amongst British sociologists, differences that can still be seen twenty or thirty years later. On the one hand, Bryan Wilson (1966, 1976, 1982) defined (and continues to define) secularisation as "the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance" (1966, 14) and argued, persuasively that this process has been dominant, not only in Europe but in significant parts of the modern world. It is a point of view characterised by a Weberian understanding of the rationalisation of culture. On the other hand, David Martin (1967, 1978, 1979) offered a "theory of secularisation" that was rather more nuanced, attentive in particular to the different circumstances in which the *process* of secularisation took place. Nor, following Martin was this process necessarily a one-way affair; not only did it form different patterns in different places (taking into account amongst other things the difference between Europe and the New World), it could, in principle, be reversed. Secularisation was an empirically observable phenomenon – undeniably manifest in the circumstances of post-war Europe, but not a theoretical necessity. Despite their differences in this respect, Wilson and Martin are recognised as the outstanding contributors to the sociology of religion in post-war Britain.

The secularisation debate, variously understood, became the dominant paradigm of British sociology of religion until the 1980s at least. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that secularisation as an issue formed the organising theme of an article on the status of British sociology of religion in a special

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3   Exactly when the decline started and for what reasons have themselves been the subject of considerable discussion, amongst historians as well as sociologists. See for example Gill's (1993) challenge to the work of Currie, Gilbert and Horsley (1977), an interesting debate in itself.

issue of the *British Journal of Sociology* (Wallis and Bruce, 1989).[4] The sub-discipline was mapped in these terms – on the one hand outlining the various theoretical approaches to secularisation itself and on the other interpreting any kind of resistance to the dominant theme as a series of aberrations (i. e. as something that opposes the norm and requires an explanation). For example, the persistence of religion as observed in Northern Ireland or in the relative buoyancy of Catholic practice in the mid post-war decades is seen as a form of cultural defence, new religious movements are interesting but necessarily marginal phenomena and extra-institutional forms of religion, notably widespread if rather vague forms of religious belief, are simply residues or left-overs from an earlier way of living (with the strong implication that they would rapidly follow religious practice into oblivion).

The Wallis and Bruce article provides a useful benchmark in the evolution of sociology; it indicates how two distinguished practitioners perceived the sociology of religion at the end of the 1980s. More than this, the article drew some interesting responses, themselves signs of change. There were those, first of all, who felt that the piece was theoretically deficient, in so far as it ignored currents of thinking which emerged from a Durkheimian perspective (Thompson, 1990). Religion still had a part to play in modern Britain as indeed in other developed societies if conceived in broader terms than those assumed by Wallis and Bruce; an exchange coloured above all by two very different definitions of religion (one substantive and one functional – an ongoing and unresolved debate in Britain as everywhere else). Far more radical, however, were the shifts in perspective that were taking place as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, shifts in which the American and British strands within the sociology of religion become once again difficult to disentangle.

The core of the argument lies (a) in the observable differences between Europe and the United States and (b) in the assumed connections between religious pluralism and the secularisation process in both places. On the one hand it became increasingly obvious that the United States, an evidently modern and Western society, was indeed secular in its constitutional arrangements but hardly so if the indicators in question concerned the religious vitality of the nation. From a European perspective Americans remains not only a nation of churchgoers[5] but – even more so – a nation of religious believers (over 90% of Americans say that they believe in God). But if this was the case, how was it possible to accommodate the very different situation found in the United States within a theoretical framework concerned primarily with religious decline?

4   This is an extremely well-referenced article which should be read alongside this one. It offers
     more detail on the mid post-war decades.
5   For very different interpretations of these figures, see Bruce (1992).

The answer lay in trying to understand American exceptionalism; i. e. in accepting that America was different and in elucidating the specificities within American society which could account for the successful cohabitation of vibrant religiosity and developed modernity. So far, so good; the secularisation thesis remains intact even if deviations from the norm can be found in the modern world[6].

Not everyone, however, has continued down this path. Berger (a leading American sociologist) and Martin (one of the most influential British thinkers), to take two prominent examples, have suggested that the argument be reversed. Exceptionalism undoubtedly exists, but it is Europe rather than the United States which is exceptional. Not only, following Berger, is the *non*-western world as "furiously religious as ever" (1992, 32), the United States itself continues by all conventional criteria to be an intensely religious country. So what happens to the argument about modernisation breeding secularity? In the US it simply hasn't happened.

In coming to terms with this situation, sociologists (and particularly the Americans) have been obliged to look again at concept of religious pluralism. Central to sociological thinking in the mid post-war decades (Berger, 1967) were the assumed connections between pluralism and secularisation. Increasing pluralism led to a loss in plausibility for all religions (they cannot all be true), and hence to a decline in their public, if not always their private significance. Faced, however, with the evidence from the United States, increasing numbers of scholars – notably Berger himself, but also the rational choice theorists (see below) – began to argue precisely the reverse, i. e. that pluralism does not lead to religious decline (via a loss in plausibility), but encourages a healthy and competitive market of religious institutions, some of which will thrive more vigorously than the others. It is the lack of such a market, not increasing pluralism, that limits the expansion of religious life in modern Europe.

Where does this *volte-face* leave the British sociologists of religion? David Martin and Bryan Wilson have taken different points of view. Martin – partly in view of his observations of Latin America and the former communist countries (1990, 1996) in addition to his work on West Europe – has become increasingly convinced by West European rather than American exceptionalism. Such a statement is not intended to imply that Martin is convinced by rational choice theory; simply that the evidence for religious vitality in much of the modern world and the lack of it in modern Europe can no longer be ignored – theoretical frameworks, it follows, must adjust accordingly (Martin, 1991). Wilson, on

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6   Indeed in Bruce's recent account, even American exceptionalism is hardly necessary as the data are reconsidered to minimise the difference between Europe and the United States (1996, 129–68)

the other hand, systematically reviewing the evidence and patiently refuting the counterclaims (1998) sticks to the view that secularisation (properly understood, i. e. not in its crude and oversimplified forms) remains the most appropriate approach to religious life in much of the modern world, including aspects of modern America.

A younger generation of scholars in equally divided. Bruce, for example, both in his studies of modern Britain (1995a) and of the modern world (1996), argues robustly in favour of secularisation. Not only are the religious indicators in modern Britain evidence for, not against, the secularisation thesis, similar trends are likely to be found in most of the modern West, *unless* specific circumstances prevent the 'normal' situation from occurring. All other things being equal modernisation will lead to rationalisation and pluralism; they in turn will lead to secularisation. Davie (1994a and 2000a) takes a different view, once again arguing the case from two different perspectives. First she is more convinced of European exceptionalism than Bruce, looking for explanations for the relatively low levels of religiousness in this part of the world in the specificities of European history, *not* in the necessary connections between religion and modernity (2000a). Secondly, even in Europe (including Britain), Davie gives considerably more weight than Bruce to the persistence of religion outside the institutional churches. As "belief" detaches itself from "belonging", it is far more likely to drift than to disappear. In other words, relatively low levels of practice are just as likely to generate heterodox forms of believing as a developed secular rationalism – the latter, in fact, remains a minority pursuit. Bailey (1998) in his long term study of "implicit religion" has contributed extensively to this debate.[7]

An interesting source of data – capable of more than one interpretation in this respect – was the outburst of emotion and grief in the days following the death of Princess Diana. Was this evidence for or against secularisation? (The articles brought together in Walter (1999) provide the best source of material on this controversial episode.) It is undeniable, on the one hand, that the spontaneous outbursts of emotion that took place all over the country revealed the very limited control that the institutional churches have over the content and expression of most people's beliefs; faced with the unthinkable, the population simply did what they liked in their efforts to come to terms with what had happened. That is evidence in favour of secularisation. The need, however, for the state church to provide an appropriate form of liturgy as a public marker of the Princess' death is an argument in favour of the churches' continuing

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7   Edward Bailey created the Network for the Study of Implicit Religion in 1968; this has since become the Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality attached to Middlesex University.

significance: who else could have performed this essential function? It is hard, finally, to see the outpouring of emotion that occurred that week as evidence of increasing rationalisation; it is, rather, a potent mixture of formal and informal religion as a weakened institutional Christianity comes to terms with a bewildering amalgam of semi-Christian, not to say pagan beliefs (Davie, 2000a).

2. Theories and methods

At several points in the above discussion, reference has been made to shifting theoretical perspectives. It is time now to gather some of these together. Beckford (1989) was one of the first British scholars to point out the "isolation and insulation" of the sociology of religion from the sociological mainstream. This feature is by no means uniquely British, but it has had a two-fold effect: first to encourage the majority of mainstream sociologists to ignore religion as a significant sociological field (a tendency undoubtedly encouraged by too great an emphasis on secularisation) but also to deprive the sociologists of religion of an effective theoretical resource, in so far as they themselves fail to keep abreast of shifts in sociological thinking.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, notably the continuing discussion of the Weber thesis (Marshall, 1980, 1982; Campbell, 1987) and a persistent current of Durkheimian thinking. Regarding the latter Lukes (1973) and Pickering (1975, 1984) were influential in the seventies, followed first by Thompson's contributions both to Durkheimian scholarship and to the sociology of religion more generally (Thompson, 1982, 1985; Bocock and Thompson, 1985) and, more recently, by Mellor and Shilling (1997) in their theorising of the body, both individual and collective. A relatively newcomer to the field, Tester, looks well-placed to make a significant contribution, notably in the field of ethical and moral relationships. By and large, however, sociologists of religion have come late to the debates concerning the nature of modern and post-modern societies; reciprocally the sociological mainstream has ignored the significance of religion and religious change in these global transformations - regrettably in view of the increasing salience of religion in the modern world. The void is not quite total. Turner (1983; new edition, 1991) filled an important gap, Flanagan and Jupp (1996) together with Heelas et al. (1998) gather together some useful recent contributions, but more work needs to be done.

The attention to rational choice theory amongst British sociologists of religion needs to be elaborated at this point, a way of thinking which has travelled from the New World to the Old – i. e. in the reverse direction to secularisation theory – and which is associated above all with the work of Stark and Bainbridge

(1985, 1987). It is important to remember, first of all, that rational choice theory derives from sources outside sociology itself, namely market economics and psychological theories of exchange, and has provided an inspiration for thinkers in almost all branches of the social sciences. In this respect, it manifestly overcomes the "isolation and insulation" of the sociology of religion and should be welcomed for this reason alone. The welcome, however, was limited. Few British sociologists have been totally convinced by rational choice theory in terms of its ability to explain the fortunes of religion and religious institutions on this side of the Atlantic, and Bruce in particular has been scathing in his attacks – using both theoretical and empirical evidence to refute the claims of the theory's protagonists (Bruce, 1995a, 1997, 1999). Whilst a number of British sociologists would agree that one reason for the low levels of religiousness in modern Europe can be found in the collusions of religion and power through centuries of European history (Martin ,1996; Davie, 2000a), such a statement is not reducible to a simple restriction of market choices; it is far more complicated than that.

An obvious corollary follows on: that is the need for British sociologists to be cautious in the borrowings from the New World. The American literature is both seductive and accessible to English speakers: it is not, however, always the most appropriate source when it come to understanding the long term evolutions of patterns of religion in Britain and in other parts of Europe. Methodological differences between Britain and the United States reflect the same point. By and large the emphasis in Britain has fallen either on historical or comparative work (a tendency exemplified *par excellence* in Martin, from whom a whole generation of younger scholars learnt their skill) or on the smaller scale observational studies associated in particular with new religious movements (see below). The attention to quantitative methods has been comparatively weak, many sociologists relying on the data produced by Christian organisations, notably the Christian Research Association.[8] Latterly, however, both Bruce and Gill have collaborated with American methodologists (notably Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler) to introduce sophisticated statistical techniques into the analysis of British data. Both emphasise the value of longitudinal studies to discern patterns over time. Francis (a prolific author in the field of social psychology) bases his multiple investigations on questionnaire and survey – in for example his analysis of the difference between men and women, or more accurately between masculine and feminine, in a wide variety

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8   The Christian Research Association was formerly known at Marc Europe; it publishes both
     the *UK Christian Handbook* and (more recently) *Religious Trends,* both on a regular basis, as
     well as occasional surveys of religious behaviour and religious membership in different parts
     of the United Kingdom.

of religious behaviours (Francis and Wilson, 1998). Hornsby-Smith's work on Catholicism (see below) has always had a strong empirical base.

There are others, however, who feel strongly that statistics may well tell a story – indeed a significant story – but the account is, by definition, deficient. At this point it is interesting to note the overlap between the sociology of religion and the contributions from the anthropologists. Jenkins (1996), for example, castigates Bruce for a too great a reliance on statistics in his account of religion in modern Britain (1995a). The conclusions that emerge from Bruce's way of working are not, strictly speaking, inaccurate, but they are, following Jenkins, radically incomplete. On the one hand, they leave unexamined points of possible interest that do not fit the underlying argument (such points are simply set aside in favour of the master narrative); on the other, distinct and often very different histories (local, regional or gendered, for example) are handled in such a way that they tell the same, rather than different, more nuanced and at times contrasting stories (1996, 335). Paradoxically, Jenkins commends as a more accurate alternative Bruce's earlier work on Northern Ireland (see below) and regrets that his handling of material in the *Modern Britain* book represents a less rounded approach to sociological analysis. What is missing in the latter is the complex "middle distance" in which human lives are lived; a space dominated by ambiguity and contradictions rather than clear cut alternatives. It is this space that is captured by Davie's phrase "believing without belonging" – an approach to religion which requires qualitative just as must as quantitative methodology (Davie, 2000b).

3. A range of substantive issues

The distinction between theoretical approaches, different methodologies and the great variety of issues to which the theories and methods are applied is necessarily blurred; it is largely a matter of emphasis. Nor is it possible, given the range of subject matter and the problematic question of definition to ensure that the discussion is exhaustive and has included everything. The following, none the less, offers some indication of the principal preoccupations of the sociology of religion in Britain and those who are responsible for the different areas of work.

3.1   New religious movements and the new age

There are two ways of looking at the attention given to new religious movements in this country. The first is to wonder why quite so much sociological work

has been directed towards a phenomenon which is undoubtedly interesting, but which is necessarily marginal in statistical terms. The second is to recognise the quality of scholarship that is evident in this area and to appreciate that the conclusions that emerge tell us a good deal about the nature of British (or indeed any other society) in addition to the movements themselves. In their attention to new religious movements, British scholars are closer to their American colleagues than to their European neighbours. The literature is huge and can only be cited selectively; the most recent overview can be found in Wilson and Cresswell (1999).

Whatever the case, a whole string of distinguished scholars have chosen to work in this field: Wilson, Wallis, Beckford, Barker and Clarke – to name but the most obvious – several of whom have worked alongside the Japanese scholars active in this area. Two (overlapping) approaches stand out: the case study and the kind of analysis which draws from a range of empirical cases to elaborate a more general or theoretical frame. The following case studies have become classics: Wilson's triple study of the Elim Pentecostal Church, the Christadelphians and Christian Science (1961), Beckford's study of the Jehovah's Witnesses (1975), Wallis' work on Scientology (1976) and Barker's analysis of the Unification Church (1984). The resulting publications are as well known for their meticulous methodology as for their content, and deservedly so.

In terms of themes, two in particular merit attention. The first looks again at the secularisation debate and asks whether the existence of sects and the rapid development of new religious movements in the mid post-war decades is evidence for or evidence against secularisation; the second concerns questions of tolerance and pluralism. Regarding the former, there are those first of all who feel that sects and most (if not all) new religious movements constitute evidence in favour of secularisation in that almost by definition they exist apart from the cultural mainstream – building alternative enclaves which, though strong in themselves, are "in tension" with the society of which they are part (Wilson, 1990). Other scholars, however (notably Wallis, 1984), make a particular point of underlining the difference between movements that draw back from the world (they are world-rejecting), and those that take a very different stance – they are world-affirming and entirely compatible with the norms of modern living. (Exactly the same ambivalence will be seen with reference to the new age.) All new religious movements, moreover, exist at least in part to offer sources of meaning for their members as they come to terms with the demands of human living – by implication secular society has failed in this respect.

The question of tolerance and pluralism is even more compelling in that most modern Western societies are becoming more rather than less diverse.

The notion of "scope" follows from this, a concept which can be summarised as follows: who does or does not have access to whatever rights or privileges are involved for entities known as "religious organisations" in modern Britain or indeed in any other society? From a sociological point of view, such questions were initially posed through a widespread engagement with sects and new religious movements (Beckford 1985, Barker 1989, Wilson 1990). More recently the debate has shifted to the other faith communities in modern Britain, a point to which we shall return. The question is both urgent and complex: in the last analysis it becomes one of definition (what counts as religion and what does not) – hence, amongst other things, the legal dimension of the debate. It is an area in which feelings run high. Notable in this respect has been the establishment of INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements), a practical and essentially neutral organisation under the direction of Eileen Barker at the London School of Economics. Barker's publication *New Religious Movements; a Practical Introduction* (1989; new edition, 1998) aims once again to offer information of a practical nature on a wide variety of movements, both to scholars and to those who are involved in a more immediate way with the movements themselves.

The overlap between new religious movements and the new age is evident, but the emphasis in each is different. We have seen, for example, that the discussion of new religious movements contains, inevitably, an important legal element, provoked at least in part by the organisational claims of the movements themselves. The new age is much less likely to do so in that it is less a collection of movements than a coming together of tendencies. Heelas (1996) has provided an admirably well-organised book on this amorphous and fragmented phenomenon. Central to Heelas' analysis is the emphasis on the self and self religions – this is the *fil conducteur* that allows an observer to make a consistent assessment of what should or should not be included under the banner "new age", whether these manifestations occur in the medical world, in the ecological sphere or in the much more hard-headed environments of management training or commercial publishing.

Bowman (1993) and York (1996) have also worked in this field encompassing a whole range of subject matter: celtic spirituality, new age sites (especially Glastonbury), paganism and consumerism. The theoretical frame of all these writers relates strongly to the debate concerning the modern and the post-modern. A *post*-modern perspective sees the new age and associated movements as essentially counter-cultural, rejecting or calling into question the capacities of modern society to solve the problems of human living. Alternative perspectives are strongly endorsed in, for example, a strong preference for the natural healing processes of the human body over the impersonal technicalities of modern

medicine.[9] It is equally possible to argue, however, that the new age or other forms of alternative spirituality are a natural extension of modernity rather than a reaction to this. In other words, the emphasis on "self-realization" is entirely compatible with modern living and indeed depends upon it. From this point of view, such manifestations are forms of religion ideally suited to the late modern world, far more in fact that traditional religious teaching at least in its Western forms.

3.2   Religious minorities

There are other far more substantial religious minorities in modern Britain. One of these, Roman Catholicism[10], has undergone a profound mutation in the post-war period, a process carefully documented by Hornsby-Smith and a small number of colleagues at the University of Surrey (Hornsby-Smith, 1987, 1989, 1991; Hornsby-Smith, Fulton and Norris, 1995). It is thanks to this team that we know far more about Catholicism from a sociological point of view than almost any other religious community in this country.[11] What then has happened to this important minority? In the immediate post-war period, the Catholic constituency in Britain remained an enclave. Largely of Irish descent, Catholics were concentrated in particular sections of the larger industrial towns; they tended to marry other Catholics and to have noticeably larger families than the rest of the population; they attended their own schools and looked to their own priests for support and pastoral care. In the second half of the century, two factors came together to alter these patterns radically. The first concerns the economic, social and geographical mobility of many British Catholics – away from the ghettos and into the mainstream of society. One reason for this can be found in the advantages gained by Catholics in the 1944 Education Act, out of which grew a whole network of Catholic secondary schools in England and Wales. Such schools were not totally effective in teaching the faith, but were undoubtedly so in encouraging the economic and social aspirations of the younger generation. Such aspirations interacted with the changing nature of British society to produce a very different distribution of Catholics in the population. The second factor was the Second Vatican Council itself; a movement which opened up Catholicism from the inside,

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9   Hamilton's work on vegetarianism would also fit into this perspective.

10   In Britain it is important to make a distinction between Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics. The latter constitute a movement or grouping within the Church of England; the former are members of the Church of Rome.

11   In this respect, Hornsby-Smith is building on to the work of Anthony Spencer who established the Newman Demographic Survey in 1953. This is the closest equivalent to the work of Le Bras and Boulard that can be found in Britain, but is in no way a parallel undertaking.

breaking down the fortress mentality almost within a generation. It is the combination of these factors and their effects on the sociological make-up of the Catholic community in this country which Hornsby-Smith and others have documented with such skill.

Turning now to the other faith communities, it is important to realise that these are markedly more diverse than in most European societies in view of the heterogeneous nature of immigration into post-war Britain. The size and nature of these communities is documented in a regularly updated *Multi-Faith Directory*, produced jointly by the University of Derby and the Inter Faith Network (Weller and Fry, 1997); an excellent overview of the field as a whole can be found in Parsons (1993). Britain has, in addition, a long-established Jewish community (the second largest in Europe), a constituency which, once again, is unusually well-documented (Waterman and Kosmin, 1986; Schmool and Cohen, 1998). It is a community in numerical decline, with relatively little in-migration in the post-war period (unlike the situation of Judaism in France and unlike the other religious minorities in Britain).

With respect to the latter, it is crucially important to keep ethnic and religious differences distinct. The Afro-Caribbean community, for example, is a major immigrant group in modern Britain but possesses significant numbers of the most vibrant *Christian* churches in modern Europe. In this respect Afro-Caribbeans are almost a special case. At one and the same time they are part of the Christian mainstream, but exemplify many of the features of immigrant churches – notably the relative activity of their members and a distinctive style of worship. They form a natural and highly effective focus for the West Indian community in post-war Britain (Pryce, 1986).[12]

The Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds has provided a natural centre for the study of both Sikhs and Hindus. Within this, the work of Knott (1998) has been particularly significant, indicating a principal area in which the sociology of religion in modern Britain overlaps with work done in Departments of Religious Studies. The disciplinary lines become very blurred at this point, remembering the strictly non-confessional nature of religious studies as an academic discipline in post-war Britain.[13] The

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12 Studies of the West Indian population tend to be undertaken by specialists in ethnic and racial studies rather than sociologists of religion *per se*. Schaeffer (1999) is a welcome exception to this rule.

13 The Departments of Theology and/or Religious Studies at the following universities are particularly significant in this respect: King's College London, Lancaster University, the University of Manchester, the University of Leeds and two departments within the University of Wales – those at Cardiff and Lampeter. The discipline of religious studies has its own professional organisations and journals; these are rich sources for scholars interested in other-faith populations.

Department in Leeds (a multi-cultural city) is equally concerned with Islam, though here the range of work is wider.[14] Modood (together with Werbner) is an important contributor in this field; edging this time towards political science, he is particularly concerned with public policy and constitutional responses to minority issues (see the following section). The work of a number of younger scholars should also be mentioned, notably Gilliat-Ray (1998) and Herbert (2000). There is in addition a growing interest in multi-faith issues among graduate students, visible in the recent conferences of the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group (see below). One of the best accounts of Islam in Britain has been written by the under-faith adviser to an Anglican Bishop (Lewis, 1994).

A significant policy issue is emerging at the turn of the millennium, namely the need to acknowledge the religious, as opposed to the ethnic identities of minorities in this country. (The two do not always coincide, particularly in the case of Muslims.) Conversely the secular liberals – a small but vociferous minority in modern Britain – have considerably difficulty with this notion, refusing in many cases to admit the significance of religion as an organising category in public life. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the acrimonious exchanges that took place for the best part of a decade in connection with Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, first published in 1988. In many ways, this was a particularly British affair in that much of the debate revolved around the existence and possible amendment of the Blasphemy Law;[15] in other respects the implications were very much wider in that the episode raised the whole question of the rights of particular minorities to resist certain aspects of Western culture in order to protect their own religious heritage.

The volume of writing on the Rushdie Affair was huge, ranging from extended journalistic accounts to scholarly contributions from all manner of disciplines (law, political science, history, sociology and religious studies). Among the most notable *sociological* contributions were the following: Modood (1990, 1994), Webster (1990) and Davie (2000a). In terms of comparisons with France, the Rushdie Affair quite clearly parallels the *affaire du foulard*. Both occurred at much the same time and both, in many ways, remain not only unresolved but unresolvable. In each case the immigrant community is interacting

14 Important work has been done at the Selly Oak campus (a multi-faith complex in Birmingham) and at the Centre for Racial and Ethic Relations at the University of Warwick – at the latter there is more of an emphasis on ethnicity than on religion.

15 The Blasphemy Law remains on the statute book in modern Britain. It was not possible, however, for the Muslim community to invoke this at the time of the Rushdie controversy, as the Law does not protect faiths other than Anglican. The injustice of this situation is manifest, but there is (so far) no consensus about the future: should the law be abolished altogether or extended to protect other faiths?

with the host society whose own norms and aspirations have an effect on the outcome just as much as the particular minority in question. If most of Europe has difficulty with the notion of a Blasphemy Law still extant in Britain at the end of the twentieth century, the British have equal difficulty with the concept of *laïcité*, something that does not and cannot exist on the North side of the English Channel.

3.3 Constitutional, political and organisational themes

In assessing the sociology of religion in Britain, it is important to keep in mind the politically diverse nature of the United Kingdom and the significance of the religious factor in this diversity (Badham 1989). The United Kingdom houses four distinct religious cultures – five if the persistent divisions in Northern Ireland are taken into account. It is hardly surprising that the Department of Sociology at Queen's University, Belfast has produced significant work in connection with the "troubles" of Northern Ireland in the past twenty to thirty years. Bruce (1986, 1994, 1998; Wallis and Bruce, 1986) is by far the most prolific author in this respect, though the contributions of Brewer (1991) and Fawcett (1999) are also important. Fawcett, significantly, draws the parallels with South Africa. Fulton (1991) has also made a significant contribution in this area in terms of his analysis of religion in the Irish Republic.

Bruce has maintained an interest in Northern Ireland despite a move to Aberdeen in Scotland. In terms of Scotland itself Brown (1987, 1997) offers the most adequate sociological account, though references can also be found in Bruce's comparative work (1986, 1998). The religious situation in Wales engenders rather different issues in that language in addition to religion becomes an important carrier of identity in this part of the United Kingdom; Trosset (1993) has looked at these questions in North Wales, whilst Harris is the principal sociologist interested in the sociology of the Anglican Church in Wales, an unusual institution in that it is primarily the church of the English in Wales (a large scale empirical enquiry was carried out in 1991).

The "non-question" of English, as opposed to British, identity has received little attention from sociologists of religion or indeed of sociologists *per se*. The issue can, however, be raised indirectly in terms of the relationship between Britain and Europe. From this point of view it is covered in some detail in Davie (1994a, 1994b) who examines amongst other things the connection between Europe and ecumenism. In many ways the Church of *England* is doubly disadvantaged with respect to Europe: not only does Anglicanism (unlike Catholicism or the Reformed faiths) have no obvious "base" in Europe, the Church of England forms in addition the hub of the Anglican Communion –

a significant global presence even at the end of the twentieth century, but one which (like the Commonwealth from which it derives) has almost no connections with Europe.

Leaving aside questions of identity, church-state issues in England are important in themselves, not least for their resonance in a increasingly pluralist society. In this connection, Modood, amongst others, has been persistent in pointing out that the other faith minorities in modern Britain are in most cases happy with the *status quo* of an established Church (Modood, 1994, 1997); there are no grounds here for disestablishment (Davie, 1994a). If there is any long-standing resistance to the dominant position of the state church in modern Britain it is more likely to be found either within the Church of England itself (particularly the evangelical wing) or amongst the secular intelligentsia at times encouraged by members in the Free Churches. That is not to say that increasing religious pluralism does not present a whole series of policy issues in post-war Britain, questions which become, perhaps, more rather than less contentious as the decades pass (Beckford, 1999). Recent examples can be found in the educational world and in the media (Beckford, 1999), in prisons (Beckford and Gilliat-Ray, 1998), in constitutional issues including the reform of the House of Lords (Davie, 2000b) and in demographic enquiry (the possibility of including a religious question in the 2001 population census is currently under review).

Political debate takes place within the constitutional framework – the two dimensions are distinct analytically though frequently confused in practice. In terms of the political controversies of Britain in the later post-war decade, the Thatcher years deserve particular attention. The background to the acrimonious exchanges that took place in the 1980s can be found in Clark (1993); the principal documents took the form of two influential reports commissioned by the Church of England both of which contained considerable sociological input: *Faith in the City* (1985) and *Faith in the Countryside* (1990). The first of these in particular had a noticeable impact on political discourse. The political climate change in the mid 1990s: the significance of the religious factor in the ideology of the Labour Party that took power so overwhelmingly in 1997, not to say of Tony Blair himself, has been analysed in a recent study of Christian Socialism (Wilkinson, 1998).

Church-state issues concern the external relationships of the Church of England – to the state, to Europe, to other Christian communities and to the other faith populations. The internal evolutions of the Church of England have also caught the attention of sociologists and over a longish period of time. Studies in this area have two principal foci: first an on-going interest in organisational aspects of churchlife (a line of thinking which derives very

directly from Weber) and secondly an enquiry into the role of the religious professional, a focus established in the mid post-war decades, but given new impetus as increasing attention was paid to the ordination of women within the Church of England.

Thompson (1970) looked at the question of bureaucracy within the Church of England using a Weberian perspective. He identified the dual authority system within a church which is both Catholic and Reformed, each system resting on a different basis of authority, a debate which reflected the definitive establishment of the synodical system within the Church of England at this time. The implications of the dual situation provided one of the questions taken forward by the then Archbishop of York in a small but influential book, *Church and Nation in a Secular Age* (1983), in which sociological thinking figured to a considerable extent. In the 1990s the debate concerning church organisation has turned in a different direction as the Church, indeed the churches, grapple with the implications of management theory and the pervasiveness of cultures which call above all for accountability. One manifestation of this can be seen in the Turnbull Report (a Church of England document which formed the basis for radical administrative reform in the late 1990s);[16] very different sociological opinions regarding this type of thinking can be found in Gill and Burke (1996), Gill (1997) and Roberts (1997).

In the mid 1960s, Canon Leslie Paul produced a widely read report on "The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy", initiating a debate on how far it was appropriate to rationalise the clerical profession, not to mention the resources that were available to pay such people. Ransom, Byman and Hinings (1979), Towler and Coxon (1979) and Russell (1980) extended this debate in their analyses of the changing role of the professional minister, and notably the Anglican priest, in a society in which the role of all professionals was evolving fast. Coxon and Towler also looked at career patterns within the priesthood, an approach which dovetailed well with enquiries that concentrated on the changing pattern of the episcopacy (Medhurst and Moyser 1988). Bishops are increasingly pastors rather than prelates, requiring a rather different socialisation from their sometimes autocratic predecessors – career paths will alter accordingly.

Of even greater significance to sociologists was the slow but persistent change in the position of women within the churches. The reasons for this shift are complex and involve both sociological and theological arguments. There can be no doubt, however, that the debate occurred in view of the changing nature of Western society. This was not a change initiated in

16 The official title of the report was *Working as One Body,* Church House Publications 1995. Bishop Michael Turnbull chaired the committee which produced it.

ecclesiastical circles; the churches were, rather, responding to profound economic and social transformations which have brought women to positions of responsibility in most professions in the modern West. Increasingly, it is the professions which have no representation of women which have to justify their maintenance of the *status quo*, not the other way round. The decision, finally (in 1992), of the Church of England – the mother Church of the Anglican Communion – to ordain women was a significant marker; it attracted huge public attention. Here a church which is both Catholic and Reformed voted democratically (and after much procrastination) to admit women to the priesthood (Aldridge, 1989, 1992; Field-Bibb, 1991; Davie, 1994a).

Sociologists have, finally, been attracted to a completely different area of church life, but one which calls into question once again the nature of authority. Work on charismatics and the charismatic movement has been brought together in Hunt, Hamilton and Walter (1997). Percy (1996) has also participated in this debate but is concerned in addition with issues of power and religion (1998). Coleman (2000) has analysed the place of a charismatic community (a Swedish one) in an increasingly global society.

3.4   Religion and the life cycle

A welcome and recent move within the sociology of religion in Britain can be seen is renewed attention to religion and the everyday, something that the anthropologists of religion (not regrettably part of this overview) never lost sight of. One manifestation of this shift in emphasis can be found in the changing patterns of the life-cycle and the place of religion within this. Walter and Davie (1998), for example, have looked at the differences between men and women with respect to both religious belief and religious activity and sought reasons to explain such differences. (See also the extensive work of Francis on the social-psychological aspects of the question).[17] Yip has concentrated on the lived experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in a growing series of articles.

In terms of age and the life-cycle, there has, first of all, been a strong comparative emphasis. Fulton (2000), for example, brings together work on young Catholics in six Western societies; Collins (2000) has worked on different groups of young people in Britain and their relationship to the churches. At the other end of the age scale Davie and Vincent (1998) have provided an

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17 Feminist theology has tackled the question of religion and gender with great energy – an ever-growing literature is emerging, but with emphases that are rather different from those found in sociology.

overview of both empirical and theoretical work on religion and older people, drawing amongst other things on the classic study of old Aberdonians by Williams (1990). Williams is concerned with how older people prepare for death in a culture which is vestigially Calvinist but changing fast. The management of death itself in modern or post-modern societies has almost become a sub-discipline in its own right, with its own journal *Mortality* and an immense amount of recently published material.

Walter (1990, 1994, 1996) is the leading writer here, concentrating on the evolving nature of death is societies where the traditional certainties have been undermined. The work of Davies (1990) and Jupp (1990) is also important, not least their documentation of and reflections about the dramatic change in burial practice in the post-war period. Over 70% of the British population now choose to be cremated rather than buried, a revolution which cannot simply be taken for granted. The implications for belief in the after-life and for pastoral practice are considerable. It is an area in which the law, social history, sociology and religious studies come together; the need for inter-disciplinary work is evident. The latter is especially necessary in the case of sudden or unexpected death – of young people or a result of an accident or "disaster". Professionals in all related disciplines are still, for instance, trying to come to terms with what happened in the week following the death of Princess Diana (Walter, 1999).

Turning points in the life-cycle are frequently associated with particular liturgies (Davie and Martin 1999). In terms of liturgy more generally, Martin has had a long-standing interest not least in his public, rather than sociological, role as a defender of the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer. Martin himself became an important focus for a prolonged public debate. Flanagan, a sociologist who writes from a conservative Catholic point of view, has produced two innovative socio-theological books on liturgy (1991, 1996). In both publications he brings together an extensive knowledge of social theory and his concern for the life of the Church – an effective if rather different response to the isolation and insulation of the sociology of religion from the sociological mainstream. Archer, finally, is a distinguished social theorist increasingly concerned not only with the religious dimension of society but with theological issues *per se* (Archer, 2000).

4. Resources

The principal place of exchange for sociologists of religion in Britain has, since 1975, been the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association. This, currently, is one of the largest study groups of the BSA and meets once a year for a residential conference and once or twice more for a day conference or special event. The annual list of members together with their recent publications and research interests is an invaluable document. The group is growing, not least because of increasing numbers of graduate students, and frequently welcomes visitors from other parts of the world. Less positive, however, is the tendency of the Study Group to exist autonomously rather than as an integral part of the British Sociological Association itself (in many ways it embodies the isolation and insulation of the sociology of religion).

In terms of journals concentrated specifically in this area, progress has been slower. In the late sixties and early seventies, David Martin and Michael Hill published (between them) eight issues of *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (SCM Press) but the venture came to an end thereafter. In 1995 a relatively small journal *Religion Today* re-launched itself as the *Journal of Contemporary Religion;* this is rapidly becoming a major forum for debate in the sociology of religion in Britain. (The journal is edited by Peter Clarke at the Centre for New Religions, King's College, London.) The principal sociological journals in Britain – *Sociology, The British Journal of Sociology and Sociological Review* – all carry articles on religion from time to time. A relatively recent venture has been the establishment of an e-mail discussion group; SOCREL provides a "bulletin board" and forum for discussion and news for anyone interested in the sociology of religion.

Taught courses in the sociology of religion can be found in Departments of Sociology and Departments of Theology and Religious Studies in a wide range of institutions. They tend to exist where there is someone interested in and capable of teaching them, though very few scholars would have the luxury of doing only this (most sociologists of religion would teach widely across the principal discipline of their department). Specialist courses in the sociology of religion exist as options rather than core courses, but are gradually growing in popularity – a fact which reflects both the enduring significance of religion in the modern world and a partial re-orientation of the discipline of sociology itself. Student textbooks have been produced in clutches: several in the 1970s for example (Robertson, 1970; Scharf, 1970; Budd, 1973; Hill, 1973; Jackson, 1974 and Towler, 1974), then two more some twenty years later (Hamilton, 1994; Aldridge, 2000).

The institutional locations for teaching have already been mentioned. A final point concerns the relationships between sociologists of religion and the churches themselves. On the whole these are good. Whatever their personal persuasions, sociologists are often willing to work for or to advise the churches, usually for very little or no financial reward. Minor tensions arise at times (Martin, 1999) but there is no equivalent in Britain to the need in parts of Catholic Europe to emphasise continually the distinction between the academic study of religion and confessional approaches (Willaime, 1999). Like so much else in Britain this is relationship that has evolved *pragmatically*; it reflects a more general approach to the discipline. It is this quality above all that helps to situate the sociology of religion in Britain between the preoccupations of a pluralist and constitutionally secular America on the one hand and the more philosophical approaches of Catholic Europe on the other.

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