The disenchantment of postmodernity

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Introduction

Social scientists show a surprising lack of interest in the influence of climate on social and cultural life. Montesquieu's claim that climate influences social life usually falls on deaf ears these days. Can anyone seriously believe that the Economic and Social Research Council would fund a research project to test the hypothesis that "in cold countries the nervous glands are less expanded: they sink deeper into their sheaths, or they are sheltered from the action of external objects; consequently they have not such lively sensations"?[1] Yet, I know that my mood is affected by weather conditions. It is difficult, however, to know exactly what the effect is and whether the same conditions are invariably associated with the same effects. My responses to *The Enchantment of Sociology* are a good case in point. I read it in proof in bleak midwinter; I read the published volume under a blazing Umbrian sun. The responses were quite different, but, as I shall explain, it is not easy to see why my responses to the book's arguments varied with these different climatic conditions. In fact, the results were counter-intuitive in some respects, so perhaps this is why Montesquieu's climatic thesis is regarded as problematic.

I want to suggest that the differences between my Winter and Summer reading of Kieran Flanagan's challenging work are reflections of the problems associated with the notion of postmodernity. It is not always necessary or sensible to read books more than once, but my experience in this case has emphasised the value of a second reading after an interval of some months. A third reading might precipitate yet more, different responses, for according to Byron the English Winter ends in July and begins again in August. Indeed, if my assessment of the importance of *The Enchantment of Sociology*, including its problems, is sound, repeated re-visits will be rewarding.

I shall begin with an analysis of the work performed by the notion of postmodernity in Flanagan's overall thesis. This exposition will lead to my Winter and Summer responses to the thesis. I shall argue that the concept of postmodernity has a very limited capacity to make sense of present-day religious phenomena and may not, therefore, be as helpful to theologians seeking an understanding of cultural change as Flanagan claims it to be.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1997.tb02740.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Postmodernity

Although the term does not appear in the book's title or subtitle, 'postmodernity' is at the very epicentre of Flanagan's concerns. It is the device which drives the main arguments along. It does so by drawing a distinction between two states of social and cultural affairs: modernity and postmodernity (or sometimes 'late' or 'high' modernity). Regardless of the preferred terminology, there is a strong assertion that, at an indeterminate date in the second half of the twentieth century and in a ragged rather than an unequivocal fashion, human social relations and cultures underwent a significant change. That is, certain taken-for-granted practices and structures allegedly fell into disuse or were superseded by new ones. The most significant change was said to be the loss of faith in foundational truths, grand narratives, the idea of progress and instrumental rationality.[2] These foundations of modernity have supposedly been undermined by ambiguity, irony, perversity, pastiche and playfulness.

But even the most ardent advocates of the 'postmodern turn' are usually quick to add that modernity and postmodernity are only ideal-types (not empirical descriptions) and that the continuity between them is no less important than the break between them. Of course, one of the many ironies of postmodernity is that it is simultaneously an instance of the rational, not to say mechanical, periodisation of history *and* a disavowal of the very possibility of periodisation. Critics also accuse the theorists of postmodernity of using rational arguments to claim that reason is no longer credible or effective. Yet, these difficulties have not deterred large numbers of social scientists and others from looking for evidence of postmodernity's effects on everything from manufacturing processes to human sexuality. Postmodernity is widely identified as the new axial principle of human society and culture on a supposedly global scale.

Although Flanagan does not explicate "postmodernity" in quite such stark terms, the concept suffuses his thesis about the changing relationship between sociology, culture and theology. It appears in phrases such as "a collapse of belief in science"(p.19), "postmodernity, which is the fruit of a secularised modernity" (p.46), and "The university is a site for contemporary debate on postmodernity. All its disciplines are affected by the relativism and the nihilism this embodies" (p.92). In short, "postmodernity" functions as a given in this analysis: it is one of the load-bearing blocks in the main construction.

Not only does "postmodernity" function as a "given" in Flanagan's analysis of relations between sociology and theology but it also plays a *liberating* or revelatory role. His argument is that, for all their preoccupation with secularisation, pluralism and rationalisation, sociologists have hitherto conveniently suppressed nagging questions about their own complicity in reporting the death of belief in God and their own "spiritual malaise"(p.107). He claims that "There has been a theological agenda even to the most secular of sociological interests"

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(p.108). The importance of "postmodernity" is that it has supposedly "resurrected a concern with these unpaid theological debts that lurk on the fringes of the discipline" (p.115) and that it has enabled sociologists not only to take religion and ethics more seriously but also to express their spiritual angst and "unacknowledged insecurity". So, if sociology has taken "a pious turn" and an interest in the quality of culture, it is thanks to postmodernity, for "postmodernity is about enchantment". Since issues of faith are no longer marginalised in the postmodern world, so the argument goes, "a whole new ball game" has begun in which positive relations are cemented between sociology, theology and culture. I shall return to assess this claim later.

The sociologists who are liberated by postmodernity from their embarrassment about discussing religious beliefs and religious faith themselves assume a liberating role vis-à-vis theologians, according to *The Enchantment of Sociology*. How? The answer is by apprising theologians of the postmodern condition and more particularly by communicating to them the fruits of sociological research into the cultural condition of postmodernity, including the ascendancy of false gods over authentic charisma and grace.[3] Thus, theologians who are accused of having capitulated to the inevitability of secularisation and the values of the marketplace are told that they "cannot just ignore these movements in postmodernity and culture" (p.165).

On the contrary, Flanagan urges theologians to learn from sociologists how to "engage with" the culture of postmodernity and to resist its corrosive effects on religious faith. This is described as sociology's "theological calling" i.e. the mission to explain how theologians can protect their cultural capital (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term), preserve its distinctiveness and reproduce it via sacramental rites in such a way that it cannot be misappropriated, trivialised or traduced by commercial interests or mere *flâneurs*. This is a call to arms. Resistance, not adaptation, to secular culture is the battle cry. Re-enchantment of culture is the goal.

Two seasons: two readings

(a) Winter...

Exposed to "furious Winter's rages", I responded warmly to many aspects of *The Enchantment of Sociology*. It was comforting to be reminded of the many ways in which sociologists have helped to reveal the inner logic of cultural formations and cultural change. Flanagan's erudite expositions of widely differing theoretical positions and empirical generalisations brought a sense of satisfaction bordering on smugness at times. His mischievous swipes at theologians, liberals, Anglicans, female altar servers, Religious Studies Departments and "multi-faith" Religious Education syllabuses, among others, elicited scandalised chuckles. Flanagan knows how to reach the parts that other iconoclasts cannot reach. Even his repeated attempts to canonise the unlikely J.K. Huysmans or to squeeze some sociological insights out of Hans Urs von

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1997.tb02740.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Balthasar's voluminous theological writings kept my spirits high.

Above all, I was carried along by the pace of his narrative. Authorities came thick and fast, but the underlying thesis about the failure of theologians to engage with the cultural conditions of postmodernity and about the heroic willingness of a veritable US Cavalry charge of sociologists to rescue theologians from their thraldom to secular culture remained clear and credible. Even the idea that theologians would eagerly incorporate sociological assumptions into their view of the world seemed plausible at the first reading. Sociology appeared to be so heroic, if not messianic, for honouring its vocation to rescue theology.

(b) Summer...

The unforgiving brightness of an Italian sun threw a different light on *The Enchantment of Sociology*. I thought I could see signs of wishful thinking in place of enchantment. But, above all, the central notion of postmodernity dissolved under my critical gaze, like the morning mist being burned off by the sun in my Umbrian valley. All that had once seemed solid melted into air. Why?

In the first place, "postmodernity" came to seem a far more contestable concept than I had expected. It may be true, for example, that styles of architecture and art have taken a turn towards pastiche, the vernacular and the local. Postmodernity in this sense is unquestionably fashionable in many spheres of culture, but I am less sure whether any significant changes have occurred concomitantly in the economics of the built environment, the distribution of power and resources in art markets or the politics of publishing. Cultural ideas and fashions are constantly changing. but the task of social scientists is to peer beneath the surface of such phenomena for an understanding of the social processes and settings in which art, architecture and literature are produced. Postmodern fiction is on the shelves, but I have not seen any evidence of publishing houses becoming playful or ironic in their business affairs. On the contrary, the appearance of magic, mystery and enchantment in culture is rationally produced and marketed, sometimes in conditions of cut-throat competition.

So, while I believe that theologians could benefit from learning about the political and economic forces shaping an increasingly globalised world, I doubt whether the best teachers are those who deploy the notion of postmodernity. The machinations of the International Monetary Fund, the geopolitical struggles for strategic resources, the restructuring of enterprise in the former Soviet sphere of influence, the dynamics of the capitalist world system, the growing gulf between the richest and poorest nations—they are all outworkings of characteristically modern, rational, long-term development. Postmodernist cultural forms may project an image of playful re-enchantment or bitter-sweet despair, but the underlying reality is still the struggle for power and wealth amidst shocking inequalities. The study of

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cultural forms is, of course, important in itself; but in my opinion sociologists should be more concerned with the interplay between cultural forms and social forces. David Harvey's work on postmodernity[4] is distinctive for tending in this direction.

Secondly, the evidence of a heightened self-reflexivity among sociologists of religion and a deeper concern for questions of faith and spirituality in their own work may be persuasive but it is only one small part of the picture. By contrast, the current preoccupation of many sociologists of religion (at least in North America) is with Rational Choice Theory. This is based on the belief that individual human conduct and the dynamics of human collectivities can be explained most economically in terms of the utilitarian or rationalistic principle that human beings constantly seek to optimise their benefits and to minimise their costs. Most advocates of Rational Choice Theory try to account for the persistence and vitality of religion in terms of its capacity to provide other-worldly compensators for felt deprivations. In short, this approach is diametrically opposed to the idea that the condition of postmodernity has opened the well-springs of mystery and enchantment.

Rational Choice Theory holds that the underlying dynamics of religion are unchanged and that the future of religion will also be bright because there will always be new competitors to challenge the old religious compensators in the marketplace of religion. The supply-side economics of religious organisations is therefore considered crucial to the never-ending sequence of secularisation, re-enchantment, re-secularisation, and so on. This view is fast assuming paradigmatic status in the sociology of religion in the English-speaking world. It is a quintessentially modern, rationalist view, which is not without its critics,[5] but which is most unlikely to be attractive to theologians outside the categories of the "Prosperity Gospel" or the "name-it-and-claim-it" theology.

Thirdly, my second thoughts about the relevance of "postmodernity" to a sociological understanding of religious change were reinforced by the evidence that sociologists have assembled in recent years about the alleged vitality of religion. Far from supporting the idea that postmodernity will revive commitment to the value of traditional liturgies, those who have challenged the ascendancy of secularisation theories have tended to unearth new strains of spirituality in, for example, ecology, feminism, and human rights campaigns. They have also documented the vitality of widely differing strains of evangelicalism, fundamentalism, sectarian and cultic movements, ethno-religious nationalisms and so on. I doubt whether sociological findings about these phenomena will satisfy many theologians thirsting for insights into the sublime, the transcendental or the enchanted.

Fourthly, while there is some truth in the claim that postmodernity is associated with, *inter alia*, the growth of social scientists' interest in religion, it would be wrong to infer that their interest is necessarily aligned with hopes for a revitalisation of theology. For the fact of the

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matter is that even those sociologists who analyse socio-cultural change in terms of postmodernity, late modernity or high modernity tend to regard religion as something rooted in human weakness rather than transcendental mysteries. Moreover, their attempts to make sense of religion usually revolve around purely conventional assumptions about religion's alleged capacity to compensate for insecurity. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, characterising postmodernity in terms of the decline of certainty, objectivity and authority, attributes "the revival of religious and quasi-religious movements" to the "increased attractiveness of the agencies claiming expertise in moral values":[6]

> The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfil them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice.[7]

This amounts to the questionable claim that authority and moral principles prove especially attractive at a time—postmodernity—when foundational truths and certainties are supposed to have gone out of fashion.

Similarly, Anthony Giddens explains the creation of new forms of religion in conditions of "high modernity" by reference to "a return of the repressed".

> New forms of religion and spirituality represent in a most basic sense a return of the repressed, since they directly address issues of the moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve.[8]

Again, religion is virtually reduced to a matter of individuals' responses to ethical or existential problems. There is more than a hint of old-fashioned functionalist reasoning in Giddens' argument.

Many other advocates of "postmodernity" also approach religion as a phenomenon in need of special explanation. It is as if religion's survival or success in conditions of postmodernity has to be explained away in terms of human failings and the need for compensation and consolation. The clear but unstated assumption is that religion *should have* faded away but has only enjoyed a reprieve for reasons to do with the persistence of individuals' felt deprivations, failings or insecurity. Religion therefore represents an exception to the rule of postmodern developments in culture, according to some eminent theorists of the postmodern condition.

How could any of this postmodern theorising about religion possibly be helpful or inspiring to theologians? This is a question to which *The Enchantment of Sociology* supplies an answer—but it is opaque. The

reader learns that sociological studies of culture in conditions of postmodernity should somehow inform and revitalise theology, but the nature of this process remains obscure. I wonder how theological thinking about abortion, genetic engineering or the new reproductive technologies, for example, could benefit from studies of postmodernity or postmodernism without being lured into relativism or cynicism or nihilism. Again, how could studies of postmodernity, including those which emphasise the re-enchantment of everyday life, enable theologians "to provide the cultural means of generating religious commitment" (p.183)? Of course, Flanagan is on firm ground when he chides liberal theologians for being "paralysed by a benign attitude to the world that has permitted initiative to pass to the cultural marketplace" (p.182). But he does not specify precisely how a sociologically-informed awareness of the postmodern condition is supposed to stiffen theologians' resolve to deal with the alleged breakdown between faith and culture. Admittedly, a better knowledge of one's enemies is always an advantage. But, since postmodernity is supposed to undermine or corrode firm truths and traditions, we need to know how this knowledge could restore faith in eternal truths, traditional symbolism, liturgies, "icons and images that firmly belong to the heavenly and the holy" (p.191).

The key to Flanagan's thesis is his appeal to revelation and grace. Only they transcend present-day chaos. This is why he places so much weight on the need to cultivate an appropriate disposition towards the holy, to awaken a sense of grace and to nurture spiritual sight—especially among young people such as altar servers and choristers—so that Christianity's symbolic capital can be preserved and expanded. Insights from Pierre Bourdieu's studies of cultural power can indeed make good sociological sense of the process whereby symbols and rites can be "managed" to protect tradition. All of this is fine, but it bears little relation to postmodernity as far as I can see.

The Enchantment of Sociology is based on the assumption that postmodernity represents social and cultural conditions which favour not only a revival of sociological interest in religion and the re-enchantment of culture but also a heightened sensibility to grace and revelation. Flanagan's hope, and his book is certainly optimistic, is that theologians will be informed by sociological accounts of postmodernity and inspired by grace to resist prevailing cultural fashions and to restore faith in traditional rites, discipline and symbolism as vehicles of revealed truth.

I wonder, however, whether his reliance on the concept of postmodernity is really necessary or advisable. On the one hand, the proponents of postmodernity tend to relegate religion to the status of either a psychological compensation or a playful commodity. This is hardly likely to cast religion in a serious light. On the other hand, most versions of postmodernity claim that belief in timeless verities and narrative traditions, i.e. precisely the kind of properties that Flanagan seeks to restore to theology, has been eroded or destroyed. It seems to me that the notion of postmodernity is not helpful to his cause. In any case,

the appeal to the power of grace and revelation does not, by definition, require support from theories of postmodernity. After all, Pascal, whose ideas clearly had an influence on this book, distinguished carefully between the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse. Can they be profitably combined? Can sociological facts inspire religious faith?

I have raised questions, then, about two aspects of the relation between religion and the concept of postmodernity. On the one hand I suspect that Flanagan's depiction of trends in the sociology of religion under conditions of postmodernity is selective. I am not convinced that the alleged turn towards reflexivity and an interest in the re-enchantment of the world are attributable to more than a very small number of sociologists of religion. On the other hand his strategy of placing so much reliance on the notion of postmodernity strikes me as problematic for various reasons. Chief among them is the danger of separating the current chaos of cultural forms and styles from the underlying rationality of the capitalist world system. Culture may be "the ideological battleground of the modern world-system,"[9] but the *casus belli* lies in political economy of a recognisably modern kind: not in postmodernity.

None of my misgivings about the notion of postmodernity in relation to religion should be allowed to detract, however, from the mastery with which Flanagan marshals a vast range of insights into sociology, religion, culture and theology. I learned a lot of things from his book in Winter; and I learned a lot of different things from it in Summer. Perhaps it is a book for all seasons.

1 C.L. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748). New York, 1949.
2 These disparate elements are sometimes unhelpfully lumped together as "the Enlightenment project".
3 Flanagan is careful to distinguish the cultural condition of postmodernity from "postmodernism", which he characterises as forms of culture such as ambiguity, pastiche, "irony, indeterminacy, anti-narrative, fracture, surface readings and images in bizarre combinations" (p.160).
4 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1989.
5 J.A. Beckford, "The Sociology of Religion" forthcoming in R.G. Burgess (ed.) *Sociology: the State of the Art*. London: Longman; S. Bruce, "Religion and rational choice: a critique of economic explanations of religious behaviour" *Sociology of Religion* 54 (2) 1993: 193–205; R. Robertson, "The economization of religion? Reflections on the promise and limitations of the economic approach" *Social Compass* 39(1) 1992: 147–57; L. Voyé, "Religion et économie: apports et limites de l'analyse du religieux à partir de cadres théoriques empruntés à l'économie" *Social Compass* 39(1) 1992: 159–69.
6 Z. Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge, 1992, pp.202–3.
7 *Ibid.*, p.xxii.
8 A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p.207.
9 I. Wallerstein, "Culture as the ideological battleground of the modern world-system" *Theory, Culture and Society*, 7 (2–3) 1990: 31–56.

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