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# Sociology, theology, Scotland

A Catholic sociologist who has spent the last fifteen years conducting ethnographic research in Fife summarises how particular class, social and national conditions can be integrated with Christianity, as well as model an original synthesis fit for the contemporary Scottish context.

While the 2014 Independence Referendum has come and gone, the May 2015 general election already looms large and the constitutional debate is set to remain dominant in Scotland's politics and to command the attention of social researchers. My book *A Sociological Phenomenology of Christian Redemption* (2014) emerges from my attempt to trace the social bases for the ongoing rise of nationalism among the working-class in particular. However, what probably makes my work distinctive is that it also attempts to model a fully-contextualised account of *integral liberation* i.e. a holistic account of working class experience and agency which includes elements such as social class, the geo-political and national, the cognitional, the psychological and, finally, the supernatural.

The book attempts to articulate a *sociology of the living God* and is thereby something of a rarity. As a student in Ireland in the 1980s 'the seeking of God through sociological instruments' (Flanagan 1996, p. 60) was an idea entirely unknown to me and no sociologist that I knew of had attempted an alignment between sociology, reflexivity and transcendence. However, as someone born in 1965 into a post-Conciliar context, central to my 'being Christian' has been the attempt to appropriate the great theme of 'opening to the world' that we associate with the Council. As an empirical sociologist a departure point for my work has been the situation where both laity and theologians accept that 'socialised

nature' and 'grace' must be brought into alignment, but suffer from not having a fully-contextualised model of how to do so *and certainly not upon the basis of a fully-contextualised account of Scottish human being.*

This long-standing failure to articulate a fully-contextualised phenomenology of Christian redemption is a blood-relative of other failures that make up the current situation where 'theologians barely know how to think about the proportionate nature of the human *ens creatum* any longer' (Long 2010, p. 2). To make progress then requires giving a credible account of human being's purely natural beatitude or happiness, but also an account of how human being brings into view and prepares for its dis-proportionate or super-natural beatitude by demonstrating the sociological constitution of human being's natural end and its supernatural sanctification.

In my book I propose that the sociological imagination is indispensable in this task and for modelling firstly, a purely natural or social perfection or beatitude and secondly, a supernatural perfection of socialised human being. Philosophically stated, I articulate a 'two-storey' anthropology where human beings or (in my particular research context) fully-contextualised Scottish working-class *dasein* ('being there') has two distinct and separate ends: a natural or proportionate end vis-à-vis their human nature and a supernatural end or perfection that is dis-proportionate to their human nature.

More concretely stated, on the basis

of conducting research among manual labourers I have attempted to articulate a Lonerganian journey of self-appropriation wherein the defining tension within the manual labourer is that between two very different worlds and two very different aspects of the self. On the one hand, the self to be appropriated is the situated labouring self that may care nothing for intellectual inquiry, and to complicate matters further there is the question of which self is to be appropriated. Lonergan's (1990, p. 193) answer is that the self to be appropriated is 'the rational, intelligent, experiencing man', and so from the existential standpoint of a particular individual labourer this means he must embark upon the intellectual pursuit of himself and in doing so will need to break with an established 'immediate' relationship to himself and make the shift from being a worker to a *worker-inquirer*. The final three chapters are devoted to articulating this journey and the issues involved in successfully accomplishing this shift.

My research trajectory has led me not simply to making the inoffensive argument that socialised human being is capable of receiving *the supernatural*, but that *the supernatural arrives as a result of exercising the sociological imagination and achieving a purely natural act of self-understanding*. In constructing this non-theological or purely sociological account of Christian redemption I align myself with sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Niklas Luhmann for whom sociology has a role to play in explaining

religious experience as I show how sociology ‘enters into the very constitution of theology’ (Baum 1989, p. 742) insofar as fundamental to theology is its ability to know and show how socialised human being is opened to what the Christian tradition calls ‘grace.’

If I arrive to the reality of Christian redemption, then, it is upon the basis of firstly describing mundane and non-religious realities such as manual labour and housing conditions before giving an account of a *special ontology* that comes into view in light of intellectual and supra-natural developments. I had every sympathy, then, with the view that the sociologist has no remit to speak of God until the moment my research into the Scottish working class led to a particular act of understanding of this socialised or situated ‘being there’ and which convinced me that socialised human being under its own sociological steam is able to open up to the supernatural. At this point I caught up with the insights of Archer, Collier and Porpora (2004) for whom sociology is able to pronounce a word upon human being’s spiritual destiny, and so at this point I saw my work as in alignment with the likes of David Lyon, Kieran Flanagan and Robin Gill with the latter having talked of sociology *assessing* theology, and I would sympathise with José Míguez Bonino’s insistence that ‘it is necessary to devote the first half of a theological book to “a discussion of sociological analysis”’ (Gill 1987, p. 147).

My text, then, gives the reader a step-by-step account of integral liberation and a description of *the performative advent* of the supernatural upon an empirical or purely sociological basis and in a way which does not rely upon religious belief, and so meets theologian Timothy Radcliffe’s injunction that anyone who would set himself the task of giving an account of Christian redemption ‘cannot bring to that task a ready-made perspective’ (cited in Gill 1987, p. 170). Ever since this performative development within myself my position has been that it is not be the

sociologist’s role to be unrealistic by refusing to study this reality, and that the sociological imagination has its own internal reasons for transcending secularist and naturalistic positions that would trap sociology into what I term ‘scarcity era’ metaphysics. A sociology that is fit for the purpose of being able to recognise the full range of what socialised human being is capable of achieving and receiving has to break with naturalism. Hence, rather than embodying freedom from superstition, secular humanism today is just as likely to be viewed as the dominant and majoritarian accommodation to the power of social determination (and therefore a form of unfreedom).

Insofar as ‘Scotland’ sets the sociological imagination the task of articulating an original account of the integral liberation of fully-contextualised Scottish working-class human being, the devout atheist or agnostic should be able to read the first seven chapters without raising any great principled objection as my argument is built solely upon an empirical and ethnographic basis. In the spirit of asking questions such as whether the ethnographic data can bear the full weight of integral liberation, and whether the exercise of reflexivity can take us to the brink of our redemption *upon a purely natural basis*, I hope my account will stimulate discussion of these questions but avoid pre-fabricated philosophical answers to these questions, so that instead of a hackneyed ‘dogmatic dance’ or dialogue of the deaf, raising such questions and giving my own answer might stimulate fresh discussion as to what integral liberation might look like in contemporary Scotland.

*Dr Paul Gilfillan is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. His book, A Sociological Phenomenology of Christian Redemption (2014), will be reviewed in a future edition of Open House.*

#### References

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#### Ascensional reflexivity

Paul Gilfillan uses the phrase ‘ascensional reflexivity’ to suggest how the researcher draws on various levels of ‘the self’ in order to access more and more specialist data, and to take the analysis of the data higher and higher.

So *the body* is used as a source of data-gathering, and this new data accessed by the body informs the development of what might be called an embodied reflexivity. Using the body helps the researcher rely on more than purely discursive sources for data – compared with reliance on interview transcripts, for example.

Next, the intellect or particular acts of understanding might be used as a source of data-gathering, and this new cognitional data or act of intellectual liberation informs the development of what he calls cognitional agency or *cognitional reflexivity* as the researcher reflects on acts of understanding.

Next, the soul might be used as a source of data by the researcher as the means of accessing a ‘higher’ level of data (the supernatural) and once again informing a further level of reflexivity.

So, the idea of *ascensional reflexivity* is basically the ordered progression of reflexivity deployed by the researcher to access more and more or higher and higher levels of data to ascend to higher levels or take his or her analysis higher and higher.