

# Surprised by Grace: the sociologist's dilemma

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I approached *The Enchantment of Sociology* primarily as a sociologist of religion who teaches within both the Theology and Social and Political Science Faculties of an ancient University and whose research interests include the impact of the social sciences upon religious functionaries. I am also an intermittently active Anglican. From all three perspectives I was wholly engaged—if not always wholly *enchanted*—by Flanagan's quirky originality, capacity for creative polemic, and heady mixture of sociological radicalism and theological conservatism. The prose is often dense, convoluted and subtly nuanced but a close and careful reading brings with it those two rarities, sustained intellectual excitement and an urge to continue the argument beyond the academy and into pulpit and presbytery.

At one point Flanagan cites Cooley's observation that "a true sociology is systematic autobiography" (p.50) and in this case three components of personal biography form an integral subtext to his main arguments. One is his Irish identity. This, when not being acted out in Joycean word-play (eg. "exasperating an individualism" [p.9]), Wildean aphorism ("Satanism... a folk panic invented by Evangelical fundamentalists" [p.45]) or Shavian table talk ("theologians can appeal to the Holy Ghost when all the sociologist can evoke is the ghost of Weber" [p.86]), is nucleated around both a sense of being at one remove from English society and culture, and pride in what he calls "the capricious genius of the Gaelic intellect lying beyond the pale" (p.153).

The second, more pervasive, strand is his Catholic persona. Here, beneath the triumphalism ("the fire insurance that matters" [p.5]) and where "being a Catholic involves a career of grace and self-understanding that shapes what is to be understood" (p.31), there lurks a justifiable measure of fellow feeling for those Catholics who "are in English culture but do not belong to it" (p.6) for whom "the ecclesial past is increasingly a foreign country" (p.79). Such domestic angst is reinforced by his negative view of both Vatican II's influence within and beyond the Church, and a contemporary climate where "a young Catholic seeking cultural roots for belief might feel that the landscape has never been more inimical" (p.101). One response of Flanagan's is to mount a none-too-genteel critique of Anglicanism as "an instrument of secularisation, a movement away from the enchantment this study seeks to affirm" (p.12). For him "English Anglicanism presents a property of mystery, less signifying the Divine than a range of anomalies and contradictions that would sink any other organization, sacred or profane" (p.12). It is, of course, such

anomalies and contradictions that help to secure the corporate global identity of Anglicanism today, while rendering it sufficiently tensile to guarantee institutional survival. Another response is—literally—to reaffirm Catholicism both as “a religion of tradition, habit and routine” (p.6) which to any reasonably informed insider it palpably no longer is, and to set up an over-simplified antithesis between Protestantism’s properties of “individualism, of liberty of conscience, of reason and interpretation” and “the communal and ritual comforts of a Catholicism more capable of providing those social bonds which accord with sociological notions of societal health” (p.182). Unsurprisingly therefore, Catholicism is also, for Flanagan, the leading supplier of “the means of enchantment which fits with the domestic cultural expectations of sociology itself” (p.182).

This stance, not untypical of many Catholic observers of English culture, especially if they have Flanagan’s own “slightly estranged Irish eyes” (p.11), leads to the third quasi-autobiographical element in his work. It is how his image of the sociologist as outsider (“the sociologist is a necessary outsider on life, the ever present alien, the stranger” [p.18]) is partly grounded in his sense of being both a Catholic stranger in the land, and a stranger to the progressive liberal wing within the Catholic Church itself. Here, I suspect, lies the core of what Flanagan calls “the self of the sociologist, his cultural context of enquiry and his relationship to that which he uncovers in his research” (p.19).

The result is a powerful, if essentially lone voice within sociology and theology, addressing bravely—and at times brilliantly—both constituencies. His central area is “a redirection of sociological attention... from the narrow concerns of the sociology of religion towards the wider field of theology” (p.xiii). It is difficult to disagree with this in principle. Most academic sociologists remain, to paraphrase Weber, theologically unmusical, and theology itself is rarely read by them, let alone taken into intellectual account, except within the over-spacious confines of the so-called secularization debate. Their students, in turn, tend to see theology as an arcane and archaic subdiscipline, lacking the rigour of “pure” philosophy, the intellectual chic of contemporary social theory or the breadth and stimulus of religious studies.

Similarly, although the sociology of religion itself—to judge from a recent flier for the forthcoming British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Group conference, of which Flanagan is co-convenor—may be enjoying a modest mini-boom in membership, few of thirty-two papers offered to date (save Flanagan’s and Mellor’s) engage directly with what Flanagan regards as a “central strand” of his study, “a sociological understanding of the link between theology and culture” (p.8). The sociology of religion still remains over-committed to low level ethnographies of marginal religious groupings, chiefly New Religious Movements. It is as if an army of youthful (and now not so youthful) lepidopterists were still busy etherising, impaling and classifying some relatively rare butterflies while paying little or no attention to global warming or the rain forests. Clearly some return to the ideological

mainstream of the sociology of religion is needed, although whether by developing a more reflexive sociological stance or by belatedly recognizing sociology's *theological* roots or by realizing—à la Hervieu-Léger—that “secularisation is less about the marginalization of religion than about a mode of thought that has come to ambiguous fruition in the context of post-modernity” (p.146) remains problematic.

Flanagan himself would like to push sociologists further in three specific directions. One is for them to shed what he perceives as “a built-in bias in the discipline *against* religious belief” (p.27). But surely sociology has now shed, even in the former Eastern bloc, its post-Comtean legacy? Instead there are currently a set of powerful, if often tacit, assumptions that religion is a constant, critical factor in human ideology and existence and that it frequently transcends its mere expression. Indeed much of my own religious “formation” (usefully defined by Flanagan as “an opening to spiritual values within academic cultures” [p.93]) was grounded, thirty years ago, in Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and Lenski's *The Religious Factor*.<sup>1</sup> Both still do much to service my attempts to “form” sociology and theology students today. Even the high priest of late modernity, Anthony Giddens, is prepared to argue that “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” (quoted p.34). Both examples suggest that today's sociologists are more positive than positivist about religion, and derive more ontological security from this than disenchantment, in either its Weberian, “modern”, or “postmodern” guise, now carries with it.

Hence the second sea-change within the sociology of religion might be, Flanagan argues, to set “Enchantment... against secularisation in that it admits the possibility of belief, of what lies beyond reason and transcends its base” (p.108). One difficulty here, of course, is a semantic one, in that most sociology of religion students (and some dimmer Faculty members) will see Flanagan's “Enchantment” less as the conscious inversion of Weber's *entzauberung* than as a damp, Gaelic rather than Teutonic, device for sociologists of religion to re-enter “faerie lands forlorn” by substituting “poesie” for reflexivity.

But it is Flanagan's third injunction to his fellow sociologists—“to redirect questions against the conventional tide, to ask why cultural processes reproduce disbelief rather than belief?”—which is the most problematic. “Clearly”, he continues, “this is an issue of grace, but it is also a matter of sociological analysis” (p.27). Quite so, and surely an equally strong case could be made (and one which David Martin has been making brilliantly in the last decade) for the *reverse* process taking place, notably through the re-emergence of Fundamentalism<sup>2</sup>—Islamic and Christian. Indeed, the latter, in its Catholic Charismatic as well as its Protestant manifestations, is treated rather too perfunctorily in this account.

All this is very helpful for the researcher and teacher, especially when buttressed by the salutary reminder that “with the collapse of the belief in

science, the sociologist has had to rejoin the humanities, with all the disbeliefs and doubts that conveys" (p.19). It may be useful, too, to point out to some of one's more unreconstructed theological colleagues that "there is a property of prophecy, of revelation, in the sociological vocation that seems to endow it with theological properties" (p.52). But when we are told that '*it is the internal transformation of sociology into a form of theology which governs this study*' (p.56—my italics) then a certain amount of reality-testing is forced into play. For one thing, this process is hard to identify. It is one thing to recognize that "issues of risk, anxiety and despiritualization now form part of sociological concerns in an agenda increasingly concerned with the quality of the meaning of life... a culture that is becoming increasingly doom-laden, ritualistic and emptying" (p.4). It is quite another to suggest that "there is a witness of some theological sort" (p.207) in such utterances. Indeed one could argue that one reason why sociologists have recently re-focussed heavily upon the post-modernist agenda is precisely because they now perceive it as a theology-free zone, unencumbered by the metaphysical baggage that it has carried for some years. Even if the larger Enlightenment project has itself failed, sociologists increasingly rejoice—or think they rejoice—in the cognitive freedoms conferred by a post-Christian culture. Put differently, the prophetic mantle and its accompanying language (both essentially predictive and transformative) have now passed to the social scientists (especially economists and futurologists rather than sociologists *per se*) from the mainline theologians. Some theological trace elements are still discernible, but they do not constitute a covert, let alone overt theological coda. Similarly, it is difficult to argue that "sociology is increasingly falling back on metaphors that have a theological origin or root in its dealings with culture" (p.4 my italics) without a fairly rigorous content analysis of the relevant journals and publications. This would be a very valuable project, somewhat akin to Paul Halmos's pioneering study of the role of religious metaphors in the official language of social work.<sup>3</sup> At present one suspects that the reinvasion of politics, economics and the caring professions by religious metaphors is as much by default (i.e. the current paucity of relevant non-religious metaphors), and hence a sign of the weakness, rather than the power and pervasiveness, of religious language. In any case, to judge from recent publishers' lists, what is deemed sociologically significant is as much a function of market forces as cultural reflexivity. Hence we currently find large swathes of what might be termed 'para-prophetic' sociology up there with cultural studies, gender and post-modernity (rather than down there with deviance, ethnicity and social stratification) not because it is of primary cultural significance but simply because it is marketable.

If Flanagan's view of sociology's theological potential seems somewhat idealistic, then his sense of theology's sociological potential seems equally so. One difficulty—at least to a sociologist who interacts daily with theologians—is that Flanagan's own theological *habitus* is an exceptionally confined one. Although he consistently defines theology as "faith seeking understanding" (p.64) in practice his model of it is a

narrowly ecclesial one. For him “theology is a body of knowledge operating under ecclesial authority and revelation... theology affirms a mystery, within a deposit of tradition and assent” (p.64), and also “the glue holding the Church (together)” (p.9). After Vatican II, such theology became “detached from its immediate ecclesial tradition” (p.9).

To an Anglican, all this seems a very narrow, institutionally prescribed and over-defensive view of theology and one which is more likely to impair rather than promote one of Flanagan’s primary goals—“how to re-think theology in the context of culture, but in a markedly different way to what went before” (p.79). A related problem is that if, as Flanagan tells us, “the credally orthodox are now a beleaguered minority as links with tradition are becoming more tenuous” (p.10) this leaves him, and his Church, with relatively little room for theological manoeuvre.

Somewhat predictably, “liberal theology” (no doubt both Protestant and Catholic) is “the villain of this study” (p.xi) while the whole strategy conceived at Vatican II, to open to the world, was “fatally misconceived”. Yet, simply as a matter of historical fact, it is surely liberal theology rather than Catholic or Evangelical orthodoxies that has sought, promoted and forged the strongest elective affinity with sociology, thus accelerating the very process to which Flanagan is so passionately committed i.e. “the more theology penetrates into culture, the more it becomes immersed in sociological forms of knowing” (p.71). In this sense to state categorically, as Flanagan does, that “liberal theologians do not think like sociologists. Conservatives and traditionalists do, and they can relate to sociology” (p.62), seems precisely the reverse of what is currently the case.

Academic theology, too, seems to have become, in Flanagan’s judgement, “disembodied from spiritual practice and ecclesial accountability”, disabled by “its soul-selling to the bureaucratized academy” (p.94), and much of it is now “engaged in a symbolic violence against theology itself” (p.90). How seriously are we to take such strictures? When Flanagan solemnly warns us that “as presently constituted no serious believing Catholic ought to consider reading for a degree in theology and religious studies in a British University” (p.85) it is difficult to judge whether this is serious advice, a rhetorical flourish, or an example (and not the only one in this book) of Flanagan resorting to “symbolic violence” himself!

A second criticism might be that, while it is tempting to endorse Flanagan’s judgement on “the callowness of theological capitulation to passing ideological fashion” (p.93), it is precisely such superficially modish areas as ecology, environmental ethics, gender *et al.* that have seen theological analysis and comment not only at its most creative, but also at its most sociologically reflexive.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, theology has not escaped modernity, but *vice versa*. Indeed it is perverse as well as inaccurate to describe “ecological issues, feminism, civil rights ‘peace’ networks” and their attendant theologies, as “movements of resistance rather than analysis” (p.5), when there is a wealth of cultural-historical evidence to suggest that they have long been self-consciously both. And, when Flanagan remarks that “the problem with theologians is that they

think in terms of modernity whereas most people act in a post-modern fashion” (p.164), it is he rather than they who might be justly accused of cultural lag. For there is, as he must know, an impressive cohort of younger theologians, (Graham Ward and Mark Taylor spring immediately to mind) who are explicitly addressing post-modernity in terms of the re-engagement of theology and culture.

A third difficulty lies less in Flanagan’s negative contempt for one of theology’s cognate disciplines, religious studies, which he seriously regards as ‘an ideology that now dominates theology’ (p.85), than in his own rather heavy-handed attempt at sociological boundary maintenance. Whereas, he argues “theology might claim to transcend sociology, religious studies is but a creature of it. It deals with issues of ethnicity, gender, economics and communal factors that are *proper to sociological concerns*” (p.92 my italics). Proper, yes, but hardly offering sociology sole entitlement to owner-occupation.

Similarly, while he rightly castigates the dimmer end of the New Age movements as more spiritually disabling than enabling, his over-triumphalist approach to the other major religious traditions—especially when studied comparatively—is misplaced. It is surely self-evident that for many, young people especially, cultural eclecticism and “pick and mix” religiosity are more than merely the product of a credal free market or post modern angst. It could be argued, as Bede Griffiths has done, that Divine Grace is dispensed beyond as well as within Christendom and that some religious studies students may become convinced that the possibilities of Grace are widened and heightened by exposure, however textually self-conscious or over-experiential, to other major religious traditions, rather than by wilfully closing themselves off to any other roads to re-enchantment than Tridentine orthodoxy. To do so is also to go against that open-ended commitment to intellectual curiosity and objectivity which is—or ought to be—at the heart of liberal higher education.

More prosaically, it is difficult to see how, on this evidence, any process of mutual inculturation between Flanagan’s theology and his sociology can realistically take place. Yet, paradoxically, the interdisciplinary agenda set by Flanagan at the macro level is an imaginative and enticing one. In a key passage he gives “sociology, when its reflexivity is turned to theological matters, a task of increasing awareness of God. If sociology is to succeed in its theological calling it can enhance understanding and appreciation of what is already known within culture. The sacred properties it discerns in the social can be returned to the original rites to work out a deeper appreciation of their sacramental basis. Theologians can draw on sociological forms of reflexivity to understand the solemnizing of rites, the seeking of their endowment with holiness and their place in a culture of post modernity whose messages suggest otherwise. Sociology provides theology with some brilliant instruments for resisting modernity. It suggests a respect for distance, and resource, for the sacredness of ritual, but above all the need for a habitus, a cultivation of discernment” (p.197).

Yet there are difficulties here, too. The most self-evident is possibly the most formidable, even insuperable. It is precisely how to re-socialize sociologists and theologians, and re-shape their teaching and research, according to Flanagan's own agenda. Indeed one wonders if Flanagan—himself lodged in academe—is sufficiently alive to the institutional framework (as opposed to the cultural context) within which sociology and theology are currently sited. Within the academy, although both disciplines carry the stigmata of marginal utility in relation to increasing the GNP, and share similar internal problems of nil growth, quality control by the State, and obsessive boundary maintenance, both are still imprisoned by powerful demonologies about the other. Many theologians, although prepared to regard sociological concepts and techniques as useful adjuncts to scholarship (e.g. in weaning Church history away from conventional “ecclesiastical” history or re-shaping theological debate), still regard sociology—intellectually speaking—as part of the service rather than the manufacturing sector, and—symbolically speaking—as an “unholy other” reeking of reductionism, empiricism and a-historicity. Many sociologists in their turn, as indicated above, still tend to regard theology as a kind of post-Enlightenment heresy or historical residue, although a minority of their students may try to use theology (if they read it at all) along with the I Ching, soft drugs and other stimulants, as something to help them glimpse the transcendent within the cracks and crevices of post-modernity. At the ecclesial level it is difficult to see how the mainline Churches, so long acclimatized to using the social sciences as a tool of mission, and perceiving social scientists as either technicians or soothsayers, can now—even with Flanagan's guidance—re-shape their own image and expectation of sociology. The irony—or tragedy—is that just when, for the first time since the Sixties, sociology has the potential to enrich theological discourse, theologians and Church bureaucrats still cling firmly to an image of sociology as crudely empirical and normatively agnostic. From every angle it seems that, even almost a quarter of a century after the Dominican initiative that led to the Blackfriars Oxford colloquium and the ground-breaking publication of *Sociology and Theology—Alliance and Conflict*<sup>6</sup>, the cognitive dissonance between the theoretical affinity that Flanagan is seeking to induce between sociology and theology, “with culture as the chosen field for interaction” (p.xi), and its practical realization, remains as visible as ever.

In the last analysis it is one thing to detect “a nascent theological position abroad in contemporary sociology in its dealings with cultures” (p.x), it is quite another to translate this into operational and institutional reality. Although most sociologists would not reject Flanagan's notion of sociology's “theological calling” (p.197) out of hand (Weber has seen to that), few would endorse his suggestion that “the reflexive nature of [the] sociological bears a confessional quality that causes it to seek an engaged contemplative form of theology” (p.55) except, in a few, a-typical cases, as part of a personal rather than professional agenda. In addition they are likely to find his theoretical framework, and its methodological implications, too daunting and idiosyncratic for day to day use.

For example, while they may now agree with Bourdieu's remark that "the sociology of culture is the sociology of religion of our time"<sup>7</sup> and welcome Flanagan's own view (drawn heavily from Bourdieu) that "any fruitful understanding of culture has to attend to the site, the field, the context of cultural reproduction" (p.156), they will find that his sketch map of the latter contains little except the blurred contours of post-modernity, plus two decidedly *un*-sociological reminders, that "a sacramental theology *shapes* secular forms of understanding of culture" (p.207 my italics), and that "cultural circumstances supply a ground for faith... a frame within which to refract the glory of God".

Both statements surely carry with them precisely the kind of "reification of objective spiritual forms" (p.224) that Simmel (rightly admired by Flanagan) saw as exemplifying modern culture's capacity to self-destruct. In any case, more empirically oriented sociologists might wish to adopt two alternative perspectives. Firstly, that "culture" is now communicated through a much wider base than sociology *per se*. This would include, for example, "pop" psychology, media moralizing, economic theorising and quasi-prophetic texts like Fukuyama or Toffler. Hence multiple, conflicting and confusing signals—the very essence of post-modernity—are now transmitted on a global basis. Indeed it is tempting to suggest that in some ways contemporary culture reproduces many of the presumed characteristics of an ideal-typical medieval world, especially in its cultural homogeneity *and* heterogeneity. Secondly, that such cultural circumstances now supply equally strong grounds for doubt, deflecting rather than refracting "the glory of God" and lending no more than a fashionable post-modern spin to the traditional debate about secularisation. In this sense, maybe Flanagan takes post-modernity too seriously, and secularization's handmaiden, modernity, not seriously enough.

Thirdly, some sociologists may have difficulty in discerning precisely how the appropriate mechanisms for re-enchantment actually operate. They may, unlike Flanagan, fail to find "cultural salvation in the language of Grace" (p.126), not only because 'Grace' is not part of the *lingua franca* of the human sciences, but also because "religious" language may seem at several removes from their own more experiential, empirical, construction of "religious" reality. All too often aural and visual modes of re-enchantment, even when under ecclesial auspices, remain elusive, inaccessible or seemingly inauthentic. Put differently, there may be a genuine, if not unbridgeable, gap between the language of sociology and that of theology in their capacity to deliver authentically transcendental experiences. It may be precisely here that the much maligned cultural studies could provide both sociologists and theologians with easier access, not merely to the more complex and crowded sites within contemporary culture, but also with useful clues as to the form and content of contemporary religious consciousness itself.

Meanwhile both should read this powerful, provocative and impassioned book, written by a sociologist whose own professional reflexivity is fruitfully grounded in Christian orthodoxy rather than



passing academic fashion. That reflexivity has yet to find its final sociological and theological *habitus*, and Flanagan's reference to "this unexpected pilgrim's progress abroad in this culture of post-modernity" p.188) is surely a reflexion on himself as much as on current sociology. His journey continues. To judge from this book, and to adapt and apply Huysman's maudlin self-portrait to Flanagan himself, "I am still too much of a sociologist to become a monk, yet I am already too much of a monk to remain among sociologists".

- 1 Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons London 1930 and Gerhard Lenski: *The Religious Factor*. New York 1961.
- 2 See especial Gilles Kepel: *The Revenge of God*. Oxford 1994 and Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby: *Fundamentalisms Observed* Chicago 1991.
- 3 Paul Halmos: *The Faith of the Counsellors*. London 1965.
- 4 See David Ford (ed): *The Modern Theologians* (2nd Edition) Oxford 1996.
- 5 Graham Ward: *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* London 1996, and Mark C. Taylor: *Deconstructing Theology*. Atlanta 1982.  
Useful collections of essays are Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick: *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* London 1992 and Frederick R. Burnham (ed). *Postmodern Theology: Christian Fault in a Pluralist World* San Francisco 1989.
- 6 David Martin, John Orme Mills and W.S.F. Pickering: *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict* . Brighton 1980.
- 7 Cited in Flanagan op.cit p.199.

## Remembrance of Things Past Sociological Ken

### Kieran Flanagan

In May 1996, addressing the central problems of faith, Ratzinger commented on the great disillusionment and non-fulfillment of hope that came after 1989. Covering issues such as pluralism and New Age religions, where god replaced God, Ratzinger observed that "if we consider the present cultural situation....frankly it must seem a miracle that there is still Christian faith despite everything". For him, relativism has now become the central problem of the faith. But the issues he raises also belong to sociology. It also has to deal with relativism, nihilism and the escape into the New Age, the unexpected spiritual impulses that mark the condition known as postmodernity. Uncertainty has arisen over religious affiliations that oscillate between pluralism and fundamentalism, both ambiguous responses to modernity. The relationships between theology and culture have been affected in an inescapable manner.

*The Enchantment of Sociology* is an effort to provide something oddly unwritten: a sociological reading of the link between theology and culture.