



# THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

SECOND EDITION MALCOLM HAMILTON



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# The Sociology of Religion

This expanded second edition of *The Sociology of Religion* provides a clear and comprehensive discussion of theoretical perspectives in relation to a wide range of substantive issues illustrating the diversity of religion. Offering a broad comparative view, Malcolm Hamilton draws on the insights of history, anthropology and sociology, surveying classic and contemporary theory to give a full picture of their variety and scope and how they relate to particular beliefs and practices. Inclusion of current debates and research findings brings this edition fully up to date in every respect. The chapters on secularisation and religious sects and movements have, in particular, been extended to incorporate recent work and developments. Both include fuller consideration of the contributions of rational choice theorists and their critics on questions such as the relationship between religious pluralism and conditions prevailing in the religious 'market place'. The chapter on sects and movements, which includes a new section on conversion, provides an extended discussion of earlier work on the nature of sectarianism as well as new insights that studies of a diverse range of religious and related movements have generated.

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# **The Sociology of Religion**

Theoretical and comparative  
perspectives

**Second Edition**

**Malcolm Hamilton**



London and New York

First published 1995  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Second edition first published 2001  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Hamilton, Malcolm (Malcolm B.)

The sociology of religion : theoretical and comparative perspectives /  
Malcolm B. Hamilton. – 2nd ed.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Religion and sociology. I. Title.

BL60 .H265            2001  
306.6–dc21            2001019300

ISBN 0-415-22666-X (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-22667-8 (pbk)

ISBN 0-203-00861-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-19144-7 (Glassbook Format)

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## Preface to the second edition

Despite the often bemoaned fact among sociologists of religion that their subdiscipline tends to be treated as peripheral, a remarkable amount of work has been carried out and published since the first edition of this book appeared. Debates have also been noticeably intense and animated and there appears to be no sign at all of the sub-discipline fading away as some had once feared.

This second edition has been extensively revised and expanded to bring it up to date with current debates and research findings. The debate concerning secularisation, for example, has been particularly vigorous and the chapter on this topic has been extended accordingly. Alongside secularisation, the emergence of the new religious sects and movements has for long been a prominent, perhaps even more prominent, issue in the sociology of religion, but although the former has in the last few years perhaps taken over the position of the latter as the topic that has attracted most attention, religious sects and movements have far from lost the fascination they have always held. This second edition allows a fuller discussion of earlier work on the nature of sectarianism and studies of new religious sects and movements as well as consideration of new work and material which have appeared in the last few years, including the addition of a new section on conversion.

Both the secularisation debate and work on the new religious movements have received close attention from rational choice theorists and this edition includes more detailed consideration of the recent contribution that this theoretical perspective has made and of its critics, and in particular of questions such as the relationship between religious pluralism, on the one hand, and the conditions that prevail in the religious 'market place', on the other.

The fact that it is the topics of sectarianism and secularisation that have required the most extensive updating would seem to reinforce the accusation that has sometimes been made that the sociology of religion has been largely preoccupied with this narrow range of subject matter and, even then, largely in a Christian context. While this continues to ring true, developments in other areas, most notably within the sphere of anthropology, have been significant. In accordance with one of the key aims of the book, namely to cut across disciplinary frontiers, the chapter on ritual which makes extensive use of anthropological work has, in consequence, been substantially filled out.



Also, developments in theoretical perspectives other than rational choice theory show healthy signs, particularly with regard to cognitive approaches which now receive fuller treatment here in Chapter 2.

The rather narrow focus of the sociology of religion upon the Christian world can, perhaps, be explained by the sheer diversity of potential subject matter and the daunting nature of the task of attempting to encompass it. No form of social activity or set of social institutions comes in quite the bewilderingly diverse variety that is characteristic of religion. In no other sphere, consequently, are sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and other social scientists presented with such seemingly intractable and puzzling problems of understanding. True, anthropologists have shown us how remarkably variable are such things as kinship systems and family patterns. These aspects of social life are such that the particular forms of them with which we happen to be familiar are usually so taken for granted as absolutely normal that deviations from them in other societies appear almost incredible. Anthropologists, however, assure us of their sheer normality in their own context. Kinship systems and family structures, however, can only come in a limited variety of forms. Not so religious beliefs and practices, the profusion of forms of which defies the capacity of any single scholar to comprehend, unlimited as they are by material constraints. Also, new ones continue to germinate while both old and new continuously transmute and evolve.

Earlier theorists, however, were less daunted by this diversity and complexity, casting their net much more widely than is common today. Spencer, Tylor and especially Frazer drew upon as diverse a range of material as they could lay their hands upon. Durkheim based his entire theoretical treatise on religion on ethnographic data pertaining to the aboriginal people of Australia. Freud relied for ethnographic detail in his studies on the subject to a considerable extent on the work of Frazer. The early functionalists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were anthropologists who had first-hand fieldwork experience of societies very different from their own. Max Weber's scholarship in the world religions is proverbial. For this reason, as this book seeks among other things to demonstrate, all these theorists continue to have a fair measure of relevance today.

This book seeks to recapture the theoretical legacy of these scholars, based as it was upon a comparative perspective taken for granted in their day as essential for the successful objective study of human social systems but which today has become all too rare. In broadening the discussion of both rational choice and cognitive theoretical approaches, one of the primary aims of the first edition is thereby strengthened. The story is brought fully up to date in setting out the most influential recent theoretical approaches alongside the classical approaches, revealing their linkages and the extent to which the former have attempted to synthesise and build upon the insights of the latter. It has to be acknowledged, however, that in this field, as in so many in what is still a relatively new subject like sociology, we remain at a rudimentary state of knowledge and understanding.

Theoretical discussion and debate alone and without reference to substantive issues, are of course, sterile. The purpose of theory is to promote understanding

of the substantive. The original structure of the book is, consequently, unchanged with the various theoretical approaches treated in conjunction with substantive questions. Each chapter devoted to a theoretical perspective is followed by one on a substantive issue. The substantive themes which follow each theoretical chapter in this way have been chosen with their particular appropriateness in mind and are intended to illustrate the application of the theories and the way in which they have been used to throw light upon specific and concrete aspects of religion. The range of substantive issues covered also serves to provide a series of topics illustrating the diversity of religious conceptions and actions. They include discussion of anthropological literature pertaining to 'primitive' or tribal societies and a major non-Western world religion, namely Buddhism, as well as various aspects of the Christian tradition.

Arrangement of the material in this way will hopefully facilitate understanding of theory but, in order to get an overview of the range of theoretical perspectives, some readers may prefer to read all the chapters dealing with theories first, that is starting at Chapter 1 and all the even numbered chapters, returning to the substantive chapters later.

This book has grown out of many years teaching the sociology of religion at the University of Reading, during which time I have incurred many debts to my colleagues there as well as many others elsewhere. I would like to thank all those who have commented upon and made various suggestions for the second edition and hope that I have paid sufficient attention to them that they and others will find this an improved and useful volume.



# 1 Introduction

## WHAT IS THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION?

The human capacity for belief is virtually limitless. It is this capacity, and the striking diversity, indeed strangeness, of the beliefs and associated practices it has generated in human society and history which have stimulated the curiosity of many writers on religion including sociologists. There are those, some sociologists among them, who might agree with Lucy in the Peanuts cartoon reproduced opposite, at least as far as certain fundamentals are concerned. However, Charlie Brown's answer, despite the dubious authenticity of the reference to Melanesian frog worship, makes it plain that if religions are all alike, they are also very different. Even if frogs are not worshipped anywhere, there are many other beliefs which seem equally odd, even bizarre, to the outsider.

The sociologist, however, is not simply puzzled by this diversity but by the fact that such beliefs and practices exist at all. The sociology of religion can be said to consist of two main themes or central questions, namely, why have religious beliefs and practices been so central a feature of culture and society, and why have they taken such diverse forms? The sociology of religion poses the question of the role and significance of religion in general, as well as that of understanding the beliefs and practices of particular groups and societies.

In one respect, both of these central questions have been stimulated by the same puzzlement. Although things have changed dramatically since, the sociological approach to the study of religion had among its roots a nineteenth-century rationalism or positivism which questioned and rejected religious notions as illusory. They were thought to be irrational and otiose in a modern society in which science as a mode of understanding of reality would predominate. Religious ideas would atrophy and die in the face of the superior conceptions and explanations of science. These thinkers saw religion as a natural phenomenon to be studied objectively and scientifically and explained like any other natural phenomenon in terms of underlying causes. This position is usually designated positivist and reductionist. Religion is 'reduced' to underlying factors which produce it so that the reality of religious entities, experience, and so on, is denied. To explain it in such a way was largely to explain it away. Indeed, the very centrality and universality of what were seen as irrational notions and actions, and which were in many cases undeniably

odd and puzzling, seemed to cry out for explanation. Because in past societies religious ideas and beliefs constituted, to a large extent, the entire world-view and value system, the task seemed all the more urgent for the understanding of the evolution of human society and culture and indeed for the understanding of human nature itself. Religious belief was not in past societies a special realm coexisting alongside mundane conceptions as had come to be the case in the contemporary society. As Max Weber put it, past societies had lived in a 'magic garden' whereas modern society had witnessed a thoroughgoing 'disenchantment' of the world. How was it possible, then, for past societies to have lived and prospered in an enchanted world and how was it possible that such notions could have been so central and significant? Hence the major task of the sociology of religion was to account for the very presence of religious beliefs and practices in human society. As Berger has pointed out, this was an even more fundamental challenge for religion than the discoveries of the natural sciences, since it not only threatened to undermine acceptance of religious claims, but purported to be able to explain why such claims were made at all and why they appeared to have credibility (Berger, 1971, p. 47). By some it was also seen as having the task of dispelling such residual irrationality from contemporary society and of quickening its replacement by science. By others it was seen as promising a basis for a substitute for religion which would preserve the essential benefits that, in their view, it had provided for past societies but without the supernaturalism and irrationality which characterised it – a substitute founded upon sound and objective principles established by the discipline of sociology itself.

During the course of the twentieth century this attitude has given way to one which is less imperious, less dismissive of and usually agnostic towards the veracity of religious statements and claims. Sociologists of religion today often have a personal commitment to one or other form of faith, although others maintain an atheistic or agnostic position. Personal convictions, whatever they might be, are, however, generally regarded as irrelevant to their sociological interests. Their fundamental concern, as sociologists of religion, remains the same, namely, to further the understanding of the role of religion in society, to analyse its significance in and impact upon human history, and to understand its diversity and the social forces and influences that shape it.

### **Sociology and the truth claims of religion**

Despite the emergence of more tolerant attitudes, very different views can still be found on what stance the sociologist of religion should or can adopt towards the evaluation of the truth, rationality, coherence or sense of beliefs and consequently the nature of the sociological enterprise in this area.<sup>1</sup> One view holds, in complete contrast to those who advocate treating religion entirely as a natural phenomenon, that it is not amenable to sociological analysis at all. In this view, religion is not just another social institution or human activity like any other. It is not something that can be subjected to rational explanation. Or,

at least, it is alleged to spring from some fundamental source of a non-naturalistic or spiritual character which cannot be understood in any other way than in religious or spiritual terms.

An extreme form of this view is that belief can be explained in no other way than that it is the truth and has been revealed as such. This would, of course, place only one set of religious beliefs out of court as far as sociological understanding is concerned, namely, those of the believer. Every other system of belief would be legitimate territory for the sociologist to explore. From the perspective of the discipline of the sociology of religion, however, this is an incoherent position. If the sociologist were to pay heed to this argument when put forward by a Christian, then it would also have to be heeded when put forward by a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a devotee of Melanesian frog worship. The sociologist would then be in the position of accepting what neither a Christian, a Buddhist, nor a Muslim would be inclined to accept, namely, that all three were based upon truth. Furthermore, sociology as a discipline would find itself in the absurd position of simultaneously holding that a particular belief system was and was not a legitimate object of analysis, since individual sociologists of different faiths would each wish to exempt their own from sociological analysis. Clearly, those who would question the sociology of religion as a viable field of enquiry cannot be selective about which religious systems can be placed outside its scope.

There are, of course, those who, along with Lucy, would claim that all religions do share some common fundamental basis – appreciation of the divine, the spiritual, the sacred, the transcendental, perhaps – but their view is rarely well substantiated, as Charlie Brown's reply would suggest.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to state what this fundamental essence is are generally vague, unsatisfactory and unconvincing. In any case, even if there were some common factor impervious to sociological, psychological or other explanatory analysis, this would leave a great deal, indeed, the greater part of the substantive content of systems of belief, open to sociological treatment. The sociologist or psychologist could, at least, search for the reasons for the differences between belief systems. Whatever the nature of the underlying essence, the specific and concrete forms that this appreciation of the spiritual takes could be related to varying social or psychological conditions.

Some of those who believe that religion entails the inexplicably transcendental would be quite content to allow sociology and psychology this broad scope (Garrett, 1974). Why the enquiry has to be limited in this way and not allowed to attempt to investigate the nature, source and causes of what believers experience and interpret as sacred or transcendental, is generally not stated.

Others, even some sociologists, would, rejecting reductionism, limit the scope of the subject to the sympathetic description and interpretation of different belief systems ruling out causal generalisations (Eliade, 1969; Towler, 1974). Comparison would be allowed only in so far as it did not seek to go beyond the understandings of believers themselves. Religion is seen as understandable only in its own terms, as a phenomenon which is *sui generis*. This approach has a long tradition in Europe and in particular Germany and Holland and is generally known as the

phenomenological or hermeneutic approach (Morris, 1987, p. 176; Kehrer and Hardin, 1984).<sup>3</sup>

Eliade, for example, argues that we cannot understand religious phenomena by attempting to reduce them to social or psychological facts. They must be understood in their own terms as stemming from the human experience of the sacred. Each is an expression of this experience and the sacred is something which is irreducible to any kind of explanation.

Against such views some have reacted by offering thoroughgoing defences of reductionist approaches (Cavanaugh, 1982; Segal, 1980, 1983, 1994). Others have criticised the anti-reductionists for asserting the autonomy or *sui generis* nature of their subject matter without sound justification and for attributing to religion an ontological reality that they do not demonstrate that it has. Such claims, according to these critics, simply constitute an attempt to rule, rather arbitrarily, certain questions out of court, motivated by the anxiety that to ask them carries a threat to the religious convictions of those who make them, to religious belief in general and to the reality of religion as an autonomous phenomenon (Edwards, 1994; Strenski, 1994). That any such threat exists is questionable, according to Edwards (1994), while Penner and Yonan (1972) argue that reductionism operates only at a theoretical level and does not in any sense undermine the reality of the phenomena that it seeks to understand. In the biological sciences a reductionist explanation of some aspect of bodily function in biochemical terms does not mean that the function in question is not real. Penner (1989) considers that the phenomenological stance in the study of religion is, in any case, as reductionist as any sociological or psychological approach. It not only departs just as much from the believers' own accounts of their beliefs as the latter approaches do but is also actually covertly theological. 'The phenomenology of religion and theology are two sides of the same coin' (*ibid.*, p. 56) and it 'could reasonably be described as Christian theology carried on by other means' (*ibid.*, p. 42) according to Penner.

Pals (1994) remains unconvinced that reductionism is as harmless as this would make it seem. In any case it is illegitimate, such critics argue, to attempt to preclude a reductionist account of religion on *a priori* grounds (Wiebe, 1990). On the other hand, Wiebe (1978, 1981, 1984, 1990) has sought a middle way between reductionism and radical non-reductionism, arguing that reductionists are wrong in claiming, in so far as they do, that an understanding of religion *necessarily* requires a reductionist account. This, of course, cuts both ways as others who have sought a middle way have argued (Dawson, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1990; Dippman, 1991; Edwards, 1994; Pals, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1994) in that it leaves the matter open to either reductionist or non-reductionist accounts which should be judged on their merits and how well they stand up empirically. There is little agreement, then, on what a middle way would look like nor do critics of this position believe that one has been found (Segal and Wiebe, 1989).

Clearly, these debates will probably continue unabated and the issues cannot be resolved here. Nor can or will the sociological study of religion wait upon their resolution. Perhaps they are ultimately irresolvable. Perhaps they can only be resolved by actually attempting to understand and to explain religious belief,

behaviour and experience sociologically and psychologically, the success or otherwise of this enterprise providing the test of the various points of view. In the face of such disagreements the approach of the social sciences to religion must be accepted as a viable one, at least as viable as the hermeneutic approach.

### **Methodological agnosticism**

In any case, even if there were some irreducible element in religious experience, the concrete forms it takes may well be mediated by psychological and sociological processes. The extent to which religious beliefs and practices can be understood in terms of such processes is an empirical question and it must be left to the disciplines concerned to attempt to discover relationships and patterns, or social and psychological influences. This means, of course, that the sociology of religion is not necessarily incompatible with phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches.

Perhaps the most prevalent and currently respectable stance which is taken towards religion by contemporary sociologists is that which in one of its versions has been called 'methodological atheism' (Berger, 1973, pp. 106 and 182).<sup>4</sup> This holds that it is necessary to 'bracket' aside the question of the status of religious claims, reserving judgement on whether they are ultimately founded upon some irreducible and inexplicable basis. This approach would take the sociological analysis of religion as far as is possible on the assumption that it is a human product (or projection, as Berger puts it) and amenable to the same sort of explanations as other forms of social and individual behaviour using whatever methods are deemed appropriate for the social sciences.

The neutrality of this methodological agnosticism<sup>5</sup> with regard to the claims of religious beliefs clearly has considerable advantages. It protects the sensibilities of those who would otherwise feel uncomfortable with the idea of treating religious belief empirically. More importantly, it is not always necessary for the sociologist to adjudicate on the matter of the truth or falsity of any given set of beliefs under investigation. In fact, in many cases it would be impossible to do so. If, for example, it were observed that in a given society certain 'medicines' claimed to have magical curative powers were utilised, the sociologist could hardly set about carrying out all the various tests to determine whether there was any evidence for the substances used having definite medical properties before going on to analyse the beliefs and practices sociologically. Even more importantly, there would be little point in doing so, since what matters in attempting to understand and explain the given pattern of belief and behaviour or assessing its social effects is the tests that the believers and the practitioners have undertaken and the evidence that is available to *them* as they see it. The existence of evidence in the eyes of the sociologist is neither here nor there in accounting for what the people themselves believe or what they do.

On the other hand, methodological agnosticism also suffers from a major weakness if it is applied too rigidly – if it is taken to imply that the question of



truth or falsity of beliefs need never arise for the sociologist as an important matter to decide upon and which might play a central role in accounting for belief – if, in short, it is used to defend a relativist position. This would place too great a constraint upon the discipline. One of the conclusions that a sociological investigation of a system of beliefs might come to is precisely that it contains much that is false, incoherent, etc. In the example used above, of medicines with magical curative powers, it might be that extensive tests of the substances used have been carried out by medical science which finds no evidence for the claims of those who use them. Clearly, then, if the sociologist accepts the findings and conclusions of medical science, there is a discrepancy between what the practitioners regard as good evidence and what the sociologist does. The crucial sociological question is thus moved on a stage to become not ‘why do the believers believe what they believe?’ but ‘why do the believers consider that they have good evidence for believing what they believe?’. Now it might be that the sociologist observes that the practitioners count only positive instances in establishing the evidence in support of their belief. It is a very common error in all cultures and societies to notice only positive instances and to discount negative ones. Every time someone recovers after the medicine is administered it is noted and remembered and the recovery is attributed to the use of the medicine. Most failures, however, are not particularly commented on and soon forgotten. It is very easy for a firm commitment to a belief to become established in this way from only a few apparently positive instances while, in fact, most instances are negative. Careful observation may establish that this all too human tendency is what occurs.

Of course, one could remain within the constraints of methodological agnosticism and decline to make any unfavourable comparison with the practitioners’ conception of what counts as good evidence. The account would simply be that they believe what they believe because, by their means of establishing the truth of something there is, for them, good evidence for it. Yet to stop here would seem to leave something vital out of the account. We cannot help but think that their methods involve making a mistake – not because we just have a different set of beliefs about the appropriate procedures for establishing the truth of propositions but because such procedures are universally those by which truth must be established. And it is because they are universally valid that those who have not followed them can come to see for themselves that they have made a mistake, just as anyone might come to this conclusion.

A sociological account, then, of why the practitioners believe what they believe might make reference to mistaken or faulty procedures for establishing truth and cannot help but imply, or conclude thereby, that the belief is false. This is not to say, of course, that it might not equally be concluded that what at first sight appeared to be ill-founded is not so because there does seem to be good evidence for it or because the belief might turn out to be other than what it was originally thought to be. But it seems unduly restrictive to say that we should never entertain the possibility or conclude that any beliefs are false or mistaken or that we should never allow this to enter into our understanding of them.

From a broader perspective, there is again good reason to retain the possibility that sociology might conclude certain beliefs to be false. They may, for example, conflict with sociological accounts of the world (Lett, 1997). The religious account of a particular social institution, for example, may directly confront the sociological account of it. There is no choice here but to deny the validity of the religious account. Sociology, like any objective discipline, offers an alternative view of the world and may need to take a stance on the propositions of other views including religious ones. It might, for example, challenge the view that there are supernatural powers, such as witchcraft, which have real, concrete, material effects in the world and the attribution of material events to the action of such powers (Segal, 1980).

Also, a sociology of religion based upon an absolute commitment to methodological agnosticism unduly constrains itself since it cannot entertain the possibility that a 'religious' proposition about or explanation of some aspect of reality might turn out to be true. True propositions, however, are sometimes derived from unlikely sources and a social scientific approach is entirely indifferent to the provenance of a hypothesis and is only concerned with whether it is true or not. Absolute methodological agnosticism rules out the possibility of taking any proposition which is seen to derive from religious sources seriously. An example of this might be the claims that religious healers in traditional cultures might make for the effectiveness of certain 'medicines' or techniques understood to be magical in nature. The substances used may well be, indeed often have been found to be, empirically effective since they contain active ingredients which medical research demonstrates to be potent. New drugs are often found in this way. While the magical claims may not be acceptable to Western science as theories of how the drugs work, their actual effectiveness is accepted. A sociological account of the role of such cures in traditional culture would be greatly impoverished if it were constrained to ignore the fact that they do actually work. This is a very concrete example taken from 'magical' healing but the same could be the case with religious claims about the psyche, psychological processes, the emotions, social relationships, paranormal experiences, and so on.

The limitations of methodological agnosticism are often demonstrated by the frequency with which it is breached by its adherents. Two examples will illustrate this. Berger himself in the same book in which he recommends it (i.e. methodological atheism in his terminology), drawing upon Marx, portrays religion as one of the great forces of alienation in human society. By this he means that religion presents society to its creators, its members, as a reality which has not been created by them (see Chapter 14). Clearly, this implies that religion inevitably falsifies the nature of human society. Stark and Bainbridge (1987) espouse a methodologically agnostic position from the outset in their exposition of a general theory of religion, yet in their analysis of new religious movements they claim that they are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are nonempirical. Otherwise, there is too great a likelihood that they will be disproved by the evidence. This clearly implies that the doctrines of at least some, less successful, movements are false. The assumption of falsehood, then, plays a central part in

Stark and Bainbridge's understanding of the rise and spread or otherwise of religious movements.

Whether the content of religious beliefs is considered to be true or false, valid or invalid, depends, of course, on an assessment of the nature of such beliefs. If religious statements are of the same kind as ordinary empirical statements, if in postulating the existence of various spiritual entities they are making statements of the same kind as those that state, for example, that black swans, unicorns and yetis exist, then they may be judged to be true or false and this judgement may play an essential role in sociological analyses of them.

But things are often not quite as straightforward as this. Let us take an example from a well-known study of the witchcraft and related ideas of an East African people, the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). The Azande attribute most deaths to witchcraft. If one confronts the Azande with the 'facts' of the case, for example, that the deceased was bitten by a poisonous snake and that this is the reason for the death, the Azande will persist in their attribution of the death to witchcraft. Even if one explains the action of certain toxins, such as snake poison, in the body and the manner in which this brings about death in certain cases, the Azande are likely to remain unimpressed and will not relinquish their belief that the death was caused by witchcraft. They might reply that they know very well that the deceased was bitten by a poisonous snake and may accept the account of how snake poison can cause death but will still attribute the death to witchcraft. Why was the man bitten by the snake at all, they will ask. Why was the snake in just that place at just that time? Why the deceased and not someone else? All this is due to witchcraft, according to the Azande. It is the consequence of the malevolent intentions of someone with witchcraft powers that the dead man stepped on the snake. It is because of witchcraft that the snake was there in the grass just at the time he put his foot down in that place. Whereas we would attribute these things to chance, the Azande would not accept that pure chance or coincidence can explain the event. Beyond the point at which our empirical explanations stop, the Azande go on to ask the further question of why the events happen as they do. Religious beliefs are often of this nature. The kinds of question posed by religion are often beyond the province of science. Science cannot give us the answer to such questions, cannot tell us why things are as they are and happen as they do. Whether or not one accepts the answers that religion gives to such questions, or even that such questions make any sense or are capable of being answered, the fact may be that they are not questions of the kind that science asks. The answers to them are not, therefore, the same kind of claims about the world that science makes. This observation will clearly have implications for the way we seek to understand and explain religion. It is probably no accident that claims like those of the Azande in relation to witchcraft are made when serious illness or death is involved – circumstances that are difficult to accept. It may well be that there are social or psychological reasons which are associated with such ideas. Also, accusations of witchcraft take a very definite pattern in terms of the nature of the social relationships between accuser and accused. These, and many other observations,

would suggest that witchcraft beliefs are closely related to social and psychological processes which are very important in understanding them. This does not necessarily mean that they can be wholly accounted for in terms of such processes but we should remain open to the idea that it might be possible to do so.

Azande witchcraft beliefs, while they are not simple causal explanations of events like those that science gives, still postulate the existence of powers which have real, concrete, material effects. Other religious beliefs may be quite different again. The claim, for example, that a member of an Australian aboriginal tribe might make that he is a white cockatoo, may, on coming to appreciate it in its wider religious and social context, be seen as not an empirical claim at all and not amenable to judgements of truth or falsity. Seen in its wider context, it may appear to be of a nature which makes it misleading or illegitimate to evaluate it as valid or invalid.

This point has been cogently argued by the philosopher D. Z. Phillips in a critique of reductionist approaches to religion, which usually misconstrue, according to Phillips, the nature of religion in assuming that its propositions are mistaken hypotheses about the facts. While not denying that they might be such and that, if they are, a reductionist approach would be applicable, he nevertheless believes that religious propositions are often not of this kind at all. In fact, in so far as they are truly religious propositions and not mere superstitions and the like, they are to be understood rather as ways of looking at and coming to terms with such things as good fortune and misfortune. Religious statements have an internal sense and meaning and therefore an autonomy which cannot be assailed by reductionist approaches. Even when a religious statement appears to be a hypothesis about the facts and which might appear, therefore, to be a mistaken one, it might nevertheless embody an expression of feelings and attitudes which give it its real force and significance in people's lives. It may even be the case that the person making a religious statement construes it as a hypothesis about the facts; the underlying meaning of it may, however, be quite different. For Phillips, religious statements often appear to be making factual claims when they are not really doing so because religious statements are trying to say something that cannot actually be said.

A very similar perspective to that of Phillips is that espoused by the sociologist Robert Bellah (1970a) and the anthropologist Martin Southwold (1978a). Bellah sees religion as essentially to do with symbols which are non-objective and which express the feelings, values, and hopes of subjects, or which organise and regulate the flow of interaction between subjects and objects, or which attempt to sum up the whole subject-object complex, or even to point to the context or ground of that whole. These symbols also express reality and are not reducible to empirical propositions (Bellah, 1970a, p. 93). This position Bellah terms 'symbolic realism'. It treats religion as a reality *sui generis*. 'To put it bluntly', Bellah states, 'religion is true' (ibid.,). For Southwold, religious claims are essentially axiomatic and symbolic. They are 'empirically indeterminate' statements in being immune to empirical falsification or verification and necessarily so if they are to function

successfully as the axiomatic grounding of ways of life. In this sense they are the basis for the interpretation of experience and they also shape that experience. They express a kind of truth quite different from factual and empirical truth.

Critics of reductionism such as Phillips, Bellah and Southwold, then, rightly caution us against misconstruing the nature of many religious beliefs. However, just as we should not prejudge the issue of the nature of any particular system of belief, as the critics of the extreme positivist position correctly say, nor should we deny ourselves the capacity to make judgements after extensive examination of beliefs. Just as we should not assume that religion is nothing other than a human product which can be fully explained wholly in the same way as any other social institution, nor should we assume that there is always some irreducible element in it and thereby preclude the possibility that it might some day be accounted for in this way. Also, it is somewhat contentious to relegate those beliefs which do make claims about the world to the sphere of mere superstition as Phillips does. To do so is to relegate, very probably, by far the greater part of the totality of religious beliefs and conceptions, or interpretations and understandings of them, to the sphere of superstition. That spiritual entities and forces can materially affect the course of events and thereby human fate and well-being, for example, is a central aspect of most systems of belief which we normally think of as religious. Phillip's conception of the 'truly religious' is very much a specific interpretation of what constitutes the essence of religion; an interpretation probably not shared by many believers themselves. In any case, even if Phillips be conceded the licence to reserve the term 'religion' for this particular type of conception, he leaves the vastly greater part of what is conventionally thought of as being religion to the very reductionist type of analysis of which he is so critical. Whether a reductionist analysis is or is not appropriate for the whole of this field would, however, remain an open question. Even in the case of beliefs which do make empirical claims about the world, it may not be possible, legitimate, or significant for the sociological understanding and explanation of them to reject them as false or accept them as true.

Also, even if there are aspects of religion which cannot be construed as empirical propositions, we can still ask and perhaps answer the question why people think in this way and why they make sense of their experience in the particular way they do. Phillips seems to think that such questions have no meaning and that once one understands what is being said by someone who makes a religious statement, one has understood all that there is to understand. It is difficult to see why understanding should be limited in this way. Surely one can ask under what conditions people come to think or not to think in religious terms and what conditions are associated with particular forms of religious expression. Those who would rule out sociological explanations of religion tend to confuse the necessity of identifying an experience as a religious one with the attempt to explain that experience (Proudfoot, 1985). While it is necessary to give a *description* of religious belief and experience in terms which do not violate the understandings of the believer or the person who has the experience, we are not thereby precluded from *explaining* it in terms of concepts,

categories and relationships which are not necessarily shared by that person; just as we must describe the experience of a person who takes an hallucinogenic drug in his or her own terms, we need not explain it in terms that he or she uses such as, for example, that the experience was a manifestation of a powerful supernatural entity. Thus, according to Proudfoot, we may distinguish between descriptive and explanatory reduction. The former is the failure to identify a belief, experience or practice in terms with which the subject can agree and is an illegitimate misidentification. The latter consists in explaining the belief, experience or practice in terms which the subject does not necessarily share or approve of. This is a perfectly legitimate and normal procedure. What writers like Phillips do is to extend a perfectly justified embargo on descriptive reduction to explanation in order to build a 'protective strategy' which seeks to place everything construed to be religious out of bounds in terms of reductionist explanations.<sup>6</sup> Phillips, according to Proudfoot, gives us examples of descriptive reduction and then proceeds to criticise those who have offered reductive explanations. The strategy is such that religious statements and understandings of the believer cannot be contested. Also, in claiming that truly religious beliefs should never be understood to be really factual hypotheses about the world, and that, if they are, they are not truly religious but mere superstition, Phillips further protects religious statements from any possibility of falsification or conflict with other perspectives, including sociological and psychological theory.

One of the important points to emerge from this discussion is that the sociology of religion must have an impact upon our attitudes towards religion, whether we start from a position which is favourable or unfavourable to it. The empirical study of religion in its social context is challenging both for the believer and the unbeliever. Our attitudes to religious statements are bound to be affected by the discovery that there are definite relationships between religious beliefs and social and psychological factors but they may be affected in several different ways.

First, it may leave our initial position of neutrality untouched. We may feel unable to say anything about the validity of religious claims. If, for example, it were to be shown that certain forms of belief were more common among the materially deprived, that in itself might not warrant any conclusion that such beliefs were nothing more than delusions brought about by material deprivation as some kind of compensatory mechanism. It might be the case that the materially deprived are simply more attuned to the spiritual than those whose prosperity blinds them to its importance. If it were shown that the dominant stratum in a given society supported conservative and traditional denominations while the poor and oppressed espoused sectarian forms of religion, this does not in itself mean that the beliefs of these respective groups are merely the expression of the material or status interests of the groups in question. They may be thus and at the same time express certain truths which the various groups genuinely espouse. It is an important principle that a statement or claim must be judged independently of the interests an individual might have for believing it. It is not automatically suspect or to be explained solely in terms of the self-interest of the believer.

On the other hand, the existence of sectional interests associated with different beliefs, or an association between them and material conditions, may bring us to alter our attitude to them because we come to see them in a new light or as something other than what we thought they were. The second way sociological studies may affect our attitudes to religious beliefs, then, might be to bring us to doubt them when we had previously accepted them.

Third, the fact that we come to see them as other than what we thought they were may lead us to see them as not so nonsensical and more meaningful than we had thought. We may come to acknowledge, perhaps, that they do express a kind of truth.

It is important to note, then, that the sociology of religion does not depend upon any resolution of the question of the truth or validity of religious claims, nor is its essential concern with such questions. Nor does it need to adopt any particular position on this matter, either sympathetic, opposed or neutral. It all depends on what the beliefs are and the circumstances of each case. It does, however, require a readiness to change one's attitudes and an acceptance of the possibility that one will be changed as a consequence of pursuing it.

## **WHAT IS RELIGION?**

So far in the discussion reference has been made to 'systems of belief as well as to religion, and the example of witchcraft beliefs has been used to illustrate the case. Some may consider witchcraft beliefs to be something quite different from religion and more closely related to superstition. This raises the whole question of the scope of the sociology of religion and comes down to the question of defining 'religion'. This is not an easy matter and there are many definitions on offer which disagree markedly with one another.

For this reason some sociologists have argued that it is better not to attempt to define the subject of investigation at the outset and that it is only after extensive investigation that one is in a position to do this. Max Weber, one of the greatest scholars in the field, declined in the opening sentence of his major general treatise on the subject to give a definition of religion. This could only be done, he argued, at the conclusion of our studies (Weber, 1965, p. 1). The anthropologist Nadel, in his study of the religious beliefs and practices of a West African people, comments that, however the sphere of 'things religious' is defined, there will always remain an area or border zone of uncertainty and it will be difficult to determine just where the dividing line between religion and non-religion is. He proposes describing, therefore, everything that has a bearing upon religion so as to be sure not to leave anything out and suggests that it will be necessary to feel one's way towards the meaning of the term (Nadel, 1954, pp. 7-8). Weber, however, it would seem, did not advance sufficiently in his own studies to come to a clear view on the question since he did not leave us with a definition. How advanced do we have to be before we can be clear on the matter? More significantly, how can we be sure that we are including in our investigations all that we should in



order to become sufficiently advanced if we do not attempt to demarcate the limits of our subject at the outset?

This has been a central issue in the sociology of religion since its inception but it has become ever more so as time has passed. In much of the modern developed world 'religion' can no longer be equated with familiar mainstream church and denominational forms but takes on a plurality of guises that render the boundaries between religion and non-religion bewilderingly fuzzy. New Age, flying saucer cults, radical environmentalism, eco-feminism, human potential groups, holistic therapies – all have been identified as instances of a growing religious diversity quite different in character from the organised and exclusive religiosity of the church, denomination and sect. Even sport, fitness and dietary practices have been claimed by some as essentially religious in nature or at least forms of spirituality very akin to religion. A multiplicity of terms has been introduced in an attempt to capture this diversity and complexity, such as invisible religion, implicit religion, surrogate religion, quasi-religion, secular religion and others. As Hervieu-Léger puts it:

if these movements offer their followers a kind of 'interior fulfilment', one that can be interpreted as an individualised and secular (and therefore modern) road to salvation, is it necessary to see therein the figure of a new modern religion? Or, due to a lack of reference to any transcendence whatsoever, and because these movements are customarily lacking in a larger social project, must one deny them all the qualification of 'religiousness'?

(1999, p. 79)

In short, the question of the boundaries of religion and therefore of its definition is particularly crucial in contemporary sociology of religion.

This being said, Nadel was probably correct in arguing that any definition will entail an area of uncertainty. However, how can we know what has a bearing on religion when we do not know where the boundaries are in the first place? Goody points out that this procedure carries the danger of leaving the investigators' criteria implicit rather than opening them to general scrutiny (1961, p. 142). Clearly, no investigation can proceed without some conception of what the limits of the subject matter are and to avoid confusion it is better to make this explicit at the outset, even if such conceptions are imperfect and have to be altered in the light of deeper understanding.

In considering attempts to define religion, one point always to be borne in mind is that they are not always free from the influence of theoretical predilections and purposes. That is to say, what theorists think religion is often depends upon the explanation of it they favour. They do not just seek to demarcate the sphere of investigation but also to state or imply things within the definition which support their theoretical interpretation of it. Their definitions are couched in terms that exclude phenomena that would otherwise be thought to belong, but to which their theories do not apply, or which include phenomena that would not otherwise be thought to belong because their theories necessitate their inclusion.



## Substantive definitions

The debates that occurred during the nineteenth century among anthropologists and sociologists will serve to highlight many of the central issues involved in the problem of defining religion. An early contribution was that of Edward Tylor who proposed what he called a minimum definition, namely ‘belief in spiritual beings’ (1903, p. 424). This definition was bound up with Tylor’s account of the origins of religion in a system of thought which he referred to as animism – the belief that all things, organic and inorganic, contain a soul or spirit which gives them their particular nature and characteristics. The definition was soon subjected to criticism from those who objected to the emphasis of Tylor and others upon intellect and reason in explaining the origins of religion and who thought that emotions lay at the root of it. Marett objected to the emphasis upon ‘beings’ since he believed that the essence of religion lay in an experience of a mysterious and occult power or force which was associated with deep and ambivalent emotions of awe, fear and respect. Experience of this power or force pre-dated conceptualisations of spirits, deities, and so on (Marett, 1914). Others were unhappy with the other aspect of Tylor’s definition, namely, its focus on beliefs, pointing out that this ignored practices, which they considered to be more important than beliefs and the real essence of religion (Smith, 1889; Durkheim, 1915). Durkheim pointed out that belief in spiritual beings implied belief in supernatural entities but some systems of belief generally acknowledged to be religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, were not founded upon such conceptions. Central to Durkheim’s own definition was a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Religion, he said, is:

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them.  
(1915, p. 47)

In its inclusion of practices as well as beliefs and its emphasis upon the group, this definition shows the influence of Robertson Smith who had argued that rituals are prior to beliefs which are little more than rationalisations of practices and who had emphasised the social and collective nature of such ritual. It was this eminently social (Durkheim, 1915, p. 10) character of religion which, in Durkheim’s view, differentiated it from magic. Magic has no church, he argued. The magician has only his clientele with whom he individually deals. Religion is an affair of the community and entails a congregation or church.

This brief summary of early debates and definitions shows that the crucial problems centred on the question of beliefs versus practices and that of the nature or character of religious entities or forces and of the spiritual or supernatural realm. The first problem is easily dealt with by simply including reference to both in the definition without necessarily implying that one is more important than or prior to the other. The second problem remains a matter of difficulty and contention. Terms

such as 'sacred' and 'supernatural' come from a Western context and are not always readily applicable to the beliefs of non-Western societies since they carry various culture-bound connotations. Durkheim's claim that religion has to do with the sacred and that this is a universal conception in human society has been challenged by anthropologists. Goody, for example, found that no distinction between sacred and profane is made by a West African people he studied (Goody, 1961). Similarly, Evans-Pritchard found the distinction was not meaningful among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). This is a valuable lesson that anthropology has taught us; that it is often the case that distinctions made in one culture and thought to be basic and obvious are not made in other cultures (Worsley, 1969).

The idea of the sacred or supernatural, then, is one which exists in the mind of the observer and not necessarily of the believer or actor. The distinction might, nevertheless, be a useful analytical one which the anthropologist and sociologist can use to describe and classify their data. Even as an analytical distinction, however, there are problems with it concerning the criteria by which the sacred is distinguished from the profane. Durkheim spoke of 'things set apart and forbidden'. Anthropologists have claimed that this does not aid them in distinguishing a sacred from a profane sphere in the societies they have studied. While many peoples do have a category of things set apart and forbidden, these things are not always those that figure in religious belief and ritual and, on the other hand, things which do figure prominently in religious belief and ritual may not be set apart and forbidden.

Durkheim also speaks of the sacred as commanding an attitude of respect. Unfortunately neither does this provide a reliable criterion since, in many religious systems, religious objects and entities do not always receive respect. Idols, and the gods and spirits they represent, may be punished if they do not produce the benefits they are expected to. Even in a Catholic context, in Southern Italy for example, a saint who does not respond in the desired manner after long and repeated prayers may be severely admonished, the statue turned upside down, even whipped or discarded and replaced with that of another saint. In any case, this criterion is hardly sufficient to distinguish the sacred from the profane, since many things and persons who have nothing to do with religious activities may command respect.

Problems such as these led Goody to reject the attempt to define religion in terms of the sacred:

it is no sounder for the observer to found his categorisation of religious activity upon the universal perception by humanity of a sacred world any more than upon the actor's division of the universe into natural and supernatural spheres, a contention which Durkheim had himself dismissed.  
(Goody, 1961, p. 155)

It certainly seems to offer no advantage over terms like 'supernatural' and 'spiritual'. Others have tried to overcome the difficulties that these entail by using terms which appear to be less culturally specific. Spiro defines religion as an

institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Spiro, 1966, p. 96).

This does not answer the point made by Marett and others in criticism of Tylor that some religious systems may not be concerned with 'beings'. Also, while it includes action as well as belief, in referring to interaction, this might be considered a rather restrictive way of doing so in that it might exclude Buddhism in certain of its interpretations and also certain mystical forms of Hinduism which do not involve 'interaction' as such with the Buddha or any deity. More problematic, however, is its use of the term 'superhuman' rather than 'supernatural' or 'spiritual'. Superhuman beings, Spiro tells us, are beings believed to possess power greater than man, able to work good or ill for man, and which can be influenced by man. Theravada Buddhism is safely included in such a definition since the Buddha can be regarded as superhuman if not supernatural. In any case, the fact that, according to strictly canonical interpretation, the Buddha, having achieved enlightenment, ceased to exist as a distinct entity or ego, need not be a problem since most Buddhists do not think of him that way in practice. If that small minority who are strictly atheistic in their understanding of the nature of the Buddha have to be excluded as not followers of a religion, then so be it. The final point Spiro makes is that most Buddhists believe, in any case, in a whole variety of gods, spirits and demons, the existence of which Buddhism does not repudiate.

While there is no compelling reason to include a major world belief system such as Buddhism as expressed in 'official' doctrines and teachings in the category of religion, it would be odd to exclude it by a definition such as Spiro's. The justification of this procedure in terms of the claim that most Theravada Buddhists misunderstand the nature of the doctrines they ostensibly espouse, or act in ways that imply that they hold beliefs other than those they are assenting to in calling themselves Buddhists, is less than satisfactory on two counts. First, to misunderstand a doctrine or to act in ways that imply assent to a different doctrine, even one which is contradictory, is not the same as rejecting it. If the majority of those who call themselves Theravada Buddhists were to openly repudiate the official teachings, there would be grounds for saying that there are two distinct forms of Theravada Buddhism, only one of which might then qualify for inclusion in the category of 'religion'. There is no evidence, however, that this is so, only that many Buddhists have an imperfect understanding of doctrine while simultaneously holding beliefs which seem to contradict it; not an uncommon situation in many religious traditions.

Second, there seems little justification in giving priority to the interpretations or understandings of the majority above canonical interpretations in order to ensure that 'Buddhism' is included as a religion. Is there any more reason to conclude that canonical Theravada Buddhism is not a religion while popular Theravada Buddhism is than to conclude that those who espouse popular Theravada Buddhism are not really Buddhists, or are imperfect ones? The latter would seem the more reasonable conclusion, in which case Spiro's strategy for getting Theravada Buddhism into the net fails. Also, the fact that he resorts to the

strategy of claiming that most Buddhists believe in all manner of beings other than the Buddha and are, therefore, followers of a religion betrays a certain lack of confidence in his definition. It is precisely because these other beings are, in fact, supernatural that the danger of excluding Buddhism is averted.<sup>7</sup>

The term 'superhuman' is, in any case, not entirely clear. Would it include other very exceptional human beings as well as the Buddha; Napoleon or Hitler, for example? How powerful or extraordinary does a human being have to be to be considered superhuman? Furthermore, as Herbrechtsmeier (1993) points out, the notion of superhuman is culturally specific and to impose it upon the belief systems of others is to introduce a cultural bias and distortion. Ideas about what it is to be human vary widely across cultures and we cannot take it for granted that being 'greater than human' will mean the same thing in different contexts. The unreflective use of the term by Spiro disguises the cultural meaning derived from the Western context that it carries. Finally, as Guthrie (1996) points out, the definition leaves entirely out of account those religious entities that might well be designated sub-human rather than superhuman.

Another attempt to avoid the pitfalls of terms such as 'supernatural' and 'spiritual' is that of Robertson (1970), who uses the term 'super-empirical'. His definition is as follows:

Religious culture is that set of beliefs and symbols (and values deriving directly therefrom) pertaining to a distinction between an empirical and a super-empirical, transcendent reality; the affairs of the empirical being subordinated in significance to the non-empirical. Secondly, we define religious action simply as: action shaped by an acknowledgement of the empirical/super-empirical distinction.

(ibid., p. 47)

It is doubtful if 'super-empirical' is much of an improvement on 'sacred' or 'supernatural'. It is probably more widely applicable than ideas of sacredness or the supernatural but it is questionable whether it is as universally applicable as Robertson believes. Whether or not other cultures acknowledge any distinction between a sacred and profane sphere or between the natural and supernatural, Robertson argues, their beliefs imply the existence of a super-empirical realm, by which he means conceptions which go beyond the readily observable and accessible, which are brought to bear on and relate to the empirical and, to distinguish religion from science and theoretical analyses, which attribute to the non-empirical an 'otherness' which gives it its religious character. This is rather vague and it is very doubtful if this 'otherness', whatever it might be, is implied in all systems of belief one feels should be included in the notion of religion.<sup>8</sup>

Difficulties of the kind that Spiro's and Robertson's definitions run into are inevitable according to another anthropologist, Robin Horton, since they are attempting to do what cannot be done, namely, to imply something about the nature and mode of existence of religious entities whilst simultaneously being universally applicable (Horton, 1960). The diversity of conceptions pertaining to

religious entities is so great, he argues, that any attempt to say anything at all about their nature and mode of existence is bound to render the definition inapplicable to some conceptions; 'we can point to no single ontological or epistemological category which accommodates all religious entities. Secondly, we find that every major ontological and epistemological category we can devise contains religious as well as secular entities' (ibid, p. 205).

Horton, consequently, proposes a definition that avoids any intimation of the nature or mode of existence of religious entities but which is expressed in terms of religious action. He says:

in every situation commonly labelled religious we are dealing with action directed towards objects which are believed to respond in terms of certain categories – in our own culture those of purpose, intelligence and emotion – which are also the distinctive categories for the description of human action. ... The relationships between human beings and religious objects can be further defined as governed by certain ideas of patterning such as categorise relationships among human beings. ... In short, religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness' sake, we should add the rider that this extension must be one in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position *'vis-à-vis'* their non-human alters – a qualification necessary to exclude pets from the pantheon of gods.

(ibid., p. 211)

This definition represents the fullest development of a trend which we have seen exemplified in the other definitions we have considered, namely, to reduce that element which specifies the nature of religious entities to as general a statement as possible and to move towards specification of the kind of relationship that believers have with the realm of the religious. Spiro's emphasis on interaction testifies to this as does the definition offered by Goody, namely, that 'religious beliefs are present when non-human agencies are propitiated *on the human model*' (Goody, 1961, p. 157; italics added). It is significant that it is anthropologists who have moved in this direction. They, more than anyone, are aware of the difficulties of definitions based upon culturally specific terms and of the dangers of ethnocentrism entailed by them. It is important to avoid imposing concepts and categories derived from one culture upon the data pertaining to another which do not fit or which are inappropriate. This is not to say that the sociologist cannot use concepts of his or her own and which are not part of the conceptual universe being analysed, provided that they do not do violence to, distort or misrepresent the beliefs in question (see Runciman, 1970).

### **Functional definitions**

Definitions so far discussed have mostly been of the type known as substantive. They state what kind of thing religion is. The alternative is a functional definition

which states what religion does. Durkheim's definition contains a functional element in referring to religion uniting followers into a single moral community, the church. Functionalist definitions are often characterised as 'inclusive'; that is to say they include a broad range of phenomena within the concept. In fact, by implication, anything which performs the said function or operates in the said way counts as religion even if not conventionally thought of as such. If religion is defined as that which promotes unity or social cohesion, then anything which does this is religion. This inclusiveness is often deliberate. Functionalist definitions are usually linked to a theoretical perspective which seeks to explain religion in terms of an alleged essential integrative role. Often such theorists claim that systems of values and beliefs such as communism, fascism and nationalism function in this way and include them in the category of religion. An example of an inclusive definition is that of Yinger: 'religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life' (1970, p. 7).

The trouble with such definitions is that they are too broad. It seems odd to include belief systems and ideologies which, like communism, are specifically anti-religious. As Scharf says of Yinger's definition, 'it is cast in wide terms which allow almost any kind of enthusiastic purpose or strong loyalty, provided it is shared by a group, to count as religion' (Scharf, 1970, p. 33). For example, fanatical supporters of a football team might, under this definition, be counted as followers of a religion. Members of the fan club of a pop singer might also be considered to be struggling with the ultimate problems of human life which for them might be the pursuit of something which the music and personality of the star seem to provide.

The difficulty, of course, lies in the term 'ultimate problems of human life'. What are they? Who is to say what they are – the sociologist or the believer? Yinger provides a list of examples. Other sociologists tend to provide a rather different list (Campbell, 1971). The ultimate problem of human life might be, for many people, simply how to enjoy it as much as possible, how to avoid pain and ensure pleasure. Campbell points out that what are presented as 'problems' or the 'ultimate problems' in any given society or sub-culture is a cultural variable. We learn to identify what constitutes a problem and since religion is usually an important part of the culture in which this learning takes place, religious conceptions enter into what is and is not defined as a problem. The second difficulty with this type of definition is that it tends to be circular. Penner and Yonan (1972) agree for a closely related reason. The term 'ultimate' in the definition can generally only be defined in terms of religion. Also, they point out, an important criterion for a coherent definition is violated, namely that the definiens (the defining statement) must not be broader than the definiendum (the term to be defined). Clearly, the term 'ultimate' is broader than 'religion' since it connotes what is incapable of further specification.

The third difficulty with such definitions is that they prejudge the important empirical question of the role or effects that religion does have in society by stating in the very definition of it what ought to be demonstrated empirically.

This allows defence, for example, of a functionalist theory which claims that religion is a universal factor in social life because it is essential for the integration of society and the promotion of social stability, against any evidence that could be cited in refutation of it. If a society were to be described in which there did not appear to be any system of religion, the functionalist could reply that absence of something which looked like religion in the conventional sense does not invalidate the theory because any set of values and beliefs which promote integration and stability qualifies as religion. By defining religion at the outset as that which promotes stability, the theory cannot be wrong and no evidence can count against it. It becomes a non-empirical statement which would be true not as a matter of fact but by definition. The possibility of it being false is ruled out of consideration with the consequence that it becomes immune to the test of evidence and loses its explanatory value. It becomes itself a statement of faith and blind to other possibilities such as that religion can be a cause of conflict and instability as much as an integrative force.

Functional definitions should be avoided, therefore, since they prejudge empirical questions which must be resolved by actual enquiry and investigation. If ideologies and belief systems such as communism and nationalism do share characteristics with religions or are found to play a similar social role, they might better be described, as Robertson (1970, p. 39) suggests, by the term surrogate religiosity.

It would seem, then, that a substantive definition is preferable and one which implies as little as possible about the nature of religious entities. Horton's appears to be about the closest one can get although even this is not without areas of uncertainty. It would seem to exclude the more mystical and contemplative forms of belief and practice which are often considered to be religious, unless one sees them as involving communication with the divine, the totality of being, or whatever, since communication is a form of interaction. It hardly takes, in these practices, however, the pattern of human interaction. The definition might thus still fail to apply to Theravada Buddhism. It might also be considered to exclude magical practices. This would not be a disadvantage in the view of many theorists who believe religion and magic are different and should be distinguished. Others see them as inextricably interwoven, however, and would wish to define religion in such a way as to include magic. We shall return to the question of the distinction between magic and religion in a later chapter when it will be argued that while magic and religion are best defined separately, they are, nevertheless, closely related and have to be understood in terms of the same general approach.

### **Polythetic definitions**

Both substantive and functional definitions of religion attempt to state what is common to all religions, that is to specify one or more attributes that a potential candidate for inclusion in the category 'religion' must have in order to qualify for inclusion. As has become abundantly clear in the discussion so far, the central



problem with this approach is that the attempt to draw clear boundaries which demarcate the category always runs up against the obstacle that instances which we intuitively feel should belong are excluded and instances which we feel do not really belong are included. The usual obstacle with respect to exclusion is Buddhism. Horton's definition is, as we have seen, designed to minimise this problem in so far as it avoids terms such as supernatural and superhuman but nevertheless ends up probably failing to include Buddhism. Critics of this approach to the definition of religion claim that the difficulties are inherent. Such monothetic definitions, as they have been termed, can never draw a satisfactory boundary because social reality is simply not like that. It is not conveniently divided and demarcated in such a way that clearly bounded categories can be used to describe it. Monothetic definitions thus always require extensive 'patchwork' as Saler (1993) puts it, often of a somewhat arbitrary kind, in order to rule out or to include what the core definition illegitimately includes or excludes. Horton, for example, has to take specific steps to rule out relationships with pets as being religious.

The answer, according to these critics, is not to attempt to define religion monothetically but polythetically. A polythetic definition is one that designates a class of things that share resemblances with one another but where no single or set of attributes is common to every member of the class. These family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1958) are such that while any particular instance will have in common a number of attributes with some members of the class, it may share no attribute in common at all with others. It is thus a complex network of overlapping instances such that, while every instance overlaps with many others, some do not overlap with one another at all. Overlapping clusters may thus be linked with other overlapping clusters like the links in a chain. As Poole expresses it:

we call something an 'X' because it is very similar in some ways to other phenomena that are properly called 'X's'. X's form a single family held together by the overlapping of many similarities and constituting, by virtue of this unity, a concept.

(1986, p. 427)

The definitional strategy consists in listing the attributes which define the class. An instance qualifies for inclusion if it exhibits a number of these attributes but it is not required that it has all of them. Southwold (1978b) offers the following attributes as a tentative and probably incomplete list:

- 1 A central concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them.
- 2 A dichotomisation of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
- 3 An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence.
- 4 Ritual practices.



- 5 Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faiths – ‘mystical notions’ but without the requirement that they be false.
- 6 An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
- 7 Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.
- 8 A mythology.
- 9 A body of scripture, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
- 10 A priesthood, or similar specialist religious elite.
- 11 Association with a moral community, a church (in Durkheim’s sense).
- 12 Association with an ethnic or similar group.

Buddhism is, of course, safely included as a religion by the use of these attributes since although it may not exhibit a central concern with godlike beings, it is based upon beliefs which are not empirically demonstrable, an ethical code, a body of scripture and a specialist elite. Other religions may lack several of these attributes but can be considered to be religions in that they share a significant number of them. For example, the religions of tribal societies may not have a priesthood or a specialist religious elite and no body of scripture but they may divide reality into the sacred and profane and show a central concern with godlike beings.

The merits of this approach clearly mirror the deficiencies of the monothetic approach. The polythetic approach draws no sharp boundaries, thus avoiding the problems that arise when this is attempted but on the other hand entails a good deal of ambiguity. For example, how many attributes must a potential instance have in order to qualify? Does it have to be a majority or would one do? Does association with an ethnic group alone qualify something as religious? Nationalisms would be included in the category of religion if this were so. How do we know that our list is exhaustive and that crucial attributes have not been left out? Wilson (n.d), for example, offers a list containing twenty-seven such items. On what basis do we include the items that constitute the list? Where do they come from? Does the particular selection chosen reflect an ethnocentric bias? Saler (1993, p. 194) suggests that Southwold’s list reflects the verbal conventions of his fellow anthropologists and non-anthropologists and the way they use the word religion.

Recognising such difficulties, Saler (1993) proposes a somewhat different strategy but one based upon the family resemblance approach. This is known as the prototype approach, the essential idea being that there is some core set of prototypical attributes derived from our experience and knowledge of familiar instances. In the case of religion it is the examples of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that form the basis of our selection of attributes. In prototypical polythetic definitions these instances, or one of them at least, does exhibit all of the attributes that other instances taken together exhibit. We may thus base our conception of what religion is on these cases but not in a constraining manner by insisting that other members of the class share the essential attributes that these three religions share. Other members of the class would be included and the class extended on

the basis of what similarities they have with the prototypical instances, and judgement as to whether these similarities are significant on a case-by-case basis. In this manner, 'diminishing degrees of typicality' (Saler, 1993, p. 220) might be identified rather than strict boundaries drawn.

The problem of prototypical polythetic definitions is that there is a serious danger of ethnocentric or other bias in selecting the prototypical instance (Herbrechtsmeier, 1993; Wiebe, 1995; Guthrie, 1996). This tends to make them too exclusive in contrast to open polythetic definitions which allow expansion of the concept to the extent that almost anything could be said to be religion. One approach tends towards excessive exclusivism and the other towards indiscriminate universalism (B. C. Wilson, 1998).

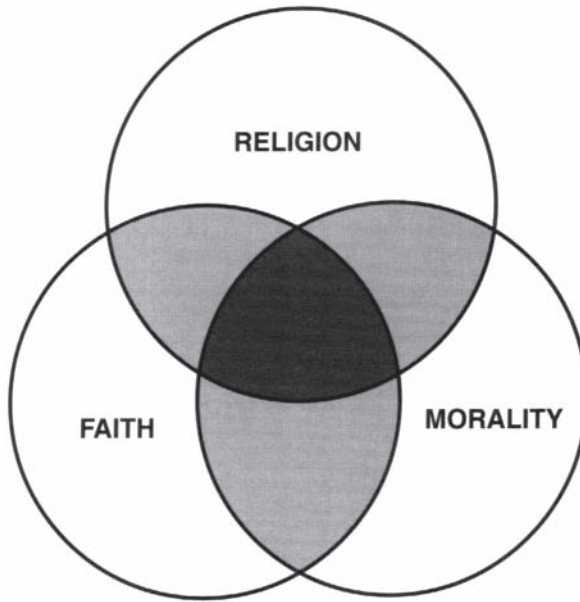
### **A unitary phenomenon?**

This discussion of the definition of religion has not, of course, resolved what is a very difficult question. Its point is not so much, however, to arrive at a final or even very satisfactory definition but rather to highlight a number of important issues: the close and often problematic relationship between definitions and theoretical predilections; the dangers of prejudging empirical issues by definitional fiat; the dangers of ethnocentrism in the use of concepts; the dangers of leaving definitional criteria implicit.

A possible reason for the difficulty encountered by sociology and other disciplines in defining religion might, of course, be the consequence of the fact that it is not possible to capture by the use of a single concept the diversity of what we call in everyday speech religion, probably in inconsistent and contradictory ways. What this points to, perhaps, is the need to define a series of concepts which would collectively cover the range, extending the idea that magic and religion should be so differentiated. In dealing with 'religion' we may be dealing, in fact, with many different things – philosophical systems, cosmologies, systems of morality, even forms of drama, literature and other symbolic representations. Robertson has pointed out that there has been a trend towards breaking up the unitary concept of religion into various dimensions or aspects which may vary independently of one another (Robertson, 1970, pp. 27, 51). As William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remarked, in speaking of the great variety of definitions of religion, that 'the very fact that they are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word "religion" cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name' (James, 1961, p. 39).

As an illustration of this point a possible division is represented in Figure 1.

Religion would essentially be as defined by Horton. Faiths would include those systems of belief and associated practices, philosophies of life, mystical doctrines, etc., which do not involve interaction on the human pattern with the non-human. Finally, we might distinguish moral systems from religions and faiths as being concerned solely with principles and ideals of behaviour. Traditional 'world' religions such as Christianity and Islam are simultaneously religions, faiths and moral systems and fall, consequently, in the centre of the diagram where all



*Figure 1* The relationship between religion, faith and morality

three categories overlap. Other systems of belief might be simultaneously faiths and moral systems but lack the religious element as defined here. Still others might conceivably fall in the area religion/moral system or faith/religion but this is less likely. Many primitive belief systems would fall into the category of pure religion, having no real concern with morality and not being faiths. Some systems of belief might be pure faiths with no element of religion or concern for morality; for example, certain contemporary self-realisation groups and Human Potential movements. Finally, there are moral systems which embody no element of religion and which cannot be described as faiths, for example, humanism.

This is by no means suggested as a definitive scheme but merely as an illustration. Both the categories and the terms used to designate them are only tentatively suggested. Other or different divisions and categories may be more useful or fruitful in the objective and sociological study of religion and related phenomena. The point is that progress may depend upon a readiness to redesign our conceptual categories in appropriate ways.

## 2 Religion and reason

It is convenient to divide types of explanation of religion into psychological and sociological theories and the former again into intellectualist and emotionalist theories. Such a division is utilised by Evans-Pritchard (1965) who points out, however, that it is only a crude classification since some do not fall neatly into a single type, but it will serve to organise the material of this chapter. It also reflects, if very approximately, the historical succession of theoretical approaches. In this chapter we shall examine psychological theories of the intellectualist variety. Psychological theories hold that religion is an affair of the individual and springs from sources within the individual, whereas sociological theories hold that religion is an affair of the group or society and that individual religiosity stems from social sources. Intellectualist psychological theories interpret religion as stemming essentially from human reason while emotionalist theories trace the roots of religion to the emotional side of human nature.

Intellectualist psychological theories see religion as the product of the human tendency to seek to understand the world and of human reason and capacity to deduce, generalise and draw conclusions from observation and experience. The intellectualist approach was one of the earliest to be formulated and, reflecting the intellectual trends of the time, namely the nineteenth century, took a strongly evolutionary character. Its roots, however, go back even further, to the Enlightenment of the previous century. The most important intellectualist thinkers were Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Sir Edward Tylor and Sir James Frazer.<sup>1</sup>

### AUGUSTE COMTE

Comte's evolutionary scheme of the development of human thought, which he thought was the key to the development of society, was set out in his *Cours de Philosophie Positive (The Positive Philosophy)* published between the years 1830 and 1842. In this he set out his 'law of the three stages' which states that in the intellectual development of humanity there are three distinct stages, namely, theological, metaphysical and positive.

In the first stage, the theological, thoughts and ideas about reality are essentially religious in nature. The metaphysical stage is a transitional stage between the

theological and positive stages, the latter representing modern scientific thought. In the theological stage natural phenomena are believed to have a life and personality of their own similar to those of human beings. Natural phenomena are explained and understood by likening them to human behaviour; they are seen as having a will and as acting intentionally.

Comte further divides the theological stage into three sub-stages. In the first, fetishism, all things, even inanimate objects, are believed to be animated by a life or soul like that of human beings. This, Comte argued, underlies all religious thought and was perfectly understandable when seen in the context of early human development. It was quite reasonable and logical to generalise from human nature and experience to the rest of reality, to see all things as having the same essential nature, and to conclude, in the absence of any better knowledge, that this nature would be much like that with which they were most familiar, namely their own.

In the second sub-stage, polytheism, material things are no longer seen as animated by an indwelling life or soul. Matter is seen as inert in itself but subject to the external will of a supernatural agent. Belief in supernatural or divine agencies arose as a consequence of the human capacity and tendency to generalise. Supernatural agencies were progressively attributed with more general spheres of jurisdiction. They were increasingly seen as not attached to specific objects but manifest in all objects of a particular kind or belonging to a given category. The process goes something like this. At first it is believed that in every single oak tree there is an indwelling spirit. But because all oak trees are alike it comes to be believed that there is a general spirit governing all oak trees. Then, because all trees are similar, it is concluded that there must be a spirit which governs all trees. In this way a conception of a god of the forest grows up and also conceptions of other gods. This is the stage of polytheism in which a pantheon of gods and deities with power to affect the world and human beings is worshipped and propitiated. At this stage a priesthood emerges whose task it is to mediate between the human realm and the gods. This priesthood constitutes a new class freed from normal toil and able to spend time in thought, contemplation and speculation. With the emergence of the priesthood we see the emergence of learning.

Taken a step further, the process which led from fetishism to polytheism leads logically on to the final sub-stage of the theological phase, namely monotheism. This is characterised by the development of the great world religions and the emergence of distinct religious organisations such as the church.

From this monotheistic stage human thought passes through the transitional metaphysical stage in which spirits and deities give way to more abstract conceptions of general principles or forces which govern reality. This, in turn, gives way to the scientific thought of the positive stage which seeks to explain reality in terms of causal laws and generalisations.

Comte, however, did not think that with the arrival of science, religion would disappear entirely. Religion, he thought, was not only an attempt to explain and understand reality but also the unifying principle of human society. In effect, Comte, as Preus (1987) has pointed out, produced two theories of religion, each

rooted in one side of his paradoxical sense of his times. On the one hand, he believed in the inexorable progress of knowledge and mastery of nature but, on the other, he feared a social crisis and breakdown. The first produced his evolutionary theory in which religion was the first stage in the advance of human thought; the second led him to see society as requiring an ordering, regulating and unifying authority or power, and the name of religion being attached to whatever fulfilled this function.

If, then, traditional religion must vanish with the growth of science, it would have to be replaced with a new form of religion based upon sound scientific principles. Since the science which is concerned with understanding the principles of social unity and cohesion is sociology, then the new religion would be a kind of applied sociology and the sociologist would be the high priest of this new secular creed. So seriously did Comte hold this view that he even devised the robes and vestments that the sociological priesthood would wear, the rituals they would perform and actually founded a Church of Positivism, of which one or two branches still survive.

In this Comte differs from most of those who followed him who, for the most part, believed religion would disappear entirely in a modern rational society. For them, reason alone would govern conduct and they would have thought Comte's sociological religion with its priesthood, robes and rituals absurd. But like Comte they too believed religion to be a product of reason and of the human capacity to generalise in an attempt to understand and explain the world. Like Comte they too took an evolutionary approach and were concerned to reconstruct the manner in which our early ancestors perceived and understood their world. They were interested in characterising the most primitive and simple or earliest forms of religious conception from which they believed all later and more complex forms developed. In this way they believed it would be possible to uncover the roots which have nourished and still nourish the religious mentality. Writers like Spencer, Tylor and Frazer turned to primitive societies to find these roots since such societies, they thought, represent survivals from the early periods of human and social development.

## HERBERT SPENCER

Herbert Spencer's ideas on the origins and roots of religion were set out in his monumental *Principles of Sociology* published between 1876 and 1896. Spencer posed the question of why primitive peoples believed in things such as spirits, magic, and so on, ideas which were clearly false and mistaken. Spencer did not conclude that primitive people were irrational but that since they had to operate on a basis of very limited knowledge, the, albeit mistaken, inferences they made about the world were understandable and reasonable.

A very important yet common experience that our primitive ancestors would have had, from which certain inferences would have been made, Spencer argued, was that of dreaming. For our primitive ancestors dreaming must have been like

living in a separate reality not governed by the same limiting forces and laws of everyday existence. In dreams great distances could be traversed in a moment, one could go back in time, and meet those long dead. This would have suggested that we have a dual nature, that there is another aspect to the self – a dream self or soul. It would have further been inferred that if human beings have such a dual nature, then all things would have one. All things in the world, both animate and inanimate, would, in primitive thought, be believed to have a soul or spirit. In the same way as Comte characterised early thought as fetishist, Spencer postulates the existence of a primal stage of human thought in which indwelling souls govern and determine the nature and behaviour of all reality. But for Spencer, the roots of religious thought lay in the more specific idea of ghosts. In meeting and speaking with the dead in dreams, it was suggested to the primitive mind that the spirit or soul in some way survives death. The first supernatural beings who were worshipped, according to Spencer, were the souls or ghosts of the dead. The idea of the ghost developed into the idea of divinities who were dead ancestors and, in particular, remote and mythologised ancestors who had founded distinct social groupings, such as clans and tribes. These ancestors were conceived as important, powerful and remarkable individuals who, after death, became gods who had to be recognised, respected and propitiated. Ancestor worship, then, Spencer thought, was the earliest form of religion and lies at the root of all religion. From it developed all the world's great religions. Terms and conceptions used in such systems of belief reflect this origin. In Christianity, for example, is there not a belief in the Holy Ghost?

Correspondingly, the earliest rituals would have been those performed at death when the spirit passes on to the world of the ancestors, namely, funerary rites. In discussing these, Spencer's account takes a markedly less intellectualist psychological tenor and a rather more sociological, indeed functionalist, turn. Funerary rites were a source of cohesion in society and the religious institutions which developed later became the bearers of tradition and the upholders of social stability.

Despite this functionalist element, Spencer constructed a picture of the origins of religion which placed in the central position the capacity and tendency of the human mind to reason and draw inferences from observation and experience, and the desire to understand and explain the world. In constructing this picture, Spencer utilised, as Evans-Pritchard (1965) has pointed out, a process of introspection by which he attempted to place himself mentally in the position of a human being living during the early period of the evolution of the species and to imagine how it would have been and how one would have thought. Herein lies the weakness of the approach but, before examining its deficiencies, the rather similar ideas of Edward Tylor will be outlined.

## **SIR EDWARD TYLOR**

Tylor's theories of the origins of religion appeared in his general study of primitive society, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, of which they form a considerable



part. It was Tylor who coined the term 'animism' which was, he argued, the earliest and most fundamental form of religion from which all others have evolved and he defined religion, as we have seen, as 'belief in spiritual beings'. The earliest conception of spiritual beings, he thought, was the animistic one of indwelling souls. Reality could be controlled and manipulated by controlling and affecting these spiritual entities. Animism was the theoretical aspect of the first belief system while magic was its practical technology.

Tylor agreed with Spencer in that he speculated that the source of such notions lay in the experience of dreams and visions. He agreed also that it was the human capacity and tendency to generalise that led to the attribution of souls to all things, or, in other words, to animism. Tylor drew also upon the views of the philosopher David Hume who had made, in his *Natural History of Religion*, first published in 1757, the following observation: 'It is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted and of which they are intimately conscious' (Hume, 1976, p. 33). This is, of course, the same claim that Comte made about the fetishist stage of intellectual development.

Since the spiritual beings with which early humans populated the world derived from a human model, Tylor reasoned that they would be attributed with human characteristics such as intention, purpose, will. Certain of them, however, namely those governing major aspects of nature, were believed to be vastly superior to humans and much more powerful and able, therefore, to control their fate. They had to be propitiated, persuaded, cajoled in much the same way that other human beings are treated – by appeal, entreaty, giving gifts, the religious counterparts of which are prayer and sacrifice.

Tylor distinguished between religion and magic, which he saw as based not upon belief in spiritual beings but in impersonal powers and forces. Magic operates, he argued, on the principle of likeness and association. Things which resemble one another, in magical thought, are believed to be causally connected with one another. By operating upon or using something in certain ways the magician thinks it is possible to affect those things it resembles. Magic is, therefore, rather like science but based upon false reasoning. He did not see it as irrational but as understandable in the circumstances of ignorance and lack of sound knowledge of the real connections between things.

## SIR JAMES FRAZER

Tylor's ideas on primitive magic influenced the work of Sir James Frazer who achieved a certain fame for his enormous study *The Golden Bough*, published in 1890.<sup>2</sup> Frazer adopted an evolutionary scheme similar to that of Comte and which reflected the conceptual distinction between magic, religion and science that Tylor espoused. There have been three main stages of intellectual development, Frazer argued, namely, the magical, the religious and the scientific.



Frazer, like Tylor, characterised magical beliefs and practices as being a kind of primitive science and technology, but one based upon mistaken reasoning which was the consequence of ignorance rather than irrationality and which was reasonable given the conditions under which our primitive ancestors had to operate. Also, like Tylor, he thought that magical thought involved association of ideas in which certain types of perceived connection or association were taken to indicate real causal connections between things.

Frazer distinguished between two kinds of magic, homeopathic or imitative and contagious. In the former, because two things are perceived to be similar, it is concluded that they must be connected such that, for example, what is done to one will take effect upon the other. Thus if a wax effigy of someone is made and a pin is thrust through it, then harm will be caused to the individual it resembles. Contagious magic is based upon the belief that if two things have been in intimate contact, then action performed upon one will affect the other. For example, the hair or nail clippings of someone could be used to harm them by burning them whilst casting the appropriate spell.

Since such techniques do not actually produce the desired effects, Frazer went on to argue, in the course of time resort was made to other beliefs and practices, namely, those of religion. Religion is based upon the analogy of human conduct, according to Frazer. The manipulative techniques of magic give way to supplication and propitiation of spirits. By a process of projection the faculties and powers of human beings are attributed to postulated supernatural beings who can be induced, by various means, to aid humans in their purposes.

Finally, as more and more is discovered of the real nature of the material world, religion itself begins to decline and to be replaced by solid scientific knowledge. This evolutionary development is, for Frazer, then, not simply one of progressive development since magic, though mistaken, is more akin in its logic to science than to religion which is, so to speak, a side-track in evolutionary development. Nor are these stages seen by Frazer as being marked by clear lines of division in time. Religion and even magic survive into the scientific age and are only progressively replaced. The prevalence of magic decreased during the stage of religious thought but it is not entirely extinguished, vestiges remaining even in the scientific age. Religion lives on but progressively loses its hold upon the human mind until eventually fading away as we find we have no further use for it.

## **CRITICISMS OF THE CLASSIC INTELLECTUALISTS**

One of the major objections that may be made to these nineteenth-century intellectualist, evolutionary theorists is that their claims were not based upon sound evidence but were largely conjectural. As we have seen in discussing Spencer, one of the methods used was that of introspection, an unreliable way, to say the least, of acquiring knowledge of the mentality of early man. Evans-Pritchard refers to such a procedure as the 'if I were a horse fallacy'. A logical construction of the scholar's mind is posited on primitive man, and put forward as the explanation of his beliefs' (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 25). Certainly, there

seems no reason to suppose that our primitive ancestors would have interpreted their dreams in the way Spencer and Tylor claimed they must have. Why should they not have dismissed them simply as dreams as we do?

The fact is that there is no evidence that early man was animistic in mentality, or that there were three stages of mental development in which religion replaced magic before giving way to science. Unfortunately we have little or no evidence at all relating to the beliefs and mentality of early human society, there being very few material remains pertaining to such things and those artefacts which have survived are of uncertain meaning and significance. The evidence from contemporary 'primitive' societies used by these writers is illegitimately taken to indicate the kinds of belief and practices that would have characterised early human beings. We simply do not know whether they have developed through time and cannot assume that they represent survivals of the primitive past. In any case, the ethnographic detail upon which these writers relied was fragmentary, unreliable and wrenched out of context. Such a method entails grave dangers of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. A criticism that can be made of them, for example, is that they all too easily assume that reported practices were nothing other than attempts to produce desired results. We know from more recent and more reliable fieldwork done since their day that many of the beliefs and practices of tribal peoples are of this kind, but equally it would be wrong to see them all as being of this nature or to see them as solely of this nature. They may, for example, have an expressive dimension (see Phillips, 1976). The possibility that there might be a lot more to such beliefs and practices than the view which sees them as mere mistakes is suggested by the fact that magic is not relied upon by tribal peoples to produce desired results. If it were, they would never have survived. For the most part they use ordinary everyday empirical techniques. They do not expect crops to grow by magical means without planting seeds, watering, weeding, protecting from parasites, and so on. They do not, in short, mistake connections which exist in the mind for real causal connections all the time or in the course of everyday activity. Magic is either reserved for special circumstances or is an adjunct to ordinary techniques. Finally, the ethnographic evidence does not support Tylor or Frazer. The simplest societies, the hunter-gatherers, are not especially animistic, as Tylor's theories would lead us to expect. If anything, they are less animistic than many horticultural and agricultural societies. Nor do they manifest a preponderance of magic over religion as Frazer's theories would suggest. Despite their deficiencies, however, these pioneering studies of the intellectualist theorists have made a lasting contribution to our understanding of magical and religious thought. Although their ideas were very much out of favour during the 1950s and 1960s, many anthropologists and sociologists have returned to them. They continue to find their characterisation of magic and religion as concerned with explanation, understanding and desire to control the world to contain more than a grain of truth, even if the more specific claims of the intellectualists concerning the manner of origination of such ideas and their evolutionary schemes are rejected as unacceptable (Horton, 1993). We shall examine this 'neo-Tyloreanism' or 'neo-Frazerianism' in the next section.

## CONTEMPORARY INTELLECTUALISM

Despite its deficiencies, the intellectualist approach to religion incorporated key insights which remain central for some contemporary theorists. It also underlies a very recent trend which emphasises the cognitive dimension of religion as fundamental and which, while in many respects somewhat different from classic intellectualism, is very much heir to it.

The leading contemporary exponent of intellectualism is the anthropologist Robin Horton whose definition of religion was discussed in the previous chapter (Horton, 1960). It is clearly a definition which both lends itself to and reflects an underlying intellectualism. To say that religion is the extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society is strongly reminiscent of Hume's claim, taken up by Comte and the other intellectualists, that religion is essentially an attempt to understand and make sense of the world upon the familiar model of human characteristics. Horton's definition implies that religion is fundamentally anthropomorphism. One can only interact with aspects of the non-human world on the pattern of human interaction if one assumes that such aspects of the non-human world are capable of interacting with us in a human way; that is to say that they have at least some characteristics which are essentially those which humans have.

Horton, however, jettisons the evolutionary speculations of the nineteenth-century intellectualists and their introspective methods. His views are based upon sound and extensive fieldwork experience in African societies and relate to the general characteristics of magic and religion, not to their origins in some distant ancestral past. Throughout his work he has been concerned with comparing traditional systems of magic and religion with Western thought and views of the world, both religious and scientific. Following the parallel between the pattern of human relationships and religious relationships, Horton perceives a polarity in the latter between relatively instrumental relationships and relatively affective ones. Human relationships can be placed somewhere along the dimension of purely 'manipulative' relationships and those characterised purely in terms of 'communion', as he puts it. Manipulative relationships are those in which the other parties to it are purely means to an end, as in business relationships, for example. Communion refers to relationships entered into for their own sake and for gratification which is intrinsic to the relationship. Religious systems will reflect this division, some being more focused upon instrumental concerns and some more upon communion.

Horton's work has been largely focused upon the manipulative dimension to the relative neglect, by his own admission (1993), of communion. This is to some extent the result of the fact that he is an anthropologist who has worked in traditional African societies. To some extent, also, it is because he sees the manipulative dimension as fundamental to religion. It is, he argues, necessary and sufficient while communion is neither necessary nor sufficient but an optional extra (*ibid.*, p. 373). He has, therefore, tended to emphasise the way that in traditional societies the business of magic and religion is explanation, prediction

and control (Horton, 1970). In small-scale, traditional, tribal societies it is control of those natural forces which affect people materially that is the primary concern of religious and magical ideas and practices since such societies have limited technical control over such forces. In large, complex contemporary societies control over such forces is much more extensive but unlike traditional societies they are less capable of providing intimacy, friendship and community. It is, therefore, these things with which religion is primarily concerned in the individualistic, alienated and lonely conditions of the contemporary world.

Horton's approach is worked out largely in the context of his examination of traditional African religion and magic, and particularly the latter, and how it differs from Western science. This will be examined more extensively in the next chapter but in essence his argument is that traditional magical and religious systems are in certain key respects much like Western science. They are attempts to understand the world and how it works, the better to control and use it for human purposes. Where they differ from modern science is that they are relatively closed systems of ideas which are seldom exposed to criticism or to alternative views, while science operates in an open environment of constant questioning, testing and consequent revision. Religious systems are conservative and defend themselves against change while science is progressive and constantly developing. It is an argument that has proven controversial and which has generated much debate, as will be clear in the next chapter. What is relevant to note here is that the parallel between traditional magic and Western science is one which another contemporary intellectualist-inspired theorist challenges, namely, Stewart Guthrie.

Guthrie (1993, 1996, 1997) adopts a cognitive approach to the study of religion which focuses squarely on anthropomorphism as essentially characteristic of it. Horton, in Guthrie's view, does not follow through his insights in his definition of religion, treating the anthropomorphic character of religion relatively superficially. But if religion is attempting to explain, predict and control aspects of nature by extending the pattern of human interaction beyond the confines of the human world, then anthropomorphism is central to it.

Guthrie argues that anthropomorphism, in the sense of attributing human attributes to things which are not human, is a fundamental and pervasive human trait built firmly into our perceptual structures and mechanisms. It is, in fact, characteristic of animals as well as of humans; a fundamental feature of perception *per se*. It is so because it has survival value in evolutionary terms. Cognitive psychology has shown us that we do not simply see things; we see them *as* things. That is to say our brains actively construct interpretations of visual (and other) stimuli forming possibilities of what the object might be. Visual stimuli are inherently ambiguous and uncertain, sometimes less so but at other times strikingly so. In the process we have a marked tendency to look for possibilities that are of particular interest or importance for us. What is of most interest and importance for us are other human beings. We thus tend to look for and to perceive in visual stimuli first and foremost evidence of another human being. We thus tend inevitably to see faces in the clouds, a man in the moon, constellations in the stars, human forms in the shadows. So shapes on a horizon might well be seen as

human even though on closer inspection they turn out to be just stunted trees or rocks. If we are correct, however, in supposing that they are human we are likely to benefit more than if we assume them to be non-human since, if they do turn out to be human, they may be able to help us; give us food or water, for example. Or they may be hostile and best avoided. Either way there is a potential advantage to us in making the assumption. If we are wrong and they turn out to be trees or rocks we have not lost anything very much. Evolution, then has predisposed us perceptually to be highly attuned to humans and perhaps also to animals which are the sources of food and often dangerous. Better to see the distant rock of a certain shape as a potentially dangerous bear than as a rock.<sup>3</sup>

The source of religious conceptions is this proclivity, indeed necessity, to anthropomorphise. It is so fundamental it pervades our lives. We anthropomorphise more or less seriously or playfully in many aspects of life. We almost cannot help seeing certain inanimate objects as human-like. We have a tendency to perceive nature and the world as somehow embodying a personality, will and purpose along the lines of human personality, will and purpose. We perceive 'organisation, communication and moral order where they do not exist: figures in constellations of stars, signs in comets and punishment in plagues' (Guthrie, 1999, p. 410). The gods are seen by all but a few desupernaturalised 'religions' as essentially human in character. Those systems of ideas which are purely philosophical and ethical, such as certain understandings of Theravada Buddhism, for example, or which have become desupernaturalised, such as contemporary demythologised Christianity, are not true religions, in Guthrie's view.

Guthrie's approach, though it shares much with that of Horton, differs crucially from it in seeing both religion and magic as very different from science. Science has strenuously sought, relatively if not entirely successfully, to eradicate anthropomorphism which has been anathema to it. It is this difference which makes religion conservative and science progressive and not the closed versus open environment that Horton identifies as the reason. Religion involves relationships with the gods and to doubt them or to question what is believed to come from them is to undermine and damage a profoundly important relationship. The virtue of scepticism in science is a dangerous vice in religion.

Again, while sharing much with Horton's intellectualism, Guthrie's approach differs sufficiently significantly from it to suggest that the label of intellectualism is not appropriate. The anthropomorphic impulse upon which religion is based is not an intellectual one in the normal understanding of this term. It is not conscious, reflective and deliberative but operates at a deeper and more basic level. Horton's approach, Guthrie points out, places too much emphasis upon rational, conscious, reflective cerebral processes. This has always been the problem with intellectualism and it has earned it much criticism from those who have stressed the emotional, experiential and less rational side of religion (see Chapter 4). Guthrie's approach, he claims, avoids such connotations and can do justice to the less rational, experiential, unconscious dimensions of religion.

Guthrie's theory is, by the current standards regarding the stance sociology should and must take to the truth claims of religion, very controversial. As

anthropomorphism, religion is in essence based upon a mistaken view of the world. It attributes characteristics to reality, or to aspects of reality, that it plainly does not have. For many, as the discussion in Chapter 1 would clearly indicate, this seriously misconstrues the nature of religious propositions and beliefs. For Guthrie, of course, the kind of propositions such critics have in mind are not fundamentally religious in character, thereby raising all the issues regarding the definition of religion discussed in Chapter 1.

But as was argued in Chapter 1, methodological atheism should not be taken so far as to rule out the possibility of explanations of religion which assume the falsehood of its propositions. Guthrie's theory is very challenging in this respect. A key problem with it, however, lies in its grounding in perceptual processes. Guthrie presents very persuasive arguments regarding the active and interpretive character of visual and other forms of perception. But the implication is that because we tend to see natural phenomena very often *as* human-like, that this is the source of our *conceptual* systems of belief which constitute religion. The implication is that our conceptions of gods derive ultimately from perceptual mistakes. Religion is, however, not primarily about how we see (and hear and feel) the world or experience it in a tangible way but about how we think about the world and experience it in an affective way. What evolutionary advantage would there have been in thinking about the world anthropomorphically as opposed to perceiving it visually in this way? While there might be some advantage in perceiving a rock as a bear, what advantage would there be in seeing punishment in plagues? While it might be the case that the outcome of the evolution of our visual system is an automatic and inescapable tendency to perceive the world anthropomorphically, are our thoughts and theories about the world as inevitably anthropomorphic? Do we not rather in our thoughts about our experience impose anthropomorphism upon it and not automatically but only after and through considerable deliberation?

Guthrie touches upon this matter only in the context of the invisibility of gods and deities. He is well aware that we do not, for the most part, see the gods. His answer is to point out that invisibility is not peculiar to religious entities. Animals are often not very visible either because they remain hidden, use camouflage, and so on. But this rather misses the point. With religious propositions we are often dealing with conceptual matters not perceptual ones at all. It is not so much that one cannot see gods and deities but rather that they are not the sort of thing which can necessarily be seen or which it makes any sense to think of as see-able. To this sort of objection Guthrie appears to argue that many gods are visible. But, again, the point is that they may well not be so and not so in principle and by their nature. One suspects that Guthrie would be tempted to say that such conceptions of gods are not truly religious conceptions but philosophical and ethical abstractions. He might have a point but it does not follow from the fact that some 'religious' conceptions of this kind may well not be truly religious according to the definition of religion used, that all conceptions of this kind are not religious. God as a creator, for example, might have nothing at all to do with the way we process perceptual information to create a meaningful picture of

what might be before our eyes, and everything to do with the conceptual processes by which we seek to make sense of our experience in terms of beginnings, the passage of time and of endings. The model used may or may not be based, in Humean fashion, upon a familiar human characteristic such as the capacity to make things, but even if it was, it would be one which stems from our knowledge and experience of ourselves and not upon the psychological processes involved in perception.

There is a lacuna in Guthrie's theory, then, which would have to be filled if it is to stand up as a general theory of religion. He would have to show how the human tendency to anthropomorphise in perception is translated into a corresponding tendency to anthropomorphise in conception whilst avoiding the pitfalls of classic intellectualism and particularly of the Humean familiarity model which he specifically rejects. Guthrie makes a connection between our tendency to anthropomorphise in our perceptual strategies and the frequently anthropomorphic language and understandings of religion, assuming that the latter derives from the former. He does not, however, substantiate this assumption.

Again, close to the intellectualist position in its emphasis upon cognitive processes but, as with Guthrie, differing from it in certain key aspects, is the approach of Lawson and McCauley (1990). They dub themselves somewhat tentatively as neo-intellectualists. Their theory is actually a theory of ritual but for them religion is essentially ritual. They define a religious system as a 'symbolic-cultural system of ritual acts accompanied by an extensive and largely shared conceptual scheme that includes culturally postulated superhuman agents' (*ibid.*, p. 5). Their explanatory approach to religion thus defined shares with intellectualism an emphasis upon systems of religious ideas as essentially cognitive models which have the form of explanations. Where they differ from the intellectualism of Horton is that they do not consider these cognitive models to be actual attempts to explain or to be very much at all like science and the way it seeks to explain. Religious systems are a means of ordering a wide range of experience which would otherwise appear to be meaningless and incomprehensible. They do not consist of testable empirical propositions but of highly flexible and indeterminate ideas which are largely immune to evidence and consistent with any possible actual state of affairs. In this sense they are not really explanations of anything and have no concrete reference to reality but are rather self-referential systems which present endless opportunities, unconstrained by reference to the real world, for forms of understanding and making sense of experience.

Intellectualism, then, seems to be generating a variety of offspring<sup>4</sup> and to continue to offer and to promise further insights into religion. It has been most systematically applied to the understanding of magic and in the next chapter we examine the debates that have surrounded the intellectualist and symbolist interpretations of magical ritual.



# 3 Magic

## INTRODUCTION

We tend to associate magic with traditional tribal, pre-industrial or pre-modern societies. Modern societies are usually perceived as ones in which scientific and technological rationality prevail so thoroughly as to yield no place to magical thought and behaviour. They are 'disenchanted' in the original and literal sense in which Max Weber used the term to refer to a diminution of the magical and mysterious realm. Apart from the predominance of science and technology, the fact that modern societies are largely Western societies and Christian by tradition and that Christianity, to a very considerable extent, eliminated the magical dimension, further explains the association between magic and 'primitive' or traditional societies. The fact that those societies which became modern earliest are Protestant by tradition and Protestantism in particular took a stringent anti-magical stance further reinforces this association.

On the other hand, it could be argued that magic has never been eradicated from modern societies. It survives in the form of superstition, forms of divination such as reading horoscopes, resort to alternative therapies, treatments, and so on. Some would point to an extensive revival of magic in contemporary culture with a marked intensification of interest in holistic and alternative medicine, the paranormal and the rise of New Age and neo-Paganism.<sup>1</sup>

However, magical beliefs and behaviour, while by no means confined to 'primitive' or tribal societies, have been studied in most detail largely by anthropologists working in this type of society. The neo-Tyloreans and their critics have tended to be anthropologists with direct and first-hand experience of such societies and their understanding has been based upon such experience.

In Western eyes the magical practices of tribal peoples appeared, when they were first observed and described, to be highly irrational. The initial reaction to the intriguing, puzzling and even seemingly bizarre beliefs and practices of tribal peoples reported by travellers, missionaries, settlers or colonial administrators, was perhaps to dismiss them as the product of sheer backwardness and savagery. Even when more serious studies of them began to be made, they tended to be seen as representative of a primitive stage of human thought, the product of a



primitive mentality and pre-logical in character, as, for example by Levy-Bruhl (1922, 1926, [1960]) or, as we have seen, as pre-scientific by Tylor and Frazer.

Later, the more detailed and careful work of anthropologists who conducted intensive fieldwork among tribal peoples showed that these ideas were inadequate to aid understanding of their magical belief and practice. These peoples were observed to be as logical as ourselves and their reasoning processes to be of the same character as our own. Their practical knowledge of their environment and how to survive in it was shown to be very extensive, detailed and sophisticated. Also, the anthropologists reminded us that there were many beliefs and practices common in the 'civilised' societies which were not in essence any different from those found in 'primitive' societies and which would appear to the inhabitants of many an African tribe to be as strange, irrational and bizarre as some of their beliefs appeared to Europeans. While Christianity had tended to reduce the element of magic in religious thought, it had by no means eradicated it and had its own mysteries such as the idea of the virgin birth. Outside the realm of religion as such, superstitions of all kinds abounded in allegedly rational, scientific, technically advanced cultures. If there was a difference between the more advanced civilised societies and tribal societies, it was merely a quantitative rather than a qualitative one. The evolutionary approaches of nineteenth-century thinkers, who had for the most part done little or no fieldwork and had no direct experience of tribal societies, fell into disfavour and gave way to the functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and their followers. Tribal peoples could not be treated as museum exhibits representative of some ancient past, this new generation of fieldworkers argued. Their beliefs and customs were not survivals from a distant past but an integral part of living and flourishing cultures. They had to be understood in terms of the role they played in such living systems.

If tribal peoples, then, were not to be characterised by a special and mystical mode of thought, if they were well aware of the causal links between things and could operate perfectly rationally and effectively in technical matters, in producing the requirements of life, in mastering the elements and materials of their environment, how could sense be made of their magical and other 'strange' beliefs and practices? There seemed to be a tremendous gap between their everyday activity, on the one hand, and the prominence of magical thought and practices, on the other.

Contemporary anthropology attempted to solve this problem by treating magical and related practices as essentially symbolic behaviour and as having functional significance. While it was clear that most practitioners of magic in tribal societies genuinely believed in the efficacy of their techniques and practised them to bring about concrete, material results, anthropologists nevertheless emphasised their symbolic character and the social functions of the behaviour as the real rationale behind them.

More recently the difficulties involved in the functionalist and symbolic approach (see Chapter 10) have led a number of anthropologists to reconsider the approach of Tylor and Frazer. These neo-Tyloreans, while rejecting the

evolutionism and speculative character of the nineteenth-century writers, have revived the view that magical beliefs and practices must be interpreted as attempts to explain, understand and control reality. In other words, they are a set of ideas and practices in many respects akin to science and technology, and not essentially symbolic and expressive. These opposing points of view have stimulated a lively debate in anthropological and philosophical circles. Before examining this debate some general points about the character of magic as opposed to religion must be made.

## THE DEFINITION OF MAGIC

The functionalist/symbolic approach applies equally well to both magic and religion whereas the neo-Tyloreans are mainly concerned with magic. However, magical practices are often closely related to religious beliefs and are frequently a part of religious rituals. It is not always possible, in any given instance, to distinguish between magic and religion.

Malinowski's distinction is probably the most useful. Magic is always related to some concrete purpose or definite outcome which the practitioner wishes to achieve. Religion, on the other hand, aims at no particular purpose or end result. 'While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim are always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event' (1974, p. 38). The rituals involved in religion are not designed to bring about or cause some effect. Religious rituals are performed for their own sake. 'The ceremony and its purpose are one' and 'the end is realised in the very consummation of the act' (*ibid.*, p. 40). Magic is a 'practical art consisting of acts which are only means to a definite end expected to follow later on' while religion is 'a body of self-contained acts being themselves the fulfilment of their purpose' (*ibid.*, p. 88). A rite designed to prevent death during childbirth differs from a rite which celebrates the birth of a child in that the former aims at a definite end result while the latter has no further aim apart from the expression of sentiments in and through the rite itself.

In reality, Malinowski's categories are rarely found in pure form but are very much intermingled. Practices often embody elements of each although usually they lean more in one direction than the other. A more elaborate attempt to define magic as distinct from religion which uses the technique of separating out the magical from the religious aspects of a practice is that of Goode (1951). While recognising that there is no sharp dividing line between them, Goode lists eleven criteria by which the magical aspect can be distinguished from the religious. They are as follows:

- 1 Magic is more instrumental, aiming at end results of a concrete and material kind.
- 2 Its goals are specific and limited.
- 3 It is more manipulative in its techniques.

- 4 It is directed at individual rather than at group goals.
- 5 It is more a matter of private practice than a group activity.
- 6 It is more susceptible to substitution of techniques – if one does not work, another is tried.
- 7 It involves less emotion.
- 8 Its practice is less obligatory.
- 9 It is less tied to specific times and occasions.
- 10 It is potentially more anti-social.
- 11 It is used only instrumentally and is not an end in itself.

A second general point to note about magic is that the concept is, of course, one which belongs to a particular cultural tradition – our own – which other cultures may or may not share. Other societies do not always possess such a concept and have no notion of a distinct category of magic with its connotations of special and mysterious forces. In many societies, practices which we would be inclined to categorise as magical on the grounds that they have no sound empirical foundation, are regarded as perfectly ordinary empirical techniques involving no extra-mundane forces. Firth (1939), for example, reports that Malay fishermen burn incense on the prows of their boats to attract fish to their nets. This is not seen in any way as a magical act. Although Malays do have a concept rather like our own concept of magic, this particular practice does not belong to it but is in their eyes an ordinary mundane technique that just happens to work. We, on the other hand, are inclined to believe that it does not work but we would be quite wrong to treat it as an instance of magic since this would be to impose categories, and therefore meanings, upon the practice which are quite alien to those it has for its practitioners. It would imply that it is an action which makes use of extraordinary and mysterious powers and techniques beyond the everyday world and modes of operation in it. If we were then to seek an explanation of the practice, we would not get very far for we would be seeking an answer to an unreal question. The result could only be a distorted understanding of the belief and the practice.

Similarly, Nadel pointed out in his study of the religious beliefs and practices of the Nupe of West Africa (1954) that we might at first sight be tempted to classify many of their ‘medicines’ and curative practices as magical since, in our view, they are obviously ineffective and in some cases probably harmful. However, many of them are not thought of by the Nupe themselves as being in any sense extraordinary or magical. Again, Hsu (1983) has pointed out in his study of reactions to a cholera outbreak in South China that most of the residents of the town he studied did not distinguish clearly or at all between magical and mundane means of avoiding the disease. Many techniques were used which to Western eyes might appear magical but all the participants were concerned about was whether they worked or not. Often methods that we would be inclined to consider magical were seen by them as mundane, and, conversely, methods we would categorise as mundane were sometimes perceived by them as being magical. To take a more Western example, Vogt (1952) has argued that water dowsing, or

'witching' as it is called in parts of the rural United States, is not, despite this name, seen as a form of magic but is viewed as a rational, technical process and can be best described as a kind of folk-science or 'pseudo science'.

It is, consequently, very important to distinguish between the actor's and the observer's account of what is happening. The actor may consider he or she is performing an ordinary empirical act involving nothing mystical. The observer, on the other hand, may see the action as odd and in need of special explanation because there appears to be no connection between the means and ends of the activity.

There are, then, two criteria which we can apply to a 'magical' practice: it might be potentially 'magical' in the terms of the observer's categories and/or in terms of the actor's categories; and it might, as a matter of fact, be a sound practice empirically or it may not. Nadel points out that this creates four possibilities. He uses the term 'rational' to refer to practices which are not considered to be in any way out of the ordinary, and 'mystical' for practices which are considered to involve something extraordinary. The four possibilities are:

- 1 Both actor and observer perceive the practice as ordinary empirical technique.
- 2 The actor considers that the practice is rational but the observer is convinced it is not empirically sound.
- 3 The actor conceives of the practice as clearly mystical but the observer is convinced that there is, in fact, a sound empirical basis for it.
- 4 The actor considers the practice to be mystical and, as far as the observer is concerned, there is no sound empirical basis for it.

The first possibility, where both actor and observer perceive the practice as an ordinary empirical technique – as rational – includes a great many practices and they, clearly, are not the concern of the sociology of religion. Some medicines used in primitive societies, for example, are indeed effective. Quinine and cocaine were first used in tribal societies before becoming part of the Western pharmacopoeia. The lesson of this is that we should not be too ready to label the traditional medicines used in non-Western societies as either quackery or magic but reserve judgement until careful investigations have been carried out. Many useful substances derived from plants are being discovered today by researchers investigating the properties of folk medicines.

The second possibility is that the actor considers that the practice is rational but the observer is convinced it is not empirically sound. Again, a large number of practices fall into this category. The practice of the Malay fishermen and the Nupe medicines are examples of this. One might also include such things as 'old wives' tales' and superstitions such as the belief that to break a mirror brings seven years of bad luck or that turning one's money over under a full moon increases prosperity. It is difficult to see why we should refer to this type of practice as magic for the reason stated above. The question we wish to ask about this sort of thing is – why do people do such things in the absence of any supporting

evidence that they work? We do not have to look into any beliefs about mystical forces and their nature for an answer since the practices do not involve any such beliefs. Nor is there any point in seeking the symbolic nature of conceptions of mystical forces since no such conceptions are involved.

The third possibility is that the actor conceives of the practice as clearly mystical but the observer is convinced that there is, in fact, a sound empirical basis for it. Quite a number of instances can be included in this category since it is not unusual in many societies to attribute the effectiveness of all sorts of substances and techniques to extraordinary powers or forces. An example would be the use of hallucinogenic substances, the properties of which are attributed by the users to spiritual powers operating in or through the substances as in the case of the peyote cult of Indian peoples of Central America.

Much more mundane things, however, may be considered to embody a mystical power which is the source of their effectiveness. A favourite knife or a particularly well-balanced spear may be thought to possess such extraordinary qualities. In fact, in so far as tribal peoples can be said to be animists, all objects contain certain spiritual powers which give them their particular qualities and capacities. Perhaps such ideas, also, were the origin of elements of legends such as the Sword of Excalibur.

The frequent attribution of what we consider to be mundane capacities of things to extraordinary powers need not imply that primitive peoples always see such powers as supernatural. The supernatural is a concept which belongs to the Western conceptual system. Other peoples may or may not possess such a concept. The extraordinary, the extra-mundane, does not necessarily belong to a separate realm of reality beyond this world. It may be conceived, as may various non-material entities – ‘spirits’, ‘demons’, ‘powers’, and so on – to be very much part of this everyday world but nevertheless special and out of the ordinary.

In short, our conceptual categories may be quite inadequate to express the ideas and conceptions of other cultures, the complexity and subtlety of which are difficult to convey except in terms of their own languages and conceptual systems.

These considerations should alert us to a potential problem in giving an account of the beliefs of cultures very different from our own, often termed the problem of translation. How can the distinctive conceptions found in other cultures be conveyed without distortion, in terms which may carry quite the wrong connotations or simply fail to convey the correct ones? One way of coping with this problem which a number of anthropologists have used is to provide and to use the actual words from the languages of the peoples they have studied, indicating the way those words are used by native speakers. Such a practice goes a long way towards avoiding misunderstandings but cannot, of course, completely remove the difficulty since it can only be used up to a point. Too extensive a use of the method would so pepper an ethnographic monograph with unfamiliar terms that it may become impossible to follow. Taken to extremes the reader would practically have to learn the unfamiliar language.

A second danger involved in finding out about the beliefs of other peoples is that the fieldworker who asks questions may be forcing the respondents to think

in unfamiliar terms and to confront issues and possibilities they have never had to consider before. This might be particularly true if they are asked, for example, about what appear to be, from the point of view of the investigator, ambiguities and contradictions but which have never been perceived to be so on the part of the respondents. There is a real danger that the answers they give will be unreliable, misleading, ill-considered or even invented for the purpose of the moment, namely, to satisfy the inquisitive stranger.

The obvious way to avoid the problem is never to ask questions but simply to watch and listen in the hope that things will become clear in time. It is not usually clear from ethnographic studies whether anthropological fieldworkers always observe this ideal methodological rule. In practice, it would clearly be very difficult to do so perfectly, since circumstances and conversations which would reveal what the anthropologist needs to know but which are taken as understood in the culture, will occur only infrequently and perhaps never at all, at least during the necessarily limited time in the field. In practice, the best that can be achieved is simply to limit questions to those which the fieldworker feels would be ones which do not challenge assumptions; those which do not, in the very asking, stretch the understandings of the actors or the limits of the conceptual systems under investigation.

The lesson to be drawn from the above observations is that learning about, understanding and even giving an account of the beliefs and practices of other cultures are not necessarily or usually straightforward and simple. There are many potential pitfalls and great care must be taken not to distort beliefs by forcing them into the framework of a conceptual system which is alien to them and which is incapable of expressing them. It has to be remembered that to describe the beliefs of other cultures is potentially to discover alternative ways of looking at the world.

The fourth and final possibility stemming from the discrepancy between the actor's and observer's viewpoints that we need to examine is that where the actor considers the practice to be mystical but where, as far as the observer is concerned, there is no sound empirical basis for it. This category is straightforward and can clearly be labelled magic in the strongest sense since both actor and observer are agreed that there is something beyond ordinary empirical action involved, even if they disagree about whether it achieves the intended effects. With such practices, what we have to account for is not simply the fact of the practice in the absence of, as far as we are concerned, evidence that it is effective, but also the belief that it involves something special and extraordinary. In taking account of the mystical element, it is likely that the absence of evidence that the technique does actually work is highly relevant.

These various categories of 'magical' practice may well admit of rather different theoretical and explanatory approaches. There is no sense in looking for the symbolism in practices which are considered mundane by the practitioner. In the case of practices which clearly do work but which are considered mystical by the practitioner, the fact that they do actually work would seem to make an analysis in terms of symbolism less likely to be productive. A neo-Tylolean

approach may prove more enlightening in this case. Where both actor and observer regard the practices as mystical, a neo-Tylorean approach could also apply but there would seem to be more scope for a symbolic approach than in the case of empirically sound mystical action.

## THE SYMBOLIC/FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF MAGIC

With these preliminary observations made we can now proceed to examine the symbolic/functionalist and the neo-Tylorean approaches. The former is most explicitly set out and discussed in the work of John Beattie (1964, 1966, 1970). Beattie argues that magical beliefs and rituals must be interpreted as essentially symbolic in nature – as expressive acts and sentiments. In his view, magic is not fundamentally the application of empirical techniques which the actors believe will work but which in fact do not. He does, however, acknowledge that the actors do believe they work and do carry them out in order to produce the desired results. According to Beattie, magic is fundamentally expressive, the instrumental aspect being only a surface and superficial one. Magic is more like art than science and requires a different type of analysis from that of instrumental behaviour if we are to understand it. It requires an analysis in terms of the meaning of the behaviour.

What is being symbolised in rites and rituals, Beattie argues, are desires and sentiments of importance for society and for the individual. Some anthropologists who adopt this approach go even further than Beattie and claim that rites are really nothing more than symbolic statements and dramatic expressions about the structure of relationships which exist in groups and in the society (see, for example, Leach, 1954).

Clearly, the denial that the expressed purposes of rites on the part of their practitioners are what the rites are fundamentally concerned with raises the question of why the practitioners believe them to be instrumentally effective at all. If the expressed purposes of the rites are irrelevant to the way we must interpret and understand them, how are we to account for the fact that they are understood by the practitioner to be aimed at producing a concrete result? Beattie's answer is that it is the act of symbolising itself which generates the conviction of their effectiveness. The acting out of desires and the expression of sentiments create the conviction in their power to affect the world.

For Beattie, then, the question of whether magical rites are rational or irrational simply does not arise. It is not the sort of behaviour to which criteria of rationality can meaningfully be applied. Since it is not essentially instrumental, means–ends activity, despite its practitioners' own account of what they are doing, but symbolic in nature, the way to understand it is to uncover the meanings embodied in it.

The weakness of this symbolic interpretation of magic and ritual lies in its dismissal of the actor's own understanding and account of his or her own actions. There are serious dangers in taking such a position. The first difficulty it presents is that it is necessary to explain why the actor has this understanding of the



behaviour. Beattie's answer, that the act of symbolising something creates a conviction that the real world is thereby affected, is not at all satisfactory. He does not, in the first place, show that this is so but only asserts that it is. It is not even a very plausible assertion. Why should the act of symbolising create such a conviction? Symbolic behaviour is common in all societies but does not for the most part lead to those who practise it believing that it is effective in acting upon the material world. The connection between the allegedly symbolic behaviour and the belief in its effectiveness, therefore, remains obscure and somewhat mysterious in Beattie's account.

This 'solution' to the problem of the discrepancy between the observer's and the actor's account of what is going on in magical ritual brings Beattie, in any case, to a position which is not far removed from that of Tylor and Frazer, whose evolutionary, intellectualist theories Beattie, a functionalist, would repudiate. To say that because some action symbolises some desire it thereby induces a conviction that the desire will be fulfilled is not very different from saying that magical thought substitutes ideal associations for real causal connections. It seems that Beattie believes that for practitioners of magic to symbolise an end deceives them into thinking that they are bringing about the end; the similarity, the ideal connection, is taken to be a real causal connection – precisely the position of Tylor and Frazer which Beattie rejects.

A second difficulty with Beattie's approach is that not all magical rituals act out the desired end or are in any way symbolic of it. They are clearly instrumental in form but do not symbolically recreate the desired event or outcome. Examples are the use of medicines, ordering or commanding a spirit to do something, and so on. This poses serious problems for Beattie's claim that conviction of the rites' effectiveness derives from the symbolic acting out of the aim.

Whether or not magical rites act out the desired end, equally serious a problem in Beattie's approach is the fact that he gives no explanation of why symbolic actions expressive of sentiments important for society should take an instrumental form at all. If the belief in the efficacy of the rites is the consequence of symbolising that which is of social value, why do they take an instrumental form in the first place? Why do they not simply symbolise in appropriate ways what is of social importance rather than looking as if they are intended to achieve a desired result? Instrumental behaviour is normally motivated by the prior desire and intention to achieve something concrete but Beattie argues that the belief that something concrete is being achieved derives from the action – action which is really directed at doing something quite different, namely, expressing sentiments which are socially important.

## THE INTELLECTUALIST THEORY OF MAGIC

The neo-Tylorean approach avoids these problems since it does not disregard the actor's own understanding of his or her own behaviour. A leading exponent of this approach is Robin Horton (1967, 1968, 1982) whose approach was outlined



in general terms in Chapter 1. Here his views on magic will be discussed more specifically. Horton argues that magical and religious beliefs are attempted explanations of phenomena and techniques for manipulating the world. In short, they are like science and technology – like, but not exactly the same, not simply a sort of inferior science. They deal with the same kinds of questions and problems, they have similar aims, but their methods are different.

Horton points to a whole range of similarities between magico-religious beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and science, on the other. For example, both search for unity underlying apparent diversity, for simplicity underlying apparent complexity, for order underlying apparent disorder, for regularity underlying apparent anomaly. Both science and magico-religious belief and practice construct a scheme of entities or forces which operate behind or within the world of common-sense observation. Also, both science and magico-religion transcend the limitations of common-sense views of causality and interconnection. Science will connect, for example, malaria with mosquitoes whereas magical belief will connect it with malevolent individuals who have witchcraft powers. Science and primitive belief both tend to break up the world of common sense into various aspects and then reassemble them in a different way. They both abstract from reality, analyse and then reintegrate that reality.

The key difference between science and magico-religion concerns the absence of alternative perceptions in the latter:

in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such an awareness is highly developed. It is this difference we refer to when we say that traditional cultures are ‘closed’ and scientifically oriented cultures ‘open’.

(Horton, 1970, p. 152)

It is the ‘closed’ nature of traditional thought which gives it its compelling and unchallengeable character; it becomes sacred and any threat to it is the threat of chaos and disorder.

Horton lists a number of more specific differences between science and magico-religion. For example, words and language in a closed system of thought take on a special and often magical significance because words are the means of making contact with reality, and in a closed system it is impossible to escape the tendency to see a unique and intimate link between words and things. More broadly, the differences between science and magico-religion can be divided into two groups – those connected with the presence or absence of alternative views of reality and those connected with the presence or absence of threats to the established body of theory. Again, Horton lists a great many instances.

For Horton, the whole basis upon which anthropologists have approached primitive beliefs is somewhat shaky. An important aspect of this basis has been the desire to find sense and value in magical belief systems, to claim coherence

and comprehensibility for them by the claim that they are not really about explaining the world or achieving concrete results, whatever appearances and the understandings of the practitioners themselves might suggest, but are really symbolic. This attitude is one which is thought and intended to be tolerant and approving, rather than critical, of the cultures of tribal peoples. What Horton's approach implies is that, on reflection, it is actually a somewhat patronising attitude since it acknowledges the beliefs of such peoples to be false, but kindly claims that they nevertheless have social value which the anthropologist can see but which the people themselves cannot (see also Horton, 1973, for an extended discussion of this point).

The desire to be generous in the description of other cultures on the part of anthropologists and to avoid interpretations that imply inferiority in comparison with Western culture is one which Gellner also believes has produced unfortunate unintended consequences (Gellner, 1970). He argues that in trying to make sense of apparently nonsensical primitive beliefs and practices, anthropologists have found that they are able to do so if they place these beliefs and practices in their social context. They have tended to take into account just that amount of social context that is necessary to give the beliefs and practices the appearance of sense and reasonableness. This Gellner calls the 'tolerance-engendering' contextual interpretation of primitive magic and religion. It has a definite social function: 'The 'social' theory of religion appears to have, in our society, the following function: it enables us to attribute meaning to assertions which might otherwise be found to lack it' (*ibid.*, p. 41).

In Gellner's view, there are serious dangers in this approach. It may lead to the misdescription and misinterpretation of other cultures. It may blind us to the possibilities for change in a system of ideas because change often does come about through criticism and questioning of prevailing ideas that come to be seen as inconsistent, inadequate or contradictory. It blinds us also to the possible uses of incoherence and ambiguity. Vagueness in concepts, ideas and beliefs is often very useful. It can allow a certain flexibility and subtlety. In short, Gellner is arguing that we can very often only make sense of other cultures by recognising the non-sense in their beliefs and practices.

In case this sounds rather functionalist – that he is claiming that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds such that even incoherence exists because it is good and necessary – Gellner points out that he is by no means denying that for the most part incoherence and contradictoriness in a system of ideas are highly dysfunctional. His point is that they can, however, be useful in some circumstances. They can also lead to change rather than the stabilisation of a social system. Every system of ideas embodies a degree of incoherence and inconsistency; there is no perfectly coherent, unassailable system of ideas. To think otherwise would entail a denial of the possibility of change or progress and would raise the problem of how we could ever explain it.

Another advantage mentioned by Gellner that lack of clarity and ambiguity may have is that it can often be put to manipulative uses. It can be useful to groups and individuals involved in struggles for resources, power and advantage

in furthering their interests and in controlling others. It is useful, for example, to be able to damn an opponent by utilising the slipperiness of meaning that words and concepts often have.

The advantage of Horton's approach, then, is that it recognises the beliefs for what they are without having to assume that those who espouse them are in any way inferior, since being wrong about the world is not a prerogative of tribal cultures. Science is constantly having to revise its picture of the world and many scientific theories have turned out to be false. Recognition of this allows us to treat all beliefs from a sociological point of view as being on the same level. It is a common fault of symbolist interpretations that they assume that what does not appear to be founded upon a firm empirical basis must therefore be explained and understood as essentially symbolic behaviour. But as Peel (1968) has pointed out, what the symbolists actually mean in taking this position is that the practices they consider to require an explanation in terms of symbolic behaviour are not empirically well founded in their perception. They might well be so in the perception of the practitioners, however. The point is not whether the observing anthropologist or sociologist thinks the techniques work or not but whether the practitioners do. It is not legitimate to say that, because we know that the techniques do not work, the practitioner must be symbolising something, when in the mind of the practitioner the techniques are thought to work.

It is not, however, only the symbolists who assume that an action requires special explanation only if it is one which does not seem to be founded upon a sound empirical basis. Intellectualist approaches have often made exactly the same assumptions, ignoring the fact that the practices are indeed thought to be empirically sound in the culture in which they occur. As Peel (1968) points out, both true and false beliefs should sociologically receive the same treatment since false beliefs are not false to those who believe them. A writer who takes this approach considerably further is Barnes (1974). He argues that none of the criteria used to distinguish science from non-science actually does so. He argues that a kind of dual standard has governed the usual approach to beliefs. Science is seen to be rational and unproblematic – it is not necessary to explain why scientific beliefs are accepted. A process of 'natural' reason underlies such beliefs. Magical and religious belief is seen as a deviation from this 'natural' reason therefore requiring explanation.

Barnes discusses the various attempts to characterise science as a mode of thought and to determine what makes it distinctive. For example, science is said to be empirical and to deal with observed facts. In fact, Barnes argues, there are many unobserved theoretical entities in science. What counts as a fact is to some extent determined by theory. Science does not merely describe the world in factual terms. Again, if one says, as Popper (1963) does, that such criteria as falsifiability, simplicity, and so on are the distinguishing criteria of rational thought, there are problems, according to Barnes. It is not possible to review his detailed arguments here but, in short, his conclusion is that there is no baseline of natural reason against which one can judge some ideas as unproblematic and others as needing explanation. We have to treat all ideas, scientific and non-scientific, in

the same way. Consequently, magic and religion do not require special explanation. Any attempt to give to the ideas of modern Western industrial society a special status does less than justice to the ideas of others. Ideas, Barnes claims, only need a special explanation if they are not the normal and standard beliefs found in the society. Most beliefs are held because they are part of a culture and acquired through the process of socialisation. It is only when someone or some group comes to adopt new and different beliefs that one needs a particular explanation of them.

Barnes's position stands or falls to a considerable extent on the question of whether science can be characterised as having a distinct method. This is a complex philosophical issue and cannot be resolved here. His claim, however, that it is only new and different beliefs that need particular explanations, is not entirely credible. In trying to understand magical belief we are attempting to understand under what sort of conditions people are disposed to think magically. Of course, the beliefs are part of a culture passed from one generation to the next. The question is, why do they continue to be passed on as part of a culture. What conditions promote their persistence and their credibility? One cannot dismiss the problem in the way that Barnes does. Nevertheless, he makes a very important point in drawing our attention to the fact that it is perhaps illegitimate to set aside our own beliefs as unproblematic while assuming that the beliefs of others require explanation because they do not square with our own.

Criticisms of the neo-Tylorean position have been many. In so far as Horton is concerned they have tended to be centred on his characterisation of scientific culture as 'open', critical and involving alternatives. He has answered many of the points but some have led him to modify his original position (1982). The 'open/closed' dichotomy he admits was too rigidly drawn. Challenges to the current scientific orthodoxy are seen as just as threatening in Western scientific culture as challenges to magico-religious orthodoxy are in traditional societies and are usually resisted by the scientific establishment.

Horton also accepts the reformulation of his position on the presence or absence of alternatives put forward by Gellner (1973). He would now see the contrast not so much in terms of awareness of alternatives but more in terms of the competition between theoretical alternatives. As Gellner pointed out, traditional societies are not so lacking in alternative conceptions as Horton and others have supposed. Also, awareness or not of alternatives is something that has to be said of individuals whereas it is the competition between theoretical perspectives that really characterises modern science in contrast to traditional thought.

## TOWARDS SYNTHESIS

If this difference between science and traditional magico-religion is not as clear-cut as Horton originally argued, Horton's claim that magico-religion is similar to science seems to be weakened. This does not mean that the neo-Tylorean approach is fatally flawed, however. Ross (1971) and Skorupski (1973a, 1973b, 1976) have

pointed out that there is more than one position embodied in contemporary intellectualism. 'Literalism' is the proposition that traditional magico-religious beliefs and practices mean exactly what they say, namely, that the rites have instrumental efficacy, and this is what they are fundamentally about. Second, there is the 'theory building' position characteristic of Horton, which holds that traditional magico-religion, is in many respects like science. Criticisms of the latter position are, according to Ross, generally valid. Science is fundamentally different from traditional magico-religion: it is the product of a long and complex development; it is characterised by parsimony in its explanatory strategies as opposed to the complexity of religion in this respect; it attempts to predict whereas religion seeks only to influence events; religious propositions are generally non-falsifiable; they are not based upon experimental observation; they utilise the same model for everything whereas science uses many.

Skorupski points out that Horton's evidence that traditional magico-religious thought lacks, or is intolerant of, alternatives, which are seen as threatening, is largely drawn from taboo customs and beliefs. His approach, however, would not explain sacred anomalies. In many tribal societies that which is anomalous, in the sense of being between categories of thought, is often considered to be an abomination. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for such things to be treated, in other instances or in other societies, as sacred. In Horton's approach they should all be abominations since all are threatening to the established sense of order.

As for awareness of alternatives, Skorupski claims that while tribal societies do not seem capable of generating alternatives from within, they are, nevertheless, certainly able to conceive of alternatives. New ideas from outside, however, do not simply supplant old ideas but tend to be incorporated alongside in syncretistic fashion. Frequently, rather than become convinced that they were mistaken in their old views, the members of traditional societies absorb new ideas by claiming that the world has changed, so that what used to be true is no longer so; the old gods are seen not as false but to have gone away. Traditional thought, Skorupski concludes from this, lacks a conception of ideas being no more than *ideas* about an *independent* reality. Rather than being like Western science, Skorupski claims, traditional magico-religion is more like Western religion. In both, contradiction and ambiguity are tolerated; both contain mysteries and paradoxes. Horton (1973) has replied, denying both that toleration of paradox is at all characteristic of African traditional thought or that Western science lacks it. All systems of ideas, since they will inevitably embody contradictions, will also contain a degree of paradox. Neither traditional magic nor science is particularly comfortable with paradox. Nor for that matter is Western religion. What does characterise Western religion, however, is the acceptance of mystery. In this it is quite unlike traditional African thought. The comparison between science and magical thought remains, therefore, in Horton's view a valid one.

Skorupski's criticisms, if they are valid, do not, however, invalidate the literalist position. In fact, criticisms of literalism, according to Ross, have not proved at all

convincing. In any case, Skorupski points out, a symbolist interpretation of traditional magico-religion is not incompatible with the literalist aspect of intellectualism. Skorupski thus suggests the possibility of a synthesis between intellectualism or neo-Tylloreanism and symbolic interpretations.

To achieve such a synthesis it is first necessary to disentangle a number of different types of action which have tended to be lumped together under the term 'ritual'. This Skorupski attempts to do. He points out that much magical and religious ritual consists simply of social interaction in the normal pattern of social interaction with beings and entities – spirits, gods, ancestors – which are within the actor's social field. Religious cosmology often extends the social field beyond its human members. Dealing with such entities is like dealing with other human beings. They can be entreated, persuaded and should be shown respect and deference. The special character of the interaction reflects only the special character of the being concerned or the special nature of the relationship, just as interaction between a king or chief and a subject or subordinate usually has a special character. There is nothing especially expressive or symbolic in this sort of behaviour. The point has also been made by Ahern (1981) who reports that much traditional Chinese ritual took the form of interpersonal interaction between humans and gods in which were used such techniques as would normally be used to influence the behaviour of other human beings. In China this involved forms of 'political control', that is, the utilisation of means of control that were typical in political life such as the exercise of bureaucratic authority which one god may have been believed to have over other lesser spirits, the use of written documents stating the rights of the supplicant and the obligations of the spirit, or the employment of the rules of etiquette by asking in such a way that refusal would be very difficult.

A second type of magical action does involve an element of symbolisation of a certain kind in that the practitioner does symbolically act out what is desired while fully believing that it is being brought about by the magical action. The magician does not, however, attempt to bring it about by the use of symbols, but rather whatever is used to symbolise something is perceived to be or to become that thing. The act of symbolising is not, in this account, unlike the interpretations of symbolic functionalists, the cause of the belief in its efficacy. This, Skorupski terms, an identificationist interpretation of certain types of magic. What is used to symbolise something is identified with that thing. The wax effigy that the witch uses to symbolise a victim is actually seen to be, to have become, the victim in much the same way that a pepperpot might be used to stand for a vehicle in an after-dinner account of a traffic accident. After all, he points out, a wax effigy does not actually resemble the victim all that closely. It might in fact look like a great many people. The point is that it is made to represent the victim and in the last resort almost anything can serve this purpose. This suggests that what is involved is not homeopathy in Frazer's sense but identification. Of course the magician will tend to choose particularly appropriate things as symbols if at all possible. But this is not the same as mistaking ideal connections for real causal connections, according to Skorupski. Rather, it makes one thing stand for another

– it creates an identity. There are not two series of events with one causally acting upon the other, for example, piercing an effigy with a pin, on the one hand and the experience of pain by the victim, on the other, but only one – the magical act. This analysis leads Skorupski to reject Horton's contention that magic often operates through the power of words, for example, names. It is not that the name is in itself effective but that it is identified with the victim.

Other types of magical action involve the definite idea of contagious transfer of properties. Again, there is little that is symbolic about this. There are, after all, Skorupski points out, many instances in which contagious transfer of properties does take place such as the spread of infections or transfer of heat from a warmer to a colder body. It is not at all unreasonable to generalise to a whole range of other things from these sorts of experience.

Finally, some magical acts take the form of operative acts which are not clearly distinguished in the minds of the practitioners from causal effectiveness. An operative act simply states that some state of affairs pertains. For example 'I declare this meeting open', or 'I name this child John'. These are performative statements which bring about a state of affairs by being made but not in any causal manner. Magic, Skorupski suggests, often uses such performative statements. The wax effigy in witchcraft may be declared to be the victim.

Operative acts of this kind are often ritualised and ceremonialised. That is to say, they are performed in such a way that it is clear to all that they are being done. Ceremonial is a way of doing this using a very formal style in order to mark the action out as special. Skorupski suggests that much ritual which is in fact a form of operative ceremony becomes understood in the minds of the participants or observers as having causal power. Absolution, for example, might be interpreted as an act which alters the social relationship between priest and parishioner, and which reaffirms obligations. This sacrament, however, may be interpreted by those concerned as actually bringing about a causal change in the absolved sinner. This is a 'reifying misinterpretation' of such a sacrament in which it becomes a sort of 'transcendental soul cleansing machinery'.

Another writer who points to the strongly performative nature of magical rituals is Tambiah but in his case the point is used in support of a clearly symbolist position (Tambiah, 1973). What Tambiah fails to recognise is that such performative acts do seem, as Skorupski emphasises, to be misconstrued as being causal in nature by practitioners. Tambiah makes the mistake of assuming that because magical acts often have a performative and symbolic-expressive aspect, it is never appropriate to judge them in terms of the 'true/false' criteria of science. This simply does not follow if Skorupski's point about reificatory mystification is valid.

Skorupski's suggestions, then, offer a way in which an essentially literalist position can account for the symbolic aspect of much magic and ritual, and which might be built into a theory of magic and ritual. Such a theory would acknowledge and account for both the instrumental and symbolic dimensions magic clearly has, but of which one is ignored by each side of the neo-Tyllorean/symbolic functionalist debate. Such a theory, however, has yet to emerge in



any systematic form. It will clearly need to address the question of the extent to which magical belief and behaviour are linked to the need for meaning in life. Instrumental behaviour designed to produce a definite effect can also embody meanings. The separation of symbolic-expressive action which is not believed or intended to have any effects upon anything as a distinct category set against instrumental action is, as Taylor (1982) and Brown (1997) have pointed out, a quintessentially modern notion. Before the eighteenth century, scientific theories often had an expressive dimension. An example Taylor uses is the language of 'correspondences', used by Bacon and others to attempt to refute Galileo's claim that there were moons orbiting Jupiter. This doctrine held that elements in wholly different domains of being corresponded to each other in virtue of embodying the same principles. For example, since there are seven metals, then there must also be seven, and just seven, planetary bodies and the moons of Jupiter cannot, therefore, exist. Taylor refers also to Brecht's *Galileo* in which theologians offer a refutation of the existence of the moons of Jupiter based upon biblical exegesis in which it is 'proved' that they cannot exist, completely disregarding the evidence of the senses provided by Galileo's telescope as irrelevant and illusory. Such ideas seemed perfectly sensible to even the most eminent and clever minds in this age since it was believed that knowledge of the world and being attuned to it were one and the same thing. Understanding the world scientifically and uncovering its meaning in terms of human purposes were the same activity. Modern thought has separated them and expects nothing from the former which is relevant to the question of the meaning of reality in relation to human life and existence. Traditional societies have generally sought to explain and to control reality not simply instrumentally but in a way that expresses what is seen to be its meaning. The Azande explanation of illness in terms of witchcraft again serves as an illustration. Illness is not just the arbitrary and accidental consequence of chance for the Azande. It is the consequence of evil intentions of enemies and rivals. Death from sickness is not a meaningless misfortune but understood and confronted in the context of human relationships. Campbell's study (1989) of notions of causality among a Brazilian tribe similarly shows how their magical ideas essentially conceive of the world in terms of relationships even where inanimate objects are concerned. Causes are conceived in terms of some thing being *responsible* for an event in the sense of it being the 'fault' of that thing. We might see this as a view of reality which imparts meaning to it in human terms.

Before leaving the subject of magic and its rationality, however, mention should be made of some of the more concrete attempts by anthropologists to make sense of it. The debate about magic has tended to be dominated by questions of a fairly abstract and philosophical nature and by comparisons between Western and traditional thought and its rationality. Anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth, however, have tried to set magic in its everyday context, drawing attention to its significance and role in the organisation and regulation of productive activities. Malinowski was one of the first to show that it had such a role. Firth has particularly



emphasised this aspect in his studies of the island of Tikopia in Polynesia (see especially Firth, 1939).

Firth argued that magic can throw a cloak of sanctity over technical operations and can create an atmosphere of significance around the task, inducing an attitude of seriousness towards it. It sets the pace for the work, marking out its various stages, and is thus a useful organising device. It gives confidence, alleviates anxiety, and in case of failure may provide an explanation and an alibi – the magical procedures can be said not to have been carried out correctly.

Such observations do perhaps help us to understand what might otherwise be very puzzling behaviour as long as we do not take them for a full and sufficient explanation. Magic cannot be said to exist in order to do things without embroiling us in all the difficulties of functionalist accounts discussed above. It is important to remember, however, as Malinowski pointed out, that magic is not just a substitute for technical procedures but an adjunct to them – an auxiliary technique. Whenever possible, tribal peoples do not rely on magic but use mundane empirical techniques. Magic appears to be an aid in the application of empirical techniques – a means of stimulating certain attitudes and of ordering and organising things.

Although Firth follows Malinowski in attributing a confidence-promoting function to magic in situations of uncertainty, he points out that this is not a universal correlation. Only in certain societies do people use magical means in situations of uncertainty and even then only in certain kinds of situation. Magic is only one form of cultural response to situations of this kind. Other types of response mentioned by Firth include reliance upon a beneficent God or spirit, reliance upon probability (another name for science) and simply fatalism. We do not know why this variation occurs.

## 4 Religion and emotion

Religion, the emotionalists argued, is not a matter of intellectual curiosity, the quest for material mastery, or of cold dispassionate reasoning. The intellectualists had made primitive humanity seem far too rational and had neglected the emotional side in which they sought to locate the fundamental roots of religiosity. Religious beliefs, for these theorists, were not the product of reasoning from observations of the experiences of dreams or of inferences about the connections between things but were derived from emotional or affective states of mind. The fact that tribal peoples do not attempt to rely solely upon magic and religion, overlooked by the intellectualists, pointed to there being particular reasons for the supplementation of ordinary empirical techniques and normal rationality by the use of magic and religion – reasons which had little to do with rationality. This chapter will discuss the ideas of the evolutionary armchair anthropologist, R. R. Marett and the work of the founding father of the tradition of participant observation in anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski.<sup>1</sup> Freud's theories of magic and religion will also be considered since, although very different and distinct in many respects, his emphasis on deeply rooted ambivalent emotions underlying religion qualifies him for classification in the category of emotionalism. The chapter concludes with a brief account of the ideas of Karl Jung whose approach has its roots in psychoanalysis though it differs markedly from the Freudian view.

### MARETT

Prominent among the emotionalist theorists was R. R. Marett. In *The Threshold of Religion*, published in 1914, he criticised the views of Tylor and Frazer for characterising the mind of early humans as too rational and dispassionate. Religion and magic, Marett argued, are not the product of reason but of emotional or affective states. The fact that ordinary technical activity prevails much of the time among tribal peoples points to a non-rational root in magic and religion. Magical and religious behaviour involves the suspension of normal rationality.

A second criticism made of the intellectualists was that they supposed that religious and ritual activity was motivated or stimulated by beliefs and ideas. For

Marett a distinctive characteristic of ritual behaviour was that it stems directly from emotions and not from beliefs. It is ritual action which is fundamental while beliefs are secondary from the point of view of understanding and explaining religion and magic since emotions give rise to action rather than reflection. As Marett puts it: 'savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out' (1914, p. xxxi). The source of the emotions which underlie religious ritual behaviour is the feeling experienced by 'primitive' peoples of the presence of a strange, mysterious and occult power or force for which Marett used the Polynesian word *mana*. The emotion experienced in the face of things possessing *mana* he characterised as a blend of fear, wonder and attraction, summed up by the term awe. *Mana* pervades many things. It is not confined to specific objects although certain things have more of it than others. The sorts of things that may have *mana* include ritual objects, powerful or important individuals, special words, corpses, symbols, special places and locations, rocks, stones, trees, plants, animals. Things which possess *mana* are generally set apart from ordinary mundane things by the use of taboos.

This type of experience, Marett argued, pre-dates and is more fundamental than belief in spirits. It represents the earliest and original form of religious experience and is older than animism. Marett accepted Tylor's account of animism but criticised his claim that this was the earliest form of religion. It was, for Marett, a later development of those impulses which sprang originally and spontaneously from emotions generated by the experience of *mana*.

Marett's account of magic was based upon similar assumptions to his theory of religion, namely, that it was equally a product of emotions and sprang spontaneously out of emotional tension. He thought, in fact, that in the pre-animistic stage magic and religion are not clearly differentiated and used the term 'magico-religious' to refer to it. Whereas the religious impulses sprang from the experience of *mana*, the magical impulses were stimulated by strong desires or fears in situations where ordinary means for fulfilling the desires or alleviating the fears were lacking. Resort is made in such situations to magical make-believe in which mimetic rites figure prominently. Rather in the same manner as Tylor and Frazer, Marett believed that magic is substituted for practical and effective action where the latter seems not to be available. For Marett, however, it is the emotional tension generated by such situations that gives rise to it, not practical aims. If such situations occur frequently and typically, the magical response becomes standardised and customary. This is what Marett calls developed magic as opposed to rudimentary magic which lacks standardisation and the backing of social custom. In developed magic the actor does not really believe that the action produces the desired end but is aware that it is only symbolic. However, giving symbolic expression to desires and fears has a cathartic effect which is recognised by the practitioner. It alleviates tension, stimulates courage and hope, and strengthens resolve. Consequently, magical techniques continue to be utilised even though they are known to be ineffective. Magic is not, therefore, a pseudoscience as Frazer had argued, but quite a different sort of activity with a quite different basis.

Marett's emphasis on emotion in religion and magic was a necessary corrective to the earlier views of the intellectualists who had provided a rather one-sided account, but the type of emotionalist position that he adopted is equally beset with problems. Exactly the same criticism can be made of his claim that there was a pre-animistic stage of religious development as of Tylor's claim that animism was the earliest form, namely, that there is no evidence for it at all.

A second criticism of Marett is that he does not show why some things have *mana* and some things do not or why different things in different societies are felt to have *mana*. The nature of and reasons for the specific emotion and kind of tension experienced in the presence of things said to have *mana* remain obscure. Emotions such as love, hate, or anger are felt for definite and usually perfectly understandable reasons. In short, they occur in certain situations and contexts such that when one knows about the situation or context one understands why the emotion is felt (Phillips, 1976, pp. 49–50). The trouble with the type of emotion said to be felt in the face of *mana* is that it is a special emotion and it is not at all clear why it occurs or what it is about certain objects and situations which produce it. Many of the things which are said to possess *mana* do so, however, clearly because there is a belief of some kind involved. A name or a place has *mana* because it is believed that it has certain powers or is the dwelling place of a spirit. In other words, most instances of the kind of emotion and phenomenon that Marett is talking about rest upon a prior set of beliefs, that is to say a cognitive factor, and are not the spontaneous experience of emotion and performance of accompanying ritual action that Marett thinks they are. The emotion derives from a belief and the actions similarly. This allows us to understand why some things have *mana* and some things do not and why the set of things which does varies from one society to another – the beliefs vary from one society to another.

Even if there is no obvious belief directly involved in producing the type of experience that Marett places at the foundation of religion, it is likely that there is, nevertheless, a cognitive process which draws upon ideas and beliefs which are part of the religious and intellectual background and culture of the individual undergoing the experience. Many individuals have reported what they describe as an awesome experience of the presence of the divine or the sacred. It is this type of experience which led writers like Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (1924), published only three years after Marett's book, to speak of the basis of religion as being the experience of the holy or the numinous. The interesting question is, however, whether the experience is interpreted differently by different individuals and differently in different cultures. It may well be that some individuals are disposed to interpret certain experiences, emotions or feelings which are intense and awesome in the traditional terms of the religious culture to which they belong, for example as the presence of God or of the divine. Those who reject the notion of the divine or sacred may interpret their experience in quite a different way. In a Hindu or Buddhist community certain experiences may commonly be interpreted as memories of previous lives or existences since belief in rebirth is a central aspect of the culture. It is not uncommon to find people in such cultures remembering incidents from previous lives. This is relatively rare

in religious cultures which lack any strong belief in rebirth or reincarnation. In other words, in making sense of experiences which may be out of the ordinary, people will resort to ideas and beliefs with which they are familiar and which have some credibility. They may even be forced to resort to such ideas and conclusions, perhaps to their own surprise, for the lack of any credible alternative.<sup>2</sup>

A further difficulty with Marett's account of religion is that it is often the case that rather than religious activity being a response to emotion, it is the cause of certain emotions. Marett and similar theorists who emphasised the emotional roots of religion were criticised by sociological theorists, such as Durkheim, for not recognising that participation in religious ritual and ceremonies is frequently obligatory and socially expected. For at least some of the participants, and perhaps even all of them, their participation in the ritual will not be the product of emotions. There would be little point in socially sanctioning participation if rituals were the spontaneous expression of emotional tension. The obligatory character of participation implies that some, and perhaps all, members of the relevant group or community would not otherwise be motivated to participate.

A further point made by sociological theorists was that such rituals may induce emotions of a certain kind in those obliged to participate. Rites, rituals and ceremonies are as often, and perhaps even more often, occasions for inducing appropriate emotions in the participants as they are means of giving expression to emotions. In fact, the expression of appropriate emotions is often itself obligatory whether or not sincerely felt. The problem with the emotionalist position is that it fails to recognise that the relationship between rituals and emotions is highly variable. There is no necessary or uniform link between specific emotions and religious action. The participants in religious ritual might be elated or bored, awed or blasé, sombre or light-hearted. As Evans-Pritchard points out, it would be absurd to say that a priest is not performing a religious rite when he says mass unless he is in a certain emotional state (1965, p. 44).

## MALINOWSKI

If Marett could be criticised for having no direct experience of tribal societies, the most important of the emotionalist theorists, Bronislaw Malinowski, certainly could not. Whereas Marett made light of the necessity of fieldwork experience, once remarking that to understand primitive mentality it was sufficient to experience an Oxford Common Room, Malinowski founded the tradition of direct participant observation in British anthropology. This came to be *de rigueur* and, in the view of some, almost a qualifying initiation ritual for entry into the anthropological community. Malinowski is famous for making the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia well known, spending several years in the field living with the people, learning their language and participating in their daily lives. Yet the conclusions he came to concerning their religious and magical life were not at all dissimilar to those of the armchair anthropologist, Marett. There is a strong

emotionalist element in Malinowski's interpretation of magic and religion even though he is usually thought of as belonging to a sociological and indeed functionalist school influenced by the work of Durkheim. His functionalism is also prominent in his writings on religion and magic but the emotionalist element is sufficiently strong to lead Evans-Pritchard to classify him as a psychological and emotionalist theorist (Evans-Pritchard, 1965).

Whether Malinowski came to similar conclusions to Marett because Marett was actually right about Oxford Common Rooms or because Malinowski was influenced by his ideas and simply saw in the field what he expected to find, or interpreted what he saw so as to confirm prior theoretical predilections (this was certainly true of other aspects of his work as far as the influence of Freud was concerned) must remain a matter of speculation. Malinowski, however, does not base his ideas about magic and religion on the notion of *mana* but, because of his direct observation in the field, roots them in the contingencies, anxieties and uncertainties of day-to-day existence in tribal societies and by extension, all societies.

Religion and magic belong to the realm of the sacred which Malinowski, following Durkheim, distinguishes from that of the profane. His characterisation of the sacred is reminiscent of Marett in that it is bound up with an attitude of awe and respect. While his concept of the sacred derives from Durkheim, however, the way he distinguishes between magic and religion is quite different. In the previous chapter it was pointed out that, for Malinowski, magic is related to concrete purposes or definite outcomes which its practitioners wish to achieve while religious rites have no such concrete purpose or end result but are performed for their own sake.

Despite this fundamental difference between magic and religion, Malinowski explains them in a similar way. Both are seen as essentially cathartic. They have their roots in emotional stress and tension to which they give release. The sources of this tension are to be found in the fact that human life is uncertain and stressful. Religion, Malinowski tells us, is deeply rooted in the necessities of human life and 'the stresses and strains of life, and the necessity of facing heavy odds' (1936, pp. 59–60). It involves both a belief in providence and in immortality. The former consists in a belief in the existence of powers sympathetic to man and which can help him in his life. Such beliefs assist in enhancing man's real capacity to act effectively in the face of difficulty. A belief in immortality is similarly indispensable for mental stability and for maintenance of social stability. The fact that religious ritual is a means of dealing with tension, anxiety and uncertainty explains why it usually accompanies the major life crises of birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death.

A universal and by far the most important source of the emotional tension which underlies religious rites for Malinowski was the fact of death. A great deal of, if not all, early religion derives from it, he claimed. 'I think that all the phenomena generally described by such terms as animism, ancestor-worship, or belief in spirits and ghosts, have their root in man's integral attitude towards death' (*ibid.*, p. 27).

The religious act *par excellence* for Malinowski, then, is the ceremonial of death. The rituals which universally surround death and bereavement illustrate the cathartic function of religion very well, he argued. Mortuary rituals derive from the natural human fear of death. When a death occurs, strong fears and emotions are generated in those close to the deceased. Such emotions can be dangerous and disruptive. A death disrupts relationships, breaks the normal pattern of people's lives and shakes the moral foundations of society. There is a tendency for the bereaved to sink into despair, to neglect their responsibilities and to behave in ways harmful to themselves and others. Group integration and solidarity tend to be undermined.

A mortuary ritual serves to channel such potentially disruptive emotions along constructive paths. It relieves the anxieties generated by the event and restores a degree of equilibrium. It often does this partly by reaffirming and strengthening a belief in immortality of the soul or spirit and thereby gives assurance to the bereaved that they are not doomed to everlasting extinction – a feeling always aroused by the experience of bereavement.

Malinowski, however, was aware that such rituals are not simply individual responses to events but are public and social affairs which involve communities. They, consequently, involve a wider circle than the immediate relatives and close associates of the deceased. In other words, Malinowski accepted the points that had been made against emotionalist theorists such as Marett that they had ignored the social dimension of religion. Malinowski sought to explain this public and social nature of religious rites once again in terms of their cathartic function. The involvement of the wider community lends force to the rituals and strengthens their effect in combating disruptive emotions. 'Public pomp and ceremony take effect through the contagiousness of faith, through the dignity of unanimous consent, the impressiveness of collective behaviour' (Malinowski, 1974, p. 63).

Magic also arises in situations of emotional tension, Malinowski argued, but here the source of the tension lies in uncertainty about the outcome of practical activities. When a task is undertaken, the outcome of which is uncertain, resort is made to magical techniques. Malinowski used what has become a famous example to illustrate this, namely the difference between lagoon and deep-sea fishing in the Trobriand Islands. The former is relatively reliable in terms of the catch that can be expected and there is little danger, whereas the catch from fishing in the open sea is always very uncertain and there are many dangers involved. It is significant, then, that there is little magic attached to lagoon fishing but a great deal involved in open-sea fishing designed to ensure a good catch and ward off dangers (Malinowski, 1936, p. 22; 1974, pp. 30–1). Whenever, in the pursuit of practical ends man comes to a gap 'his anxiety, his fears and hopes, induce a tension in his organism which drives him to some sort of activity' (1974, p. 79). In such a situation of anxiety and tension he cannot remain passive; he has to do something. He is driven to engage in some form of substitute action in the face of his impotence to do anything directly practical; 'the most essential point about magic and religious ritual is that it steps in only where knowledge fails' (1936, p. 34). The activity substituted is generally some sort of acting out of the desired



end. 'His organism reproduces the acts suggested by the anticipations of hope, dictated by the emotion so strongly felt' (1974, p. 79). Magic is founded upon the natural human response in situations of intense desire, fear or anxiety, namely 'the spontaneous enactment of the desired end in a practical impasse' (*ibid.*, p. 80). This spontaneous action creates a conviction in the minds of the practitioners that the rites have a concrete effect upon the world because they relieve the emotional tension in the circumstances of uncertainty. The practitioner, also, since he actually feels more confident as a result of this conviction and calmer as a result of the release of emotional tension, may well perform his tasks the more effectively.

Magic, however, as was perfectly evident to Malinowski in the field, is not wholly spontaneous. Its procedures are standardised, socially recognised and customary. In other words, Malinowski was well aware of the social nature of magic. It may originate as spontaneous action but becomes part of a culture, standardised, learned and passed on from generation to generation. Effective magical rites, in the sense of being genuinely cathartic, are chanced upon or created by creative innovators, men of genius. Being particularly appropriate for circumstances commonly encountered, others take them up and in this way they become part of the culture and tradition. Their fundamental source is, however, in the emotional tensions of life. 'Magical ritual, most of the principles of magic, most of its spells and substances, have been revealed to man in those passionate experiences which assail him in the impasse of his instinctive life and of his practical pursuits' (*ibid.*, p81). Malinowski, then, saw magic as 'founded on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive' (*ibid.*, p. 87). The function of magic, he said, is to 'ritualise man's optimism' (*ibid.*, p. 90).

Although this is clearly a psychological and emotionalist approach, Malinowski was strongly influenced by the prevailing intellectual fashion of functionalism and, in fact, considered himself to be a follower of functionalism. Consequently, he appended to his essentially emotionalist account of religion and magic a sociological and functionalist addition. He did not rely entirely upon the motives and dispositions of the individual in his analyses of religion and magic but supplemented this with an explanation in terms of the social functions of beliefs and rituals.

His functionalist side can be clearly seen in his analysis of initiation rituals. Of them he said:

Such beliefs and practices, which put a halo of sanctity round tradition and a supernatural stamp upon it, will have a 'survival value' for the type of civilisation in which they have been evolved ... they are a ritual and dramatic expression of the supreme power and value of tradition in primitive societies; they also serve to impress this power and value upon the minds of each generation, and they are at the same time an extremely efficient means of transmitting tribal lore, of ensuring continuity in tradition and of maintaining tribal cohesion.

(*ibid.*, p. 40)



And to take the example of mortuary ritual once again, by counteracting the forces of fear, dismay and demoralisation, it provides, he says, 'the most powerful means of reintegration of the group's shaken solidarity and the re-establishment of its morale' (*ibid.*, p. 53). Magic too has important social functions. Through its cathartic and confidence-generating functions it enables people to perform their tasks more effectively and this is crucial for the stable conduct of social relations and social life.

Clearly, Malinowski's emotionalism is not open to the same kinds of criticism as Marett's. Malinowski identifies quite clearly the type of situation in which emotional tension is experienced in a way which makes it perfectly comprehensible why the emotion is felt. What his approach fails to do, however, is to give an adequate account of the specific forms and variety of belief and ritual practice. An emotionalist approach, as we have seen, neglects the dimension of belief in attempting to move directly from emotion to behaviour. It overlooks the fact that there is no necessary link between a specific emotion and a specific action or form of behaviour. As a result, it does not adequately explain the specific form of religious or ritual behaviour and therefore does not explain why rituals differ from one society to another. Emotion and anxiety might explain why something is done in the situation but they do not explain what is done. There is nothing in the emotion of hatred *per se* which would suggest that, by making a wax effigy of the hated person and piercing it with a needle, harm can be done to that person, as was allegedly the practice in Europe. There is nothing in the emotion of anxiety about an important outcome which would suggest that touching wood, to take a familiar example from our own culture, would bring about the desired outcome. Neither of these actions stem directly from the emotion alone. The specific form of action derives from a belief that the action will produce the desired result and the beliefs involved are culturally and historically specific.

Malinowski, as already noted, suggests that actions sometimes do stem directly from emotions when he claims that rituals act out the desired end. As Nadel puts it, for Malinowski, magic 'is nothing but the figurative anticipation of the longed for events' (1957, p. 197). There are two problems with this. First, as Malinowski himself states, not all magical or religious rites act out the desired end. In *Magic, Science and Religion* he makes reference to 'ritual proceedings in which there is neither imitation nor forecasting nor the expression of any special idea or emotion' (1974, p. 73). Second, even in the case of rites which do imitate the desired end, since there are many ways of doing this, it is no explanation of the particular form of the rite to say that it acts out the desired end. Malinowski provides only a possible account of the general form of some magical and religious rites but no account of the specific form. In any case, as Nadel points out, since magical rites are standardised, customary and learned, they must be based upon more than simply emotion but also upon certain principles and arguments which make them persuasive and give them objective appeal. They must, in short, 'contain something in the nature of a *theory*... akin, however remotely, to scientific theories' (1957, p. 197, original emphasis). It is, in fact, surprising that Malinowski did not see this point more clearly or manage to relate the emotional and cognitive

dimensions of religion and magic more effectively. In characterising magic as a form of behaviour which acts out the desired end in the belief that it will occur as a result, he makes a claim very similar to Frazer's, namely that in magical thinking connections which exist in the mind are mistaken for connections which exist in reality. In fact Malinowski fully and explicitly accepts Frazer's ideas in this respect (1974, p. 72, pp. 86–7). Where he differs from Frazer is that he rejects the view that the mistake derives from ignorance or naïvety but believes that the root source of the error lies in emotional tension and the need to relieve it. What he fails to do, is to integrate this intellectualist emphasis on the theoretical aspect of magic and religion with its emotional aspect.

Finally on this point, Malinowski's claim that rites began as the inventions of men of genius is highly speculative and quite without the backing of empirical evidence – the very criticisms he and his contemporaries made of the intellectualists.

Malinowski's functionalism presents a different set of problems from his emotionalism but they are, for the most part, the problems from which functionalist explanations in general suffer and, since these will be confronted later when dealing specifically with functionalist approaches, they will not be discussed in detail at this point. One point to note here, however, is that, given his account in terms of emotional tension, Malinowski's functionalism seems superfluous and unnecessary. It seems to be simply a reflection of his general espousal of the functionalist approach prevalent at the time he was writing rather than a considered and essential element of his treatment of magic and religion. The consequence of his dual emphasis on emotion and social function, as Nadel has pointed out, was that he failed to strike a balance between the individual and social aspects of religion. Nadel suggests that this was because in reality for Malinowski 'the decisive weight', when it came to religion and magic, 'lay with the psychological, and in this sense individual, sources of religion' (1957, p. 203). Despite his awareness of the social as well as the individual side of religion, he tended to attempt to reduce it to a single type of cause and never managed to fully grasp it as a many-sided phenomenon.

This is shown most clearly in Tambiah's (1990) criticism of Malinowski's neglect of the expressive dimension of magical rituals, which relate not so much to those situations which give rise to anxieties for the individual, but to those which generate anxieties pertaining to social values. This point can be demonstrated from Malinowski's own material. In contrasting deep-sea and lagoon fishing he fails to tell us, Tambiah points out, that only deep-sea fishing provides sharks which have a high ritual value for Trobriand Islanders. More clearly, the cultivation of taro and yams is surrounded with magic while the cultivation of mangoes and coconuts is not. Yet taro and yam cultivation is a matter of great pride and the good gardener of them enjoys great prestige. There is a high degree of control involved. Differences in the degree of control and uncertainty of outcome cannot explain differences in the degree of magic involved in garden practice. What does seem to be relevant is the fact that taro and yam constitute the bulk of important payments a man must make to his sisters' husbands in fulfilment of his

affinal kinship obligations to them. Such payments become a test of his capacity, through skill in gardening, to fulfil crucial social obligations. Important men in the Trobriand Islands conspicuously display stores of surplus yams until they rot in order to demonstrate their prestige and power. Yams and taro are at the centre of social evaluations and concerns which the magic addresses and expresses rather than any technical uncertainties.

A second aspect of Malinowski's version of functionalism again warrants mention at this point since it presents specific problems which derive from his attempt to locate the social functions of religion in its function for the individual. To take the example of mortuary ritual where he argues that, in calming potentially disruptive emotions, it promotes group cohesion, he has to assume that actions which stem ultimately from intense emotions will have beneficial effects for the individual. Clearly they will often do so. For the most part people will behave in ways which benefit themselves but, where intense emotions are felt, it is by no means certain that people will always behave in ways which are either beneficial to themselves or to the social group. Situations of emotional tension are quite likely to produce behaviour which is disruptive of relationships, destabilising, and even self-destructive. Even the standardised and customary nature of ritual is no guarantee that it is essentially beneficial to individuals or to society. As Yinger has pointed out (1970), the fact that, in most cases, mortuary rituals affirm a belief in immortality does not necessarily mean that they are beneficial since such a belief may have the effect of producing resignation to suffering and injustice and prevent action to remove such things.

Despite the many problems that Malinowski's approach presents, it was a valuable contribution to our understanding of religion since it rightly emphasised an aspect, emotion, which the earlier intellectualists had neglected and it did attempt to analyse the nature of the emotions involved and the circumstances that generated them. Malinowski's contribution was also invaluable in showing that magic is not just a mistaken form of rational behaviour or a pseudo-science but an expression of hope and desire. He showed too that magic runs parallel to 'science', existing alongside it as an adjunct to it and not as a substitute for it.

### **FREUD AND RELIGION<sup>3</sup>**

Despite their unique characteristics, Freud's theories of magic and religion belong in the emotionalist category. Because of such characteristics, however, it is impossible not to treat them separately. There are three aspects to Freud's work in this area: a theory of magic, a general theory of religion, and specific theory of the origins of religion in totemism and its subsequent evolution.

#### **Magic**

Freud attributed magical practices to what he called the omnipotence of thought. By this he meant essentially that primitive human beings thought that they could

manipulate the real world just by thinking about it – by willing certain things to happen. This is quite reminiscent of Tylor's and Frazer's claim that in magical thought ideal connections are mistaken for real connections. Freud was, in fact, strongly influenced by Frazer's work. For example, in his essay 'Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought', he says: 'Objects as such are overshadowed by the idea representing them; what takes place in the latter must also happen to the former, and relations which exist between ideas are also postulated as to things' (1938, p. 136).

However, for Freud the omnipotence of thought was far from being just a mistake in reasoning or the false product of an inherent tendency to speculate about the world and to generalise, as it was for Frazer. For Freud it had little to do with rational processes at all.

Magical acts, he argued, are like the actions of neurotics; they are akin to obsessional actions and protective formulae which are typical of neurotic behaviour. Just as the latter are the consequence of repressed thoughts, fears and desires, so with magical acts the 'mistakes' are more than mere mistakes and have their source in irrational impulses.

It is important to note that Freud did not say that magical practices are the same as obsessive actions or neurotic behaviour. What he argued was that they are alike and that there is a parallel between them such that we can understand magic by examining the causes, as he saw them, of neurotic behaviour. Freud was quite aware that it would be absurd to claim that the entire populations of many tribal peoples are neurotic or suffering from individual mental disorders.

The parallel between magical and neurotic behaviour exists because, in the course of human development, the individual goes through certain stages which are the same stages that the whole species has gone through in the course of its emotional and psychic development. There is, as Freud put it, a parallelism in ontogenetic and phylogenetic development. The neurotic individual is stuck at an infantile stage of development. Aberrations which occur in later life can be attributed to events in the course of early development in childhood which have arrested emotional and mental development.

Thus magical thought and practice represent an early stage of the development of the species reminiscent of an early stage in the development of the child and of the behaviour of the neurotic arrested at the same stage. It is characterised by the attempt to solve difficulties in fantasy rather than realistically; to overcome them in thought and imagination – hence the belief in the omnipotence of thought.

Freud claimed that the human individual goes through four stages of development from birth to adulthood. These he termed auto-eroticism, narcissism, object selection and finally maturity. These stages are stages in sexual development or, to be more precise, stages in libidinal development, which, while fundamentally sexual, includes also much of emotional and affective development in general. Freud believed that the sexual impulse underlies a great deal of emotional life in its various manifestations, and he used the term *libido* to refer to this impulse.

In the first stage, that is the auto-erotic stage, the libidinal impulses of the human infant are not yet directed towards any object. The child seeks and obtains gratification and pleasure in its own body and bodily functions.

In the narcissistic stage the sexual impulses find an object but it is not yet an external one. It is at this stage that the infant develops a conception of a self or, in other words, an ego. This ego becomes the object of libidinal impulses in the narcissistic stage.

In the stage of object selection the child turns its libidinal impulses towards external objects. At this stage the external objects which are of greatest concern and interest to the child are the parents. It is here that the roots of the Oedipal complex are found. The tendency is for the libidinal impulses to be directed towards the parent of the opposite sex. The parent of the same sex becomes a rival and feelings of hostility towards that parent develop in the child. This in turn generates feelings of guilt. In other words, the feelings of the child towards the parent of the same sex are characterised by ambivalence. In the male the father is seen as both a protector and provider and yet a rival for the affection of the mother. Also, because the libidinal impulses are directed externally, they now become subject to repression. The instinctual desires and wishes are opposed by the real world and its pressures. They are disallowed and must be repressed. This produces further tension, aggression and hostility, guilt and ambivalence.

In the final stage, maturity, the individual adapts to reality and to the external world and accepts the limitations it imposes upon desires. A realistic attitude is adopted towards problems.

Corresponding to the stages of narcissism, object selection and maturity in the development of the individual, there are three stages in the development of the species, respectively the magical, religious and the scientific. (There is no stage which corresponds to auto-eroticism.) The similarity of this scheme to that of Frazer is not accidental.

Magic, then, corresponds to the narcissistic stage of the development of the individual. It is the technique associated with an animistic mode of thought and this mode of thought is characterised by the omnipotence of thought. The infant at the narcissistic stage of development, when unable to satisfy desires in reality, tends to seek to satisfy them in fantasy and imagination. Thought is substituted for action. Similarly, the magical stage of development is characterised by the attempt to produce desired results by the use of techniques based upon association of ideas. Again, thought is substituted for action. The neurotic, arrested at the narcissistic stage of development, also responds to problems in an unrealistic way. Both the neurotic and the magician overestimate the power of thought. Omnipotence of thought is most clearly manifested in cases of obsessional neurosis, according to Freud. It is characterised by superstition. Just as the magician is afraid of offending spirits and demons, the neurotic is often fearful that something awful will happen if the dictates of obsessions are not observed. Everything must be checked over and over again. The state is often characterised by hypochondria, fear of infection and of dirt, or obsessional washing and cleaning. But in all forms of neurosis, Freud argues, 'it is not the reality of the experience but the reality of

thought which forms the basis for the symptom formation' (ibid., p. 139). In short, both the magician and the neurotic attribute far more to their ideas and thoughts than is admissible.

Of the spirits and demons that the animist postulates, Freud says that they were 'nothing but the projection of primitive man's emotional impulses; he personified the things he endowed with effects, populated the world with them and then discovered his inner psychic processes outside himself (ibid., p. 146).

So the magical approach to the world derives from a sense of frustration and emotional tension. The projection of inner psychic processes onto the outer world – animism – offers psychic relief. Magic is a form of wish fulfilment through which gratification and relief are obtained in fantasy.

## Religion

The religious stage of human development corresponds to the object selection stage of the development of the individual which is characterised by ambivalent feelings towards the parents. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1928) Freud argued that life inevitably entails privation. Since civilisation itself is based upon a renunciation of instinctual drives and impulses, the inescapable consequence is that the individual suffers frustration. Civilisation entails social order and regulation and cannot but impose privations upon us. Also, we impose privations upon one another because in any society some dominate or exercise power over others. In addition to these privations, nature itself holds many threats and imposes many limitations and therefore many privations. It is the purpose of civilisation and culture to combat such threats which it does only at the cost of a different set of privations.

In the religious phase of development the tendency is to attempt to cope with the threats and limitations imposed by nature by humanising it. The natural world is seen in human terms, as if it had the characteristics of human beings. If nature is seen as impersonal, it cannot be approached and dealt with and contact with it cannot be established. If it is seen in anthropomorphic terms, i.e. as having a will, desires, purposes and intentions, it can be influenced, appeased, adjured, bribed, or persuaded. It is great relief and consolation, especially in the conditions of primitive society in which religion first emerged, to think of nature this way and, Freud argues, actually a step forward in dealing with the world.

This way of dealing with frustration and privation is based, according to Freud, upon the model of the child–parent relationship or more specifically the relationship between child and father. The individual attempts to interact with the world in much the same way as the child interacts with the father. Freud expresses it as follows:

For this situation is nothing new. It has an infantile prototype, of which it is in fact only the continuation. For once before one has found oneself in a similar state of helplessness; as a small child, in relation to one's parents. One had reason to fear them, and especially one's father; and yet one was

sure of his protection against the dangers one knew. Thus it was natural to assimilate the two situations ... a man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals – that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him – but he gives them the character of a father. He turns them into gods.

(1961, p. 17)

In time the gods become, by degrees, more autonomous from nature. The idea arises that the gods themselves are subject to their own fates and destinies. At this stage the compensatory function of gods is emphasised. They are believed to provide compensation for the privations that culture imposes as a result of its repression and regulation of instinctual drives. Religion now becomes bound up with morality:

It now became the task of the gods to even out the defects and evils of civilisation, to attend to the sufferings which men inflict on one another in their life together and to watch over the fulfilment of the precepts of civilisation, which men obey so imperfectly. Those precepts themselves were credited with a divine origin; they were elevated beyond human society and were extended to nature and the universe.

(*ibid.*, p. 18)

Religion provides compensation by presenting a picture of a world order in which everything has meaning, everything fits into place and nothing is arbitrary and accidental. All sins will be punished in the long run. Those who seem to prosper by wrongdoing will receive their punishment in due course. Their actions do not invalidate or undermine the moral order. Without this type of belief, Freud argues, the moral order would break down.

This aspect of Freud's approach contains a clearly functionalist element but it is not fundamental. It does not warrant treating him as a functionalist as some have done (for example, Scharf, 1970, p. 82). Freud states, in fact, that the consoling and reconciling functions of religion are not sufficient to explain it. His explanation is essentially in terms of a psychological process which he terms wish fulfilment. Religion, he says, is an illusion. He defines an illusion as any belief, true or false, which is held not because there are good grounds for holding it but because there is a strong desire or need to believe it. Religion is made up of such beliefs. It is a form of wish fulfilment or self-delusion which derives from an overpowering will to believe – a will stronger than reason.

It is, therefore, a psychological process which explains religion and not fundamentally its socially beneficial effects. Although religion may be functional for social order, its root source lies in individual needs and in the psychology and motives of individuals.

For Freud, then, the religious stage parallels the stage of object selection of the development of the individual characterised by ambivalent feelings towards the



father and the Oedipus complex. Religion would thus be 'the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father' (1961, p. 43).

Again, however, Freud is not arguing that all religious believers are actually neurotic in the same way that some individuals are. Quite the contrary, 'their acceptance of the universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one' (*ibid.*, p. 44).

## **Totemism**

Freud's theory of totemism is perhaps the most celebrated of his work in the sphere of religion. It is an extraordinary story of the origins not only of religion but of the whole of human civilisation. The term 'story' is not used inappropriately. Evans-Pritchard (1965) calls it a 'just so story' and a 'fairy tale'. Here then is Freud's fairy tale. Once upon a time, a very long time ago, primitive man or perhaps it was the pre-human ancestors of man, lived in what Darwin had called the primal horde. This was alleged to have consisted of a dominant male who monopolised a number of females, greedily keeping them all to himself. The other males of the troupe, largely the sons of the dominant male and offspring of the females, were kept away and relegated to the periphery of the group by the stronger, jealous and violent father.

One day, however, the peripheral males, a group of brothers and half-brothers, joined forces and killed the dominant father – an act they could never have achieved singly. The very first act of co-operation was to commit parricide.

Freud goes on to heap one horrific event upon another. 'Of course', he says, 'these cannibalistic savages ate their victim' (1938, p. 218). One wonders whether Freud used the introspective method to arrive at this conclusion. The reason for this act of cannibalism, according to Freud, was that the brothers believed that by eating the victim they would absorb his strength and power into themselves. The first ever celebratory feast, then, was a cannibalistic one. It was the forerunner of the totemic feast in which the totem animal, normally taboo, is ritually slaughtered and eaten.

After their triumph, however, the brothers would have been seized by remorse for what they had done. They may have resented and hated the dominant father when he was alive but at the same time they admired him and loved him. While he was alive the negative aspect of their ambivalent feelings tended to predominate in their consciousness but, once he was dead, they came to realise the strength of their positive feelings and were overcome with guilt.

In an attempt to undo and to atone for their terrible deed they invented two prohibitions. They found a symbolic substitute for the father in the form of an animal species. This claim is based upon Freud's analysis of the displacement of feelings and emotions onto substitute objects, a phenomenon analysed by Freud in clinical studies of childhood phobias relating to animals. They then placed a taboo upon killing or eating the totem animal. Second, they renounced the fruits



of their victory by denying to themselves the liberated females. In this the two fundamental institutions of totemic society were established – the taboo against killing the clan totem and clan exogamy. These taboos represent the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex, namely, to kill the father and sexually possess the mother.

The taboo against killing the totem animal is interpreted by Freud as an attempt to strike a bargain with the dead father. He would watch over them and protect them while they pledge not to repeat their act of parricide by not killing the totem animal. Thus totemic religion derived from a sense of guilt and an attempt to atone for it and to conciliate the injured father through subsequent obedience. These factors are at the root, in fact, of all religion according to Freud, who says:

All later religions prove to be attempts to solve the same problem, varying only in accordance with the stage of culture in which they are attempted and according to the paths which they take; they are all, however, reactions aiming at the same great event with which culture began and which ever since has not let mankind come to rest.

(*ibid.*, p. 222)

The old antagonistic attitude towards the father, however, does not entirely disappear. Attitudes to him remain ambivalent. So, once a year the great triumph over him is commemorated in the form of the totemic feast – the totem animal, standing for the father, is ritually killed and eaten. His strength is once again absorbed by the participants. Freud claims that this theory of totemism has distinct advantages over others that were prevalent at the time. For example, one such was that of Robertson Smith (1889), an early theorist who had treated the sacrificial totemic feast as a means of communicating with the tribal deity. The feast, he argued, was seen as the sharing of a communal meal with the tribal god by which means members of the tribe could establish a close relationship with him; they could become identified with him in common solidarity. This is all very well, Freud says, but how does this idea of a tribal god arise in the first place? His own theory, he claims, can account for the belief in a tribal god. Psychoanalytic theory shows that ‘god is in every case modelled after the father and ... our personal relation to god is dependent upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him ... god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father’ (*ibid.*, p. 225).

Freud goes on to trace certain aspects of the development of religion from totemism and to show how the original events upon which it is founded have left their traces in myth, legend and religion generally. The first step is that the totem animal loses its sacredness. It becomes more of an offering to the gods and less a representation of the god.

The sacrifice becomes less a re-enactment of the original parricide and takes on an aspect of self-denial and of an offering in expiation of the original crime. The sacrifice of an animal is not, however, adequate expiation for the murder of the father and does not allay the feelings of guilt. Nor is it a true re-enactment of

the original crime. It follows, Freud argues, that only a human sacrifice would be really adequate to these purposes. He goes on to interpret the ritual sacrifices of kings who had grown old, alleged to occur among the Latin tribes and other peoples in antiquity, as acts representing the ambivalent emotions of the members of the tribe in relation to the father.

It was such customs that Sir James Frazer was ostensibly concerned with explaining in his book *The Golden Bough* and which had stimulated the writing of that massive study. Freud saw such sacrifices as partly a re-enactment of the original parricide and partly expiation for it. The original animal sacrifice, can, with this development, be seen for what it was – a substitute for a human sacrifice. So, along with parricide, incest and cannibalism Freud now adds human sacrifice to the catalogue of customs upon which civilisation and culture are founded.

The ambivalent emotions felt towards the father, guilt on the one hand, defiance on the other, continue throughout history, Freud argues. It is manifested in a great many myths and legends. Figures like Attis, Adonis, Tammuz and many others commit incest with the mother in defiance of the father. They often suffer punishment through castration, as in the case of Attis, or at the hands of the father in the form of an animal – a boar in the case of Adonis.

Finally, Freud examines Christianity and finds in it also evidence for his psychoanalytic theory and presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of certain of its distinctive features. Why, he asks, should Christian doctrine speak of an original sin which had to be atoned for by the sacrifice of a human life and, furthermore, the life of the son of God? He argues that an offence against a father which can only be atoned for by the life of the son must have been murder – it must have been parricide. Christian belief thus reveals the influence of the momentous event which took place in the remote past and from which has sprung so much of our culture and belief.

Thus in the Christian doctrine mankind most unreservedly acknowledges the guilty deed of primordial times because it now has found the most complete expiation for this deed in the sacrificial death of the son. The reconciliation with the father is the more thorough because simultaneously with this sacrifice there follows the complete renunciation of woman, for whose sake mankind rebelled against the father. But now also the psychological fatality of ambivalence demands its rights. In the same deed which offers the greatest possible expiation to the father, the son also attains the goal of his wishes against the father. He becomes a god himself beside or rather in place of his father. The religion of the son succeeds the religion of the father. As a sign of this substitution the old totem feast is revived again in the form of communion in which the band of brothers now eats the flesh and blood of the son and no longer that of the father, the sons thereby identifying themselves with him and becoming holy themselves. Thus through the ages we see the identity of the totem feast with the animal sacrifice, and the Christian Eucharist, and in all these solemn occasions we recognise the after-effects of that crime which so oppressed men but of

which they must have been so proud. At bottom, however, the Christian communion is a new setting aside of the father, a repetition of the crime that must be expiated. We see how well justified is Frazer's dictum that 'the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is doubtless far older than Christianity'.

(*ibid.*, pp. 236–7)

### **Criticisms of Freud**

Freud's theories of magic and religion are highly ingenious and challenging yet open to innumerable criticisms and replete with difficulties of many kinds. Let us take the theory of magic first. Being an emotionalist theory, it is open to many of the criticisms of such theories already discussed. The distinctive aspects of Freud's approach, however, create problems of their own. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of his approach is that it generalises from observations of a limited number of individuals whose behaviour is abnormal. Generalisations made upon this narrow and dubious basis are applied to the whole of humankind and to the intellectual and emotional development of the entire species.

It is important to note, in this respect, that Freud, of course, did not perceive the alleged parallelism between individual development and that of the species. He could never have perceived the development of the species but had to infer it on the basis of his observations of individuals who were suffering from mental and emotional difficulties. This is a highly suspect way to proceed.

There are, also, logical difficulties in likening magical behaviour to neurotic behaviour. The notion of neurotic behaviour depends for its sense upon a notion of normality. It is logically parasitic upon the idea of normality (Phillips, 1976, pp. 58–9). Now in the case of individuals whose behaviour is considered to be abnormal, it may well be possible to characterise it as neurotic by contrasting it with normal behaviour and showing that it deviates from this in specified and typical ways. In the case of the practitioner of magic, it is not possible to do this. The actions of the magician are perfectly normal in the society in which he operates. Freud does not say, however, that the magician is individually abnormal. He says that the whole of the culture of the magician and all cultures like it are abnormal in relation to modern rational empirical ways of dealing with the world. But what can abnormal mean in this context? Against what is the cultural tradition of magic being contrasted, such that it can be said to be abnormal? Can the greater part of the history of human culture and the majority of human societies that have so far existed be legitimately or meaningfully thought of as being abnormal? Can long stages in the development of the intellectual and emotional life of the human species be seriously characterised as abnormal? The parallel between magic and neurosis appears very shaky indeed when seen in this light.

There is one distinctive aspect of Freud's approach which, it might be thought, overcomes the difficulty of emotionalist approaches discussed previously – that

they cannot explain the particular form of religious beliefs and practices. Psychoanalytic theory provides a way of analysing symbols and religious beliefs, and rituals might thus be amenable to treatment in the same way as psychoanalysis deals with what it regards as the symbolism of dreams. Freudians have often attempted such analyses. Reik (1975), for example, in his book *Ritual* tries to make sense in psychoanalytic terms of many ritual practices including, to take just one example, that of the *couvade* in which the husband of a woman undergoing labour will manifest all the symptoms of labour himself and be treated by all those around him as if it were he and not his wife that was about to give birth. Failure to observe this custom is often believed to have the consequence of bringing harm to the yet unborn child. The custom is widely distributed in societies throughout the world including traditional Basque society. What it symbolises, Reik argues, is the desire for self-punishment on the part of the husband, by taking on the pain that his wife must endure. This desire for self-punishment is a consequence of the guilt he inwardly feels because of repressed feelings of aggression towards the child about to be born and a wish for its death, since it is a potential rival for the affections of the mother and a challenge to his masculine authority.

The problem with psychoanalytic theories of this kind is that it is difficult to know whether the interpretation of the symbolism is correct. Symbolic meaning can be read into almost anything and there is no way of checking if the interpretation is correct independent of the theory itself. Consequently, different interpretations of the alleged symbolism are possible. There can be quite different psychoanalytic interpretations associated with different schools of thought within psychoanalysis. Freudian interpretations, for example, will differ markedly from Jungian ones. There is no easy way to resolve these differences, no means of appealing to the evidence; one is simply a Freudian, a Jungian or neither.

Another difficulty with the psychoanalytic theory is that it fails to deal effectively with the social nature of magic, the fact that it is customary, standardised, learned and socially recognised, perhaps even obligatory. Freud was well aware of the social character of magic and interprets it as a collective response to those situations which involve frustration and emotional ambivalence. Magic is a collective fantasy, he said. But how can a collective fantasy come about? How could comforting self-delusions have become socially recognised and even obligatory? Freud does not answer such questions. The problem is that there is a certain tension between a psychological approach to magic in terms of the mental characteristics or states of individuals, on the one hand, and the social nature of magic, on the other, which is not resolved by psychoanalytic theorists.

There is, however, a possibility that the psychoanalytic approach, assuming that it is not without any validity at all, might be addressing itself to quite different aspects of magical belief compared to sociological approaches. It might be that the two approaches simply ask very different questions about a complex and many-faceted type of behaviour.

An example of how a psychoanalytic approach might complement a sociological analysis is given by Leach (1958) in his discussion of the psychoanalyst

Charles Berg's 1951 treatment of customs concerned with hair, the dressing of hair and its significance in rituals. Berg argued that head hair can be a symbol of the genital organs. Cutting hair and shaving the head can be seen, therefore, as symbolising castration. This symbolic castration is an attempt, he argued, to control primary aggressive impulses. Berg derived these conclusions from clinical studies which he then applied to ethnographic data which, Leach points out, were of rather limited quality. Taking rather better data, Leach concludes that the psychological and the anthropological interpretations could coexist side by side without contradiction since they are concerned with rather different aspects of the same rites. The rituals are performed for social reasons and embody social meanings. The particular symbols used in such rituals may, however, be chosen because they have a potency derived from the fact that they relate to those powerful and dangerous thoughts and impulses of which the psychoanalysts speak and which are normally repressed. Thus the explanation of social rituals has to make reference to social structures and social processes in order to understand why they are carried out at all. But the particular symbolism involved may require an explanation in psychological and perhaps psychoanalytic terms. Rituals may be socially effective because they make use of and make public potent symbols which have a private and internal, if not fully realised, meaning for the participants.<sup>4</sup>

Turning now to Freud's theory of religion, what of his claims that God is an exalted father, that religion is the humanisation of nature on the pattern of the child–father relationship and that religion is a form of wish fulfilment that gives consolation to men at an immature stage of development?

For someone of a Christian background there does, at first sight, seem to be a lot in Freud's account that is plausible. The Christian religion does speak of 'God the Father'. God is usually conceived as a paternalistic figure but also a stern disciplinarian. It is a very human characteristic to believe what is comforting to believe. Perhaps this is what some Christians mean by faith. Finally, as previously noted, at least one anthropologist has defined religion as the extension of human interaction beyond the confines of human society. It is conceivable that the pattern for such interaction could be that of the child–father relationship.

However, if much of what Freud said about religion might be said to fit Christianity quite well, can it be generalised to suit other religious traditions? Could Freud's theory account for the variety of forms that religious belief and behaviour take? It would seem not. The diversity of religion across different cultures is so great that it seems very doubtful that there is, underlying such diversity, a uniform pattern which derives from universal characteristics of human nature. Take, for example, female deities. Freud himself admitted that female deities do not fit into his theory at all well, for obvious reasons. Female deities have, however, been an important feature of many religious traditions. Also, Wulff (1991) points out that empirical studies have found that the concept of God correlates more highly with the concept of the mother than that of the father. There is a marked tendency for both men and women to associate the

idea of God with the preferred parent which for both sexes is more often the mother.

It would seem, then, that Freud was somewhat ethnocentric in his approach. He did not know very much about, or at least overlooked, a great deal of the variety and diversity of religious belief. He tended to generalise from the type of religious tradition with which he was familiar and to see features of this tradition and of his own culture as universal and inherent traits of human beings *per se*. He tended also to reduce all social forms to basic universal psychological processes. The problem is that it is difficult to see how the diversity of social forms can all derive from the same source. Freud ignores the specific social contexts in which emotional tensions exist and arise. Emotional tension and ambivalence of a particular kind cannot just be assumed to be there, inherent in all human beings and in all societies. For one thing, societies are structured very differently and the tensions and emotions which occur typically in a society will reflect, to a considerable degree, the particular character of the social structure. An example would be matrilineal kinship organisation, such as that of Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders, where the father is relatively unimportant, is not a disciplinarian, and has no real responsibility for his children for whom the mother's brother is the figure of authority and the child's real superior and guardian. Clearly, emotional ambivalence towards fathers in such a society is likely to be much less intense than that in the nineteenth-century, middle-class Victorian family in which Freud grew up.

However, this may simply mean that Freud's ideas require only modification in such a way as to be more generally applicable rather than outright rejection. The essential hypothesis of such a generalised Freudianism would be that religious beliefs are a function of the type of domestic situation in which socialisation occurs in a given society. Gods and deities, if this approach is correct, should look like projections of the characteristics of parents, bearing in mind that parents will behave in different ways towards children in different societies. A number of studies have been carried out in order to test this sort of hypothesis. The evidence has so far proved to be contradictory. Few studies have found much evidence for Freud's original ideas but some have found evidence favourable to a generalised version of it.<sup>5</sup> The most useful studies of this kind are those which take a cross-cultural perspective. One such came to the conclusion that there exists 'an extraordinary analogy between the Oedipus structure and the structuring of the religious attitude' (Vergote *et al.*, 1969, p. 877).

Some theorists who have been influenced by Freudian ideas do not see the origins of religion as arising out of relationships between parents and children and patterns of child-rearing but rather use such factors to explain the persistence of religious ideas in a population.<sup>6</sup> Beliefs, they acknowledge, are learned and part of a cultural tradition. They come, however, to have a hold upon people and are felt to be credible because they conform to the psychological forces within the typical individual in a given society. The private fantasies of individuals conform to the culturally determined and acquired beliefs. In this way this approach allows for the social and cultural dimension of religious belief.

Psychology is brought in only to explain why individuals accept and perpetuate the cultural tradition.

Of course, the fact that images of gods and deities match, to a large extent, parental images, if they do, would not in itself prove that the source of religious belief does lie in experiences in the family situation. The neo-Freudians have far from demonstrated their case as yet.

Another criticism that can be made of Freud's theory of religion is that it fails to do justice to the expressive character of religious ritual which other emotionalist theories bring out more effectively. Freud tended to see religion as essentially pragmatic, an attempt to control the world so as to produce definite practical results. There is much more to religion than this. Freud is very close in his attitudes to the typical nineteenth-century view of religion as a mere illusion based upon false reasoning.

Another weakness of Freud's approach can be seen in his attempt to account for religious development. In its initial phase, Freud tells us, religion is the humanisation of nature in an attempt to control it. But it is the privations that civilisation and social regulation of the instinctual drives impose that are the source of those ambivalent emotions and tensions which underlie the Oedipus complex rather than the privations imposed by the natural world. Since this is so, why should religion take the form of humanisation of nature? Also, it is difficult to see why this humanised nature should come to have the responsibility of compensating human beings for the privations that civilisation imposes upon them. Why should an anthropomorphised nature become concerned with upholding morality and justice? There is little coherence or plausibility, then, in this aspect of Freud's account. There is a certain sleight of hand in it; the Oedipal theory first applied to relations with the natural world is rather surreptitiously generalised to social relations and morality.

Finally, we come to Freud's discussion of the origins of religion in totemism. It is hardly necessary to dwell on this. It is, of course, highly conjectural and there is not the faintest trace of evidence for it. The information on totemism on which it was based has since been shown to be largely false or misleading. There is no evidence that totemism was the earliest form of religion or that other religions have evolved from it. Totemism as a distinct form of religion had, in fact, been shown, even at the time Freud was writing, to be a myth. The various elements of totemism – clan exogamy, belief in clan descent from the totem animal, tabooing of the totem animal, the totemic feast – all occur separately in different societies and in various permutations but only very rarely all together (Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

There is no evidence, either, for the claim that early human or pre-human social organisation took the form of the primal horde. Even in primate species where there is a horde-like structure of dominant and peripheral males, the dominant males do not monopolise the females (Freeman, 1969).

Finally, the theory was based upon a notion of an inherited racial memory of the original events which continued to exert its influence in every subsequent generation, an idea now wholly discredited by modern biology.



## KARL JUNG

Before leaving psychoanalytic theories of religion a brief mention of the work of Karl Jung should be made. Jung at first accepted Freud's claim that religion was a comforting illusion but slowly came to believe that religion in fact expressed a kind of truth – a psychological truth. He came to believe that religion had positive value for the individual.

Jung broke with Freudian theory in rejecting the notion of libido being primarily a sexual impulse. He modified the concept, seeing it as a sort of diffuse psychic energy or drive. Neuroses, for Jung, resulted from the blocking of this energy. The neurotic response, he claimed, had a positive side to it and he saw it as an attempt to produce a solution to problems arising out of the blocking of psychic energy. This solution consists in finding new channels for the psychic energy and is accomplished through the medium of symbols, the symbols of dreams, for example. Symbols raise the psychic energy to higher levels and often to a religious level. Religious symbolism is a way of exploring new possibilities and of discovering new ways of coping with personal difficulties relating to emotional development. For Jung religion was psychotherapeutic – it gives meaning to existence and suggests paths for adaptation for the future.

It is a characteristic of symbols, Jung argued, that they have no fixed meaning. Symbols are multi-faceted and their meanings may remain unrealised until revealed by analysis. They are products of the unconscious and the process of analysing them throws up new possibilities for the psychic and emotional development of the individual. Very often Jung believed that he discovered in the dreams of patients a religious symbolism which he interpreted as the unconscious mind attempting to show the individual ways to overcome personal problems.

This implies that there is more to the unconscious than just suppressed wishes, thoughts and experiences, as Freud had maintained. Jung is famous for his postulation of a collective unconscious and of the 'archetypes'. The unconscious, he said, is divided into two parts. First, there is the personal unconscious which includes things forgotten during life, subliminal perceptions and all psychic contents incompatible with conscious attitudes, i.e. things which are for one reason or another inadmissible and consequently pushed out of consciousness and repressed. Second, there is the collective unconscious which includes things which are not restricted to the individual. These complexes, as Jung calls them, are universal, that is, common to all human beings. The collective unconscious is inherited by all members of the human species and contains its collective experience.

It is these elements of the collective unconscious which produce the symbolism of dreams in which religious solutions are being suggested. He calls these elements the archetypes. They are manifested not only in dreams but in myths and legends, stories and in many aspects of culture. Examples include the wise old man, the mother figure, the cross, and the hero.

When some element of the unconscious rises into consciousness, it is felt by the individual to be uncanny and strange. It does not seem to come from within



the individual but to come from outside. It is also fascinating and awe-inspiring. Jung interprets the experience of spiritual powers and belief in spirits as elements of the collective unconscious rising into consciousness. Members of a tribal society who have such experiences will say that a spirit is bothering them.

Such experiences are particularly common when society undergoes a profound change of a social, religious or political nature. At such times elements of the collective unconscious rising into the conscious mind cause many people to see strange things, or experience visions. The sighting of UFOs and flying saucers might be a contemporary form of this phenomenon. The collective unconscious is attempting to provide possibilities for adaptation to the changing circumstances and the problems this creates for individuals and the society. These experiences are religious experiences and religion is thus a progressive and adaptive force, according to Jung.

All this may seem very mysterious and indeed much of Jung's writing is. It is also difficult to grasp without a good grounding of his complex psychoanalytical system, which it is not possible even to outline here.

## **NEO-FREUDIANISM: MELFORD SPIRO**

While the psychoanalytic approach to understanding religion, and the Freudian approach in particular, are not accepted by many theorists in their original forms, a number of writers have developed modified, less ethnocentric versions of them and most prominent among these is Melford Spiro.

Spiro (1966) believes that it is not, in fact, possible to develop a single comprehensive explanation of religion because it is too diverse and complex a phenomenon. We must develop separate explanations for its various aspects. The fact that every theory we have examined so far seems to have some element of truth in it would support Spiro's claim. Some aspects of religion, Spiro argues, require a modified Freudian understanding.

Spiro first considers beliefs as opposed to practices and asks why people believe what they do believe. On what grounds are religious propositions believed to be true? He considers that a psychological theory is necessary to understand this aspect of religion. He is aware that beliefs are part of a cultural tradition and handed down from generation to generation; he accepts, in other words, that an explanation of the content of beliefs cannot be essentially or primarily psychological. His concern, however, is not with the content of the beliefs or with their origins but with why they are believed at all, why they persist and have credibility. Cultural tradition is not adequate to answer this. In other words, Spiro implies that people do not believe religious propositions simply because they are socialised into them. He believes that certain psychological processes are behind the acceptance of beliefs.

Nor does Spiro attempt to explain beliefs in terms of any need to believe. Because people need to believe in something, this is not a sufficient reason for them believing it or an explanation of why they do believe it. Nor does any need

in the sense of a functional requirement of society explain belief. It does not follow that if society needs its members to believe something that they will believe it.

Spiro proposes a broadly Freudian interpretation of belief – one which is generalised from Freud's own ethnocentric model. He argues as follows. It is a child's experiences in the family which dispose him or her in later life to accord credibility to beliefs in powerful beings which are sometimes benevolent and sometimes malevolent, or some similar set of beliefs. This is because it is in the family that beings who have such characteristics are experienced. A child learns that various actions on his or her own part can induce powerful beings, the parents, to act either benevolently or malevolently; in this way the efficacy of ritual is learned since for the child the actions required by adults seem ritualistic.

Spiro suggests that this is a better hypothesis to account for beliefs in superhuman beings and for ritual than other theories because it can account for crosscultural variations whereas most others cannot. If childhood experiences are different in different societies, then we would expect to find differences in beliefs to be correlated with family structures and methods of child-rearing. An empirical test of this theory, then, is clearly possible. Various studies, Spiro claims, have confirmed the hypothesis.

Turning to the question of religious practices, Spiro argues that in general terms people engage in various actions because they wish to achieve various ends and satisfy various desires and believe that the activity will accomplish this. In short, to understand religious practices we must examine the motives people have for engaging in them; 'an explanation of the practice of religion must be sought in the set of needs whose expected satisfaction motivates religious beliefs and the performance of religious ritual' (*ibid.*, p. 107).

Although Spiro speaks of the satisfaction of needs by religion as being its social and psychological functions, he is not really a functionalist. He does not seek to explain the existence of the practices in terms of the needs (see Chapter 10). As in the case of belief, the same applies to practice; need does not ensure occurrence. Spiro explains practices in terms of motivations on the part of individuals who experience certain needs and respond to this situation in a certain way. If, for example, it is necessary to promote social cohesion and it is claimed that this is done by means of religion, the existence of the religious beliefs and practices is only explained if it is recognised by believers and participants that it is necessary to promote cohesion, if they desire to promote it and if they accept the beliefs and engage in the practices in order to promote it. In short, an explanation in these terms is possible only if the participants recognise, desire and intend that the alleged function be fulfilled.

With this clear, Spiro goes on to examine the 'functions' that religion has which, in his view, explain it. He distinguishes three types of function: adjustive, adaptive and integrative, and corresponding to these there are three types of desire which are satisfied by religion: cognitive, substantive and expressive. Religion satisfies cognitive needs by providing explanations of puzzling phenomena in the absence of competitive explanations. Religion satisfies the

desire to know and to understand and is resorted to when more mundane means of explanation fail.

The substantive needs that religion satisfies concern concrete and material desires which cannot be satisfied in other ways. Religion satisfies them in the absence of competing technologies. In doing so it reduces anxiety by giving confidence that desires will be fulfilled and goals achieved.

The substantive functions of religion are both recognised and intended, according to Spiro. They are, however, not real in the sense that they do not produce the results they are believed to. Their function is only apparent; one that is, which is not empirically confirmable. Rain-making ritual, for example, has only an apparent not a real function. The fact that much religious ritual has no real function has made it seem irrational which has led to the tendency to attribute social functions, such as integration to it. Rain-making ceremonies are said to integrate society. But even if they do, they cannot be explained in this way. Spiro claims that to say that their functions are unreal is, however, not to say that they are irrational.

Religion meets expressive needs by allowing the symbolic expression of certain painful drives and motives. Spiro here is referring to those drives involving fears and anxieties which psychoanalysis has revealed to us and which can be disturbing and destructive. By painful motives he means those which are culturally forbidden including aggressive and sexual motives. These drives and motives become unconscious but still seek satisfaction. Religion reduces these drives and motives by symbolically giving expression to them.

All three of these sets of desires that religion satisfies, cognitive, substantive and expressive, refer to the motives underlying religious behaviour, that is, to a psychological variable. Yet the sources of these motives are often related to social factors. Again the crucial social context in which such motives are generated, according to Spiro, is the family. We ought, therefore, to be able to correlate different family structures with variations in religious practices. Spiro has undertaken studies of this kind which, he claims, support his basic hypotheses.

Spiro, then, seeks to integrate psychological and social dimensions and to provide a theory which is couched in terms of both cause and function. 'Function', in his approach, is, however, very different from the concept as it is used in traditional functionalist theory. For Spiro 'function' means only certain actual or putative effects.

A point to note about this type of causal/functional approach is that it would, of course, explain not only religion but anything that would satisfy cognitive, substantive and expressive desires. The question arises why these desires are satisfied by religion rather than in some other way. Spiro recognises that the desires might not be satisfied by religion but by some alternative means. This is why he stresses that religious means are resorted to in the absence of more mundane means. As he puts it: 'the importance of religion would be expected to vary inversely with the importance of other projective and realistic institutions' (*ibid.*, p. 116). But this does not tell us why religious means are used in the absence of alternatives. All Spiro says is that in such circumstances religious means are

the means *par excellence*, but he does not tell us why that is so. Perhaps it has something to do with the origins of religious conceptions – a question he declines to examine. The theory, then, is only a partial one. It is a theory, however, which Spiro has sought to apply in his substantive work in the sociology of religion and particularly in his work on Buddhism which is examined in the next chapter.

## 5 Buddhism

Chapter 1 discussed the dilemmas that Theravada Buddhism poses for the attempt to define religion because belief in god or gods is not a central tenet of Buddhist faith, which is often said, in consequence, to be atheistic.

According to orthodox teaching, the Buddha was not divine. Although a very remarkable man, he no longer exists, and cannot help us to achieve salvation. He only pointed the way, when alive, for others to follow. His teaching consisted of the Four Noble Truths. First, life entails suffering (*dukkha* in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures – a term which means, more accurately, the opposite of well-being. The closest word in English that anyone has so far been able to suggest is ‘unsatisfactoriness’.) Second, the source of suffering is desire and craving. Third, suffering can be ended by extinguishing desire and fourth, this can be achieved by following the eightfold path of the *dhamma* (Sanskrit, *dharma*)<sup>1</sup> – the path of Buddhism. This results in the attainment of *nibbana* (Sanskrit, *nirvana*), a blissful state in which desire has been extinguished. As in Hinduism, the Buddha Gottama taught that true salvation meant escape from the cycle of rebirths.

Rebirth is the inevitable consequence of *kamma* (Sanskrit, *karma*) which is intentional action, that is, action which springs from desire. Action which is good results in a better rebirth. Action which is bad results in a worse rebirth. Escape from this endless cycle of rebirths and inherently unsatisfactory material existences may be achieved by following the noble eightfold path of right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right contemplation. The first two ‘steps’ refer to the necessity of seeking salvation and acceptance of the *dhamma*. The next three concern morality and may be stated also in terms of the five precepts – abstention from taking life (*ahimsa*), from stealing, from illicit sex, from taking intoxicants, and observance of honesty. On holy days and during the Buddhist ‘Lent’ further precepts should be observed – abstaining from food after midday, from theatrical entertainments, from wearing adornments and perfume, the enjoyment of luxury and often the handling of money. Monks must observe all these precepts all of the time and must do more strictly (no illicit sex becomes complete celibacy) and, beyond the novice stage, the remainder of the 227 rules are to be heeded as specified in the *vinaya*. The final three steps of the eightfold path concern

meditation and through it the achievement of tranquillity and the attainment of wisdom.

Meditation leads to ultimate salvation – *nibbana*. This is achieved when wisdom is attained – the wisdom that the self or soul is really only an impermanent flux. The Buddha taught that nothing is permanent and that all is transitory. There is no self or soul which endures; this is known as the doctrine of *anatta*. Rebirth is not the rebirth of the soul in a new body since there is no enduring soul to be reborn. It is simply an effect in the future of karmic causation or consequence of actions performed in the past. Meditation reveals the truth of this and enables the extinction of desire which falls away when the illusory nature of the soul is realised. Even meditation will now be done without desire, even for salvation, and will be without karmic consequence.

Spiro (1971), in his study of Buddhism in the daily lives of villagers in Upper Burma, distinguishes between the set of beliefs described above, which he calls *nibbanic* Buddhism and which is the canonical or ‘normative soteriological’ form and a modified adaptation or popular form of Buddhism which he terms *kammatic* Buddhism. While *nibbanic* Buddhism, Spiro argues, was the religion of a world-weary privileged stratum, *kammatic* Buddhism (from the Pali *kamma*), or non-normative soteriological Buddhism, is the religion of relatively disprivileged strata. Since it is a selection and modification of normative Buddhism, it is still Buddhist, according to Spiro.

*Kammatic* Buddhism has considerably modified the doctrines of *nibbanic* Buddhism. It does not renounce desire but seeks satisfaction of desire in a future worldly existence. Suffering is not considered to be inherent in life but only temporary. *Kammatic* Buddhism, then, seeks a better rebirth, a worldly goal, not *nibbanic* salvation. Gombrich (1971) reports also that in Sri Lanka the aim of *nirvana* is not sought by most villagers at least in the near future. Like St Augustine who prayed that God would make him chaste and continent – but not just yet, village Buddhists were happy to have *nirvana* deferred almost indefinitely. In Burma, if *nirvana* is sought, it is not conceived of as extinction of the self. The doctrine of *anatta* is not well understood by most followers of *kammatic* Buddhism or they are psychologically incapable of accepting it. Their ideal is a form of salvation in which the self endures.

*Kammatic* Buddhism holds that a better rebirth is achieved by good *karma*. Deliverance from suffering, therefore, is achieved not by the extinction of desire and *karma* but by increase in good *karma*. Suffering is due to bad *karma* and immorality must be avoided because it brings bad *karma*. Good *karma* comes from meritorious actions. Salvation is achieved by the accumulation of merit not extinction of *karma*. If it is desirable to meditate it is because it is meritorious not because it brings wisdom. But merit mostly comes from giving in a religious context – feeding monks, donations towards the building and upkeep of monasteries and pagodas.

In *kammatic* Buddhism merit can be transferred from one person to another. It can, for example, be transferred to a dead relative during the days immediately after death through the performance of meritorious acts by the living to increase

the good *karma* of the deceased and earn him or her a better rebirth. Strictly contrary to the doctrine of *karma*, this fact is simply not perceived or is ignored by most villagers. Others rationalise it within the principles of karmic causation by claiming that the rituals performed give the deceased an opportunity to applaud the living for their desire to share merit. The act of applauding this is itself meritorious so merit is not actually transferred but earned by both parties. Such rationalisations of what appear to be practices contrary to orthodox Buddhist doctrine are common.<sup>2</sup>

These beliefs, Spiro argues, are consistent with the perceptual and cognitive structure of the Burmese – they fit the actual experience of the Burmese of how things really are. This experience and view of reality are laid down in childhood. Spiro here draws upon a school of thought which argues that religious and other conceptions reflect childhood experience and child-rearing patterns (Kardiner, 1945; Whiting, 1960).

The important elements of the notion of *karma*, Spiro points out, are first, that one can rely on oneself and one's own actions for salvation, and second, that there is in fact no saviour one can rely on – one has to rely on oneself. Spiro claims that the belief that one can be saved by the efforts of a compassionate saviour, a divine figure, can only carry conviction where, in the formative stage of experiencing what the world is fundamentally like, namely in childhood, that experience is one of persistent and enduring love and emotional nurturance. The child is assured that he or she is not alone and a cognitive structure is created isomorphic with belief in saviour gods.

Such a cognitive structure would be difficult to acquire in Burma, Spiro claims. Early on infants are treated with the greatest nurturance. Their need for affection is constantly satisfied and dependency indulged. This nurturance is rather abruptly and unpredictably withdrawn at a certain age and after infancy physical expression of affection is rare and verbal praise and expression of affection slight in order not to spoil the child. Children may become victims of much teasing and are compelled to carry out many small chores. Strict obedience is expected of them and punishment is often severe. 'Burmese socialisation is characterised by an important discontinuity between the indulgent nurturance of infancy and its rather serious withdrawal in childhood' (1971, p. 133).

There is thus no experiential model for the development of the notion of a divine saviour. The only view which carries credibility and conviction is that salvation must be attained by one's own efforts. The belief that one can save oneself is equally strongly fostered.

Salvation for the average villager, we have seen, is largely achieved by feeding and providing for monks. Monks, Spiro argues, stand in the same position relative to laymen as infants do in relation to adults – dependent, provided for and in a state of blissful irresponsibility. Magical reciprocity suggests that feeding monks will place the laymen himself eventually once again in the blissful position of infancy.

There is an inevitable uncertainty in the notion of *karma*. No one can ever be sure of the fate that awaits them because no one knows what acts performed in

the past have affected the karmic balance. Misfortunes can be explained in terms of bad *karma* acquired in past lives but the price is that the future is always uncertain. This also fits the Burmese experience – as a child affection was unpredictably withdrawn and the world is experienced, therefore, as an unpredictable place.

It is important to note that Spiro's theory is not one of origins of belief systems. It is a theory of why beliefs carry conviction. Mahayana Buddhism reached Burma as early as Theravada but did not take root. Nor has Christianity had much success in the Theravada countries of South-East Asia. These religions, with their emphasis on saviour figures, carry no conviction, given the Burmese cognitive structure. Whatever the reasons for the emergence of the particular form of Theravada belief, the exposure of Burma to it is largely an accident of geography, but once exposed to it this type of belief carried conviction. Only the generic notion, then, that salvation must be attained by one's own efforts is promoted by this particular cognitive structure. The particular form of the doctrine is accidental. In short, the cognitive structure which is favourable to such a belief is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the prevalence of the belief.

Spiro's analysis of the nature of Theravada Buddhism is further developed in his treatment of the monks, the *sangha*. The monkish way of life is held in the highest esteem by lay Burmese. The monk is largely concerned with seeking salvation for himself. He is not an intermediary and does not administer sacraments. His main role is not to serve a congregation; he is not a priest.

The monk–layman relationship, Spiro argues, is the reverse of that between priest and layman in Christianity. The Buddhist layman supports the monk and therefore assists him in attaining his primary aim of salvation. In Christianity, it is the priest who assists the layman to achieve salvation by his sacramental function.

Monks are supposed to spend a great deal of time meditating in the quest for wisdom and enlightenment but few, Spiro reports, do so. Gombrich (1971) also reports that Sri Lankan monks find frequent meditation to be impractical and uncongenial. The routine of Burmese monks consists largely of the daily round of alms begging and some teaching of the village children. The alms begging was performed largely for the benefit of the villagers in order to allow them to acquire merit. The monks rarely ate the food they collected. Much better food was provided for them by wealthier members of the community, prepared and cooked at the monastery. Ryan (1958) reports much the same in Sri Lanka where monks had, in fact, largely given up the daily round, the food being provided by organised rotation of donors. In the Burmese village where Spiro worked, the monks seemed bored most of the time and slept a great deal. Most came from poor rural families. The monastery gives them status and a higher standard of living than they would otherwise enjoy. Tambiah (1976, pp. 356–7) reports the same for Thailand where entry into the *sangha* is an important route for upward mobility and the acquisition of education. In Burma, where there was no state education in rural areas, the



monastery had greater influence and ability to attract recruits than in the town where monastery education is looked down upon.

As for the particular individuals who become monks, Spiro argues that monks have a certain personality. It is, he believes, the general type of the Burmese personality but in a more extreme form. Spiro claims that monks manifest a strong 'need for dependence'. The monk-layman relationship places the monk in the structural position of the child and the layman in the position of the parent. In Christianity the priest is called 'father' by the layman whereas in Burma, Spiro reports, the monk calls the layman 'father'.

As a result of Burmese child-rearing practices, Spiro claims, there is a strong unconscious wish to return to blissful infancy. The monastery is an institutionalised means of realising this fantasy. It is a form of regression symbolised by the physical appearance of the monk. His shaven head gives a foetalised appearance. The celibacy required of monks is interpreted by Spiro as an institutionalised and symbolic resolution of the Oedipus complex. All women are forbidden mothers and all men fathers. In exchange for this renunciation the monk can enjoy the benefits of infancy.

Spiro's interpretation echoes to some extent that of Tambiah (1968). Commenting on the common practice whereby most Thai youths spend a period of time in the monastery as monks, as they do in most of the countries of South-East Asia including Burma, he interprets it as a form of *rite de passage* marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. Those young men who take up the yellow robe acquire merit by doing so and also confer merit upon their parents. Merit produces good *karma* and is essential for a better rebirth.

There is, then, a kind of reciprocity between the generations and between monk and laymen here. The older generation persuades its youth to temporarily give up worldly pleasures and pursuits. The rule for monks is an ascetic one; they must remain celibate, renounce personal possessions and observe all 227 rules of the *vinaya* code governing the life of monks. Youth is asked to give up its vitality and sexual potency in order to follow this ascetic way of life. This is a kind of sacrifice of sexual vitality, according to Tambiah, made by young Thais in order to produce in its place an ethical vitality which counters and combats the effects of bad *karma* and thereby suffering.

Fortes (1987) interprets the reciprocity between monk and layman in a similar way. It is, he argues, a symbolic, ritually legitimated working out of repressed rivalry and mutual hostility. The renunciation of sexuality is seen by him as an expression of filial submission and a form of symbolic castration before regression to a state of infantile-like 'back-to-the-womb' dependence on parents and sexual innocence as a member of the monastery. Filial piety expressed through the institution of monkhood is thus a customarily legitimate device for converting repressed hostility into socially respectable humility.

Monks also, Spiro claims, manifest a lack of sensitivity to the needs of others and a preoccupation with self. They are characterised not by egotism but by narcissism. Often a man will abandon wife, children and other dependants, leaving them with no support in order to enter the monastery. Monkish life provides,

Spiro says, a legitimate means for indulging this abdication of responsibility and narcissism:

We may conclude, then, that the Buddhist emphasis on redemption from suffering permits the monastery, in addition to its other functions, to serve as an institutionalised solution to the problems of all kinds of men including those who, from a secular perspective, are (or would become) misfits, neurotics, and failures.

(1971, p. 350)

The monastery, in fact, not only protects them from potential neurosis but allows them to achieve an honoured status in the society. Monks are not abnormal because their behavioural pattern conforms to culturally prescribed norms and values (Spiro, 1965). The monastic order acts as a collective saviour in Theravada Buddhism.

Monks are indeed highly venerated because of their ascetic way of life. Despite a low intellectual level, a tendency to narcissism and vanity, their moral standards are very high and they keep the precepts of the *vinaya* strictly. This asceticism is seen by laymen as being extraordinarily difficult and greatly admired and it is often thought to give monks extraordinary qualities and powers – in Weber’s terms, magical charisma. Monks are also essential for the layman to acquire merit. By giving to monks, laymen can improve their karmic balance and their rebirth.

Spiro’s neo-Freudian interpretation of Theravada Buddhism has been challenged by Gombrich (1972) and Southwold (1983) who criticise Spiro for basing his charge of narcissism on a very small sample of monks (21) who are not typical of the *sangha* in general but only, Southwold argues, of those monks who practise Spiro’s ‘normative’ Buddhism.

Gombrich has also questioned the claim that child-rearing practices promote Theravada beliefs. Spiro presents no evidence for the alleged character traits of the Burmese which are postulated to be the reason for their commitment to Theravada beliefs but deduces them, in fact, from their beliefs. ‘Spiro seems to ... have built up a picture of what Burmese personality ought to be like, given their religious systems’ (Gombrich, 1972, p. 485). In any case, does it seem plausible that differences in child-rearing practices could explain differences in religious conceptions? All babies are given unconditional nurturance. Are we to conclude that belief in saviour figures is only possible when this is maintained through childhood? Should we not find the basic elements of Theravada belief, if in different form, in many other cultures? How could we account for religious change such as that which occurred in India on the part of the majority of the population from the belief that everyone is wholly responsible for their own salvation to that of devotion (*bhakti*) to a saviour god? Surely not in terms of a change in child-rearing practices?

One might also question Spiro’s characterisation of the personality and motives of monks. Their alleged narcissism is, nevertheless, as we have seen, tolerated by

laymen. Spiro believes this toleration of and reverence for the monk are the reflection of the laity's own inner desire to return to the infantile state. The character of the monk is that of the Burmese writ large. Most people do not become monks, however, because they could not follow the ascetic regime. An alternative interpretation of lay tolerance might, however, be that the pursuit of salvation is seen by laymen as indeed of overriding importance for those who are fortunate enough to be able to pursue it. If existence is defined as unsatisfactory and meaningless, as it is in Buddhism, then one can hardly be too concerned with the plight of others. The fact that monks avoid attachments because they involve risk of hurt is interpreted by Spiro as emotional timidity. There are two possible motivations, Spiro argues, from which the relinquishing of attachments may stem – that which is sacrificial and heroic and in which attachments are given up for the greater goal of salvation, and that which is overcautious, timid and fears pain. This, surely, is too great a contrast. 'Fear' of attachment may be just the other side of the coin of 'sacrifice'. It does not follow that to give up attachments, even out of fear of pain, is to make no sacrifice at all. In all religions escape from fear and pain is, at least in part, what salvation is, and for what it is worth sacrificing transitory, worldly satisfactions.

Gombrich has further challenged Spiro's interpretation of popular Buddhism (*ibid.*). Both he (1972) and Southwold (1983) reject Spiro's contention that kammatic Buddhism is an adaptation of canonical nibbanic Buddhism and a deviation from orthodoxy. Gombrich shows that this view is founded upon a misunderstanding of the doctrine of *karma*. Spiro erroneously states that even good and meritorious action always results in rebirth since it has karmic consequences so that salvation is only achieved by the extinction of *karma*. Gombrich points out that canonical Buddhism holds, in fact, that only action performed from desire produces rebirth. The merit in an action depends upon the intention behind it. Good actions performed from the desire for reward have karmic consequences. Disinterested actions, as long as they are good, do not. Salvation is achieved by the extinction of desire. Good action is a step on the way to salvation and is considered to be spiritual progress. The consequence of this is that popular Buddhism is as canonical as nibbanic Buddhism and not a heterodox adaptation of it. The peasants who pursue merit are doctrinally quite correct in their understanding of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Gombrich acknowledges that there is a difference between kammatic and nibbanic Buddhism. He prefers, however, to express this difference in rather simpler terms than Spiro – as simply the discrepancy between what people say they believe and what the behaviour tells us they believe. It is this distinction which informs his own detailed ethnographic study of Sri Lankan Buddhism (Gombrich, 1971). Spiro presents the two forms of Buddhism as distinct cognitive structures. Gombrich's correction of Spiro's misinterpretations of the doctrine of *karma* means, he claims, that the cognitive structure which he calls kammatic Buddhism is really only in part nibbanic Buddhism and in part an extrapolation of people's actual behaviour. Burmese villagers do not behave as if they really do believe all life entails suffering. Because of this Spiro attributes to them a different form of

Buddhism. Gombrich argues that they are simply not very good Buddhists, a fact which is no more remarkable than that most professed Christians or Muslims are not very good Christians or Muslims. The values of Buddhism represent, as Spiro himself puts it, 'what the Burmese think they ought and would like to be – but aren't' (Spiro, 1971, p. 475).

Southwold makes a similar point in his treatment of the alleged lack of interest of most laymen in attaining *nirvana* but goes further than Gombrich to whom his remarks equally apply. We cannot assume, he claims, that the popular lack of interest in the goal of *nirvana* is a deviation from canonical Buddhist teaching. The fact is that *nirvana* is simply not available to most people, if anyone, for a very long time – not until the coming of the next Buddha, Maitreya – a very distant prospect. There is, Southwold claims, no lack of scriptural backing for this view. Village Buddhists are uninterested in *nirvana* largely because it is something they have no hope of attaining in any case. They are very rationally and understandably prioritising proximate and ultimate goals. It is perfectly reasonable and not a deviation from orthodoxy to place a very low priority on something which has very low probability of attainment and to defer concern with something which can only be achieved in the distant future. Emphasis on *nirvana* as a primary and immediate aim of Buddhism is in any case, Southwold claims, largely a middle-class interpretation of Buddhism which not even many monks share, as Spiro's and Gombrich's studies confirm. Furthermore, this middle-class Buddhism has itself been largely shaped and influenced by prestigious Western interpretations of what the essential features of Buddhism are. These interpretations have fed back into the understanding of both monks and laymen in Buddhist countries. The layman's viewpoint is, if anything, more consistent with scripture than that of middle-class Buddhism which is guilty of a misreading of them.

Nevertheless, the distinction between nibbanic and kammatic Buddhism, or that between what people profess to believe and what their actions tell us they believe remains valid whether or not the latter is a deviation from or adaptation of the former.<sup>3</sup> These two forms of Buddhism broadly address the transcendental and pragmatic needs that Mandelbaum (1966) distinguishes. Yet the latter are also catered for by non-Buddhist pagan beliefs and practices in all Theravada countries – for example, *nat* cults in Burma (Spiro, 1978) and spirit cults in Thailand (Tambiah, 1970). Obeyesekere (1966) has shown that, in Sri Lanka, cults centring on various deities and demons are nevertheless integrated with Buddhist belief to some extent. The ultimate source of power and authority of these gods is said to be the Buddha who has delegated power to them. The Buddha is associated with other-worldly concerns whereas the gods and lesser supernatural are concerned with material and this worldly matters. Ames (1964a; 1964b) similarly argues that magical practices and Buddhism do not stand in contradiction but are complementary even though pagan beliefs and practices are clearly distinct from popular forms of Buddhism (see also Evers, 1965). Both Ames (1964b) and Obeyesekere (1963) argue that the relationship between canonical Buddhism and popular Buddhism is not that between a great and a little tradition along the

lines of Redfield's (1956) well-known distinction. Buddhism, Ames states, whether canonical or popular, belongs to the realm of the sacred – *lokottara* in Pali. Magic and worship of gods belong to the realm of *laukika* or the profane. Popular Buddhism is concerned with earning merit while magical practices focus instead on practical, immediate mundane ends. Obeyesekere argues further that the concepts and values derived from the 'great' tradition of Theravada Buddhism are by no means merely a thinly formed veneer over a mass of non-Buddhist popular concepts which constitute the true religion of the masses, as interpretations of the great–little tradition distinction often suppose. The concepts of Theravada Buddhism, even the popular interpretations of them, constitute the frame of reference by which the deeper and fundamental facts of existence are understood.

## 6 Religion and ideology

Karl Marx

Freud's theories of magic and religion, like most psychological theories examined in Chapter 3, have the greatest difficulty, as noted, in dealing with the social character of religious belief and practice. Yet Freud's theories are often compared with those of the first sociological theorist to be discussed here, namely, Karl Marx. There are indeed some similarities between them. Both saw religion as a compensating and comforting illusion which would eventually be dispensed with as human beings lost their need for illusions. Neither saw religion as an integral part of human society or life *per se* and both can be contrasted in this respect with typical functionalist theorists to be examined later. Yet Marx's theory is essentially a sociological theory and not a psychological one.<sup>1</sup>

Religion for Marx was essentially the product of a class society. His ideas on religion are part of his general theory of alienation in class-divided societies. Religion is seen as both a product of alienation and an expression of class interests. It is at one and the same time a tool for the manipulation and oppression of the subordinate class in society, an expression of protest against oppression and a form of resignation and consolation in the face of oppression.

In pre-class societies, Marx believed, human beings are at the mercy of nature. Primitive peoples had little control over nature and little knowledge of natural processes. They attempted, consequently, to gain control over nature through magical and religious means. When society became characterised by class division, human beings were again in a position where they were unable to control the forces which affected them and in which their understanding was inadequate. In class society the social order itself is seen as something fixed and given which controls and determines human behaviour. Yet the social order is nothing but the actions and behaviour of the members of society. It is in fact their creation in the sense that they maintain it by their own actions. In short, in class society human beings are alienated and have a mystified view of reality. Human products are not seen as such but as being the creation of external forces. They take on an independent reality which is seen as determining rather than being determined by human action.

It was the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx considered, who had shown that the characteristics of gods are really nothing other than the characteristics of man projected beyond man into a fantastic realm where, in an elevated and

exaggerated form, they are thought to lead an independent existence and actually control men through their commandments. To this Marx added the observation that Christians believe that God created man in his own image whereas the truth is that man created God in *his* own image. Man's own powers and capacities are projected onto God who appears as an all-powerful and perfect being.

Religion is, therefore, a reversal of the true situation because it is a product of alienation. Feuerbach had shown the true nature of the religious illusion; the next step was to show how this illusion could be understood in terms of the structure of the society. For example, Marx says in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His work consists in the dissolution of the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after this work is completed the chief thing remains to be done. For the fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and established itself in the clouds as an independent realm is really only to be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then revolutionised in practice by the removal of the contradiction.

(Marx and Engels, 1957, p. 63)

The criticism of religion, then, is also the criticism of the society which produces religion.

There is no systematic treatment of religion in Marx's writings. What he had to say consists of many scattered passages throughout his works. The most extensive passage occurs in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* which contains in highly condensed form his overall approach to the analysis of religion. It is worth quoting in full before discussion of its elements:

The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, *a reversed world-consciousness*, because they are *a reversed world*. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification. It is *the fantastic realization of the human essence* because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore mediately the fight against *the other world*, of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*.

*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and *the protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed

creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand *to give up a condition which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe*, the *halo* of which is religion.

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flower from the chain not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusiones man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.

(*ibid.*, pp. 37–8)

Religion, then, is a ‘reversed world-consciousness’ because it is a product of a reversed world. In this claim we see the characterisation of religion as essentially ideological. Ideology, for Marx, is a form of thought in which ‘men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*’ (*ibid.*, p. 66). This is so because, in a sense, in a class-divided society – a society in which we see ourselves as essentially determined rather than as determining agents, in which we actually are determined by our social creations to a degree – things are upside down. Engels expressed the idea in this way: ‘Religion ... is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces’ (*ibid.*, p. 56).

At first it was the forces of nature which were so reflected, but with the emergence of class division, social forces became supernaturalised in this way. When Marx says religion is the general theory of this reversed world, he is referring to this fantastic reflection which involves an explanation and account of society and its nature because men in such a society cannot be clear about or grasp the truth of the matter.

But religion is also the ‘universal ground for consolation’ and ‘the opium of the people’. The clear implication here is that whatever consolation religion may give to those who suffer or who are repressed, it is the kind of consolation one gets from drugs which give only temporary relief and at the cost of blunting the senses and having undesirable side-effects. It provides no real solution and, in fact, tends to inhibit any real solution by making suffering and repression bearable. Religion thus plays its part in helping to perpetuate the very conditions which produce it. It promotes resignation rather than the search for means of changing the world.

But religion is more than simply compensatory and in being the ‘universal ground for justification’ of this reversed world, religion is more than simply an explanation of it. It is a force which legitimates it. The very thing that gives



consolation and produces resignation is also used to convince those classes that might benefit from change that their condition is not only inevitable but has been ordained by a higher non-human authority. The submissiveness of the exploited and oppressed classes is reflected in their submissiveness to the commandments of religion. Religion offers compensation for the hardships of this life in some future life but it makes such compensation conditional upon acceptance of the injustices of this life.

However, not only the oppressed classes are religious. Members of the ruling class are often equally so. Religion is not a mere manipulative device to control the exploited groups in society. To some extent religion may be upheld by the ruling class because consciously or unconsciously it is seen as a force for social control, but it may be followed also because the ruling class is itself alienated to a considerable degree. The need to take various measures to maintain privilege leads this class to see the social order as something other than simply the way human beings have chosen to organise themselves and, in a sense, 'in the nature of things'. Their perception is, of course, not that privilege is being preserved but that good order and stability must be maintained. Inequality, superiority and subordination, the distinction between rulers and ruled are all perceived as inevitable features of human society. This is not just rationalisation. Commitment to such ideas and their religious legitimation results from the ruling class's own fear of social disruption and its own dependence upon forces which seem to be, and to a degree are, beyond its own control. It stems from the feeling that it is constrained to do what must be done in the interests of stability and social order.

Marx also suggests that religion can be an expression of protest against oppression and distress experienced in a class-divided society as well as something which promotes acceptance of such a society. It is a form of protest, however, which cannot help the oppressed to overcome their conditions of oppression – a palliative drug, not a cure. This acknowledgement that religion is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature' in Marx has led to a tradition of analysis of certain religious movements, particularly millennial movements, as essentially political protest and class-based movements expressed in a religious idiom. They are seen as socialist movements before their time and consequently doomed to failure. This approach will be discussed in the following chapter but one point to make here is that, in seeing them as representing an incipient class consciousness, it seems to ignore Marx's emphasis upon the opiate-like and mystificatory character of religion.

Finally, religion, Marx says, must be abolished as the illusory happiness of the people before they can achieve real happiness. However, since religion is the product of social conditions, it cannot be abolished except by abolishing those social conditions. The institution of a communist society will, therefore, abolish religion. In an environment such as this, men will control their own society rather than being controlled by it, alienation will be overcome, and mystified views of reality will no longer prevail. Like Tylor, Frazer and Freud, Marx believed religion had no future. Religion is not an inherent tendency of human nature but the

product of specific social circumstances. Marx makes the point clearly in the seventh thesis on Feuerbach where he says ‘the “religious sentiment” is itself a social product’ and ‘the abstract individual ... belongs in reality to a particular form of society’ (*ibid.*, p. 64).

## CRITICISMS OF MARX

The first major criticism that can be made of Marx’s approach to religion concerns his characterisation of it as an expression of class interests and a form of ideology useful to the ruling class. There can be little doubt that religion can and has been used in that way. One could certainly argue, also, that in class-divided societies it is very likely that it will be used in such a way. The dominant ideas in any age, as Marx said, are generally the ideas of the ruling class, including religious ideas which, as a consequence, are likely to legitimate its position and to discourage any challenge to it. Religious leaders and organisations have often accommodated themselves to this situation, accepting an alliance with the secular powers in which religious legitimisation is exchanged for state support and even state-maintained monopoly in religious matters. However, given all this, the question remains as to whether religion can be said to be essentially ideological and manipulative or whether it is only used in this way in certain circumstances. Because a set of beliefs can, and often is, put to certain uses, does this mean that it is nothing more than a device to support a particular social order? Critics of Marx would say it does not. Marx himself suggests that it does not. If religion were fundamentally a manipulative device, one would expect it to stem largely from the dominant class in society. But Marx, in seeing religion as a product of alienation, recognises that it springs from those who are most alienated, the subordinate classes. He emphasises its compensatory function and the fact that it is a form of expression of protest.

Certainly, once in existence, religion may lend itself to ideological uses. To say, however, that religion can be turned into an instrument of manipulation is no more to explain it than saying that, because art or drama can be utilised for ideological purposes, this explains art or drama. The explanation of religion as ideological manipulation can, at best, explain only why it takes certain forms or receives certain emphases and interpretations. It does not explain religion as such.

In short, the analysis of religion as ideological is to some extent in conflict with its attribution to alienation. This shows itself in Marx’s interpretation of religion as simultaneously an expression of protest and a means of legitimisation which defuses protest. It is able to be both of these things in Marx’s view, of course, because as an expression of protest it is ineffectual. It does not lead to alteration of the conditions which produce it but, in fact, serves to perpetuate them. In removing the solution to a fantastic plane it forms no threat to the status quo but is, rather, in channelling aspirations into ‘harmless’ paths, a prop to it. Not only does this seem far too convenient a position to take for the critic of

religion, but it tacitly acknowledges that religion is fundamentally grounded in the circumstances of the subordinate class and that its ideological aspects are secondary.

This immediately raises the possibility, one never considered by Marx and Engels, that religion might be something more than a mere opiate-like and resignation-generating compensatory fantasy. Might it not, for example, be a means of preserving a sense of meaning and dignity in the face of difficult circumstances? After all, Marx did not believe that it was possible in most class societies for the oppressed class to fundamentally alter their conditions of existence. This only becomes a possibility in late capitalism. Why, then, should one expect the prevailing world-view to be anything other than one which accepts the status quo and attempts to help people adjust to it and to come to terms with their lot? Whether or not one accepts that there is a degree of mystification in the religious world-view stemming from a condition of alienation, it does not follow that it is merely compensatory. Much more could be involved than this. The Marxist approach tends to ignore many aspects of religion, to oversimplify a complex phenomenon, and to make sweeping generalisations. The fact that religion may be an attempt to struggle with universal questions, inherent in the human condition, concerning the meaning of suffering, life and death, is never entertained by Marx and his followers. These are questions which transcend class interests and specific social situations. The implication is that such concerns only trouble people in tribal societies, where they are at the mercy of nature, and in class-divided societies. In a communist society people will not be disposed to dwell on such questions but will concern themselves only with material matters so that religion will atrophy. It would seem less than plausible, however, that the removal of those problems which stem from the specifically capitalist organisation of production by the institution of a different social and economic order will of itself also remove all those factors and forces which underlie the religious view of the world.

Perhaps Marx would have acknowledged that there is more to religion than his account seems to suggest if the point had been put to him. To some extent the fault in Marx on the question of religion is one of omission. It is what he left out of his account that renders it problematic. Marx was, however, largely concerned to offer a critique of religion and to analyse those aspects of it which bore upon his major purposes, namely, to provide a critique of exploitation in capitalist society which would play its part in its overthrow. Marx rarely wrote out of purely academic interest but generally had political purposes in mind. It did not serve those purposes to analyse all aspects of religion but only those which seemed to stand in the way of those purposes. Marx, therefore, did not attempt to produce a comprehensive analysis of religion (McKown, 1975; Plamenatz, 1975, p. 228). In not being explicit about this, however, Marx left the impression that what he said about religion was the essence of the matter and, therefore, that his view was rather a crude, one-sided, careless and unsophisticated one.

Marx's ideas on religion can also be examined in the light of the predictions they suggest. They imply that with the growth of class consciousness there would

be a turning away from religion and concentration on the part of the proletariat on purely political forms of action. In short, one should expect increasing secularisation generally, greater secularisation in the more advanced capitalist societies and greater secularisation among the proletariat.

Most observers would agree that there has been such a process of secularisation in many countries. However, secularisation does not seem to be closely correlated with the level of maturity of capitalism, as measured by the degree of industrial advance, nor with the level of class consciousness of the industrial proletariat, as measured by support for left-wing and particularly communist parties. The most advanced capitalist country, the United States, shows one of the lowest levels of secularisation among industrial nations, at least as measured by church affiliation and membership, and a low level of class consciousness. European societies have shown greater class consciousness and more extensive secularisation but to varying degrees which are not closely correlated with one another nor with the level of industrialisation. Class consciousness does not appear to differ very much between these cases. Also, within particular countries secularised life-styles are often by no means confined to the proletariat but extend throughout the society.

All this suggests that the relationship between religiosity, class consciousness and level of industrialisation is more complex than the Marxist theory supposes, even if it does fit some of the facts. There are also a host of problems, glossed over in the generalisations set out above, relating to what is meant by secularisation and how it can be measured – problems which cannot be examined at this point but which will receive discussion in a subsequent chapter. To illustrate the Marxist approach in more substantive terms the next chapter will look at Marxist and other approaches to millennial movements.

# 7 The coming of the millennium

## INTRODUCTION

Marx and Engels, and particularly Engels, applied their ideas to many aspects of religion and especially to the analysis of religious movements such as early Christianity and millennial movements. They were attracted, it would seem, by the revolutionary, world-changing potential of such movements and their frequent association with rebellion and revolution on the part of the oppressed and downtrodden sections of society. In this chapter their treatment of millennial movements of the Middle Ages and the way their ideas concerning such movements have been developed by more recent writers will be discussed and applied to a variety of such phenomena, both historical and contemporary.<sup>1</sup>

The millennial movement is a phenomenon more often found in Third World and developing countries or in the past and which, in consequence, has received more attention from anthropologists and historians than sociologists. There are, then, broadly two types of study in the literature on millennial movements. First, there are the historical studies which utilise sociological concepts and approaches and, second, the anthropological studies, many of which are based on first-hand observation and have been able to document the conditions in which such movements have arisen in some detail. These two types of study have tended to produce somewhat different interpretations but as a result complement one another. They provide, also, a broad comparative basis for the development and testing of theories of this type of religious movement. The study of them is, then, not only fascinating in its own right but of considerable theoretical importance. While for the most part these movements tend to fade away when the promised millennium fails to materialise, sometimes they grow into important religious traditions. Christianity was a millennial movement in its early phase and within the Christian tradition a millennial undercurrent has survived throughout its history.

The millennial movement expects a complete overturning of the present world order. There are perhaps five main characteristics of the millennial view as to how this transformation will come about and its nature. Cohn (1970) and Talmon (1966) identify much the same set of characteristics which the latter incorporates

into a useful definition. Millennial movements are 'religious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation' (*ibid.*, p. 166). Cohn leaves out the 'ultimate' aspect but adds that this salvation will be brought about by miraculous means.

In the millennial movement, then, the present world order is expected to be transformed at any time. It may be thought to be only days, weeks or months away. The transformation will be complete and total and is often thought to be the result of a final catastrophe which will destroy the present world order. A perfect world will come about in which men and women are freed from all troubles and difficulties. There will be peace, justice and plenty. There will be no evil or unhappiness. Often this perfect world is seen as the final and ultimate stage of history. There can be no further development since a perfect world will exist and it is a world not essentially different from the existing material world except that it lacks its faults. It is a this-worldly salvation, not an other-worldly one. The believers do not seek escape from this world but a perfect life within it. The millennium, finally, is usually seen as something that applies to a whole society or group within it, that is, to a collectivity rather than to individuals. It is a collective form of salvation.

A common and important additional feature is the central role of a prophet or leader who may have experienced revelations concerning the imminence of the millennium and may believe that he has been specially selected for his mission. Sometimes this prophet is seen as a cultural hero returned from the dead or a supernatural figure in human form – in tribal societies sometimes a returned ancestor. In this case the movement can be said to be messianic. Also messianic are those movements which believe that when the final catastrophe occurs, a charismatic leader, again often a past hero, will appear and bring about this event.

Another common feature of such movements is the high degree of emotion generated. These movements are often ecstatic and frequently hysterical. They tend to spread at an alarming rate and to involve totally those who fall subject to their influence, whose whole lives become bound up with the millennial expectations. There is often a complete break with previous ways of life. All past morality, all the old rules, norms and customs may be abandoned. Very often the millennial expectation is so strong that people abandon normal productive activities. They may abandon homes and fields and in some cases have destroyed property and livestock convinced that they will have no further need for such things.

In the case of the cargo cults of Melanesia the usual belief is that, with the onset of the new order, the natives will be inundated with the consumer goods of Western civilisation. A common practice in such movements is feverish activity in building airstrips or wharves so that these goods, the cargo, can be delivered, often by ancestors. The natives frequently come to believe that they have somehow been cheated by the white men of their share of the cargo which comes from the ancestors who will now put things to rights.

Another common feature of these movements is a deep sense of guilt or responsibility for the plight in which the followers find themselves. Often in Melanesia, the natives feel that it is somehow their own fault that things have gone wrong. They may be cheated but this has only been possible because they have been foolish or wrong in their ideas and behaviour. The millennium comes about when someone finds a way of putting things right. In his discussion of early Christianity, Engels (Marx and Engels, 1957) identifies a similar sense of guilt and personal responsibility for the malaise of the Roman Empire, expressed in terms of original sin and the inherently sinful nature of mankind who can, nevertheless, be redeemed by God's goodness and sacrifice in the form of the messianic saviour. This echoes a familiar theme, often seen in discussing the character of tribal religion, of misfortune and its association with personal responsibility or with the state of moral relations within the group or community.

This brings us to the question of the underlying conditions which generate and promote the millennial response. Most writers on this question have seen a very strong connection between millennialism, on the one hand, and deprivation and oppression, on the other. Because of this there is usually a very close relationship between millennial movements and the political aspirations of those who are caught up in them. For this reason the study of millennial movements has been bound up with the study of the emergence of political awareness and activity among peoples and social strata which have not previously manifested an interest in political activity.

A number of such studies have been carried out from a Marxist perspective. One of the earliest accounts in sociological terms of a millennial outburst was Engels' account of the movement centred around Thomas Müntzer during the peasant wars in Germany in the Middle Ages (Engels, 1965). This type of interpretation began a long tradition which sees millennial movements as essentially incipient political movements arising from class antagonism, oppression and exploitation. Hobsbawm (1971) and Worsley (1970) in particular have contributed to this tradition. They tend to emphasise the positive contribution of millennialism to the development of realistic political movements among the lower classes in society. Such a view could be contrasted strongly with that of Marx himself, however. Marx saw all religions, and perhaps millennial ones more so than most, as opiate-like, fantastical and likely to preclude the possibility of the realisation of any real, practical, concrete political aims.

A different approach is that which emphasises the essentially irrational and desperate character of these movements (Cohn, 1970). The difference between these two approaches is that one sees millennialism as essentially a social phenomenon while the other, although acknowledging the importance of social factors, sees it as an essentially psychological response.

One could consider the approach of BurrIDGE (1969), who stresses psychological factors to a certain degree, while seeing the movements as part of a transition from one set of values and assumptions to a completely new set, in a radically altered social situation, as in some ways a synthesis of these two approaches.



## MARX AND ENGELS ON MILLENNIAL MOVEMENTS

Engels (1965) characterised the role of Luther in the German Reformation as first encouraging the peasants in their demands for an improvement in their conditions but then deserting them when they went too far in demanding too far-reaching changes. Luther had given the peasants a powerful weapon in having the Bible translated into the vernacular because they could now read about early Christianity for themselves and about its millennial promise which they tended to apply to their own situation. But Luther himself represented the interests of the propertied classes and the lesser nobility. The peasant and plebeian interests were actually expressed by Thomas Müntzer who early on in his studies came under the influence of millennial ideas concerning the Day of Judgement, the downfall of the degenerate Church and of a corrupt world.

Müntzer soon became involved with the millennial Anabaptist sect. He travelled all over Germany preaching violently against the Church and the priesthood, rapidly becoming more and more political and revolutionary in his preaching. He advocated the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth and by this he meant a society without class differences, according to Engels – a society without private property and without any central authorities independent of the members of society.

Müntzer aroused much interest and attracted many followers but Engels says that he went far beyond the immediate ideas and demands of the majority of the peasants. He created a party of the elite and the most advanced elements of the revolutionary groups in society which remained, however, only a small minority of the masses.

The time was not ripe for his ideas. Many fragmented and unco-ordinated peasant rebellions and uprisings swept across Germany but all were defeated and brutally suppressed. Müntzer became a prophet of the revolution, spurring the peasants on. He was recognised as leader of one of the uprisings centred on Mühlhausen in Thuringia. This too was defeated by the Landgrave Philip of Hesse – Müntzer's followers were massacred and Müntzer himself was captured, tortured and decapitated.

Engels emphasised the communism and egalitarianism of Müntzer's teachings and tended to play down the fantastical and truly millennial element in them. He also presents the millennial aspirations of Müntzer as a kind of forerunner of communism, centuries before its time and necessarily expressed in terms of religious ideas and concepts because in the Middle Ages it was not possible to think in any other terms. Müntzer is seen as a hero and a martyr and one of the first revolutionary figures to promote class war. This has been the general tendency of Marxist historians in interpreting such movements. In this way Engels founded the tradition of interpreting millennial movements as really incipient political movements with a class basis and as forerunners of modern class-conscious revolutionary political movements.

## CRITICS OF THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

Cohn (1970) is very critical of this approach and presents a very different picture of the movements centred on Müntzer. He emphasises the mystical nature of Müntzer's thought and his obsession with millennial fantasies. His writings are full of the most fantastic claims and beliefs. One account of the final battle tells us that Müntzer claimed to have conversed on its eve with God himself and had been promised victory and that he would catch the enemy's cannon balls in the sleeves of his cloak. His followers certainly seem to have believed that some extraordinary miracle was about to take place.

As for Müntzer's communism and his concern for the plight of the peasantry, Cohn claims that he was indifferent to the material welfare of the poor. Müntzer, according to Cohn, simply utilised social discontent in a fantastic and hopelessly unrealistic programme to bring about his perfect society.

Originally, and Engels himself acknowledges this, Müntzer appealed to the princes and rulers to institute his perfect society, but not surprisingly they showed little interest in his ideas. Only then did Müntzer turn to the disaffected peasantry. Even then the great majority of them were not in the least interested in his millennial ideas. There had been and later there were to be frequent millennial outbursts associated with displaced social groups suffering relative deprivation, but the mass of the German peasants in Müntzer's time were actually better off than they had previously been. Their militancy was actually the consequence of a newly acquired self-confidence and they were attempting to remove obstacles that still remained in their way. This is true, Cohn claims, at least of those groups that took the initiative in the peasant uprising. Consequently, Müntzer and his ideas had no appeal for them. Their demands were realistic and political and they were sometimes able to make limited gains through bargaining with the princes. When they did come into open conflict, it was often because the princes drove them to it in order to have an excuse to crush them. The peasants and their traditional rights stood in the way of some of the princes' aims of establishing absolutist regimes, imposing new taxes and laws and of bringing local administration under centralised control. Engels himself describes a long series of such conflicts in which there is no hint of millennialism.

The role of Müntzer, then, was one which, according to Cohn, has been greatly exaggerated by Engels and others. He played no part in the majority of uprisings, nor did his aspirations or programme appear in the demands of the majority of the peasant revolts. Here, as in the case of his analysis of Christianity, Engels shows his tendency to find class-conscious revolutionary movements among the lower orders of society at various periods of history without much justification. In fact, if religion acts as an opiate which inhibits the lower orders from furthering their real interests, as Marx said, Engels' interpretation of millennial movements is hardly a Marxist one. Millennial movements demonstrate a total lack of awareness and understanding of the real conditions and what is possible given such conditions. They demonstrate a thoroughly mystified religious way of

thinking which expects a social transformation, not by the efforts of human beings themselves, but by the intervention of supernatural powers or other fantastical means.

That class conflict is not central to these types of movement is a finding also of Adas's (1979) study of five anti-colonial, millenarian uprisings or 'revitalisation' movements which occurred in widely different settings in South-East Asia, India, New Zealand and Africa. Conflict between landlord and peasant, rich and poor, etc. were markedly absent in these cases. Peasants and villagers and tribal groups rose against a common enemy largely under the leadership or with the support of regional lords, chiefs and members of traditional elites and groups with high social status and prestige. Adas finds class analysis, therefore, quite inappropriate for understanding movements of this type.

Cohn and Adas are in close agreement, then, that it is not poverty or material deprivation *per se* that stimulate such millennial fantasies. But they do not agree on the actual character of the followings of such movements. In the Middle Ages, Cohn argues, the ordinary peasants who lived the traditional life, however hard and poverty-stricken it was, were not particularly disposed to join the outbursts that occurred from time to time. It was rather the displaced groups and those on the margins of society that provided the following of such movements – landless peasants, unemployed journeymen, beggars and all those who could find no assured and recognised place in society.

It was in conditions of change and uncertainty, also, that the millennial response tended to occur, stimulated by the break-up of the old order and familiar patterns. Particularly important was the loss of credibility and authority on the part of the Church. This left emotional needs unfulfilled and many people tended to turn to prophets and miracle workers.

Cohn emphasises the fact that these movements also tended to arise amidst some more political and wider uprising which was more realistic in its aims. The millennial prophet attempted to use such situations to raise support and to gain a following during a time of unrest. Millennial movements in the Middle Ages were thus not early stages of political movements but outbursts of fantasy and mania.

Cohn considers that those who got caught up in such movements were in a pathological state of mind and that on the whole they were irrational outbursts. When they collapsed, there was no necessary tendency for things to take a more realistic political direction. They were highly ephemeral movements incapable of making any headway in dealing with the social and economic problems of those affected.

Adas questions much of this as typical or characteristic of millennial movements or at least of millennial revitalisation movements. While the movements he studied certainly drew their support from groups that had lost political power and status and had suffered a worsening of their economic conditions, they were by no means peripheral, marginal, fragmented and rootless. For the most part they were members of stable and established communities but under pressure from the colonial regime.

Cohn and Adas also place a somewhat differential emphasis upon the fantastical character of these movements. Certainly it is difficult to accept that they were the product of mass psychological disturbance or pathological mental states as Cohn suggests. Their social character refutes such a claim. Adas plays down the role of supernatural agents in these movements. While supernatural forces and events were certainly a central element in the movements he studied, unlike some movements, rather than passively waiting for the millennium to occur, leaders and followers had actively to prepare the way using their knowledge and initiative.

Indeed, for Adas the existence of relatively intact traditional social structures provides the necessary basis upon which such movements can organise. Leaders, especially prophetic leaders, play a vital role in this process. Adas differs from Cohn and Talmon in seeing relatively organised prophetic leadership as a vital and essential element in these movements rather than as a common but inessential factor. Not only is prophetic leadership a necessary precondition but a tradition of such prophetism is generally found in the socio-cultural contexts where movements of this type emerge. Either that or the community has been extensively exposed to eschatological ideas from the outside. Millennial revitalisation movements do not occur in every situation of colonial oppression. The presence of these factors is essential, according to Adas, for their occurrence.

Many of the differences between Adas and Cohn might be attributed to the fact that one is largely concerned with medieval movements and the other with anti-colonial movements. The lesson to learn from this is that there is to a considerable extent a wide degree of variation in such movements and probably not simply between medieval or historical movements, on the one hand, and anti-colonial movements, on the other, but between movements occurring in somewhat different circumstances within these categories or which do not fall into either of them. As we shall see below, this is true of different colonial situations with respect to the type of society, the nature of the colonial power and the nature of the relations between the indigenous and colonial populations.

## MILLENNIALISM AND POLITICS

Whatever the significance of the prophetic, eschatological and fantastical elements in such movements, do they pave the way for more realistic political movements? Are they early exploratory stages of a growing political awareness? This is the kind of claim that writers like Worsley (1970), from an analysis of the Melanesian cargo cults, and Hobsbawm (1971), writing on nineteenth-century movements in Southern Europe, make. Worsley also links the movements to the oppressed and the displaced elements in society and sees them as essentially revolutionary movements which reject the rule, power and values of the dominant group and inevitably come into conflict with it. This may be a dominant class or a different ethnic group as in the case of the colonial situation of Melanesia.

Usually, this kind of movement occurs among peoples who are divided into small isolated units lacking adequate political institutions or existing means of organisation for coping with the situation in which they find themselves. This is true of many primitive societies and especially of Melanesian societies where there were no permanent institutions of chieftainship or wider political structures other than the small lineage groups. Also, the terrain was such as to produce a patchwork of numerous very small tribes and linguistic groups with little contact or communication with one another. What the millennial movement can do in such a situation is to integrate these fragmented units into some degree of unity. The common situation *vis-à-vis* the colonial rulers promotes this tendency towards unity and the means is very often a millennial cult.

Another common situation where such movements tend to emerge is that of feudal organisation where the peasants and urban plebeian strata lack forms of political organisation which would enable them to effectively oppose the political authorities.

Marx likened the rural peasantry to potatoes in a sack. They are all in the same situation and have common interests but do not form a true class and lack any organisations for furthering their interests. Leaders tend to be thrown up claiming to represent their interests but these leaders inevitably become new masters. In more advanced types of society the tendency is towards Bonapartism or Caesarism. In backward societies prophets promising a mystical resolution of problems tend to emerge. In Worsley's view such millennial movements are early phases of political movements and forms of political activism among peasants.

A third type of situation in which millennial ideas flourish is that where political institutions representing the interests of all groups in society exist but where the society is in conflict with a vastly superior power and suffers a series of defeats and disappointments. Frequently, recourse to millennial hopes and dreams is the result, all else having failed. This has occurred in Africa and was, of course, the situation in Palestine when Christianity emerged. In these cases, when the old structures and the old political organisations will have been destroyed, the millennial movement can weld the fragmented society together on a new basis.

Having unified a people in these ways, millennial movements, according to Worsley, tend either to develop into secular political organisations which divest themselves of their millennialism or they become passive, quietistic, escapist sects. The conditions under which a cult is likely to become passive are, first, where it has been defeated and, second, where political aspirations are no longer expressed in religious forms and where political parties supplant religious organisations. In other words, while some are politicised, those elements which retain their millennial outlook after defeat, and after the majority has gone over to secular politics, adopt a response which ceases to really confront the dominant powers of the current world order. They lose their revolutionism and drive and blame things on their own sinfulness or on mankind as a whole rather than on the dominant elements in the society.

Worsley's account and interpretation are, then, a good deal more sophisticated than those of Engels. His account is based, also, upon a much wider range of material and data. There is a good deal in it that is sound, especially the points about integration of fragmented communities. But Worsley may go too far in claiming that these movements are early forms of political movement or that they grow into secular political movements. It seems rather that they are replaced by the latter when more realistic assessments of the situation are grasped in time. The millennial movement, as Cohn argues, is essentially fantastical and attempts to solve problems through fantasy due to a general lack of appreciation of the realities of the situation. In this Marx seems to have had a better understanding. Worsley sees them as early attempts at realistic action which are successively replaced when tested against the realities and found to fail. This perhaps over-rationalises the process. It also assumes a spurious succession. The various movements that have occurred in Melanesia do not seem to have formed any overall progressive development.

These movements may give the authorities a good deal of concern and cause them some trouble but, unlike genuine attempts to bring about political change, they never really threaten the established order and are much easier to deal with than real rebellion or insurrection. If Melanesian natives insist on engaging in feverish activity building airstrips so that the ancestors may fly in the cargo, this does not unduly worry the authorities. It is a nuisance rather than a threat since all it does is to take the natives away from their normal jobs and work. Such activities could be seen as relatively harmless outlets for frustrations which do not last long.

Another problem with Worsley's approach is that it is probably more often the case that millennial movements follow a period of straightforward political activity than precede it. They are more often post-political than pre-political and follow a period of despair after normal political means have failed. This was clearly the case with the emergence of Christianity and among the North American Indians when the Ghost Dance cult swept through many of the tribes after a long period of military resistance and warfare. (We may take warfare to be political activity in the wider sense of the term; politics carried on by other means, as Clausewitz said.)

Political and military resistance to invading powers is the understandable initial response and, therefore, the more usual and normal one. Insurrection seems the more likely response of oppressed and displaced peasantry in agrarian societies. Worsley acknowledges that this kind of situation may occur but he does not recognise it as the more usual response.

In the case of Melanesia, political and military resistance to the colonial powers was impossible from the start, as the peoples living there when contact was first made were so small-scale and fragmented and so superior were the colonial societies that brought these regions under their administration. Where resistance is impossible, a millennial response may well occur at the outset due to the total hopelessness of the situation and the total lack of comprehension of it. In the North American situation, where colonial penetration occurred much earlier,

the technological and cultural superiority of the colonists was not as great. Communications were less difficult and the Indian tribes used the horse and had, therefore, the means of rapid mobility across wide areas of the plains. It was difficult to isolate and control them. They were sometimes able to form large-scale alliances and to engage in full-scale warfare with the colonial settlers. Although military action on the part of the North American Indians was often encouraged by new prophetic religious cults, only when hopelessly defeated did they come to rely wholly on millennial hopes (Wilson, 1975).<sup>2</sup>

It is the situation of despair that seems to be the key point in understanding the nature of such movements. Cohn, as we have seen, attempts to deal with the emotional nature of them by resorting to psychological factors and by characterising them as pathological. More enlightening is the approach of Burrige writing about the Melanesian cargo cults (1960, 1969). In Melanesia the cults generally involve a high degree of emotion and, at times, even hysteria. The disruption of traditional patterns of life has been of a severe nature but it is not the material suffering of the native people that has been significant so much as the tremendous blow to their self-respect and dignity. The cults obviously centre upon white man's goods because these things are in themselves desirable and the natives feel deprived of them. But these things are also a symbol of the power of the white man and of the superiority of his culture.

More than this, traditional material goods and their ceremonial distribution and exchange for the purpose of acquiring prestige by men who sought a leading role in the society – big men – are a key institution of Melanesian society. Such goods are given away to rivals and their followers in the hope of humiliating them by making it impossible for them to make an adequate return. The ceremonial gift exchange system embodied all the most central values of the Melanesians relating to dignity and prestige. Suddenly, however, they found themselves excluded from possession of the most desirable goods – white man's goods. Their position as a culture stood in the same relationship to the white man's culture as an individual native who played no role in ceremonial gift exchange stood in relation to a big man. Such a man was known in many tribes as a 'rubbish man'. The Melanesians were forced into the awful realisation that, in relation to white man's culture, theirs was a 'rubbish culture'. The clearest expression of the fact was that the white man would not exchange his goods with the natives on the traditional basis. They were not even considered players in the game.

In the cargo cult, as in the Middle Ages, what seems to be happening is that the disaffected are desperately trying to restore a sense of dignity and self-respect. They are seeking a way of placing themselves once again at the centre of things, to make themselves people who matter and who have a role to play in the world. Hence the emotion, the fanaticism and the hysteria. All this goes much deeper than desire for material goods. It goes beyond politics.

Related to this and also extremely important in these movements is the attempt to understand what is happening. The impact of white civilisation, the defeat or futility of all resistance, the displacement of traditional patterns, all this is confusing,



bewildering and incomprehensible. In this situation people use whatever intellectual resources they possess to account for the situation – traditional mythology, the Bible, the religious tradition, or new ideas that arise. In pre-industrial societies any attempt to construct a coherent view of the world and man's place in it will tend to take a religious form and often one which seems fantastic to the outside observer. Given the cultural context and the people's perception of their situation, such attempts can be seen not to be irrational or the product of collective mental disturbance but reasonable and, for those involved, a credible response, given the tradition of ideas and ways of thinking.

Very often the initial response in primitive societies is couched in magical or thaumaturgical terms, according to Wilson (1975). In Africa troubles are often blamed upon witches, for example. A rise in witchcraft accusations is common in situations of rapid change and disruption of traditional patterns. Witch-finding cults and movements may flourish as a result. In the Middle Ages, as Cohn documents, as well as millennial outbursts there were frequent persecutions of Jews.

Early stages of millennial movements are often simply thaumaturgic or magical cults applied to the collectivity as a whole. It is not just individuals who perceive themselves as under threat from evil but the whole community or society. From this the truly millennial movement may develop under certain circumstances – war, suppression of magical movements by the colonial authorities, or despair.

Wilson agrees with Worsley that such movements can create unity where it was lacking before because they are reflections of a common situation. But he places much less emphasis on them as early forms of political action. He too considers them to be very much emotional responses to a loss of integrity and status and of feelings of inferiority. He also emphasises their attempts to make sense of a confusing situation going beyond merely political aims. They do, in his view, however, create a new consciousness of the possibility of change and an expectation of it. In this way they establish a new framework of order. A new conception of the social organisation of the community is created. The religious tradition which sanctioned a particular social order is now utilised to initiate changes and to justify them.

In some ways this is the beginning of a more secular view of things. As Wilson puts it, 'it is within religious phenomena that secularisation must first appear' (1975, p. 497). Millennial movements may be fantastical in their ideas and outlook but they do create the concept of change in cultures that had never before looked at the world as changing and changeable. In time, such a radically new way of thinking can give rise to realistic and rational demands for change based upon an appropriate comprehension of the situation.

## 8 Religion and solidarity

Emile Durkheim

The most outstanding ‘sociological’ theorist and one who has exercised an enormous influence on the sociology of religion is Emile Durkheim. Some of his ideas and aspects of his approach were influenced by those of the earlier but rather less well-known W. Robertson Smith in his study of ancient Semitic religion in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* published in 1889. Before examining the views of Durkheim himself, a brief exposition of those of Robertson Smith will serve to set the background to Durkheim’s contribution.

### ROBERTSON SMITH

Robertson Smith emphasised practices rather than beliefs. It is the practices of religion which are fundamental, he argued – its ceremonies, rites and rituals and not the beliefs. To understand religion, one has to analyse first and foremost what people do and not what they believe. Practices are primary and beliefs secondary. This is why beliefs are often rather vague, inconsistent and contradictory. People are not so much concerned about doctrine but with rituals and observances. The sociologist must therefore pay attention primarily to what they do and not what they say.

Robertson Smith was perhaps rather extreme and one-sided in this emphasis but he did have a point. There is often a tendency to focus upon the scriptural and doctrinal side of religion whereas in the lives of its followers it is the practices which matter rather than the finer points of dogma. On the other hand, the point of view of Robertson Smith entails the danger that the actor’s conception of what he or she is doing will be overlooked or insufficiently taken into account by the sociological interpretation of the actions concerned which may, consequently, misunderstand and distort them.

A second point to note about Robertson Smith is the emphasis he placed upon the obligatory nature of religious observance in most societies. Religion is not, for the most part, a matter of individual choice but instilled into the members of the society and required of them. Religion is part of what Durkheim would later call the collective representations of the society. The emphasis Robertson Smith placed on this aspect of religion relates to his views on the close connection

between religion and political allegiance. Religion is an affair of the group and the society and these are essentially political entities.

Religion, Robertson Smith claimed, has two functions: regulative and stimulative. Regulation of individual behaviour is important for the good of all, or in other words, the group, and it is religion which has been largely responsible for this regulative task in the history of human societies. Sin, Robertson Smith said, is an act which upsets the internal harmony of the group. Religion also stimulates a feeling of community and unity. Ritual is a repetitive statement of unity and functions to consolidate the community. The function of the sacrificial totemic feast that the ancient Semites were alleged to have practised – and at the time totemism was thought to be the most elementary form of religion – was to sacralise the group and promote its unity and solidarity. Clearly, then, Robertson Smith was opposed to the view that sees religion as springing from within the individual. Religion, he said, is not to do with the saving of souls but with the consolidation of the group.

### ***THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE***

Robertson Smith based his analysis upon very flimsy and unreliable data. Durkheim had rather better data to work upon, relating to the totemic system of certain Australian aboriginal tribes, particularly the Arunta, collected by the field workers Spencer and Gillen. In the very first sentence of his major work based upon this material, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,<sup>1</sup> he announces that the purpose of the study is to look at the most primitive and simple religion known to us, which he believes to be the totemism of these Australian tribes. First, however, he undertakes to characterise the nature of religion and to define his subject matter, offering the definition quoted in Chapter 1 where the concept of religion was discussed. He also sets out his methods of study and subjects theories of religion current in his day to trenchant criticism.

He is particularly concerned to challenge the prevalent notion that religion is largely false and illusory. How could it have survived so long, he asks, if it were mere mistake and illusion? While the tenets of various religions may seem odd and strange, we have to see them as essentially symbolic in nature and we have to go beneath the symbolism to appreciate what they are really expressing. When we do so we find, Durkheim says, that 'in reality there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion' (1915, p. 3). So in examining what he takes to be the most primitive and simple religion as a means of understanding all religion, he is not doing what other writers had done. He is not reducing religion to its origins in mistaken and false conceptions of primitive societies and thereby discrediting it. On the contrary, even the most primitive religion expresses a kind of truth, even if this truth is not quite what the believer thinks it is.

Durkheim goes on to set out the rationale of his own approach. In looking at the most primitive form of religion, he is looking for that which is constant and

unvarying in religion, its essential features. Durkheim assumes that the most primitive societies known to us will provide the simplest cases of religion in which the relationships between the facts will be more apparent. In more developed and complex instances it will be difficult to disentangle what is essential and constant from the inessential and contingent. In such cases the essential features of religion tend to be lost in secondary elaboration and accretion.

This is not all Durkheim sets out to do in *The Elementary Forms*. It is also a study in the sociology of knowledge. The basic concepts and categories of thought, such as those of space, time, number and cause, are born in religion and of religion, Durkheim claims. Also, since religion is something which is eminently social, it follows that the basic categories of thought are derived from society. It is only because we live in society that we conceptualise the way we do.

After these preliminaries, Durkheim embarks upon the analysis of Australian aboriginal totemism. He describes the clan organisation of aboriginal society and the association between each clan and a sacred totem animal or plant species. The totems are represented by stylised images drawn on stones or wooden objects called *churingas* which, since they bear the image of the sacred totem, are also sacred. They are surrounded by taboos and treated with the utmost respect. In fact, Durkheim argues, since they are even more taboo than the sacred species itself, they are actually more sacred than it is. These totemic symbols, Durkheim says, are emblems of the clan in much the same way as a flag is the emblem of a country.

Durkheim goes on to show how the totemic system is also a cosmological system and how such basic categories as class, that is, the idea of a category itself, is tied up in its origins with totemism and the clan structure said to characterise early human society. First, he notes that human beings also partake in the sacred. As members of clans with sacred totems and who believe themselves to be descended from the sacred totem, they too are sacred. An Australian aborigine will not say that he or she belongs to the white cockatoo or black cockatoo clan, for example, but that he or she *is* a white cockatoo, or a black cockatoo. In other words, they are in some sense of the same essence as the totemic species and, consequently, sacred.

In the same way, in the totemic system of ideas, since all known things are associated with one or other clan totem, they too partake in the sacred. For example, rain, thunder, lightning, clouds, hail, winter and so on, are all associated with the Crow clan among the Arunta. Similarly, each clan has associated with it a range of natural phenomena so that 'all known things will thus be arranged in a sort of tableau or systematic classification embracing the whole of nature' (*ibid.*, p. 142). These totemic systems of classifications were the first in the history of human thought and are thus modelled upon social organisation. They have taken the form of society for their framework. It is, consequently, clan social organisation which has made the basic categories of thought and, thereby, thought itself possible.

Where else could this notion of class or category and of a system of categories come from, asks Durkheim. It was not, he claims, given to our minds *a priori*. It

must have been suggested by something in experience. It was the experience of collective life that generated such ideas and concepts.

After reviewing current theories of the origins of totemism, Durkheim sets out his own. The variety of natural things associated with the totems, as previously noted, all partake of the sacred. This is so because all partake of a common principle. Totemic religious practice is really addressed to this common totemic principle rather than to the individual clan totems. 'In other words totemism is the religion not of such and such animals or men or images but of an anonymous and impersonal force, found in each of these beings but not to be confounded with any of them' (1915, p. 188).

This impersonal force turns out to be the familiar *mana*. Durkheim says of it:

This is the original matter out of which have been constructed those beings of every sort which the religions of all times have consecrated and adored. The spirits, demons, genii and gods of every sort are only the concrete forms taken by this energy or 'potentiality' ... in individualising itself.  
(*ibid.*, p. 199)

What is this *mana* and in what does it originate? Why do certain things have it? Not, Durkheim says, because of their intrinsic nature but because they are symbols of something else. This is shown by, among other things, the fact that it is the symbolic representation of the totem, the *churinga* that is the more sacred. What is this something else? As already noted, the totem stands for two things: first, this abstract and impersonal force or totemic principle and, second, the clan. Durkheim therefore concludes that 'if it is at once the symbol of the god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one?' (*ibid.*, p. 206). He goes on, 'The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem' (*ibid.*).

How did such a thing come about? Why should there be this equation between god and society? Durkheim answers:

In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers.  
(*ibid.*)

The characteristics of gods are that they are superior to men who depend upon gods and are subject to their will and commandments. Society also gives us this feeling of dependence. Durkheim characterises the nature of society and the relationship between it and the individual in the following way:

Since it has a nature which is peculiar to itself and different from our individual nature, it pursues ends which are likewise special to it; but, as it

cannot attain them except through our intermediacy, it imperiously demands our aid. It requires that, forgetful of our own interests, we make ourselves its servitors, and it submits us to every sort of inconvenience, privation and sacrifice, without which social life would be impossible. It is because of this that at every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts.

(*ibid.*, p. 207)

This highly characteristic passage from Durkheim well illustrates the primacy that he always gave to the social over the individual and his conception of society as a reality *sui generis* subject to its own laws and with its own requirements and needs.

This predominance of society is not, however, based so much upon material or physical restraints but upon moral authority. We are induced to obey the dictates of society by a moral authority exercised by society rather than because we reason that it is in our interests or wise to obey. We obey, Durkheim says, because our will is overcome by an outside pressure. When we feel such a pressure we feel at the same time a deep sense of respect for the source of it.

For Durkheim, then, the dictates of society form the basis of morality. Actions are moral because society demands them of us. Of moral precepts Durkheim says, 'It is society who speaks through the mouths of those who affirm them in our presence; it is society whom we hear in hearing them; and the voice of all has an accent which that of one alone could never have' (1915, p. 208). On occasion this moral supremacy of society is brought home to us in a striking way. 'In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces' (*ibid.*, p. 209).

Because this moral sensibility is experienced as an external pressure, human beings came to conceive of the society which exercises this pressure as an external force or power which also took on a spiritual and sacred nature since it was quite unlike any ordinary external object or force. In this way reality was perceived to be of two radically different natures or, in other words, divided between the sacred and the profane.

Religion, then, for Durkheim, is nothing other than the collective force of society over the individual. Religion 'is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it' (*ibid.*, p. 225). Religion, then, is not an illusion; it is not inherently false. When believers believe they depend upon and are subject to a moral power from which they receive all that is best in themselves, they are not deceived; 'this power exists, it is society' (*ibid.*).

However, religion is not simply a system of beliefs and conceptions. It is a system of action; it involves rituals. What is the significance and role of ritual in religion? Religion, Durkheim argued, is, in fact, born out of ritual. It is in

participating in religious rites and ceremonies that the moral power is most clearly felt and where moral and social sentiments are strengthened and renewed.

Durkheim illustrates this function of ritual from the Australian aboriginal data. Most of the year the clan is scattered in the form of small hunting bands. During a certain season the bands gather together at a certain place and at this time a series of rites are performed in which great excitement is experienced as well as feelings of exaltation, or, as Durkheim calls it, effervescence. It is these rites, he argues, that generate, strengthen and renew religious sentiments and a sense of dependence upon an external spiritual and moral power which is in fact society. It is the collective nature of such gatherings which is responsible for effervescence and which gives the participants a sense of the importance of the group and the society, couched in religious terms. Ritual thus generates and sustains social solidarity and cohesion.

Durkheim seeks to show how his approach can explain a great variety of religious beliefs and practices. For example, the idea of the soul is really, he argues, 'nothing other than the totemic principle incarnate in each individual' (*ibid.*, p. 248). It is a recognition that society exists only in and through individuals. The soul, he points out, partakes in divinity. In this it represents something which is other than ourselves but yet within us. This is no illusion, Durkheim insists. The soul represents the social aspects of the human being and, in a sense, society is something external to us yet internalised within us. We do incorporate a sacred element in the form of the social in that we are social creatures. The soul, also, is immortal because it is the social principle. Individuals die but society continues and the belief in the immortality of the soul expresses this.

Belief in various spirits and gods is explained by Durkheim as being derived from belief in ancestral spirits which are actually the souls of ancestors and, therefore, the social principle manifested in particular individuals.

Ritual taboos and prohibitions are derived, he argues, from an attitude of respect for sacred objects and their purpose is to maintain this attitude. He derives the whole ascetic outlook, common to many religious traditions, from these ideas of taboo, sacredness and respect. From these arose the values of prohibition and self-denial which express the notion, also, that social order is only possible if individuals suffer denial of their wishes to some degree.

Sacrifice is, of course, closely related to self-denial but Durkheim asks why are gods so often hungry for sacrificial offerings. It is because gods cannot do without worship, which sacrifice expresses, and this reflects the understanding that since gods are nothing other than society, they cannot do without worshippers, no less than society can do without individual members.

Rituals, as we have seen, are for Durkheim, essentially about maintaining group cohesion but frequently they are believed by participants to bring about some desirable state of affairs or prevent an undesirable one. Such is the case with the aboriginal *intichiuma* ceremony, the express purpose of which is to ensure the reproduction and abundance of the totemic species. Durkheim seeks to explain this putative instrumental efficacy of religious rites as the result of their moral



efficacy. Because of this moral efficacy, which is real, a belief in their physical and material efficacy, which is in fact illusory, can be supported. The rites give a profound sense of elation and well-being and this generates a confidence that the rite has succeeded in its purpose. In other words, what the participants think is happening is not happening; something quite different is happening which is not perceived by the participants; 'the true justification of religious practices does not lie in the apparent ends which they pursue, but rather in the invisible action which they exercise over the mind and in the way in which they affect our mental states' (*ibid.*, p. 360).

Rituals are thus explained in functionalist terms. Durkheim says of them that 'they are as necessary for the well working of our moral life as our food is for the maintenance of our physical life, for it is through them that the group affirms and maintains itself (*ibid.*, p. 382). It is not surprising that Durkheim has been likened in this aspect of his work to Marx. As Turner puts it, 'it is often difficult to distinguish between the Durkheimian conception of religion as social cement and the Marxist metaphor of religion as a social opium' (1991b, p. 78).

Durkheim notes that different aboriginal ceremonies are all essentially variations on a basic theme. They are all the same ceremony adapted for a variety of purposes. This is also true of other religious systems, he observes, for example, the Catholic mass of which there is a form for marriages, funerals, etc. Durkheim concludes from this ambiguity that the real function of such rites is not the expressed aim. This is only secondary – 'the real function of the cult is to awaken within the worshippers a certain state of soul, composed of moral force and confidence' (1915, p. 386). Consequently, it does not matter what form the rite takes or what its expressed purpose is. The real function of it is always the same. It does not matter what the members of a group assemble to do; all that matters is that they assemble and do what they do collectively. 'The essential thing is that men are assembled, that sentiments are felt in common and expressed in common acts; but the particular nature of these sentiments and acts is something secondary and contingent' (*ibid.*).

What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the Exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?

(*ibid.*, p. 427)

## **CRITICISMS OF DURKHEIM**

There have been many criticisms of Durkheim's account of religion but they can be broadly divided into three kinds: methodological, theoretical, and ethnographic/empirical. To take the methodological difficulties first, the fact that Durkheim bases his whole study on a very limited range of data, that

pertaining to a few Australian aboriginal tribes, gives cause for concern. He considered that it was only necessary to examine one case in detail since his purpose was to find the essential nature of religion. Is it then possible to generalise this to any religion? The problem is that it is not possible to be certain that the essence of the particular religion examined is the essence of religion in general. To determine that, it would be necessary to examine a wide range of cases, which Durkheim does not do. If he had done so, it is unlikely he would have observed the close relationship between religion and social groups that he does in the case of the Australian aboriginal tribes in question. In many primitive societies there is a strong relationship between a given set of effective social units, usually kinshipbased, and most aspects of life including such things as religion, political action and economic structures. This is not necessarily so in more economically advanced, larger-scale societies. Or to put it another way, in the latter type of society individuals belong to a multiplicity of single-purpose groups and their religious lives may overlap very little with their economic and political activities, at least as far as the sets of people involved are concerned.

Also dubious is Durkheim's claim that, if one takes a society at a very simple level of technological development, one can observe the simplest form of religion. It does not follow that, because the level of technology is simple, other things such as symbolic and religious systems will also be simple and unelaborate. 'Simple' should not, in any case, be equated with 'essential' or 'fundamental'. These points are supported by the fact that the religious and symbolic systems of hunter-gatherer societies like that of the Australian aboriginal societies vary considerably in character including their degree of elaborateness and complexity. It is not the case that all such societies have clan structures or totemism, nor is there any correlation between totemism and clan structure.

This brings us to criticisms on ethnographic and empirical grounds. EvansPritchard (1965, pp. 64–6) sums up the many criticisms of this kind that have been made of Durkheim as follows:

- 1 There is no evidence that totemism arose in the way Durkheim speculated that it did or that other religions are derived ultimately from it.
- 2 The distinction between sacred and profane is one which does not fit many systems of belief, a point made earlier when discussing definitions of religion.
- 3 The Australian aboriginal clan is not the most important group in the society. It is not a significant corporate group. These groups are the horde or hunting band and the tribe.
- 4 Totemism of the Australian aboriginal type is untypical and the totemism of the Arunta and related tribes is even untypical of Australia.
- 5 A relationship between totemism and clan organisation is not common.

The first theoretical point to be made about *The Elementary Forms* concerns Durkheim's central claim that society has everything necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in our minds and that the divine is not, therefore, illusory

but refers to something real, namely, society. Of course, it would hardly be surprising to discover that there is a close connection between religion and society but what is contentious in Durkheim's theory is that he goes much further than this, in arguing that the object of religious concern, the divine, is nothing other than society. It is perfectly acceptable to describe similarities between religious conceptions and the nature of the social, but can one leap from the observation of such similarities to the conclusion that religion is nothing other than the symbolic representation of society and the way in which the members of a society represent to themselves the relationship they have with it? Even if the parallel between the character of society and the divine were as close as Durkheim makes it out to be, and this is very questionable since he selects only those aspects of each which support his case, it does not follow that it is society that is the source of religious conceptions or the object of religious concern. There are many reasons why religious conception might reflect aspects of social structure other than those Durkheim proffers.

A central problem with Durkheim's thesis, then, is the way he characterises the nature of the divine and of society and the relationship between them. His characterisation of the nature of society and the relationship individuals have with it can most clearly be seen to lead to problems in the context of his discussion of morality. Such is the force or pressure that society exercises over us, and this, remember, is essentially moral pressure, that we are capable of acts we would not otherwise be capable of, and of someone who is inspired by moral/social pressure he says:

Because he is in moral harmony with his comrades, he has more confidence, courage, and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned towards him. It thus produces, as it were, a perpetual sustenance for our moral nature.

(1915, p. 210)

If social pressure can inspire acts of heroism, however, it can also inspire acts of atrocity. Durkheim's seems a strange conception of morality. Does the social and collective pressure that the crowd situation exerts, for example, guarantee moral action or is it more likely to lead to the suspension of our moral sensibilities and their replacement with mob mentality? Collective passion is no guarantee of moral behaviour. Is it not the case, also, that the great moral heroes of history are precisely those who have stood against the majority or against those with power and authority and suffered as a consequence?

In a sense, of course, morality is a matter of social relationships. In this sense society could be said to be the source or at least the subject of moral concern and Durkheim is right to point out that a society is a moral community. The trouble is that he jumps from saying this to the conclusion that morality is nothing other than the voice of society.

The fact that our moral sense might make us go against the majority, the society, or authority, shows that we are not quite so dependent upon or creatures

of society as Durkheim claims. Society, powerful as it is, does not have the primacy that Durkheim believes it has. Ironically, it often seems to be the case that religious beliefs can have a much greater influence upon and hold over the individual than society does, since it is often out of religious convictions that individuals will fly in the face of society or attempt to withdraw from it, as in the case of many sectarian movements.

The emergence of sectarian movements and of religious pluralism and diversity within a society is, of course, something that Durkheim's theory has great difficulty dealing with. Also, religious differences frequently lead to tension and conflict, a fact which seems to undermine his functionalist account of religion as an essentially integrating force. Religion has been a divisive force as often as it has been an integrating one. As Aron has pointed out, if Durkheim were right, 'the essence of religion would be to inspire in men a fanatical devotion to partial groups, to pledge each man's devotion to a collectivity and, by the same token, his hostility to other collectivities' (1970, p. 68).

However, the cynic might argue that this is precisely what religion does and it is a strength of Durkheim's thesis that it recognises this. This would indeed be too cynical a view, despite the conflict and suffering that have occurred in the name of religion, since it neglects the universalism that transcends group allegiances that is also a genuine and fundamental aspect of many great religious traditions. It is precisely this universalism that Durkheim's approach fails to do justice to or account for.

A further problem with Durkheim's theory relates to his functionalism. He does not only seek to explain religion by demonstrating that it embodies fundamental truths in symbolic form but also in terms of the role it plays in integrating society. Functionalism is a perspective which owes a good deal to the influence of Durkheim. It came to dominate British social anthropology through figures such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown during the early part of this century and American and British sociology during the 1940s and 1950s. Functionalism essentially states that a social institution can be understood in terms of the contribution it makes to the survival of a society or to its social integration and solidarity.

Functionalist explanations are beset with problems and functionalist explanations of religion particularly so (see Chapter 10). This is because the discrepancy between the functionalist account of the given social behaviour and the interpretation of the participants themselves is at its greatest in the case of religion. The consequence of Durkheim's explanation of religion is that he places himself in the position of claiming to know what the participants in a religious ritual are really doing and that the participants are mistaken in what they believe they are doing. Durkheim does not only claim a privileged position in regard to ritual of course, since to say that God is real, that he is society, is to say that although religious belief embodies a truth of a sort, believers are nevertheless deluded about the nature of this truth. Participants in religious rites do not consider that what they are doing has much to do with integrating the group, or if it does do this in their eyes, this is, at least, not its primary purpose and not what it is

fundamentally about. The participants also, of course, do think it really matters what they do and would not accept that all rites are fundamentally the same. For the Arunta the aim is not to promote clan solidarity but to ensure the abundance of the totem species and it is crucial to do just the right things to achieve this aim.

The implication of Durkheim's view that all rituals are essentially the same, then, is that the beliefs of the participants and the expressed purposes of the rites have nothing to do with what happens. This is a strange conclusion to reach. It seems unavoidable that, in attempting to understand religious behaviour, attention has to be paid to the beliefs the participants have about their behaviour and that this must be significant in accounting for it. This is not to say that there can never be any factors other than the participants' own understanding of what they are doing and that when one has understood that, one has understood everything, as some would argue. It is equally extreme, however, to argue, as Durkheim does, that what the participants think they are doing plays no significant part in an explanation of what they are doing.

A further consequence of Durkheim's dismissal of the importance of the particular form of rites is that he is left with no real basis for explaining the particular form they take. If it does not really matter what people do, then how can one explain what they do? How is it they come to do one thing rather than another?

To be fair to Durkheim, he was not a naïve functionalist and realised that it is not enough to point to the function of a social institution in order to explain it but that an account of its origin is also needed. He attempts in *The Elementary Forms* to construct hypothetically the way in which the aboriginal cult practices could have arisen in the course of which he says, 'Men who feel themselves united, partially by bonds of blood, but still more by a community of interests and tradition, assemble and become conscious of their moral unity' (1915, p. 387).

The trouble with this is that Durkheim has already said that the fact of assembling and the performance of a collective ritual are the cause of the common bonds and feelings of unity. Now he argues that the rites originate from these feelings. The origins of the rites are explained in terms which presuppose a social order, a community of interests and a tradition. The rites are necessary for the continuation and stability of society but without there first being a social order of some kind, there can be no rites. While it is easy to see that once a social order exists, part of which is a religious and ritual system, that social order might be sustained by the religious and ritual system but this does not explain the genesis of it.

This kind of logical contradiction is very typical in Durkheim's work. It occurs in his account of the origins of religious and moral ideals and of the basic concepts of thought. In the former case, he argues that the notion of the ideal and of the perfect arise in the course of collective ritual. The intense emotion generated on such occasions produces a sense of the extraordinary in which the participants feel themselves transformed and experience the everyday environment as similarly transformed. In order to account for this, extraordinary powers and qualities are attributed to otherwise ordinary things and the notion of the sacred

is generated. This is seen as an ideal and perfect dimension of reality. The notion of an ideal world is, then, generated in and through collective life and the experience of the social; it is not innate but a natural product of social life. If religion upholds certain ideals and is concerned with what ought to be, this itself is a social product. The ideal constitution of society grows out of and is a product of the real, concrete and actual existing society.

The problem again is how any society could function at all without some prior set of notions about what ought to be and to happen – in short, a set of ideals. How can the set of ideals which is necessary for social order and stability be generated in the experience of social life when such life presupposes a set of norms and standards for behaviour? The ideal constitution of society could not grow out of its real constitution but must exist alongside it from the start.

Similarly with the basic categories of thought. These are generated in and through the experience of the social, Durkheim argues, and sustained by collective ritual, but how could there be any social order without the prior existence of the essential concepts with which human beings think and make sense of the world (see Runciman, 1970)?

Durkheim has been criticised, as discussed above, for his equation of religious sentiments with the emotions generated in collective gatherings. Apart from the charge that this misrepresents the nature of religious sentiments, this has left him open to the accusation that *The Elementary Forms* runs counter to his own 'rules of the sociological method' which state that social facts cannot be derived from psychological sources. Religion is, for Durkheim, an eminently social fact yet he bases it on what Evans-Pritchard calls crowd psychology and crowd hysteria (1965, p. 68). This is little better, Evans-Pritchard argues, than deriving it from hallucination, delusion and error, an idea upon which Durkheim himself poured scorn.

Evans-Pritchard points to a final contradiction in Durkheim's approach. If his analysis in *The Elementary Forms* is correct, then religion is exposed to the believer for what it really is and as something other than what it was thought to be. It loses any basis of credibility. Yet religion is necessary for social order and stability. Durkheim's way out of this dilemma was to admit that traditional forms of religion were unsupportable in the contemporary world but that new creeds would arise to take their place – secular doctrines which would yet fulfil the functions of religion. It will always be possible to invent new doctrines as was the case with the French Revolution and its cult of Fatherland, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Reason. Durkheim is thus the forerunner of those who claim that there is and always will be something in society to which the label religion can be attached which fulfils an essential integrative function and who tend, thereby, to defend their functionalist theory against any test of evidence. Like Durkheim, they solve the question of religion by definition rather than by empirical demonstration. Religion is whatever happens to integrate the society; it is whatever unites it into a moral community. There never could be a moral community without religion by this conception and the claim that religion exists because it integrates is rendered inevitably true by definitional fiat.

Despite its many faults, Durkheim's highly original and provocative analysis of religion provided many insights into its nature and inspired many followers and subsequent analyses of a variety of aspects of religion. In France, Hubert and Mauss undertook studies of magic and sacrifice (Hubert and Mauss, 1964; Mauss and Hubert, 1972). More recently O'Keefe (1982) applies Durkheimian views in his study of magic. Durkheim was a great influence on the functionalists, particularly within British anthropology. His emphasis upon the social dimension of religion, its role in regulating behaviour and in upholding morality and the social order, appealed strongly to this school of thought. His analysis of the effervescence generated in crowd situations still strikes a chord today when we consider such phenomena ranging from rock festivals to the Nuremberg rallies. It is Durkheim's influence that stands at the back of functionalist approaches which see in fascism as well as in festivals a religious strand. To illustrate Durkheim's approach in action, however, the next chapter will examine the work of another of his followers, Guy Swanson.



## 9 The birth of the gods

### GUY SWANSON

The most systematic application of Durkheim's theory of religion and attempt to test it empirically using comparative data is that of Guy Swanson in his book *The Birth of the Gods* (1960).<sup>1</sup> He takes up Durkheim's basic idea that it is the experience of society which generates feelings of dependence expressed in symbolic form. He reasons that since it is experience of social life that generates religious belief, different types of social condition would give rise to different types of religious conception. It is the particular experience of people in differing social circumstances that produces their various concepts of supernatural and spiritual beings or entities.

Swanson finds it necessary, however, to make some modifications to Durkheim's views. First, he asks what exactly is the society that is venerated. 'Is it the composite of all the effects which contacts with one another have on people's conduct? Is it the pattern of such contacts? Is it but one special kind of social relationship to which people may belong?' (1960, p. 17).

Swanson suggests that it is certain key features or relationships in the social organisation that provide the clue to the particular religious conceptions held. He also raises the question of how gods associated with nature and natural forces, such as the wind, sun, or sea, could refer to social forces in a symbolic guise when such forces are quite clearly not controlled by society. Finally, he points out that not all spirits are venerated or respected – for example, demons and devils – while others may be ignored, ridiculed, or even punished by those who feel some grudge against them. Durkheim's theory does not account fully for this variety of relationships between human beings and gods.

What has to be done, he argues, is to link religion not to society in the very general way that Durkheim does but to look carefully at the particular characteristics of gods, spirits and other religious agencies and then to see what specific kinds of social relationships have corresponding characteristics.

First, he notes that spirits are purposeful beings. They have desires and intentions and produce effects in accordance with those intentions. This implies that the corresponding social relationships are those where there is an evident connection between intention and effect, or in other words distinct purposes.

Second, spirits are immortal so we must concentrate on social relationships or groups that persist beyond the lifespan or involvement of particular members or sets of members. Such groups are usually those into which members are born and in which they die.

Finally, the fact that gods and spirits differ in their purposes and are concerned with and govern specific aspects of nature, or seek particular forms of attention from human beings, implies that we should look for social groups with specific and differing purposes. He sums up all this by saying 'the characteristics of spirits suggest that we identify them with specific groups which persist over time and have distinctive purposes' (ibid., p. 20). These groups, Swanson argues, are of the kind which have sovereignty in some specific sphere of life which is not delegated from some superior authority but which originates from within the group itself. In so far as a group has sovereignty, it is likely to provide the conditions in which concepts of spirits and gods originate.

These, then, are the fundamental assumptions of Swanson's study. Spiritual beings are conceptualisations of the constitutional structures of social life. Constitutional structures are those which define the purposes of groups and set out their spheres of competence and their proper procedures.

Within any group, however, in addition to its constitutional structure, there will be a whole range of interactions not governed by constitutional procedures. Swanson calls this aspect of the patterning of relationships in groups the primordial structure. This does not give rise to conceptions of specific spirits or gods or any discrete religious entity but to that vague, unspecific and mysterious power or force – *mana*.

To test out these claims Swanson undertook an extensive comparative analysis examining the ethnographic data on some fifty societies for details of social organisation and religious conceptions. These elements were coded and a statistical analysis carried out to uncover patterns and relationships in the data. A number of statistically significant correlations between religious factors and aspects of social organisation were found. The religious factors found to relate to social structures included monotheism, polytheism, ancestor worship, reincarnation, ideas of the soul, witchcraft, and certain aspects of morality.

Perhaps the most important finding is that concerning the belief in high gods, as Swanson calls them – that is, those which are considered to be ultimately responsible for all things whether as creator or director or both. The idea of a high god is one which gives a sense of order to the world and its diversity. Belief in a high god explains everything and makes the world seem a determinate and ordered place. The social situation which corresponds to this belief is where a sovereign group reviews, judges, or modifies the actions of subordinate groups. Belief in a high god is the consequence and expression of a hierarchical structure of superordinate and subordinate groups.

Swanson next turns to polytheism which he links to the existence of specialisation. Where production is no longer on the basis of everyone doing everything and distinct occupations emerge, the model for a pantheon of important gods exists. Specialisms are of different kinds, however. Some are to

do with what Swanson calls the communal purposes of groups, such as government, military activities, and so on. Others are the affair of individuals or distinct groups or segments of the society. This complicates the relationship between specialism and polytheism. Broadly, however, Swanson found that the number of superior gods reflects the number of communal specialisms in societies based upon kinship and the number of non-communal specialisms in societies not based upon kinship. Occupational specialism is, of course, associated with class division so it is not surprising that Swanson also found that societies exhibiting class division were more likely to possess beliefs in superior gods.

The third type of belief Swanson examines is that of ancestral spirits. These are found to be associated with the occurrence of a kinship organisation more embracing than the nuclear family. Such organisations endure as entities across many generations and embody purposes beyond those of the particular individuals that comprise them at any particular time. The persistence of the spiritual dimension of deceased members who continue to have importance for the group and have an impact upon it reflects this fact.

Reincarnation beliefs, Swanson found, are associated with a settlement pattern of neighbourhoods, nomadic bands, extended family compounds or other small but continuing social units. This has to do with the importance of individuals in small territorially based social groups. Where small clusters of related or unrelated nuclear families live in relative isolation and work together co-operatively, the unique and individual capacities, qualities and talents of particular individuals are of great importance. Also, such groups endure beyond the existence of their individual members or component families. Such groups may exist in complex as well as simple small-scale societies. Also, small self-sufficient communities of this kind are not uncommon within large polities such as chiefdoms and kingdoms. They are, then, territorially defined entities, over and above any kinship linkages that may exist, in which individual personalities are vital. This is reflected in the belief that the spiritual dimension of the individual is not lost to the group on death but returns in another bodily form.

As for the prominence of such beliefs in India, Swanson speculates that this has to do with caste organisation. Castes, to a large degree, live rather separate lives relatively isolated from one another, constituting communities rather like those of the hamlet or family compound.

Belief in a soul, and whether that belief involves notions of its immanence or of transcendence, is another type of belief that Swanson found to be associated with social structural characteristics. Immanence of the soul refers to the idea that it is, during life, located in the body even though it may leave it on occasions. In the case of a transcendent conception of the soul, it is thought of as directing the material body but not as being of the body. Certain aspects of the soul are seen as due not to individuals themselves but to come from outside or beyond the individual. These are aspects attributed to and associated with social roles which exist independently of particular incumbents of them but which determine certain of the characteristics of those incumbents. They appear to have, therefore, a life and reality of their own beyond that of the individual. These aspects will

generate beliefs in a transcendent soul. Other aspects of the soul refer to the particular attributes of individuals which are entirely theirs alone. These will tend to generate beliefs in an immanent soul. The more individuals' characters are bound up with the performance of roles with defined behaviours, the more likely a belief in a transcendent soul will be. The less this is the case, the more likely a belief in an immanent soul will be. The more organised social groups people belong to, the more of their character will be seen to stem from forces outside of themselves as individuals. It follows that there should be an association between the number of organised groups people belong to in a society and the prevalence of a belief in a transcendent rather than immanent soul. Since the data available related to the presence of a belief in the immanence of the soul, it was the relationship between this and the number of groups that was used to test the hypothesis.

Swanson found the hypothesis to be supported under certain other conditions, namely, the presence of unlegitimated contacts, small size of settlements and the absence of sovereign kinship groups. Unlegitimated contacts are those between, for example, members of distinct villages or communities, which are important but not regulated by overarching institutions which settle disputes, arbitrate disagreements, etc. In a situation such as this, social integration is weak and this, in turn, is reflected in immanent notions of the soul. Small settlement size, as in the case of reincarnation, favours the perception that an individual's powers are more his or hers than derived from the group. Kinship organisation favours the perception that an individual's powers come from the group not from the individual.

Another type of belief investigated in Swanson's study was that of witchcraft, sorcery and black magic. This was found to be associated, when endemic, with conditions in which people interact with one another on important issues 'in the absence of legitimated social controls and arrangements' (*ibid.*, p. 151) governing such interaction. Witchcraft and sorcery involve magical procedures carried out clandestinely to cause misfortune. Witchcraft is the reflection of tense social relationships in the absence of accepted means of managing them non-conflictually in circumstances where there is uncertainty and frequent misfortune.

Finally, Swanson explores the relationship between social structure and the idea that misdemeanours are punished supernaturally. Contrary to prevalent understandings this is not a notion confined to the more complex societies, according to Swanson, but, although not universal in small-scale societies, can be found in any type of society. In all societies interpersonal relationships are regulated by supernatural controls but the idea that misdemeanours are punished supernaturally becomes explicitly formulated only in some. Such an idea will be found, he argues, where it is necessary to buttress unstable moral relationships. Moral relationships tend to be unstable and difficult to enforce in larger, more complex, impersonal societies with denser populations. People explicitly articulate an idea only when it becomes necessary. It becomes necessary in such societies because it is no longer possible to uphold morality in interpersonal interactions by informal means.

Indicators of situations in which moral relationships were likely to be difficult to regulate were found to be debt relations, social class, individual ownership of property and the existence of primogeniture. Swanson speculates that all these are to do with the existence of inequalities in society and conflicts associated with this.

Swanson concludes in general terms from all of this that 'the belief in a particular kind of spirit springs from experiences with a type of persisting sovereign group whose area of jurisdiction corresponds to that attributed to the spirit' (*ibid.*, p. 175). In other words, his comparative investigation is claimed to support a broadly Durkheimian theory. The data do not support other theories, he claims. No significant relationship was found between religion in general and deprivation, nor does the latter seem to account for any particular type of religious belief. Swanson argues that if there is a relationship between religion and deprivation, it is that once a particular religious belief has arisen, it is put to compensatory use. The beliefs do not arise as a result of the condition of deprivation.

No relationship was found, either, between religious beliefs and attitudes towards the father. The data contradict the claim that monotheistic gods are projections of the experience with the father in childhood.

Finally, Swanson tackles the problem of religious decline in contemporary industrial societies. If Durkheim were right, should we not expect the structures of such societies to be represented in thought in terms of gods and spirits? Disbelief in modern industrial societies, he argues, is associated with one or more of the following conditions:

- A lack of contact with the primordial or constitutional structures of the society on the part of its members.
- Alienation from those structures.
- The assumption that all, or most significant features of those structures are knowable and controllable by human effort and will.

## CRITICISMS OF SWANSON

With this last condition Swanson introduces a completely new factor which radically alters the nature of his theory (Robertson, 1970, p. 154). It clearly implies that once we are able to reflect upon and to understand social structures we are freed from religious modes of thinking. If this is so, any one-way deterministic model in the sociological approach to religion cannot succeed. Also, contemporary societies are not uniformly characterised by an absence of religious belief. The extent to which they are is highly variable and to the extent that some retain a significant element of religious belief, this tends to be highly diverse. This diversity does not appear, in every respect at least, to be patterned along lines of structural differentiation in such societies. This suggests that while there may be a relationship between social structures and religious conceptions in many traditional societies,

the fact that this is not necessarily true of contemporary industrial societies undermines Swanson's interpretation.

It is worth pointing out a number of similarities between Swanson's ideas and the Marxist approach to religion. Both regard religion as something which declines when we are no longer controlled by social arrangements but can ourselves control them. Religion is a product of the failure or inability to conceive and become aware of the fact that we create our own social arrangements.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Swanson differs from Marx. For Marx, consciousness of human ability to control social arrangements is the outcome of a class situation and emerging class consciousness, whereas for Swanson it seems to be simply a product of the growth of knowledge and understanding and not embedded in any particular kind of social organisation or situation. In fact, Swanson declines to attempt to answer the question of under what circumstances the assumption arises that human social arrangements are controllable. Consequently, he does not make it clear why it is that all past societies have not made such an assumption and why it has been possible only in recent societies. As with Durkheim, there is no satisfactory answer to the question of why it is the case that in traditional societies social structures are conceptualised in a religious/symbolic way at all. It is far from obvious why the experience of a given social structure should be expressed symbolically, let alone in terms of religious conceptions. Swanson's answer to the question of how his theory can account for, or be compatible with, contemporary secularisation is, therefore, inadequate and, because of this, so is his theory.

A final criticism that can be made of his approach is that it places too much emphasis on statistical correlations and concludes from them more than is warranted. It is not so surprising that different social structures are associated with different religious conceptions (especially in certain types of social structure), or that the religious beliefs found in a type of structure are closely related to aspects of it, but it is a long way from this to the conclusion that the beliefs are no more than symbolic expressions of those structures and in particular of experience of persisting types of sovereign groups. The statistical relationships he finds certainly do not prove this; it is still only Swanson's interpretation of what the correlations mean and how they come about and there may be other possible interpretations.

For example, studies of witchcraft beliefs have shown that the pattern of accusations runs along lines of inherent tensions arising from features of the social structure. Swanson's analysis of witchcraft, while strongly influenced by Kluckhohn's study of the Navaho, is also very reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's classic study of the Azande of the southern Sudan. Subsequent studies have shown, however, that it is not just unregulated relationships that are the focus of witchcraft accusations but relationships in which tension and friction are inevitable and inherent whether regulated or not.<sup>3</sup>

A second example concerns Swanson's claim that supernatural sanctions for moral misdemeanours are associated with social inequality. One does not have to accept the Durkheimian package in accepting this. Inequalities of wealth are

associated with social complexity, larger and denser populations and increased interaction with those outside small face-to-face communities. In these circumstances supernatural sanctions can be a way of upholding standards of conduct and of regulating dealings between strangers or people of different communities. Analyses of the rise of Islam have argued that it was to a large extent a means of replacing old tribal loyalties with a new basis of solidarity and trust. Christianity emerged in a situation in which the Roman Empire and the imposition of Roman law had undermined traditional communities and the foundations upon which relationships of trust rested. Buddhism arose at a time when the old tribal republics of north India were giving way to more extensive centralised bureaucratic states and there was a need for a new, more universalistic basis for the secure conduct of business and other affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Swanson's analysis is, in many respects, quite complex. A number of factors seem to be involved in the relationship between religious beliefs and social structure. It is doubtful if the database used by Swanson was quite up to the task demanded of it. There have been a number of criticisms of the database he used and in particular that it was too narrow.

A statistical analysis of a very much more extensive set of relevant data than that used by Swanson which takes a Marxist view is that of Underhill (1975). In this study, 684 societies, for which data are available, were included in order to test Swanson's claim that the presence of high gods (monotheism in the terminology of the study) is related to a hierarchical structure of sovereign groups. The findings were that, while political complexity does appear to be an important factor, economic complexity is also strongly related to monotheism. Both have an independent effect but the effect of economic complexity proved to be stronger, although political and economic structures interact in complex ways. Underhill's interpretation of this is that concepts of a high god represent an ideological and mystified expression of economic relationships.

In reply, Swanson (1975) challenges Underhill's procedures for coding the data, the categories used and the type of data included. A reanalysis using his own procedures produces a result which exhibits no effect reflecting economic relationships and a strong effect which reflects hierarchical arrangement of sovereign groups.

Swanson does not, however, get the last word in this debate. Simpson (1979), while accepting Swanson's criticisms of Underhill, argues that material as well as social factors are important in explaining the pattern of presence or absence of monotheism. The material factors that Simpson finds to be significant are what he terms 'active' as opposed to inert, subsistence raw materials; in short, animals and especially land animals and mammals. Such 'active' raw materials used for subsistence are relatively volatile, unpredictable in their behaviour or require many factors to be taken into account in their successful use in production. Societies based upon the exploitation of active raw materials are the hunter-gatherer societies and those based upon animal husbandry.

Simpson classifies societies in terms of whether they utilise relatively active or inert raw materials and also into Swanson's and Underhill's categories of political



and economic organisation. He finds that the nature of subsistence raw materials is associated with the presence of high gods when the number of sovereign groups is controlled for. The reason for this, he argues, is that reliance on this type of raw material encourages skilled and swift responses to fast-moving events. It encourages autonomy and pursuit of individual excellence and achievement on behalf of and for the material benefit, well-being and survival of the group and its members. Conceptions of a high god represent this symbolically. A high god, through his individuality and extraordinary qualities, similarly sustains the life of a society as well as acting as superordinate arbiter and judge.

Studies of this kind have been remarkably scarce in the sociology of religion. Much credit must be given to Swanson for pioneering the type of comparative studies that he did. We still know very little about the factors that might be associated with different types of religious belief. Only a few have attempted to test, extend or modify Swanson's work and much remains to be done in this area.

# 10 Religion and solidarity

## The functionalists

### A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* had a great deal of influence and many sociologists and particularly anthropologists took up and applied his ideas. One such was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown who did much to establish functionalism as the dominant perspective in anthropology and sociology. His essential ideas on religion are contained in his ethnographic monograph of his fieldwork in the Andaman Islands (1922) and in his Henry Myers lecture of 1945 on 'Religion and Society' (1952a). These were applied to totemism (1929) and taboo (1939).<sup>1</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown, along with Malinowski and others who adopted a functionalist position, strongly rejected the evolutionary schemes of earlier writers. They were critical of the search for the origins of religion which they saw as a futile endeavour, since we could never know much if anything about the religious life of the remote past from which little survives. To them it was also a misguided method, since what mattered was not how things began but the role they now play in the societies in which they are found. It was a mistake, Radcliffe-Brown thought, to think that the 'primitive' societies existing today represent unchanged examples of the societies characteristic of the remote past of our early ancestors. Their religious and ritual systems had to be understood in the context of the existing society and their role in that society. They could not be taken as evidence for the way religious ideas and actions originated in some remote past.

Although influenced by Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown differs from him in a number of ways. Most importantly perhaps, he differs in not accepting the idea that religious ideas express a truth even in a symbolic way. He accepts that, for the most part, religious beliefs are error and illusion. Despite this, however, they are symbolic expressions of sentiments necessary for the stability and survival of society. For Radcliffe-Brown false beliefs and erroneous practices nevertheless have valuable social functions. The rituals do not have the effects that the practitioners and participants hope for but they do have effects which have beneficial social value.

We may entertain at least as a possibility the theory that any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery, as are morality and law, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. From this point of view we deal not with the origins but with the social functions of religions, i.e. the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of social order.

(1952a, p. 154)

Radcliffe-Brown follows Robertson Smith in believing that it is religious practice which is primary rather than beliefs. An emphasis on beliefs, and the view that practices are the direct consequence of beliefs, lead, in Radcliffe-Brown's view, to attempts to discover how the beliefs were formed and adopted and this search for origins encourages neglect of the way in which rites play a vital role in the lives of participants and of the society. It is clear, then, why Radcliffe-Brown is not concerned with the fact that the beliefs are false or with how it is that false and illusory beliefs come to be held. Beliefs do not really matter all that much; it is what people do that is crucial. The relationship between beliefs and practices, he argues, is not causal. 'What really happens is that the rites and the justifying or rationalising beliefs develop together as parts of a coherent whole' (*ibid.*, p. 155).

For Radcliffe-Brown, then, beliefs are rationalisations and justifications of rites. To understand religion we must first concentrate upon the rites and it is their social function which provides the key to an understanding of religion. His approach is summed up in the following passage:

an orderly social life amongst human beings depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of a society of certain sentiments, which control the behaviour of the individual in his relation to others. Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends.

(*ibid.*, p. 157)

He also proffers the general formula that religion is everywhere an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power. He likens this dependence to that of a child upon its parents. In this aspect Radcliffe-Brown is reminiscent not only of Durkheim but also of Freud.

There is clearly something vital missing from this very functionalist account, a deficiency from which all functionalist accounts suffer. That certain sentiments necessary for social order require reinforcement through ritual expression is not sufficient to account for the fact that they are so expressed. Because a thing is necessary for social order this in itself is no guarantee that it will occur and is no

explanation of its occurrence. This is especially so when those who perform the rites do not say or believe that they are performing them to maintain social order and when such notions are far from their minds. And, of course, it is by no means clear that such rites and the beliefs associated with them do always contribute to social order – they may, in fact, do just the opposite.

In any case, it is not at all clear why sentiments necessary for social order require reinforcement. If the participants were sufficiently aware of their importance to stage rites which reinforce the social order, then surely these sentiments were strong enough in their minds in the first place. Unless, of course, they were unaware of their importance, but then how is it the participants come to perform socially necessary rites without having the slightest understanding of what they are doing, undertaking the action out of wholly different motives? It seems entirely fortuitous and, indeed, mysterious that actions performed to increase the abundance of a totemic species or to ensure that the actor has a place in heaven should actually have the real and important but unconscious effect of maintaining social order.

In any case, to say that religion is essentially about maintaining social order is to take a very limited view of it. Clearly, most religious traditions have been concerned with order and harmony in human affairs and relations but it does not follow that this is all religion is about.

Radcliffe-Brown's claim that religious doctrines and beliefs are merely rationalisations of practices is also beset with difficulties. Many rites are of a clearly instrumental character. The practitioners say they perform a rite to bring about some definite end – prosperity, protection from danger or whatever and what they do may appear to be very much such an attempt. But if what they do is not the consequence of a belief that this particular set of actions will produce the desired result and what they do believe is just a rationalisation of what is done, how is it possible to account for what is done, that is, the form of the rite? It is almost as if Radcliffe-Brown is suggesting that after having been unconsciously driven to express symbolically sentiments necessary for social order, the participants come to reflect upon what they have done and find that it appears to have been behaviour designed to bring about some definite result. Why they should have acted in the particular way they did remains completely mysterious since it was not their belief which motivated them nor the desire to ensure social order since they never realise, unless the anthropologist is kind enough to allow them to share in his or her superior insights into their own behaviour, that this is what they have been doing.

Clearly, this will not do. The actions must be the consequence of a desire to bring about the result the actions are said to achieve and the belief that they will do so, or at least of a feeling that the desired end is a matter of some importance and an intention to express this. In other words, the actions are stimulated by ideas and beliefs and the latter cannot, at least always or even most of the time, be rationalisations. (This is not, of course, to say they could not sometimes be, and in certain circumstances are, rationalisations.) At the root of the difficulties with functionalist accounts such as that of Radcliffe-

Brown, then, is the inevitable discrepancy between the observer's and the actor's account of what is going on and the necessity to dismiss the latter. The functionalist, while dismissing what people say they are motivated to do as largely irrelevant, is left with no way of explaining how they come to do what they are not motivated to do.

## RECENT FUNCTIONALIST APPROACHES

Despite their deficiencies, intellectualist, emotionalist, and sociological theories have each illuminated our understanding of religion. Each provides a partial insight into the nature of religion but only a partial one because religion is a far more complex phenomenon than any of these approaches supposes. A comprehensive theory of religion thus needs to incorporate the insights of all of these approaches into some synthesis in which the complex interplay of intellectual, emotional and sociological factors is fully encompassed. More recent functionalist theories have gone some way towards doing this.

Some functionalist-oriented theorists, recognising the deficiencies of the purely functionalist approach, have introduced a psychological dimension into their analyses and attempted to integrate it with their functionalism. Modern functionalists became aware that the existence of a social need for religion is not adequate to account for it and have attempted to complete their functionalist analyses by seeking to root religious belief and behaviour in certain fundamental aspects of human nature. They have tended to see religion as arising from basic, universal human needs and circumstances. They have, therefore, introduced a strong psychological component into what is essentially a sociological approach and there is in their analyses a dual emphasis in which, on the one hand, religion is seen to be the product of psychological factors inherent in all human beings, and on the other it is seen as providing support for social values and social stability. The two emphases do not always coexist comfortably.

### **Kingsley Davis**

Kingsley Davis's once widely used textbook *Human Society* (1948) is a good example of the tension between the social and the individual dimensions in functionalist accounts of religion. In the chapter on religion, entitled 'Religious Institutions' he lists the positive functions of religion which, he says, justifies, rationalises and supports the sentiments that give cohesion to society. The expression of common beliefs through collective ritual seems to enhance people's devotion to group ends. It strengthens their determination to observe the group norms and to rise above purely private interests. It reinforces their identification with their fellows and sharpens their separateness from members of other tribes, communities or nations.

Davis uses the familiar distinction between the sacred and the profane. Things which are sacred symbolise certain intangible phenomena to which religious

beliefs and practices refer. Davis calls them 'super-empirical realities'. They are of three kinds: first, subjective states of mind such as 'peace', 'salvation', 'nirvana', and so on; second, transcendental ends such as 'immortality' and 'purification'; and finally, imaginary creatures, beings, objects and things such as gods, spirits, heavens and hells. Because these things are intangible they must be represented by concrete objects or actions.

These intangible phenomena and the concrete objects and actions which represent them play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion in the following way. Society requires that individuals subordinate their desires and drives to the dictates which are necessary for social order. Group goals, ultimate values, and so on, are not inherent but have to be sustained by some means. To achieve this they must be brought into association with individual drives and it is the function of the super-empirical realities to do this. The necessity and validity of social regulations are brought home to the individual by linking them to an imaginary world. This supernatural or super-empirical world is made to appear to be the source of these ultimate values and ends and through this imaginary world these things appear both necessary and plausible.

The imaginary world, then, justifies and accounts for the ultimate values. The sacred objects which represent the imaginary world convey a sense of its reality. Religious practice, or ritual, functions to sustain beliefs and it is the 'chief instrumentality for reviving the actor's devotion to ultimate values and his belief in the fictitious world' (Davis, 1948, p. 528).

All of this, of course, owes much to Durkheim. Belief in the supernatural world, however, is also a convenient device for propagating the view that good is inevitably rewarded and evil inevitably punished. The promotion of such beliefs helps to uphold the ultimate values which might be undermined if individuals were to believe that evil may prosper and good go unrecorded; that is, if it were to appear that life and fate are just a matter of chance unrelated to good or bad actions. This implies that religion fulfils a social function through meeting the individual need for psychological reassurance that the world is not arbitrary and meaningless.

The emphasis upon ultimate and supernatural punishment for bad actions and reward for good actions explains, Davis argues, the frequently anthropomorphic character of the religious realm. Reward and punishment imply some will or power which commands or expects certain kinds of behaviour and whose action is conditional upon the expected behaviour being forthcoming. As Davis puts it, 'to create the illusion of moral determinism it is necessary to invent a supernatural realm' (*ibid.*, p. 531).

The supernatural realm has another compensating function. The goals that society emphasises for this life are usually such that they are unattainable for some people and rarely attainable to an equal degree by all. To prevent them from becoming dissatisfied and disillusioned, society provides transcendental goals which anyone can reach, no matter how unsuccessful in this life. Again, religion provides psychological compensation for the apparent injustices of this world.

## **Milton Yinger**

Later functionalist theorists go much further in introducing a psychological element into their theories. Yinger, for example, tells us that a set of overarching values to live by is essential (1970, p. 8). These values must provide answers to the 'ultimate problems' of human life and, most of all, the problem of death. They must account for and make meaningful such things as frustration, failure, tragedy, suffering, and so on. Certain exceptional individuals, religious innovators, have discovered 'solutions' to these problems. To put it another way, they have discovered the possibility of salvation.

It was seen in Chapter 1 that Yinger actually defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices addressed to the ultimate problems of life. It is an 'attempt to explain what cannot otherwise be explained; to achieve power, all other powers having failed us; to establish poise and serenity in the face of evil and suffering that other efforts have failed to eliminate' *ibid.*, p. 7). In other words, religion is an attempt to deal with problems that cannot be dealt with in any other way or by any other means.

This approach might be thought to resemble that of Freud and other psychological theories which explain religion in terms of fear, anxiety, frustration and helplessness. But Yinger does not believe that religion will disappear in some future stage of maturity as Freud did. The basic problems will always remain, no matter what level of development is reached.

One might argue against this claim that religion is declining in advanced industrial societies. This would not invalidate Yinger's claims, however, because of the nature of his definition of religion. For Yinger any system of belief which aids people in dealing with the ultimate problems of human life is a religion whether or not it looks much like a religion or fits the general common sense or traditional conception of what religion is. In his view, such systems of belief can be found in even the most secular societies. All men and women have some set of absolute values or beliefs which provides some sort of answer to the ultimate problems, even if only as a form of escape from them. He would, therefore, consciously include such 'creeds' as communism and nationalism within the category of religion since in his view they do struggle with ultimate problems. Even the belief that science can ultimately solve all problems is, for him, a kind of faith and essentially religious in character.

Clearly, the needs that religion satisfies are fundamentally psychological needs but Yinger recognises that religion is, at the same time, primarily a social phenomenon. For this reason, 'private' beliefs are not considered to constitute a religion; not until doctrine and practice are shared by a group can we speak of a religion. One reason for this is that the ultimate questions to which religious belief and practice are addressed are never simply a matter of individual concern. They are ultimate primarily because of their impact upon human associations. Even death is not fundamentally an individual crisis, in Yinger's view, but a group one. Fear, frustration and uncertainty are socially disruptive unless they can be reinterpreted as part of a shared experience. Also, the desires and drives



of the individual must be subordinated to a conception of an absolute good which is in harmony with the shared needs of the group.

Religion thus has a double root in that it meets individual and group needs. It meets group needs largely through its functions for the individual. Yinger echoes Davis in claiming that, by emphasising values which are universally and equally attainable, that is non-material values such as salvation, and by accounting for suffering, failure, deprivation, etc., religion upholds the moral order of society.

It is this emphasis upon a 'double root' of religion which is the major source of difficulty in Yinger's approach. Religious allegiance, motivated by personal needs, may conflict with the needs of social cohesion. Religion is often a divisive force as much as a cohesive one and very often religious convictions can lead to anti-social or disruptive attitudes and behaviour. Yinger is well aware that religion may not always be integrative but argues that there are circumstances in which it is unable to perform its essential, integrative role. He lists six such circumstances but considers these factors to be things which reduce the integrative power of religion. He simply does not consider the possibility that religion may itself be a factor promoting disintegration. Religion is still seen as essentially integrative; it is just that in certain circumstances it is inhibited from performing its role.

The evidence suggests, however, that to the extent that religion does have value for the individual, this may well be in conflict with any alleged socially integrative role. As Scharf has put it, 'it is not clear why a religion which meets the personal need for ultimate meaning in the face of death and frustration should also constitute a "refusal to allow hostility to tear apart one's human associations"' (1970, p. 75). We only have to remember, she reminds us, how certain religious sects have tended to withdraw from and even express hostility to the wider society and prevailing social order to see this. In fact, most religious innovations have been reactions to prevailing social conditions and have sought not to integrate and make cohesive a society which is seen as unsatisfactory but to change that society.

The contradiction in Yinger's theory, Scharf argues, derives from his desire to hold on to the view of religion as a response to ultimate questions transcending the everyday life and goals of particular groups. But in doing so he shows how the social function of religion, which he considers basic, may not in fact be fulfilled. He postulates an individual and social need for religion but fails to systematically relate the one to the other.

There is a second contradiction in Yinger's approach, which is related to his characterisation of the social function of religion in terms of its power to justify deprivation and injustice by providing non-competitive and non-scarce goals, such as salvation, which make exploitation and inequality in this life seem relatively unimportant. The contradiction here is the reverse of the one that Scharf mentions. It is not just that the function of religion for the individual may prevent it from fulfilling its function for society but conversely that its social function may prevent it fulfilling any need for the individual.

If religion, for example, promises salvation in the next life but makes it conditional upon quiescent acceptance of injustice in this life, then one might

argue that, while it may provide some sort of answer to the question of why injustice exists, it nevertheless does a disservice to the individual if it prevents action to bring about change and a more just society. This would, of course, be the sort of criticism of Yinger that a Marxist would make. As Giddens (1978) points out, the functionalist approach deriving from Durkheimian tradition neglects the ideological dimension of religion which aids the legitimation of domination of one group by another.

Yinger, however, anticipates this criticism to some extent. In claiming that religion integrates society he is not claiming that that is necessarily a good or desirable thing, simply that as a matter of fact this is what religion does. It may integrate a just or an unjust society. The functionalist approach makes no value judgements about the desirability of integration of any particular social order but merely points to the objective role of religion.

This does not, however, really answer the point that in fulfilling its function for society religion may be dysfunctional for the individual. Second, it is somewhat misleading to imply that the integration of a just society and an unjust society are the same sorts of process. Two rather distinct senses of the term 'integration' are implied by Yinger's claim. Integration may involve the resolution of conflicts through a process of persuasion, mutual adjustment and compromise or it may involve manipulation, deception, and so on. Religion may, whether consciously, unconsciously, or at least in effect, play the second kind of role. The problem with Yinger's approach is that it makes these rather different processes seem to be the same kind of thing. In any case, as Turner (1991b) points out, too great an emphasis is placed by the functionalist and Durkheimian approaches upon collective beliefs and values expressed traditionally in religious forms as the primary integrating force in society. There are many other processes by which social cohesion is generated including economic inter-dependency, force, habit and pragmatic accommodation and acquiescence. Societies, also, can often function perfectly well despite relatively high levels of conflict, disaffection, disagreement over, or indifference to, prevailing norms and values.

### **Thomas O'Dea**

The final example of the attempt to overcome the difficulties of functionalism by fusing psychological and sociological approaches that will be discussed in this chapter is the work of O'Dea (1966). The essence of religion according to O'Dea is that it transcends everyday experience and we need this transcendental reference because existence is characterised by three things – contingency, powerlessness and scarcity. By contingency he means the fact that existence is full of uncertainty, danger and vulnerability. Life, safety and welfare are precarious. By powerlessness he means the fact that we cannot do very much to remove uncertainty from existence and by scarcity he refers to the fact that because wants seem to be almost unlimited, goals and values are differentially distributed in society.

These characteristics of human life produce frustration and deprivation, adjustment to which is made possible by religion. Religion helps adjustment to what O'Dea calls the 'breaking points' of daily existence. It is crucial in providing answers to basic problems such as death and suffering by giving meaning to distressing experiences. 'If they are found to be without meaning the value of institutionalised goals and norms is undermined' (1966, p. 6). Religion provides a 'larger view' which makes misfortune and frustration seem relatively unimportant. Life in the ordinary and everyday world is fitted into this larger view which includes the super-empirical. Without it there would seem no need or reason to conform to norms of social life.

O'Dea lists six functions of religion for the individual and the society:

- 1 It provides support and consolation and thereby helps support established values and goals.
- 2 Through cult and ceremony it provides emotional security and identity and a fixed point of reference amid conflicts of ideas and opinions. This is the priestly function of religion and involves teaching doctrines and performance of ceremonies. It gives stability to the social order and often helps maintain the status quo.
- 3 It sacralises norms and promotes group goals above individual goals. It legitimates the social order.
- 4 It also provides standards which can be a basis for criticisms of existing social patterns. This is its prophetic function and can form a basis for social protest.
- 5 It aids the individual in understanding him or herself and provides a sense of identity.
- 6 It is important in the process of maturation, in aiding the individual at the crises of life and point of transition from one status to another and is, consequently, part of the educational process.

Unlike Yinger, O'Dea does not think that these functions are always fulfilled by religion. It is not, therefore, an inevitable feature of society. Nevertheless, it has, O'Dea points out, been practically universal in known social systems. He also admits that the functionalist approach is partial and incomplete in that it fails to raise or answer significant questions and tends to overemphasise the conservative functions of religion. It neglects the creative and sometimes revolutionary character of religion. He further concedes that the functionalist approach tends to neglect the process of secularisation and admits that claims that secularisation cannot proceed to the point where religion will disappear cannot be supported. Finally, he admits that religion may have actual dysfunctions and again lists six of these which correspond to its positive functions:

- 1 It may inhibit protest against injustice by reconciling the oppressed.
- 2 Its priestly function of sacralising norms and values may inhibit progress in knowledge.

- 3 It may prevent adaptation to changing circumstances through its conservatism.
- 4 Its prophetic function can lead to utopianism and unrealistic hopes for change and, consequently, inhibit practical action to this end.
- 5 It can attach individuals to groups to the point where conflict with other groups is promoted and adjustment is prevented.
- 6 It can create dependence on religious institutions and leaders thereby preventing maturity.

After such a battery of qualifications to the functionalist approach one might well ask if there is anything much left of it. Once one admits, as O'Dea does, that religion is not a functional necessity, then the functional approach to understanding it seems vacuous. We are still faced with the problem of why a religious solution to problems occurs in certain situations but not in others and with understanding in what circumstances the religious response does occur. In short, we are still left with the major questions. To say that the religious response to difficulties may sometimes be of positive value individually and socially but at other times may be dysfunctional, is to say nothing very significant. The same is probably true of any institution or pattern of behaviour. It certainly does not explain anything. Religion, we are told, may integrate society or inhibit change, give consolation or promote conflict, provide stability or hinder progress – a whole variety of effects which are good, bad and indifferent. None of them explains the occurrence of the religious response or religious sentiments and actions.

Recent functionalist approaches, then, although going some way towards the development of a synthesis of earlier insights, have been somewhat limited in their achievements. Meaning theories, which are to be examined in Chapter 12, go much further towards a satisfactory synthesis. Before examining them, however, examples of applications of the functionalist approach, specifically to aspects of religions studied by anthropologists working in tribal societies, will be discussed.

# 11 Taboos and rituals

Functionalism dominated social anthropology for several decades, particularly in Britain and the Commonwealth countries in which Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's ideas were so influential. The work of anthropologists in tribal societies shows this influence very clearly and in this chapter some of this work will be outlined and discussed and contrasted against alternative perspectives in order to get as clear a picture as possible of how functionalist ideas have been applied. Just two themes among the many that the anthropological literature covers, namely taboo and certain types of ritual, specifically communal rituals and *rites de passage* are considered. Alongside functionalist accounts of these sets of beliefs and behaviour various alternative interpretations will be examined.

## TABOO AND RITUAL AVOIDANCE

### The functionalist perspective

Misfortune in many societies may be attributed to a variety of supernatural or supramundane causes including the actions of gods, spirits, demons, ancestors or witches. It may also be considered to be the automatic consequence of a breach of taboo regulations. A taboo is generally defined as a ritual prohibition and the word derives originally from the Polynesian word *tapu*. The notion of taboo is extremely widespread in human cultures and religious systems including the 'higher' or world religions where it is often associated with ideas of sacredness or holiness as well as with ideas of profanity and pollution. The latter are particularly strong in Hinduism and Judaism.

An early theory of taboo, that of Robertson Smith (1889), argued that in its aspect of impurity, contagion, or danger, taboo represented the survival of primitive superstition. The notions of holiness and sacredness of the higher religions, in contrast, he thought to be quite distinct. In fact it is impossible to separate these elements in the notion of taboo. No real distinction is made between what is sacred and what is polluting in the conceptions of taboo in many cultures.

Also, as Steiner (1967) points out, taboos and ritual avoidances, even where they embody an element of contagion or pollution, are being created continuously

right up to the present and are by no means primitive survivals. Robertson Smith's own Victorian society was taboo-ridden. Many ordinary things could not be mentioned in polite conversation, such as trousers, which had to be referred to by the euphemism of 'unmentionables'. One might question the implication that such avoidances are ritual in character but in this broad sense contemporary society may be said also to have its taboos, although they are perhaps less extensive.

Another major difference between such prohibitions in modern industrial societies and in traditional societies is, of course, that in the former there is no belief that breach of taboo regulations will result in some kind of misfortune whereas there is such a belief in the latter. Radcliffe-Brown emphasised this aspect of taboo in tribal societies. He offered a functionalist interpretation of taboo or, as he preferred to call it, ritual prohibition, which he defined as 'a rule of behaviour which is associated with a belief that an infraction will result in an undesirable change in the ritual status of the person who fails to keep the rule' (1952b, pp. 134–5). It is this change in ritual status which places the person in a situation of vulnerability and danger.

The rules of behaviour generally concern things that must be avoided, in which case Radcliffe-Brown speaks of them having ritual value. Anything which is the object of ritual avoidance has ritual value and this may include people, places, objects, words, or names. Radcliffe-Brown considered that these ritual values are also social values or, in other words, things of common concern or significance which bind two or more persons together. He thought that the key to understanding taboos lay in this relationship between things which have ritual value of a positive or negative kind and things which have social value. The object is to uncover the social functions of ritual prohibitions.

Such ritual actions, Radcliffe-Brown said, establish certain fundamental social values and in doing so enable an orderly society to maintain itself in existence. Ritual behaviour does this because it symbolically expresses the social value of a thing, occasion or event. He illustrates with an example from his own field work among the Andaman Islanders, namely, the set of ritual avoidances surrounding childbirth. The parents of a girl or young woman who is about to give birth are forbidden to eat certain foods and their friends are forbidden to use the names of the parents. Because of these avoidances the event acquires a social value. Radcliffe-Brown takes, then, the opposite view to those, such as Malinowski, who see such ritual behaviour as a means of generating confidence in a situation of anxiety and uncertainty. If anything, in Radcliffe-Brown's view, the ritual behaviour creates anxiety and ensures a concern with the event and outcome which might not otherwise have existed.

It is largely in this process of generating a common concern, by the sharing of hopes and fears, that human beings are linked together in association:

By this theory the Andamanese taboos relating to childbirth are the obligatory recognition in the standardised symbolic form of the significance

and importance of the events to the parents and to the community at large. They thus serve to fix the social value of occasions of this kind.

(*ibid.*, pp. 150–1)

As for the things to which ritual prohibitions are attached, they are chosen because they are themselves objects of important common interest or because they are symbolically representative of such things. The notion that some misfortune will befall those who do not keep the taboo is a rationalisation.

The functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown's approach to the analysis of taboo and ritual avoidance is clearly problematic and suffers from the sort of difficulty discussed in the general treatment of functionalist approaches in Chapter 10. The essential points are that the behaviour is said to occur because of the necessary social effects that it has. But the need that these effects be produced does not guarantee that they will be and thus cannot be the explanation of the behaviour. Nor do those who observe the taboos do so in order to bring about the alleged effects, of which they are in any case probably unaware. Their reason for observing the taboos, apart from socialisation and custom, is that failure to do so will bring misfortune. It will not do to dismiss this as a mere rationalisation.

### **Freud on taboo**

Freud likened taboo behaviour to that of obsessional neurotics on the grounds that both involve an apparent absence of any motive for the prohibition, both derive from an inner compulsion, both involve the idea of contagion, and both give rise to injunctions which require some ritual performance, usually purification, to be undertaken if the taboo is breached. A central element in taboo behaviour for Freud is ambivalence towards the object which is taboo. There is a desire to touch it or come into contact with it, which is repressed, as well as a horror or fear of touching it. Such ambivalence derives from the fact that the institution of taboo represents the repressed desire to touch the genitals and at the same time a horror of doing so.

As Steiner (1967) points out, Freud's characterisation of taboo is incorrect in a number of respects. First, the feeling that the taboo must be observed is quite unlike the compulsion that the obsessional neurotic feels, and derives from custom not from inner drives. Second, the actions that the obsessional neurotic performs are not at all like the rituals that are involved in taboo behaviour which, again, are not private but a matter of custom.

Even more importantly, the characterisation of taboo in terms of ambivalence could not successfully be applied to the whole range of taboos found in various societies. The taboos surrounding menstrual blood, Steiner argues, surely involve no repressed desire to come into contact with it. Also, there seems no more reason to believe that taboos reflect anxieties (as well as desires) than there is to accept Radcliffe-Brown's claim that taboos may serve to generate anxiety.



## Recent approaches

More recent interpretations of taboo behaviour have drawn, as Steiner (*ibid.*) points out, on the work of van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1960 [1908]). Van Gennep pointed out that taboo behaviour is nearly always an important element in transition rituals and is related to the belief that a transition from one status or condition to another is inherently dangerous. This has provided an important clue, Steiner argues, to the nature of taboos. They seem to be very much associated with transitions, boundaries, ambiguities, anomalies, and so on – in other words, things which are at the margins of established categories, the transitions from one category to another, or things which do not quite fit into established categories.

Such is the view developed by Mary Douglas (1966). Douglas also considers that contemporary industrial society is as taboo-ridden as any traditional society. Our ideas of cleanliness and dirt are not just a question of hygiene. We tend to think of the ritual avoidances of other peoples as being entirely ritual in character and as having nothing to do with hygiene. There have been attempts to explain them in terms of a concern with hygiene but while there may be something in these ideas, they have, on the whole, not been very successful in explaining ritual avoidances. Douglas suggests that neither traditional nor contemporary avoidance behaviour is entirely or primarily a matter of hygiene: 'our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems' and 'the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is a matter of detail' (*ibid.*, p. 35).

This concept of dirt is not really a product of fear of infection or of transmission of germs or diseases, according to Douglas. The idea of dirt is much older than our knowledge of the causes of disease and the mechanisms of its transmission. Ideas of dirt have, in fact, to do with notions of order and disorder:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. ... Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements ... our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

(*ibid.*, p. 35)

This interpretation, Douglas claims, would allow us to comprehend the essential nature of taboo in both its aspects. Anomalous things are dangerous and must be avoided; they have a kind of power. Consequently, they come to be classed along with the sacred, which is also dangerous and powerful.

Douglas looks at a wide range of things from this point of view in order to show how her interpretation fits. For example, in a chapter entitled 'The Abominations of Leviticus', she interprets the dietary restrictions of Judaism in terms of the Israelite system of animal classification. Animals which do not quite fit the major categories are tabooed and cannot be eaten. A major category is

that of animals that chew the cud and have cloven hooves. The pig does not chew the cud but does have a cloven hoof; it is an anomaly not belonging to any category in this system of classification and so must be avoided.

The widespread taboos which relate to the orifices of the human body and its products are also interpreted by Douglas in this way. Bodily products which cross a threshold are both of the body and yet are rejected by it and become something external to it. They are neither one thing nor the other and become the object of avoidance behaviour.

Taboos relating to bodily emissions, however, have a great deal more to them than this, according to Douglas, who sees them as reflecting certain aspects of social order and threats to it. She claims that the body is almost universally used as a symbol for society such that every aspect of the body expresses some social aspect. Rituals often revolve around bodily functions. As Douglas says:

We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast-milk, saliva, and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.

(ibid., p. 115)

For example, she considers ideas of pollution associated with sex and with females to be reflections of a certain kind of social situation, especially one where men's relations with women are for some reason problematic. This might be because there is a conflict of interests between them, because for one reason or another women are able to frustrate the plans of men or resist their control, or where there is a conflict of structural principles.

An example of the latter situation would be that of matrilineally organised societies where there is often a conflict between, on the one hand, the fact that men have authority over their kinswomen who are to a large extent dependent on them, while on the other the residence pattern may be uxorilocal (that is, a man goes to live in the village of his wife on marriage) and men are thus separated from their kinswomen.

Also, Douglas examines the relationship between taboos and morality and the role of taboos in upholding the system of morality and in social control. An excellent example of the use of taboo in social control is given by Firth (1939), who describes how Polynesian chiefs on the island of Tikopia can place a ban on the consumption of certain crops. Normally this is done during times of scarcity to ensure that reserves will not be depleted and that there will be sufficient seed for planting later. The chief will place a sign near the crop which indicates that it is tabooed and anyone breaking the ban is thought likely to suffer a very unpleasant misfortune such as contracting a disease, breaking out in boils, and so on.

Here taboos are used for the common good. Douglas points out that they may also have an ideological and political use in situations of conflict. They are not just symbolic expressions of conflicting principles or interests but are sometimes weapons used in the pursuit of those interests.

For example, Douglas interprets the widespread taboos relating to menstruation and menstrual blood as being very often essentially manipulative devices for controlling women. By their use men are able to do the following:

- Assert male superiority by contrasting females as unclean and polluting as opposed to male purity.
- Designate separate male and female spheres and thereby exclude women from male spheres in order to control strategic resources such as food, tools, etc.
- Blame failures on breaches of the rules of segregation by women.
- Attack people and blame them for sickness and misfortune caused by breach of taboo regulations, possibly extracting compensation from them.

An example of taboos relating to menstruation which illustrates how they may be used to manipulate situations is that of the Hadza, an African hunting and gathering people. In this society, men and women are to a very great extent separated. Also, women are very largely independent of men. In this situation men show great concern and anxiety about sexual access to women. Marriage is fragile and unstable and divorce frequent. When a woman is menstruating it is taboo for her husband to go hunting or gathering honey along with his fellow men. To do so would bring bad luck on the venture. He has to stay at home. The husband and wife, consequently, are conspicuously set apart from others during this time and there is a periodic reaffirmation and statement of the link between them. Their marital status is publicly demonstrated as a means of retaining an always precarious claim on the wife.

This is, of course, a rather functionalist explanation, and perhaps does not fully explain the existence of the taboo. The same problem exists for all of the ways in which Douglas shows how taboos may be used manipulatively but she does give us, perhaps, some insight into how taboo behaviour of this kind, whatever the reasons for its original appearance, can be put to manipulative uses once it exists.

The idea that tabooed things are things that confound the system of categories has been challenged by later writers on the grounds that it oversimplifies and fails to explain the pattern of taboos found either in Leviticus or in societies in which they have carried out fieldwork. Carroll (1978) broadly supports the basic contention that it is anomalous things which are taboo but argues that the relevant anomaly in the case of Leviticus is that which derives from a fundamental distinction between nature and culture. Human beings (culture) can eat meat but animals (nature) should eat only vegetable matter. Carnivores are therefore anomalous and taboo. The pig eats carrion. Carroll argues that this accounts for many more of the things mentioned in Leviticus than Douglas's theory. Vermin, mould and mildew, for example, belong to nature but invade the world of man and of culture. It also accounts for more than just the dietary regulations, he claims, including regulations relating to leprosy.

But even Carroll's theory cannot account for all the taboo proscriptions of Leviticus, as he himself admits. Other critics of Douglas (Bulmer, 1967; Tambiah, 1969) argue that it is not possible to account for taboos in entirely taxonomic terms. While polluting things may be things out of place, there are many different ways in which things can be out of place. Taxonomic systems relating to animals, for example, are closely linked to social classifications and come to be charged as a result with a variety of affective connotations.

Douglas, in later work, has recognised the force of some of these criticisms and has modified her analysis of the Jewish dietary laws (1975). The Jews maintained, she argues, very strict social boundaries. Marriage with outsiders of certain categories was strictly forbidden. Conversely, marriage within the group between fairly close relatives, such as first parallel cousins, was allowed. The ban on eating the pig was not simply the consequence of the way it confounded categories but also because pigs were reared as food by outsiders, i.e. non-Israelites. This dietary rule also celebrates the theme of purity versus impurity – the pig eats carrion. Among the Lele, an African people whom Douglas studied early in her career (Douglas, 1963), the reverse situation can be found. Here boundaries are weak and the crossing and confounding of boundaries are considered a good thing. An animal that does not fit anywhere in the Lele's system of categories, the pangolin, is not polluting but sacred. In short, the social situation has a profound influence upon how anomalous things are treated.

It has to be said that such analyses, while insightful and promising, are based on very few instances and must be treated as highly speculative. Much more systematic comparative work needs to be done on the subject of taboo before we can claim to have much understanding of it.

## **COMMUNAL RITUALS AND *RITÉS DE PASSAGE***

Communal rituals are those which involve a kinship group, tribe, village, neighbourhood, community or even sometimes a whole nation. The rituals may be conducted for a variety of purposes such as veneration of gods, prosperity, protection against danger, commemoration of birth, marriage and death or the marking of seasons. Such rituals have usually been interpreted by anthropologists as means by which a society, community or group upholds central values and principles and preserves the moral order. This may involve the recognition of divisions, conflicts and disharmonies inherent in the society and rituals may be seen as a means of coping with and defusing them. According to this view, many rituals arise as a response to situations in which there is a conflict between the general, moral order on the one hand, and individual or sectional interests which lead to competition, on the other. Such an analysis is supported by frequent observations that many rituals involve and demonstrate an open exhibition of strife and antagonism as well as cohesion and co-operation.

## Functionalist perspectives

A leading exponent of such an approach is Max Gluckman. He interprets, for example, the great Swazi national first-fruits ceremony, the *incwala*, as a symbolic representation of the underlying conflicts within the nation as well as its fundamental unity and cohesion (Gluckman, 1963). In this latter respect Gluckman presents a revised functionalist account of them. In the ritual the political divisions of the Swazi nation are clearly visible. Different groups play different parts in it. Those who stand in a potentially hostile relationship to the royal clan will ritually abuse and criticise the king. The whole ceremony dramatises the potential antagonisms centring on kingship and it symbolises the eventual triumph of the king over his enemies and the ultimate unity of the nation.

Gluckman points out that an ambivalent attitude exists towards the Swazi king. The *incwala* ceremony expresses this ambivalence; 'symbolic acting of social relations in their ambivalence is believed to achieve unity and prosperity' (ibid., p. 126). In other words, accompanying the ritual expression of ambivalent attitudes is the idea that doing so somehow removes the stresses which are seen to prevent the society from realising its aims. We find here a connection in the ideas of these people between the moral order and events in the natural world, a belief that reflects structural contradictions which lie at the root of such ritual expressions.<sup>1</sup> If the society embodies stresses and antagonisms which become bottled up and are not released in some harmless ritual way, then the society will not prosper. The *incwala* ceremony, as a first-fruits ceremony, is closely bound up with the productive cycle in the Swazi economy. Ritual, then, can once again be seen to be about moral relationships and a means of claiming that people depend upon one another for their welfare. It does so, however, in an exaggerated way to the extent that prosperity is only possible if moral conditions are good.

Gluckman also interprets the rites of reversal that used to occur among the Zulu and other people in terms of ambivalence and conflict. In these rites, on a certain day in the year women would throw off all the normal restraints on their behaviour. They would behave aggressively and more like men. They would abuse men and shout obscenities at them, but all in a ritualised manner. The rituals were believed to increase the harvest and promote prosperity in general. Gluckman sees this kind of thing as an instituted form of protest on the part of a subordinate section of the society which gives expression to animosities and frustrations. By expressing them, tensions were released and repressed feelings were alleviated. Such ritual expression of ambivalent attitudes renewed the unity of the system, according to Gluckman.

## Ritual as symbolic expression

Gluckman's interpretation of such rituals has been criticised by Norbeck (1963) for not taking into account the meaning that the rituals have for the participants. Also, from a survey of similar rituals throughout Africa, Norbeck is led to question the claim that these rituals are forms of protest or rebellion. Gluckman's approach

would not explain, for example, the frequent indulgence in transvestism by men in such rituals nor the fact that they often involve the expression of animosity towards women. Rather than being specifically a form of protest or rebellion, Norbeck suggests, they are instances of a much wider range of customs which may be interpreted as the expression of generalised tensions and which may indeed be cathartic. In some cases, far from being protests, they may be seen as a form of humour and amusement. Humour, of course, can be a way of expressing and dealing with tension and conflict.

Abrahams and Bauman (1978) also challenge the protest and rebellion argument on the basis of an analysis of festivities in which humour and 'horse play' associated with role reversal are prominent. In a comparison of festivals in St Vincent in the Caribbean and the La Have Islands, Nova Scotia, they show that rites of reversal are not really rebellious but expressive of values which predominate in one part of society and which are opposed to those prevailing in the domestic context. In the case of St Vincent they express the values of male-dominated public meeting places where a degree of rudeness and loudness are taken for granted in contrast to the more polite respectability of the domestic scene. In the La Have Islands they express values associated with youthful prankishness as opposed to adult sense and sobriety. In both cases the two value systems are, on a special occasion, brought into conjunction, thereby demonstrating their normal separateness yet coexistence. An essential harmony despite their inherent opposition is highlighted. Societies are able to tolerate much more diversity and contradiction than functional theory can envisage.

On the other hand, rituals involving role reversal may be quite instrumental and integrated with cosmological systems of thought through which the world is understood and by being understood can be controlled. Rigby (1968) shows how rites involving reversal of gender roles among the Gogo people of Tanzania reflect their system of ideas in which social categories, such as the dichotomy of male versus female, are taken as general models for understanding and dealing with natural processes and events. Such ideas are about explaining the order and disorder of the world and how to promote, preserve or restore an order which is beneficial. The Gogo perceive periods of hardship and shortage as a kind of reversal of normal processes and a bad ritual state. This reversal can be rereversed and a good ritual state restored through rites in which the male and female roles are reversed. This is so because male and female are used as categories for the ordering of relationships in which men are responsible for the health, well-being and productivity of animals and people and women for the health and well-being of plants and crops. By reversing the normal roles of men and women the Gogo believe they can reverse the bad ritual state; this involves the reversal of the flow of time and restoration of a previous state of affairs. Such an interpretation, Rigby argues, makes sense of much of the symbolic detail of Gogo rituals which the protest and rebellion argument could not make sense of. It provides a richer understanding, in his view, than the functional approach is able to in mechanically reducing all ritual, regardless of content, to the same function of promoting social solidarity.

Gluckman's analysis of communal rituals such as those of the Swazi *incwala* have also been reassessed in a way which again emphasises cosmological systems of thought in order to make better sense of the detail of their symbolic expression. Beidelman (1966), through a detailed analysis of Swazi cosmology and certain aspects of the symbolism of the *incwala* ceremony overlooked by Gluckman, comes to quite a different conclusion. It is not the symbolic expression of hostility to the king, nor a form of symbolic rebellion, but the expression of the separation of the king from the various groups in Swazi society, so that he may be free from allegiance to any specific group, in order to take on the supernatural powers of his office. Beidelman also takes Gluckman to task for ignoring the actors' own understanding of what they are doing. This can to some extent be recovered from a thorough understanding of their cosmological system which reveals much of the symbolism in the rituals. Gluckman's neglect of this stems from the lingering functionalism of his approach which seeks to find social value and solidarity-generating capacity in rituals even where conflict seems to be involved. Gluckman also neglects, in Beidelman's view, the psychological aspects of ritual – the mechanisms which give it its cathartic effect. The efficacy of symbols is essentially a psychological question, he suggests.

Gluckman's approach emphasises the expressive aspect of ritual. Other theorists place even more emphasis on this aspect, as observed in discussing the symbolic functionalists such as Beattie who applies his ideas not only to magical rituals but to ritual in general. Such writers see rituals as a kind of dramatic performance. Barth (1975) has applied this approach in a study of initiation rituals among the Baktaman of New Guinea. He sees the symbols involved as essentially metaphorical and expressive. This means they are complex and rich but often also vague and contradictory. But such rituals are not simply drama. They are a distinct genre or form of human activity in their own right and in some ways quite unlike any other. They express things which cannot be said in any other way and provide a meaningful world-view which informs daily life and tasks. In this he adopts an approach to religion in general rather like Beattie, but also like that of Phillips (1976), which was discussed in Chapter 1.

### **The instrumental role of ritual**

This interpretation of ritual as expressive has been challenged by a number of writers, not as being wrong so much as incomplete. Dramatic expression is an important aspect but ritual is also much more than this in that it attempts to do or to change something. It also has its instrumental side (Bloch, 1974; Lewis, 1980; Rappaport, 1967; Rigby, 1968; Skorupski, 1976). Skorupski in particular reminds us that much of what occurs in ritual is like the formal interaction that takes place between a commoner and a chief. Supplication, for example, is not merely expressive but, since the god is conceived to stand in relation to the supplicant as a chief does to a commoner, it is a form of social interaction on exactly the same pattern of interaction as certain types of human interaction. Many rituals take



the form of operative acts. They say something but also do something by saying something (see Chapter 1).<sup>2</sup>

Bloch (1974) goes further in questioning whether ritual is essentially expressive at all, stressing instead its uses as means of exercising power and authority, an approach which Douglas (1966) has developed more specifically in relation to taboo.

The role of ritual in regulating relationships of power and conflict is stressed by Rappaport who sets this in an ecological context. His studies of the Tsembaga of New Guinea (1967, 1968) show, he claims, that whatever the expressive role of ritual, it can at least sometimes play a very material and practical role. The ritual cycle of this people helps to regulate their relationship to the immediate environment and to other surrounding groups. Rappaport shows how the ritual cycle maintains the ecosystem, balances the relationship between people and land and limits the frequency of inter-group conflict. It plays a central part in the mobilisation of allies at times of warfare. This is linked to the way in which it also provides a mechanism for redistributing surpluses, especially of pigs in the form of pork, over a wide area at a time when people most need high quality protein.

Finally, Lewis (1980), while acknowledging the insights that the approach to ritual as a form of expression gives us, warns of taking it to distorting lengths. Ritual is not exactly like a form of communication but in some ways more like a form of stimulation. It is not performed simply to communicate but to resolve or alter a situation. To emphasise its communicative aspect is to indulge in a contrived intellectualisation of ritual which carries the danger that social scientists will claim to know better what the practitioners are really doing than they do themselves.

### **Psychological approaches**

The psychological aspects of ritual to which Beidelman (1966) refers remain unaddressed by the interpretation of ritual as expressive. *Rites de passage*, and particularly initiation rituals, even more than such rituals as the *incwala*, might seem to demand a psychological interpretation. Initiation rituals commonly involve the humiliation, infliction of pain upon and often the mutilation of the initiates. One way of interpreting this would be to see it as expressing the ambivalent attitudes of adults towards the new generation which is making the transition from childhood to adulthood. The younger generation are becoming to some extent rivals of the older generation. One day they will replace them in positions of authority and their relationship of dependence will be reversed as their parents age.

A Freudian interpretation suggests itself here, especially when the alleged aggression takes the form of mutilation of the genitals as in the case of circumcision. The Freudian, Reik (1975 [1946]), interpreted circumcision as symbolic castration performed as a punishment for and in order to deter incestuous desires and parricidal wishes. Badcock (1980) also emphasises the repression of such desires in the process of the formation of the superego. In totemic hunting bands,

according to Badcock, when simple foraging by single males gave way to cooperative hunting by groups of males, such repression became necessary in order to prevent conflict between the generations. But as Paige and Paige (1981) point out, orthodox psychoanalytic theory holds that the Oedipal complex is normally resolved in childhood, at around the age of five. It is difficult to see, therefore, why Oedipal conflicts should be present at the time of puberty such that they require lengthy and elaborate initiation rituals to control them.

A number of theorists have attempted to understand initiation rituals, especially those which involve circumcision, in less orthodox Freudian, but still largely psychoanalytic, terms. Or they have, at least, emphasised psychogenic rather than sociogenic factors. The general thrust of such theories has been to stress the role of initiation in radically breaking identifications, dependencies and habits of mind and creating new allegiances and orientations by the use of dramatic and traumatic means. Others retain an emphasis on sociogenic factors but do not accept the more functionalist forms of this approach. Not wholly incompatible with functionalism are those approaches which characterise initiation rituals as having what we might call an 'educational' function. The initiates are taught to think and act like adults and learn what is involved in taking on an adult role in the community.

However, in many ways initiation rituals go well beyond mere education in the sense of the imparting of information, as Turner (1974a) points out. They focus the initiates' thoughts on key aspects of life and shape them into a new identity. To some extent the infliction of pain might be seen as a means of achieving this – a form of shock tactic designed to induce a psychological disposition to behave in an adult manner – a means of driving home the message dramatically and quickly and of making it take root in a firm and fixed manner. The young are stunned into acceptance and understanding of their new role and status and a complete break is made with their previous mode of life which is now put behind them forever. The ordeals may serve, also, as a test and proof of capacity for adult responsibility.

Morinis (1991) considers that only recognition of this transformative role of initiation rites can explain the extraordinarily frequent aspect of the infliction of pain and suffering upon initiates. More than this, echoing Durkheim, they serve in his view to emphasise the importance of the community and the group in relation to individual autonomy and self-direction. The rites require the initiates to sacrifice, to a certain degree, self and accept a measure of subordination to the constraints that being a full and adult member of a community inevitably demands. The pain represents the opposite of what community membership provides. The rites symbolise also the metamorphosis of the initiates from relatively unsocialised 'natural' children inclined to indulge their instinctive drives into 'cultured' and restrained adult members of a community. The trauma of the initiation rite, like many extreme experiences, suddenly and rapidly dishabituates initiates out of their childish mentality into the new adult frame of mind. In the process, self-awareness may well be intensified as is frequently the case, Morinis argues, with extreme ascetic practices which are often followed in order to produce

spiritual development and insight. The experience is one of personal growth and opening towards to new understandings. Again we see that rituals of this kind are not just expressive and symbolic but may bring about real consequences and effects. Morinis considers that it may well be possible to generalise the point, that one way ritual does this is through how it affects the minds of participants in lasting ways, to other rites of transition and more broadly still to other types of ritual.

Morinis integrates a psychogenic element into a broadly sociogenic approach. Other sociogenic approaches, however, have placed much less emphasis upon the effects of initiation upon the individual being initiated and have seen it in terms of broader political conflicts and strategies in kinship and local groups.<sup>3</sup>

It is not just the passage from childhood to adulthood that is marked by a transition ritual in tribal societies. Most transitions are so ritualised. This is something that van Gennep (1960 [1908]) emphasised. In discussing taboo it was seen that van Gennep showed that being situated between two statuses or positions is often considered to be dangerous. Those who go from one status to another pass through a phase of vulnerability in which they are neither one thing nor the other. This condition he termed marginal (*liminaire*) and it lies between two phases of most rituals of transition. First, there is a rite of separation in which the subject of the ritual performance is removed from his or her old status. This may involve actual physical removal and segregation from the wider society for a period of time, as in the case of many initiation rituals. After the intervening period of marginality or liminality the subject is integrated into a new status through a rite of aggregation. This often involves a symbolic rebirth of some kind such as passing through a short tunnel or passage, under an arch, or through an aperture of some kind.

Transitions from one status to another are in every society, of course, usually marked by some form of ritual but the ritual marking of roles and statuses and movement between them is something which is particularly prevalent in and characteristic of tribal societies. According to Gluckman (1962), this is the consequence of the multiplex structure of these societies in contrast to the simplex structures of modern industrial societies. In multiplex structures the multiplicity of roles in which any two individuals may interact requires that some means of demarcating and signalling these different roles is required. This is done by means of special observances and avoidances, that is, by rituals. In general there is an exaggerated emphasis on custom, which includes ritual, in such societies: 'I suggest that the effect of this relatively "exaggerated" development of custom is to mark off and segregate roles in social groups where they may be confounded' (*ibid.*, p. 25.).

The dense interlocking network of relationships in such multiplex structures is one in which moral implications are embedded. How a person fulfils obligations within a given role will have a whole series of effects on other roles and relationships. All of a person's actions are morally significant in any given role because they will have implications for others in a whole variety of ways. Gluckman believes that this is why rituals are associated with changes of activity

in most tribal societies. In societies in which roles are largely segregated, moral judgements tend also to be segregated. Failure to fulfil the obligations of a particular role does not have moral implications in all or most other spheres of activity. Failure in one role does not necessarily disturb other areas of interaction. Ritualisation, then, isolates and demarcates roles in circumstances where there is a strong tendency for them to be confused and conflated. It ritualises them by exaggerating the prescribed behaviour associated with each role.

The approaches we have been considering – ritual as the expression of ambivalence and as a means of demarcating roles – are concerned with the broad connections between ritual and types of social situation. Other approaches have been more concerned with the actual process by which rituals achieve their effects – for example, the catharsis of which Gluckman speaks. Generally this involves the careful analysis of the complex symbolism involved in ritual and of the power of symbolism in achieving various effects.

### **Vic Turner and Mary Douglas**

Turner (1964, 1965), for example, emphasises the way in which the symbols involved in ritual have many different levels of meaning associated with them. They may range between two sets of associations which are at opposite poles to one another. At one pole the symbols refer to the social order, the normative order; at the other they refer to natural and physiological processes. These poles he calls respectively either ideological or normative and sensory or orectic.

The meanings associated with the sensory or orectic pole tend to arouse strong emotions. Such emotions tend to be transferred to the other meanings of the symbols, namely, the normative or ideological aspects. There is an exchange of qualities which takes place in the psyches of those who participate in or observe the rituals. The normative or ideological order becomes saturated with emotion while at the same time the baser emotions and drives in human nature are ennobled through contact with social values. Turner clearly draws, then, on Freudian ideas in referring to psychological processes of this kind. Presumably, the emotional response to certain meanings in the symbols associated with physiological processes – bodily functions, human drives, and so on – is due to the ambivalent attitudes we have to these things resulting from the repressions involved.

Turner's ideas are innovative and promising but also rather speculative and tentative.<sup>4</sup> Equally so is the work of Mary Douglas. In the discussion of taboo above, it was seen how she attempts to show that ritual symbolism controls, creates and modifies experience and that she considers that the human body is frequently used as a symbol of the society (1966). This theme is developed further in later work (1973) where she is concerned with 'systems in which the image of the body is used in different ways to reflect and enhance each person's experience of society' (p. 16). Different systems of symbols relating to the body are, she argues, reflections of particular types of social situation. Societies with a particular

character will have a different attitude to the body and different norms and customs which regulate bodily activity. They will also have different styles of ritual and religion. In this way she attempts to relate anthropological material to the religious systems of advanced and complex societies.

To take one example, in a social system in which there is an emphasis on subordination to authority, all behaviour tends to be regulated by norms. In this type of society ritualism will be high and there will be many taboos. Societal characteristics will be reflected in and through the body and attitudes towards it. Social interaction takes place as if people were spirits without bodies at all. Bodily and organic functions and processes will be closely regulated. Interaction will be highly formal. Posture will tend to be rigid and upright. There will be many standards for politeness and refined behaviour. People will not behave in a physically demonstrative manner. This type of society will have its own religious style which will emphasise formal, ordered and controlled ritualism.

In the opposite type of society, where authority structures are more diffuse and weak, where the individual is less subject to control, the religious style will not emphasise formal ritual but enthusiasm, spontaneity, excitement and effervescence.

Douglas's approach might be criticised for being over-reductionist and indeed at times rather vague and even obscure but her use of anthropological material to develop understanding of wider religious patterns is stimulating and thought-provoking.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that ritual is an extremely complex and varied form of human behaviour with many different aspects and dimensions and manifesting considerable ambiguity. It is expressive yet instrumental, dramatic yet practical, social yet embodying meanings with psychological import at the individual level, akin to other forms of activity yet perhaps a distinct type of human activity in its own right.

## 12 Religion and rationality

Max Weber

In modifying the functionalist approach, writers like Davis, Yinger and O'Dea introduced the idea that religion is, among other things, a provider of meaning in the face of what threatens to be a meaningless world. Even more than in these contributions, the key claim of other recent analyses of religion has, in fact, usually been that religion is in essence a response to the threat of meaninglessness in human life and an attempt to see the world as a meaningfully ordered reality. In Chapter 14 the ideas of the most prominent of such theorists will be examined. However, among earlier theorists, Max Weber to a considerable extent anticipated and laid the groundwork for such an approach and for the synthesis of the various strands from which the religious life is woven.

Weber did not directly confront the broad question of the sources of the religious mentality or the causes of religious belief and behaviour. He was less concerned with the explanation of religion *per se* than with connections between different types of religion and specific social groups and with the impact of various sorts of religious outlook upon other aspects of social life and particularly on economic behaviour. However, Weber did, if rather briefly, develop a general approach to religion as a social phenomenon and attempt to assess its nature and the type of human concern and motivation which underlie it.<sup>1</sup> To some extent this has to be reconstructed from observations and comments occurring throughout his work but perhaps the most explicit discussion occurs in 'The social psychology of the world religions' (1970c). Here Weber set out what is essentially a psychological approach to religion, but one which recognises both the intellectual and emotional bases of it, and which is so closely integrated with social factors that it has to be considered an eminently sociological account also.

He is careful, however, to dispel any idea that in linking religion to social factors one need adopt a reductionist position. The sociological approach cannot fully account for religion, he states. He rejects the thesis that religious ideas are mere reflections of the material position and interests of social groups. 'However incisive the social influences . . . may have been upon a religious ethic in a particular case, it receives its stamp primarily from religious sources, and, first of all, from the content of its annunciation and its promise' (1970a, p. 270).

He also rejects theories of religion which see it as basically a response to deprivation and, consequently, motivated by resentment, a reference to Nietzsche,

although in saying this he acknowledges that there is a very close connection between religion and suffering. In his discussion of this relationship he gives the clearest indication of his fundamental assumptions about the nature of religion and the sources from which it springs.

Those who suffer misfortune, he observes, are, in many religious traditions, thought to have angered the gods who are punishing them, or to be afflicted by demons because they are guilty of some action which has made them vulnerable. In accounting for suffering in this way, religion has met a very deep and general need. Whatever fortune befalls a person, whether it be good or bad, it cannot be accepted as mere chance. It must be explained and thereby justified in some way. Those who are fortunate, need to know that their good fortune is not just arbitrary luck but deserved. Above all, when the fortunate compare themselves to the less fortunate they feel a strong need to justify the difference in terms of desert and justice. Hence the tendency to account for misfortune in terms of guilt and supernatural punishment. Similarly, the less fortunate and those who suffer feel an overwhelming need to account for it in terms which deny its arbitrariness and which see it as part of a meaningful pattern and a just order, whether this entails acceptance of guilt and punishment, the expectation of ultimate compensation, or some other interpretation.

Here we have, then, the root source of religious attitudes. Religion is fundamentally a response to the difficulties and injustices of life which attempts to make sense of them and thereby enables people to cope with and feel more confident when faced by them. Religious conceptions arise as a result of the fact that life is fundamentally precarious and uncertain. Uncertainty implies that human beings desire certain things but find their desires are not always fulfilled. There is always a discrepancy between what we think ought to be and what actually is. It is the tension generated by this discrepancy which is the source of the religious outlook.

The discrepancy exists at a number of levels. At the most basic it is simply that between material desires and actual conditions and at another level it is that between normative expectations and actual circumstances. The good and the just do not always prosper while the wicked often do. Religion is an attempt to cope with such facts and, by its mediation with the supernatural world, it is believed that material desires can be satisfied. Through its doctrines the apparent injustices of the world can be made to seem only apparent.

Religion can thus make the apparently arbitrary world seem meaningful and ordered. The fortunate deserve their good fortune if the wider religious view is taken into account while the unfortunate deserve their fate or are only temporarily unfortunate in this material world and will enjoy their rewards in the hereafter. In this way religion provides what Weber calls a 'theodicy' of good or ill fortune.

Those who enjoy good or bad fortune, however, generally or frequently do so because they occupy positions in society which determine to a large extent their life-chances, their prestige, and so on. Inequalities are not random but part of a patterned structure. Consequently, religious attitudes tend to be associated with particular groups in society. Different groups have somewhat different



religious outlooks since they experience the problems that discrepancies between expectations and experience create to differing degrees and in different ways. As a consequence, the sociology of religion is, for Weber, fundamentally the study of the relationships between religious ideas and the particular social groups that are the 'carriers' of those ideas and of the consequences for history and society of such religious orientations and their impact upon styles of life, attitudes and behaviour.

In his section on religion in *Economy and Society* (1978), translated and published separately as *The Sociology of Religion* (1965), Weber begins his analysis by looking at what he considers to be the most elementary forms of religious belief and behaviour, namely, the religions of tribal societies. In such societies, he observes, religious behaviour is largely motivated by the desire to survive and prosper in this material life. Religious and magical thought and behaviour are not set apart from everyday purposes and are oriented primarily towards economic ends. Questionable as it may be, in tribal societies, Weber believed, people are too immersed in the immediate problems of everyday life and survival to give attention to anything but magical and manipulative means of realising material goals.

It is significant that Weber always speaks of religious and magical behaviour, implying that they are somewhat different, if related. He tends to distinguish them on the basis that magic is largely manipulative and attempts to coerce gods and spirits whereas religion involves the worship of them. Magic, also, conceives of gods and spirits as part of this world or at least as immanent in everyday objects and entities whereas religion has a more transcendental conception of them. 'Primitive' religion, then, tends towards the magical; and Weber starts to trace a development from more magical to more religious conceptions and practices in the evolution of human society.

In the earliest stages, magic centres on the experience of extraordinary characteristics or powers that seem to be inherent in certain objects, actions or persons. In many tribal societies there have been specific terms for such characteristics or powers, for example, *mana* in Polynesia, *orenda* among some North American Indian tribes and *maga* in ancient Persia from which our own word magic derives. Weber chose to use the term 'charisma' to refer to such powers or extraordinary qualities. Magic begins to develop into religion when this charisma is attributed less to the objects themselves than to something behind the object which determines its powers – in other words to a spirit, soul, demon or similar conception.

Once charisma is located outside the material world and in a sense beyond it, the way is open for ethical rationalisation to begin to dominate religious attitudes. The spirits become further and further removed from this world. Man has to rely more and more upon his own skills and techniques to survive and prosper in this world and life. Gods become more and more bound up with ethical considerations. They begin to make demands upon men that they should live in accordance with certain moral and ethical principles. Values and principles are increasingly

emphasised above narrow self-interest. Weber, in fact, tends to equate religion with the appearance of ethical rationalisation and he tends to see religious developments in terms of development in ethical rationalisation. Once begun, the process seems to lead in certain definite directions.

Weber associates ethical rationalisation in religion with the appearance of a priesthood. Previously, the only specialists who had existed within the religious or magical sphere were magicians concerned with achieving concrete material results for clients. The concern of priests is with intellectual matters and with the elaboration of doctrine which generally involves the development of ethical thought.

Weber links the emergence of a priesthood and the development of ethical rationalisation with increasing social complexity. This increases interdependence among human beings because they no longer live in small face-to-face groups in which mutual control and adjustment can be secured by informal and customary means. In complex social situations greater reliance must be placed on law and formal rules and procedures.

In such circumstances there is a need to formulate ethical principles, to propagate them, to iron out contradictions and ambiguities and to deal with new situations and contingencies. This requires specialists in the ethical code and hence a priesthood which tends to develop a professional and vested interest in carrying the whole process still further.

If in the development of human society we can discern a certain pattern of religious development, then, according to Weber, not all groups in society develop religious sentiments to the same degree or with the same intensity. Peasants, for example, like the members of primitive societies, are inclined towards magic rather than religion. Being bound closely to nature and dependent upon elemental forces, they tend to be concerned primarily with immediate control of such forces. Their concern is largely with how the world can be manipulated by magical means.

Nor do warrior or noble classes develop much interest in religious ideas of an ethical kind, nor do they spontaneously have much feel for religion. They are inclined, for example, to consider subservience to a deity to be dishonourable. Their religiosity tends to be confined to a concern with warding off evil and defeat, with enlisting divine assistance in battle and in war and with ensuring entry into a warriors' paradise on death. Only when the warrior comes to be convinced that he is fighting in the name of a god or a religion does he really fall under the influence of ethical ideas, as was the case with Islam.

Officials and bureaucrats are also, generally speaking, little inclined towards religion. They are mainly interested in the maintenance of order, discipline and security and religion is regarded by them as a useful instrument for achieving these goals. Typical in this respect was the Confucian, educated, administrative class in China – the literati. Weber comments, 'The distinctive attitude of a bureaucracy to religious matters has been classically formulated in Confucianism. Its hallmark is an absolute lack of feeling of a need for salvation or for any transcendental anchorage for ethics' (1965, p. 90). In fact Weber hesitates to

classify Confucianism as a religion at all. Nor do wealthy merchants, financiers and such show any intensity of religious conviction or concern with ethical salvation religion. Their concern with mundane things, their pursuit of worldly material goals and their overall satisfaction with their lot usually prevents them from developing other-worldly, spiritual or ethical concerns. Weber comments that 'everywhere, scepticism or indifference to religion are and have been the widely diffused attitudes of large-scale traders and financiers' (*ibid.*, p. 92).

The attitudes to religion of the classes mentioned so far, that is to say the privileged classes, is, then, most often one which seeks legitimation of their position of privilege. They require only psychological reassurance of the justice of their position and of the worthiness of their mode of life. They are not entirely irreligious but only relatively so and their religious sentiments and aspirations tend not to be towards systematic ethical rationalisation, salvation or other-worldly aims.

It is the middle and lower classes who have been the real carriers of ethical religions and especially the lower middle class of the urban areas. The lowest classes tend not to develop distinct religious ideas but are highly susceptible to the missionary endeavours of lower middle-class religious leaders, innovators and preachers.

The final major social category that Weber discusses from the point of view of religious orientation is that of intellectuals. Intellectuals may come from a variety of backgrounds, either relatively privileged or middle class, and their contribution to religious thought and ideas varies accordingly. In general, however, intellectuals have been of great importance in the development and elaboration of religious conceptions. Weber believed that all the great oriental religions were largely the product of intellectual speculation on the part of members of relatively privileged strata. Perhaps even more significant, however, have been intellectuals coming from relatively less privileged groups and especially those who for one reason or another stood outside the main traditional class structure. Such religious thinkers have tended to develop highly ethical and radical religious conceptions which Weber saw as having had great importance and impact upon the development of the societies in which they occurred, in contrast to the rather conservative and elitist religious intellectualism of privileged strata.

Highly important in such developments is the role of the charismatic prophet. Much religious change and development, Weber argued, has tended to take the form of rather sudden innovation brought about by exceptional charismatic leaders or prophets. Charisma, as we have seen, may be possessed by things and by people. Charisma may also be inherent or it may be acquired. When acquired by a human being it is usually the result of indulgence in practices which are extraordinary or by undergoing some extraordinary experience. It may, for example, be acquired through rigorous ascetic practices or long hours spent in mystical contemplation or through strange states of mind such as trance, or possession by spirits. Those who indulge in such practices or undergo such experiences are often thought to have extraordinary or exceptional powers.

Charisma, then, represents the extraordinary, the non-routine aspects of life and reality. It is thus something which can transcend established ideas and the

established order. It tends to be radical and revolutionary and opposed to tradition. The charismatic prophet was for Weber one of the most important figures in religious history. The prophet is the agent of religious change and of the development of new and more complete solutions to the problem of salvation. His or her message is one which is accepted out of regard for the personal qualities and gifts of the charismatic leader. Prophecy is fundamentally founded not upon reason or intellectual analysis but upon insight and revelation.

In contrast to the prophet, the priest stands for tradition, established authority and conservatism. The priest is a full-time professional attached to a cult and its ceremonies and who often administers divine grace as part of an established religious tradition.

Weber distinguished two types of prophet – the emissary or ethical prophet and the exemplary prophet. The latter sets an example to others through his or her own behaviour and not simply or primarily by preaching and advocating a particular way of life or pattern of conduct. The exemplary prophet provides a model which others may follow if they wish and if they are wise enough to do so. An example of the exemplary prophet is that of the Buddha. The emissary prophet, in contrast, preaches a way of life to others claiming that they have a duty or obligation to conform to it on pain of damnation. The emissary prophet typically says ‘do as I say not as I do’. Exemplary prophecy tends to be elitist. The mass of the population are unable to emulate the prophet very closely if at all and salvation is, therefore, denied to them as an immediate possibility. For the ordinary lay follower it is typically, as in the case of Buddhism, only a distant goal.

Whether provided by prophet or priest, the psychological reassurance that religion gives can take a variety of forms but the aim is always, Weber argues, to make sense of the world and this entails making sense of the particular position and typical life-fate of given social groups. Speaking of the variety of religious conceptions, Weber says in ‘The social psychology of the world religions’:

Behind them all always lies a stand towards something in the actual world which is experienced as specifically ‘senseless’. Thus, the demand has been implied: that the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful ‘cosmos’.

(1970c, p. 281)

Weber refers to the needs which give rise to such religious ideas as ideal interests, as opposed to material interests. His conception of the relationship between material and ideal interests and between both of these and religious ideas, and his characterisation of the role of material and ideal interests in social change, is a complex one. It is most clearly and succinctly stated by Weber in another passage in ‘The social psychology of the world religions’:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’

have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. 'From what' and 'for what' one wished to be redeemed, and let us not forget, 'could be' redeemed, depended upon one's image of the world.

(*ibid.*, p. 280)

So it is not ideas themselves which stimulate change, it is interests. Yet 'world images' can determine which way action in the pursuit of interests will go. This of course implies that one can realise interests in different ways. Faced with a problem there is usually more than one way one can solve it. How it is solved will depend upon one's world picture.

Also, world pictures are, Weber, says, created by ideas. Here Weber would allow for the particular and unique insights of creative individuals and religious innovators such as prophets. The visions and revelations of such people have often contributed to the world images of groups and even whole civilisations.

It is also important to note that interests are of two kinds, material and ideal. Marx would probably have argued that these so-called ideal interests were not inherent but themselves socially determined and therefore ultimately to be accounted for by material conditions of existence. For Weber, however, as we have seen, they are a fundamental aspect of the human condition.

Finally, Weber suggests in this passage that world images, which are created by ideas, determine to some extent ideal interests. The need for redemption or salvation is shaped by the picture of the world the believer has, which is in turn shaped by ideas.

It is then a fairly complex relationship that Weber traces between ideas and interests and one which can work out in a variety of ways in different circumstances. Broadly speaking, however, we can say that no set of ideas will have any impact unless it somehow matches the interests of a significant social group. It does not follow that it will serve their material interests specifically. It might serve their ideal interests. For the most part it will not appeal if it is too much at variance with material interests but it is certainly possible that in certain circumstances individuals will espouse a set of ideas which meets their ideal interests but which actually conflicts to some degree with their material interests.

Ideas for Weber, then, are never simply or merely ideological statements or reflections of the interests of a specific stratum or group. Yet ideas embody certain basic assumptions which have been determined to a considerable extent by the particular circumstances and situation of that stratum or group and the social and psychological forces which have formed its particular outlook and conception of its own interests.

These basic assumptions or presuppositions are at the root of religious conceptions and Weber considers them to be in the last analysis fundamentally non-rational. The way in which religious systems develop on the basis of such presuppositions Weber looks at in terms of rationality. From the basic presuppositions religious ideas can take various directions which are more or less rational.

The concept of rationality is a fundamental one in Weber's sociology but one which has caused a great deal of difficulty and confusion. The problem is that Weber used the term in a variety of different ways. In 'The social psychology of the world religions' he speaks of 'rationalism' as involving 'an increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts' but points out that it can also mean 'the methodical attainment of a definitely Gadequate means' or simply 'systematic arrangement' (*ibid.*, p. 293). Rationalism in these senses is used by Weber to characterise the particular way in which Western culture and civilisation as opposed to Eastern have developed. The West, Weber believed, was more rational in its approach to all spheres of life and endeavour. Often he seems to be thinking largely of the development of the scientific outlook, the systematic pursuit of scientific knowledge and its application through technology. Along with this goes rational bureaucratic organisation of administration and production. Even in spheres such as music, however, the West developed a more rational approach. All of this promoted greater production but Weber was not necessarily implying that the West is thereby superior. No necessary value judgement is intended by Weber in his use of the term rational. This is shown in his contrast between formal and substantive rationality. The systematic pursuit of profit in capitalism by careful calculation of costs in relation to return, optimal use of resources, elimination of waste, and so on, may be highly rational in the formal sense but it does not necessarily produce substantive rationality in the sense of meeting human goals and needs or the needs of a society as a whole. Formal rationality has nothing to do with values; substantive rationality involves value positions. Whether something is rational in the substantive sense depends upon the values one holds and what is rational in this sense from one point of view may not be so from another. Much of Weber's work is oriented to the understanding of why the West has placed so much emphasis, in his view, upon formal rationality.

In the sphere of religion, rationality meant the elimination of magical aspects and the removal of contradictions and ambiguities in the solutions to the problem of salvation. There are various directions which this process can take, according to Weber. The direction taken is in part dependent upon the position in the society of the stratum which is the carrier of the religious ideas. On the other hand, religious ideas may have inherent tendencies to develop in certain ways. As a result they may have a significant independent influence upon the conduct of life of the stratum which is their carrier and indeed upon a whole society and civilisation. Weber was particularly concerned with the practical implications of systems of religious ideas; that is to say, their impact upon economic activity. The whole of his work in the sociology of religion is inspired by this definite interest and purpose and it has always to be remembered, therefore, that his work is informed by a specific standpoint and perspective.

Weber outlines in 'The social psychology of the world religions' some of the major directions that religious ideas may take. Where there is a genteel stratum of intellectuals the tendency is towards an image of the world as being governed

by impersonal rules. Salvation is an affair of the individual *per se* and can be achieved only by a purely cognitive comprehension of the world and of its meaning. This was the case in India where contemplation became the supreme religious value.

Where there existed a professional class preoccupied with cult ceremonies and myth, or anywhere where there existed a hierocracy, this has sought to monopolise religious values. They have taught that salvation is impossible by one's own efforts but can only be attained through the mediation of priests who dispense sacramental grace or its equivalent. Political officials have tended to develop religion in a ritualistic direction because ritual implies rules and regulation. Chivalrous warriors have employed notions such as fate and destiny and have pictured gods as heroes.

The religious tendencies of artisans and traders are much more variable, according to Weber, but it is among these classes that one gets a tendency towards active asceticism, i.e. the work ethic combined with a dislike of self-indulgence and, therefore, regulation of private consumption. It is, of course, this particular combination of ideas that Weber thought to be of enormous significance for social change and to be an important contributory factor in the development of capitalism.

This active asceticism is only one direction that salvation-type religion may take. There are, in fact, a great variety of forms but within this diversity a number of fundamental types can be discerned which are derived, by Weber, from the basic possibilities inherent in all solutions to the problem of salvation. If the events and facts of this life and world seem to threaten the meaning of a person's existence, that is if they provide a motive for seeking some kind of salvation, the individual can either attempt to escape from the world or he can attempt to find a mode of adjusting to it and of accepting it. Escape from the world is referred to by Weber as an other-worldly orientation and adjustment to the world as an inner-worldly orientation. Having adopted one or other approach there are essentially two paths the individual seeking salvation can take. Whether escape from the world or adjustment to it is sought, it can either be pursued through resignation or through self-mastery. The latter Weber calls asceticism and the former mysticism.

These two sets of alternatives generate four fundamental possibilities.<sup>2</sup> First, salvation may take the form of inner-worldly or active asceticism mentioned above. This involves the total devotion of all worldly activity to the sole end of serving God. Salvation is achieved through activity and hard work in this life and world combined with a renunciation of indulgence in the fruits of that hard work and emphasis upon abstemiousness.

The opposite of inner-worldly asceticism is other-worldly mysticism. Here the goal of salvation cannot be achieved, it is believed, except by rejection of this life and world and this means, ideally, rejection of all worldly desires, pursuits, responsibilities and involvements. The other-worldly mystic preaches indifference to the world and to material pleasures and desires as irrelevant, illusory and transitory. It is an attitude characteristic of Buddhism. It is commonly monastic



and, therefore, a way of life which only the religious virtuoso can fully lead and one denied to the ordinary masses. The inner-worldly approach can be combined with mysticism and this combination is characteristic of religions such as Taoism, which have emphasised acceptance of this world and life but which have taught minimisation of the interference of worldly responsibilities with the ultimate goal of mystical contemplation and enlightenment or union with the divine. The Taoists valued earthly existence and sought longevity, even material immortality, but only in order to pursue and to continue in contemplation of mystical truth.

Finally, other-worldly asceticism has sought to achieve salvation through complete mastery and overcoming of all worldly desires which draw the believer back into involvement with the world. The ascetic is not indifferent to desire but rather seeks to conquer it. It is characteristic of monastic Christianity.

Weber's approach to religion, then, is rich and complex. At its root is a psychological approach which emphasises the pursuit of meaning. This is no mere intellectual quest, however, but springs from deeply rooted emotional sources, from the desire for a theodicy of good or bad fortune and out of ideal interests which have to do with a sense of worth, legitimacy and rightful place in the scheme of things. The way in which these needs are met varies according to social position, and the generation of solutions to the problem of salvation is thus very much a social process, influenced by social forces and meeting social exigencies. The individual innovative prophet, nevertheless, often plays a crucial role in the process and it is a role based upon personal charisma of an unpredictable and, in social or psychological terms, of an ultimately inexplicable kind.

## 13 The Protestant ethic debate

At first sight, it is perhaps puzzling why Weber's *Protestant Ethic* essay has stimulated so much debate in sociology. It was of course a bold claim that he made, namely that the development of that type of economic system which he called rational capitalism, which has come to dominate by far the greater part of the globe and which has stimulated such a remarkable growth in technology and production, is rooted partly in religious developments at the time of the Reformation. But the intensity of the debate probably has much to do with the fact that, in the eyes of many, Weber seemed to be providing a counter to the materialist conception of history and thereby to Marx in emphasising a religious factor in the process of historical development and change. Many would argue that such an assumption is false on the grounds that Marx's understanding of the materialist conception of history is not of the crude form that Weber took it to be. Such disputes in the history of ideas cannot be resolved here but Marshall (1982) has shown that if Weber had anyone in mind that he was concerned to refute, it was not Marx but Sombart, who had argued that capitalism owed its development to the Jews.

Weber, then, was by no means taking up the opposite position to that of the Marxists on the question of the role of ideas in history nor did he deny 'the influence of economic development on the fate of religious ideas'; and he was concerned to show how while 'religious ideas themselves simply cannot be deduced from economic circumstances ... a mutual adaptation of the two took place' (Weber, 1930, pp. 277–8).<sup>1</sup> He does not offer an idealist explanation of the origins of modern capitalism:

we have no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation. ... On the contrary, we only wish to ascertain whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit over the world ... In view of the tremendous confusion of interdependent influences between the material basis, the forms of social and political organisation, and the ideas current in the time of the Reformation, we can

only proceed by investigating whether and at what points certain correlations between forms of religious belief and practical ethics can be worked out. At the same time we shall as far as possible clarify the manner and the general direction in which, by virtue of those relationships, the religious movements have influenced the development of modern culture. (ibid., p. 91)

His argument, then, is a very tentative one. It is that one important factor in the process by which a specifically rational and distinctively European form of capitalism developed was a specific type of religious outlook. This was a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Many other factors of a material kind were involved. Even this probably overstates Weber's case. The religious factor may have been a necessary condition only for the vigour of rational capitalism in certain parts of Europe, not its appearance. There was a close affinity, Weber argues, between the spirit of modern capitalism and the Protestant ethic. Ascetic Protestantism created an ethos compatible with modern rational capitalism and did not stand in conflict with capitalist business methods and practices. The capitalist could engage in his work with an easy conscience and indeed with that much greater vigour and enthusiasm in the knowledge that what he did was not only not morally suspect but was, in fact, the carrying out of God's purposes for him in this life (Fischhoff, 1944). The spirit of capitalism, which had its roots in ascetic Protestantism, stimulated and promoted a distinctively European type of economic development. The motivation and orientation to life that constituted this spirit of capitalism were derived from Calvinist teaching and were characteristic of the outlook of Calvinist and Calvinistic Protestants.

Weber makes it very clear at the outset that what he is concerned with is *rational* capitalism or 'the rational capitalistic organisation of (formally) free labour' (1930, p. 21). He distinguishes this from other forms of capitalism such as adventure capitalism and political capitalism. These have existed throughout history and in many cultures. Rational capitalism is something which has flourished only in recent times beginning in Northern Europe.

Weber begins his essay by making the preliminary observation that certain religious affiliations have frequently been associated with success in business and with ownership of capital resources. Those who have enjoyed such success, he points out, seem at certain times to have been overwhelmingly Protestant. This is *prima facie* evidence that there may be some connection. Also rational capitalism and economic development were to be found earlier and to a greater extent in Protestant than in Catholic countries and regions.

Having established the possibility of a connection, he then characterises what he calls the 'spirit of capitalism'. It is important always to remember that he is speaking of an attitude or orientation and not actual behaviour when he speaks of the 'spirit of modern capitalism'. It can most clearly be seen in the passages that Weber quotes from the works of Benjamin Franklin which best exemplify, in his view, this spirit in its purest, that is to say, ideal-typical form. It is significant

that Franklin was not himself a Puritan of any description and expounded the capitalist spirit in a country which was still largely agrarian. This allows Weber to suggest that the spirit of capitalism as an ethos could exist independently of capitalism as an economic system and thereby be a causal factor in its emergence rather than merely a product of it.<sup>2</sup>

The modern entrepreneur characteristically seeks to maximise profit through continuous rational and optimal use of resources not simply because it is prudent to do so but as a duty. This primacy of the profit motive entailed the pursuit of ever-renewed profit through reinvestment of the maximum available resources above modest and customary levels of consumption. In other forms of capitalism profits were often dissipated in the form of conspicuous or extravagant consumption. Weber's capitalists tended to regard such consumption and dissipation of capital as morally reprehensible. Money spent on luxuries was lost many times over, Franklin said, because once spent it could not be reinvested and thus multiplied.

The spirit of capitalism involved the work ethic which meant that any time not devoted to the end of making money was considered to have been wasted. As Franklin put it, time is money. That not earned during half a day idling, though no money be spent, is lost many times over. It could not have been necessary for consumption otherwise the half day could not have been spent in idleness. The money could therefore have been invested and multiplied.

The pursuit of profit for its own sake by the most systematically rational means stressed that all waste had to be eliminated, costs cut wherever possible and no resources left under-utilised, for which careful calculation of cost in relation to returns and accurate book-keeping were essential. However, this was not just a matter of good business sense and practice. These principles were not simply useful standards for success but a true ethic or ethos peculiar to Western capital. 'The earning of money within the modern economic order, is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling' (*ibid.*, pp. 53–4).

This ethos was not one which came naturally to human beings. The desire to make money was natural enough but not the particular ethos which emphasised the careful and systematic pursuit of money through such rational means, accompanied by an emphasis upon restraint in its use in consumption. It is this which has produced the tremendous pace of economic development in the West. In fact, Weber says, the desire to make money when divorced from such an ethic is correlated with an absence of rational capitalist development. 'The universal reign of absolute unscrupulousness in the pursuit of selfish interests by the making of money has been a specific characteristic of precisely those countries where bourgeois-capitalistic development, measured according to Occidental standards, has remained backward' (*ibid.*, p. 57).

The most important force which has impeded the emergence of such a spirit Weber terms traditionalism. Characteristic of this attitude is the tendency only to work for as long as is necessary to earn enough to satisfy customary demands and needs or expectations. Weber said that no man by nature wished to earn more and more for its own sake; men for the most part wish simply to live to a customary standard. This was very much the attitude of labour in the pre-capitalist

era and in parts of the Third World today where, if enough can be earned in three days to satisfy customary needs, people will tend only to work for three days.

The spirit of capitalism for Weber, then, was something new and distinctive and characteristic of the rising stratum of the lower industrial middle class. It was such groups who, Weber argued, upheld the ideal of the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling. It was an ideal which had its roots in religious sources and Weber attributes considerable importance to it.

The notion of the calling was essentially a product of the Reformation, Weber argues. It was not entirely new in itself but certain aspects and emphases of the Protestant interpretation were distinctive in his view; 'the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume' (*ibid.*, p. 80). This imparted a religious significance to everyday activity which Weber contrasts with that of Catholicism. For the ascetic Protestant the only acceptable way of life from a religious point of view was one which did not seek to go beyond this world but to live in accordance with the obligations imposed by one's existence in this world. This was in complete contrast to both Catholic and Lutheran attitudes:

The typical antipathy of Catholic ethics, and following that the Lutheran, to every capitalistic tendency, rests essentially on the repugnance of the impersonality of relations within a capitalist economy. It is this fact of impersonal relations which places certain human affairs outside the church and its influence, and prevents the latter from penetrating them and transforming them along ethical lines.

(Weber, 1961, p. 262)

The idea of the calling did not always lead to the rational capitalistic stereotype of business activity which Weber believed was fostered by the spirit of capitalism. It depended upon how it was interpreted. The idea had been developed by Luther but his interpretation was on the whole one which had rather conservative and traditionalistic implications. According to Luther, 'the individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life' (Weber, 1930, p. 85). The Lutherans preached obedience to authority and acceptance of the way things were and did not contribute in any direct way to the development of the spirit of capitalism, according to Weber.

Calvin's interpretation of the idea of the calling was in contrast radical in its implications and promoted the spirit of capitalism among Calvinists and Calvinistically oriented groups, even though there was no intention on Calvin's part that it should have any such consequences. They were entirely unforeseen, Weber argues. In addition to the Calvinists, certain other groups with strong Calvinistic influences in their theologies were significant in promoting this radical idea of the calling, namely, Pietists and the Baptist

sects. Weber also mentions Methodism in this respect but probably incorrectly.

It was the specifically Calvinist doctrine of the elect or predestination which, combined with the idea of the calling, gave it its radical impact. According to the doctrine of predestination, a certain part of humanity, the elect, will be saved and the rest eternally damned. No one can earn their salvation because this would be to bind and to obligate God who cannot be so obligated. God may save the worst sinner if he so chooses. Who is to be saved and who not is entirely a matter of God's will and is predetermined since God is omniscient and must therefore know already whom he will save.

For the individual this helplessness and uncertainty of fate were psychologically intolerable. Some way had to be found of knowing that one was to be saved. It was not sufficient simply to trust in God as Calvin himself had taught. Calvinist preachers taught that the devout could seek some sign of being among the elect. Everyone had a duty to regard themselves as saved and the sign they might be given was that of worldly success in their calling. Also, they could attempt to attain a state of self-confidence in their elect status by engaging in intense worldly activity. The consequences, Weber claims, were that God was seen to help those who helped themselves by regulating their life conduct in an ascetic and rational way. In effect, Calvinists came to believe that they had to prove themselves before God, not as a means of earning their salvation but rather as a means of assuring themselves of it. This, and the belief that God had not placed us in this world for our own benefit and pleasure but to be his instruments, to carry out his commandments and to glorify him, led to a total rationalisation of life conduct. 'The moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole' (*ibid.* p. 117).

In striking contrast to Catholic teaching, then, the ascetic Protestant could not fall back upon ideas of atonement and remission of sin through confession and penance, good works or giving to the church. The necessity for Calvinists of proof before God meant unceasing devotion to one's worldly calling which neither Catholic nor Lutheran interpretations of duty entailed. The organisation, also, of many of the Protestant sects influenced by Calvinism produced a similar devotion to worldly duty in that one had an obligation to prove oneself not only before God but also before other members. This was a theme which Weber developed further in a slightly later essay on the Protestant sects.<sup>3</sup>

Such an ethic would have provided a basis for life highly appropriate to the conduct of business in a rational capitalist economic system and would have fitted in extremely well with the practical concerns of lower middle-class artisans, traders and businessmen. It was an ethic which, when adopted by workers, overcame their traditionalism, rendering them diligent, responsive and adaptable.

The consequences of ascetic Protestantism, then, were that the religious life was no longer something to be lived apart from the everyday world but within it. In the Middle Ages Christian asceticism had retreated from the everyday world into the monasteries. 'Now it strode into the market place and slammed

the monastery door behind it' (*ibid.*, p. 154). And in a later series of lectures Weber was to say that 'Such a powerful, unconsciously refined organisation for the production of capitalistic individuals has never existed in any other church or religion, and in comparison with it what the Renaissance did for capitalism shrinks into insignificance' (1961, p. 270).

Ascetic Protestantism was not opposed to the accumulation of wealth as such; it was opposed to the enjoyment of it. The consequences of consuming wealth were, inevitably, idleness and temptation. Puritanism believed sensual indulgence to be both sinful and irrational since it was not devoted to the sole end of glorifying God and fulfilling his commandments.

The work ethic, the systematic pursuit of profit and the emphasis on abstemiousness naturally led to surpluses which could only be reinvested; in short, to the accumulation of capital. Capital accumulation and deferred consumption were the key to the enormous economic dynamism of modern capitalism and to the breakthrough to continuous growth as a normal feature of modern societies:

When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save. The restraints which were imposed upon the consumption of wealth served to increase it by making possible the productive investment of capital.

(Weber, 1930, p. 172)

[W]hen asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order.

(*ibid.*, p. 181)

Once on its way, the modern economic system was able to support itself without the need of the religious ethic of ascetic Protestantism which in many ways could not help but sow the seeds of secularisation in modern society by its own promotion of worldly activity and consequent expansion of wealth and material well-being. Calvinistic Protestantism was its own gravedigger.

## **CRITICISM AND DEFENCE, COUNTER-CRITICISM AND COUNTER-DEFENCE**

Weber's thesis has inspired a flood of words and many criticisms. Many of his critics have failed to understand his point and have criticised him for or have cited evidence against things he did not claim. Samuelsson (1961), for example, points out that while the first capitalist countries may have been Protestant, not all Protestant countries were capitalist. There is no simple relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, nor any clear pattern in the relationship between



them. The Protestant countries show considerable variation in the extent of their development and not all Puritan communities were economically advanced. These points ignore Weber's quite explicit and clear statement that he did not think that it was only Calvinistic Protestantism that was important for the development of rational capitalism but that many other factors were important, variations in which would account for variations in the strength and pattern of development of capitalism. Weber was quite aware that it was possible to find capitalism without Calvinism and vice versa. Both Samuelsson and Tawney (1938) referred to a spirit of enterprise and innovation associated with economic enterprise and advance which pre-dated the Reformation, most clearly seen in Renaissance Italy or the Hanseatic towns but this is no refutation of Weber. Samuelsson also mentions Calvinistic Scotland where capitalism did not develop until relatively late. Again, this ignores the fact that Weber states that many other conditions are required for capitalism to emerge and flourish, not just the appropriate motivations stimulated by ascetic Protestantism.

On the face of it, Weber's thesis has plausibility. Plausibility is not, however, the same as verification. This plausibility might in any case be an artificial one which results from Weber's methods and in particular his use of ideal types (Robertson, 1970, pp. 172–3). The spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic are pure types, distillations of essences which are not claimed to have existed in this pure form in reality. Reality is complex and the method which uses ideal types is a way of removing all factors not strictly relevant to the hypothesis in question. The relationship between these ideal types will also hold in reality to the extent that reality approaches these types. Whatever the merits of this method, however, a danger might be that in defining the types in the first place, a selection of elements is unconsciously made which makes them effectively the same thing. This gives plausibility to the thesis but at the expense of tautology. The spirit of capitalism *is* the Protestant ethic (Marshall, 1982).

This does not necessarily invalidate Weber, however. If the spirit of capitalism was nothing other than the Protestant ethic expressed in the context of practical business activity, this could still have provided an important stimulus to the development of rational capitalism as a system of action. The essence of Weber's argument is that A (the Protestant ethic) produces B (the spirit of capitalism) which affects C (rational capitalist action). There may be problems with the link between A and B such that it is difficult to disentangle one from the other but the really central question is whether C is actually significantly affected by A/B in the way Weber suggests.

On this point it is crucial to note that Weber nowhere offers any evidence. It was not his purpose in the essay to establish his thesis empirically but only a case for there being a connection between ascetic Protestantism and rational capitalism in the sense of an affinity between them. It is also a remarkable fact, despite so much having been written about it, that there has been almost no attempt to verify or refute it empirically. One of the few attempts to do this is that of Marshall (1980). What Weber would have needed to show to establish his claims empirically was that:

- Calvinistic and ascetic Protestants did in general behave in accordance with the Protestant ethic.
- Non-Protestants behaved differently.
- Early capitalistic entrepreneurs were predominantly Calvinistic Protestants.
- Such people were indeed imbued with the spirit of capitalism.
- This spirit did indeed derive from ascetic Protestantism.
- They did in fact conduct their businesses in accordance with the spirit of capitalism.

Marshall attempts to test some of these propositions in the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland. He finds that Calvinist pastoral teaching during this period in Scotland was very much as Weber had portrayed it. Scots capitalists also seem to have conducted their business much in accordance with the spirit of capitalism. Marshall was able to uncover some evidence, though not sufficient firmly to establish the point since the evidence is sparse, that their attitudes to the conduct of business were derived from their Calvinism. Marshall considers that in the Scottish case, then, there are fairly good grounds for supporting the general thrust of Weber's thesis as far as the business class is concerned. The same could not be said for the attitudes and conduct of the labouring classes for which little evidence is available.

In a later work, Marshall (1982) stresses that Weber himself provided very little empirical evidence of the sort that his study of Scotland seeks to do. He argues that the central weakness of Weber's procedure is that it assumes that certain motives and understandings underlie the actions of rational capitalist businessmen and infers these motives from an examination of those actions. Weber produces no direct evidence of the motives of early capitalists – no evidence independent of their observed actions. Without such evidence, there is no way of knowing that something like the Protestant ethic or the spirit of capitalism informed their behaviour rather than the exigencies of the situation they faced. Conversely we can assume nothing about the traditionalism of medieval businessmen from the way they behaved (Marshall, 1982, pp. 108–19). Their conspicuous consumption and accumulation of luxurious possessions, rather than testifying to relatively less rational recklessness and desire for status and aggrandisement, could simply have been the most sensible way to use wealth in certain market and political conditions. Investment in luxury goods – gold, jewellery, fine houses, and so on – may have been the best way to preserve wealth in an uncertain world in which opportunities for other forms of investment were limited. In the prevailing circumstances this may well have been the most rational strategy for preserving property and those who followed it, therefore, were no less imbued with a spirit of enterprise than the most abstemious and hard-working Calvinist Protestant.

The same point concerning the relationship between action and motivation may be made about the alleged 'traditionalism' of labour in pre-capitalist economies (Marshall, 1982, pp. 126–31). Again motives are imputed on the basis of observed behaviour. It may be, however, be that in a situation of limited

supply of consumer goods, for example, there is little point earning more than money can buy. There may be a whole set of circumstances, knowledge of which reveals the behaviour in question to be perfectly rational, or motivated by quite different values and beliefs than those it appears to be motivated by, given the assumptions and the theoretical expectations of the observer.

Weber, then, Marshall concludes, merely asserts that capitalists thought in a certain way but does not establish this on any sound empirical basis. Nor has subsequent work, apart from Marshall's study of Scotland, placed it on any firmer empirical ground. On the other hand, it has not disproved it either.

A similar criticism of Weber is made by Walzer (1963) who argues that the values of Protestantism, as he sees them, were characterised by a need to bring passions and desires under rigid control at a time of change and disorder. Such an attitude was generated by anxiety and fear of chaos. It was quite unlike those that Weber attributes to Protestantism and not at all those of the entrepreneur or in any way conducive to rational capitalistic behaviour or accumulation of capital. If businessmen often preferred to do business with Protestant sectarians, as Weber said was the case (1970b), it was because they were always being watched. Puritan congregations were characterised by constant suspicion and distrust of one another and collective vigilance against any individual member falling prey to temptation. This tended to make them narrow and conservative in their views. The emphasis on control of passions and desires was not the consequence of a determination to live daily life in accordance with God's intentions but of fear and insecurity.

Walzer's criticisms of Weber perhaps miss the point to some extent. Perhaps the values of Protestantism that Walzer emphasises are only the other side of the coin to those that Weber emphasises and not incompatible with the thrust Weber believed they had. Insecurity and anxiety are not necessarily prohibitive of hard work in the pursuit of a calling; quite the contrary, in fact. After all, Weber acknowledges the psychological insecurity that the doctrine of predestination induced in those who accepted it and was explicit in emphasising that hard work in the pursuit of one's calling was the way Calvinistic Protestant preachers recommended for the removal of that anxiety and for attaining some reassurance of salvation.

A further criticism of Weber that is often made is that it was not so much Protestant doctrines that contributed to the development of rational capitalism as the minority position of certain Protestants in their societies (Tawney, 1938; Trevor-Roper, 1973). The marginal position of Calvinist Protestant minorities encouraged innovation and individualism – values which were congruent with rational capitalist activity. Exclusion from traditional occupations forced them, also, into new types of economic activity. Against this view is the fact, which Weber himself had pointed out, that Catholic minorities did not succeed in business or acquire the values of the spirit of capitalism.

Luethy (1964) has countered this apparently incompatible evidence with the claim that Catholic minorities were not actually in dissent against a long established and dominant tradition, as were Protestants, despite their minority position. It

was the dissenting nature of Protestantism, and especially where it remained a minority faith, that gave it its dynamism, not any specific set of religious or theological views. Protestants were often successful in many spheres of life, not just in commerce. However, it was not the Protestant Reformation *per se* that generated this dynamism, innovative capacity and new outlook upon life, according to Luethy. These developments and changes pre-date the Reformation and can be found in many parts of Europe, some of which remained Catholic. What extinguished this new spirit in some parts of Europe was the Catholic Counter-Reformation whereas the Protestant Reformation in some circumstances fostered their development. In fact, before the Counter-Reformation some of the most progressive and dynamic areas of Europe, such as northern Italy, were those which later on were to stagnate under the restrictive regime of the Counter-Reformation, which stifled initiative and enthusiasm. Luethy contrasts the northern Protestant Netherlands or Holland with the Spanish Netherlands which became Belgium. There was nothing in particular which favoured Holland economically but there rational capitalistic enterprise and industry flourished while in the Spanish Netherlands it was destroyed.

If Calvinistic Protestantism was particularly associated with the bourgeoisie, it was because, Luethy argues, only they had the independence necessary to stick to a faith while the state and the princes adopted compromises or retained Catholicism. An example is that of the Huguenots in France. This independence accompanied by a minority position made such people a great force for change. 'The significance of Calvinism in world history lies in the fact that it failed to win political power and thereby remained almost free of political-opportunistic considerations and princely usurpations' (*ibid.*, pp. 102–3). The Calvinist–Puritan did indeed have a new mentality. He answered only to God and his conscience and was therefore free and responsible. The Calvinist community bowed to no human authority. Such men were a 'yeast in the Western world, the most active agents of the development towards a modern Western society in which "capitalism" is but one strand among many' (*ibid.*, p. 103).

MacKinnon (1988a, 1988b, 1993), even more directly than Luethy, challenges the alleged impact of Calvinism upon the spirit of capitalism. Through a careful examination of Calvinist teaching, he is led to reject Weber's characterisation of it. Only in the most formal sense did Calvinist teaching retain any real commitment to Calvin's own emphasis upon the doctrines of predestination and salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). These doctrines were effectively abandoned by Calvinism and not just in its routine pastoral teaching but also in its central theological stance. Consequently, doctrines which commanded only formal assent could not have had the force and impact upon people's consciousness that Weber attributed to them. The psychological tension and anxiety that the notion of signs of proof of salvation and immersion in the duties of the calling were designed to alleviate could not have been generated by effectively redundant beliefs.

By the time of the Westminster synod, according to MacKinnon, infallible assurance of salvation was, in effect, offered to all provided they sought it sincerely

and earnestly. Such theological revision removed Calvinism's tendency to generate anxiety regarding proof of election. Believers now held personal responsibility for their own salvation and were no longer passive and helpless recipients of God's grace.

A further departure from Weber's characterisation of Calvinism is MacKinnon's claim that Calvinism was not predominantly this-worldly but quite other-worldly in ethos. It stressed spiritual and religious works in the form of acts of piety, devotion and humility rather than this-worldly concerns. It was thus not unlike Catholicism and Lutheranism in these respects. Weber uses considerable sleight of hand, amounting almost to intellectual dishonesty, according to MacKinnon, in the way he very selectively characterises Calvinist teaching to suit his thesis.

In his turn, MacKinnon has himself been charged with gross selectivity in the use of documents. He fails to observe the essential rules governing the proper and reliable use of documentary evidence, according to Zaret (1993). While accepting that the documentary evidence relating to Calvinism is contradictory, containing both deterministic and voluntaristic elements, Zaret argues that MacKinnon produces a grossly one-sided view of the ethos of Calvinism, unjustifiably focused upon the voluntaristic dimension. Zaret considers that it is, in fact, the deterministic dimension which predominates.

Another recent contributor to the debate also finds a high degree of ambiguity and contradiction in Calvinist teaching (Lessnoff, 1994). Using much the same sources as MacKinnon and Zaret, Lessnoff distinguishes between the work ethic and the profit ethic within the spirit of capitalism. The former is defined extremely broadly to include a general self-denying asceticism, desire for freedom from sin, particularly the sin of idleness, and moral conduct. According to Lessnoff, contradiction was inherent in Calvinism, since if salvation really is by faith alone and not by works, how can moral conduct be ensured? Calvinism was forced to uphold the dogma of *sola fide* and yet simultaneously deny it through its emphasis on good works and worldly success as a sign of election.

The Calvinist preachers sought a way out of this predicament by teaching that, although all are equally sinners and those who are to be saved is entirely a matter of God's choice, a sign of election can be found but not so much in actual worldly success as in earnest striving to overcome sin, including the sins of idleness and waste. The elect were not those without sin but those who did their utmost to conquer it and who mounted an unceasing struggle against it. But such an ethos, according to Lessnoff, could have provided as strong a motivation for hard work as Weber's emphasis upon worldly success.

On the question of profit maximisation, Lessnoff is less convinced. Again Calvinism faced a dilemma which tended to generate contradictory elements in its teachings. Clearly, those who prospered did not always do so through upright conduct and those who were upright in conduct did not always prosper. Various means were tried to remove the contradiction. Sinners might prosper in the short term but would eventually suffer punishment. God tests the faith of some through inflicting poverty upon them. The effect of such teachings, however,

was to undermine the link between prosperity and election. Calvinism could find no consistent resolution of these dilemmas.

If, however, Calvinism placed direct emphasis upon a duty to seek worldly profit, the link between prosperity and election would be relatively insignificant regarding the impact of Calvinism on the development of rational capitalism. Consequently, Lessnoff asks whether there was such an emphasis in Calvinist teaching. He finds, once again, considerable inconsistency. What tends to predominate is the notion of 'stewardship' – the wise use of God's gifts. This clearly implies approval of the pursuit of wealth if it is done for the right reasons. This is quite different from the medieval attitude but it does not really amount to a full-blown profit ethic. It permits the pursuit of wealth but does not uphold it as a duty. The purpose of acquiring wealth in Calvinist teaching, furthermore, is to be able to perform good works such as providing charity. In MacKinnon's terms these are essentially other-worldly goals which entail the dissipation rather than the accumulation of wealth. Also, as many others have noted, Lessnoff perceives a marked anti-profit ethic in Calvinist teaching which was actually more prominent than its tolerance of the profit motive. Wealth, according to Calvinist teaching, leads to idleness, temptation and immorality. Such attitudes are prominent in works of Calvinist theology and in its pastoral preaching. Lessnoff, however, seeks evidence of a profit ethic in Calvinism by examining sources not previously extensively utilised, namely, catechisms. While few reveal any such ethic, the most common one in use, the Westminster Assembly shorter catechism, might have had an important influence on relevant attitudes. It might have done so through the gloss it contains on the eighth commandment which forbids the coveting of the wealth of others. This takes the form of an injunction to further one's own estate. Lessnoff concludes that Calvinist teaching could have unintentionally induced a profit ethic through the widespread use of this catechism if the gloss referred to had acquired a particular interpretation.

It seems unconvincing that a small part of one, albeit widely used, catechism should override, against the intentions of its authors, all the other sources and teachings which stressed an anti-profit ethic. One of the central problems in attempting to resolve the issue of the impact of Calvinist Protestantism upon modern capitalism is that the documents available to us tell us little about the way its doctrines and teachings were received, understood and interpreted by ordinary believers and how they were implemented in terms of practical conduct (Greyerz, 1993). Until we have such data, and we are unlikely ever to have sufficient of it, the debate over the Protestant ethic is likely to continue.

## 14 Religion and meaning

Max Weber saw religion as essentially providing theodicies of good and bad fortune. While this is in many respects more of a psychological than sociological approach, it integrates both intellectualist and emotionalist elements with an eminently sociological analysis of the interrelationships between beliefs and social groups. This makes him one of the forerunners of those who have attempted to synthesise the insights of previous theoretical approaches. Among these one of the most influential has been Peter Berger who, like Weber, finds in religion the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence. A slightly earlier and important contribution, however, which similarly emphasises meaning, is that of Clifford Geertz.

### CLIFFORD GEERTZ

The main source of Geertz's theoretical ideas on religion is his article 'Religion as a cultural system' (1966) where he approaches the subject from what he calls the cultural dimension of analysis. This means looking at religion as a part of a cultural system. By culture he means 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms' (*ibid.*, p. 3). As part of culture, religion deals in sacred symbols; and what sacred symbols do, Geertz says, is

to synthesise a people's ethos – the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer reality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.

(*ibid.* p. 3)

Geertz distinguishes two basic elements – a people's ethos and their world-view. Sacred symbols or, in other words religion, play an important role in creating a world picture and in relating it to the ethos. Sacred symbols make the ethos intellectually reasonable by showing it to be a way of life ideally adapted to the



state of affairs that the world-view expresses. On the other hand, the world-view is made convincing because it is constructed in such a way that it fits the actual way of life.

Ethos and world-view are mutually supportive. 'Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysics and in doing so sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other' (*ibid.*, p. 4). From such considerations Geertz arrives at a definition of religion and this definition is perhaps better seen as a condensed theory of religion. It was seen in Chapter 1 that definitions often conceal theoretical predilections. In Geertz's case, the theoretical element is quite conscious and deliberate. Religion, he says, is

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (*ibid.*, p. 4)

Geertz goes on to unpack this 'definition' and to explicate further its various parts. In doing so he sets out in detail his theory of religion.

His first point is that religion is a set of symbols. A symbol can either stand for something, represent or express something or it can act as a sort of blueprint or instruction for what to do. This idea might be illustrated with an example which Geertz does not use himself but which expresses the point quite well, namely, that of a set of traffic lights. The red light tells us something about the situation we are coming up to – that we are approaching potential danger from traffic crossing our path. But it also predisposes us to act in a certain way; it gives an instruction and indicates a course of action that should be adopted. It both represents a situation and at the same time acts upon the world to bring about certain behaviour. In the same way religious symbols express the world and at the same time shape it. They shape the social world by inducing dispositions to behave in certain ways by inducing certain moods. For example, they may make worshippers solemn, reverential, and so on, or they may produce exultation, joy or excitement.

According to Geertz, religion does this by formulating concepts of a general order of existence. People need such concepts. They need to see the world as meaningful and ordered. They cannot tolerate the view that it is fundamentally chaotic, governed by chance and without meaning or significance for them. Three types of experience threaten to reduce the world to a meaningless chaos. Geertz calls them bafflement, suffering and evil.

Bafflement is the experience which comes about when unusual or dramatic events occur, with which none of the normal means of explanation are competent to deal. Religion provides an ultimate answer as it explains the otherwise inexplicable. Geertz sees religious beliefs as attempts to bring anomalous events and experiences within the sphere of the, at least potentially, explicable. In this

category of anomalous events and experiences he would include such things as death, dreams and natural disasters.

This sounds on the surface very intellectualist and somewhat Tylorean but Geertz sees this need for explanation as also an emotional need. He says, for example, 'any chronic failure of one's explanatory apparatus ... to explain things which cry out for explanation tends to lead to a deep disquiet' (*ibid.*, p. 15).

Geertz focuses upon unusual or anomalous events and puzzling phenomena. Without denying the force that such events are particularly likely to have, one might also acknowledge that the very daily, mundane, humdrum routines of life might, for some people at least, also come to be questioned in respect of the meaning of such routine. The very ordinariness of much of daily existence may threaten at times to appear without significance precisely because of its ordinariness and routine character. Religion may thus be not just an attempt to deal with odd aspects of the world but also to make life significant in a broader context in the face of the sheer routineness of existence.

To return to the experiences which Geertz feels most threaten our view of the world as a meaningful order, the second he mentions is that of suffering. Geertz is opposed to the view that religion helps people to endure situations of emotional stress by helping them to alleviate it or escape from it. He specifically mentions Malinowski's views in this respect as being inadequate. He describes Malinowski's theory, in Nadel's words, as the 'theology of optimism'. The problem of religion, as Geertz sees it, is not how to avoid suffering but how to accept it, how to make it sufferable. Most of the world's religious traditions affirm the proposition that life entails suffering and some even glorify it.

Whereas the religious response to bafflement is primarily an intellectual one, the religious response to suffering is largely an emotional or affective one. In its intellectual aspects religion affirms the ultimate explicability of experience. In its affective aspects it affirms the ultimate suffering of existence. It does this by providing symbolic means for expressing emotion. It attempts to cope with suffering by placing it in a meaningful context, by providing modes of action through which it can be expressed and thus understood. To be able to understand it is to be able to accept it and endure it.

The third type of meaning-threatening experience is that of evil. What is central here is the common feeling that there is a gap between things as they are and things as they ought to be. This feeling is important when it takes the form of an awareness of a discrepancy between moral behaviour and material rewards. The good often suffer and the wicked prosper. Geertz, of course, echoes Weber and many of the functionalists in this. As he puts it, 'the enigmatic unaccountability of gross iniquity raises the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world and man's life in the world have no genuine order at all' (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Religion attempts to make moral sense of experience, of inequality and of injustice. It attempts to show that these things are only apparently the case and that if one takes a wider view, they do fit into a meaningful pattern. A very common way in which this is done is, of course, to claim that injustices in this life are compensated for in the next.

In short, religion tackles the problems of bafflement, suffering and evil by recognising them and by denying that they are fundamentally characteristic of the world as a whole – by relating them to a wider sphere of reality within which they become meaningful.

But why do people accept such beliefs at all? How do they come to acquire convictions of this kind? It is to such questions that the part of Geertz's definition which speaks about clothing conceptions of a general order of existence with an aura of factuality is addressed.

Geertz is opposed to psychological explanations of why people accept religious conceptions. Although bafflement, suffering and evil drive people towards belief in gods, spirits, and demons, this is not the real basis upon which the beliefs actually rest. The real basis of particular beliefs lies either in authority or tradition. Religion is only one perspective on the world among others. The problem thus boils down to, first, what is distinctive about the religious perspective in contrast to others and, second, how do people come to adopt it?

What is distinctive about the religious perspective, Geertz claims, is that it is characterised by faith. The scientific perspective is essentially sceptical; it is always putting its ideas to the test. The religious perspective does the opposite; it tries to establish its ideas as being true beyond doubt or beyond evidence.

The mechanism which generates faith and conviction is, according to Geertz, ritual. For example, he says 'the acceptance of authority that underlies the religious perspective that the ritual embodies flows from the ritual itself (*ibid.*, p. 34). Ritual is both the formulation of a general religious conception and the authoritative experience which justifies and even compels its acceptance.

One point of criticism might be made here. If religious conviction arises from participation in rituals, then why do people participate in rituals in the first place? This is the same problem that plagues all theories which see ritual as primary and belief as secondary, including those of Robertson Smith, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown.

In the last part of his definition Geertz refers to the moods and motivations created by religion being made uniquely realistic. The operative word here is 'uniquely'. Geertz is saying that religious perspectives are each unique ways of approaching the world – ones which seem uniquely realistic to those who espouse them and eminently practical and sensible. It is this imperviousness of religion to doubt that religious perspectives seem to acquire that gives them their power to affect society so profoundly. The fact that believers within each religious perspective regard their own perspective as obviously and self-evidently the most sensible and realistic one gives such perspectives great potency.

Since each perspective is unique, any attempt to assess the social value or function of religion *per se* becomes impossible. Questions about whether religion in general is functional or dysfunctional cannot be answered, Geertz argues. They can only be addressed to particular religions. We can only sensibly ask whether this or that particular instance is functional in its circumstances and it may well be that any given religion or religious movement is not functional or integrative for the society in which it occurs.

Despite his definition of religion being cast in functional-sounding terms, Geertz departs from the functionalism of many theories that appear on the surface to be similar to his own. We might ask on this point whether the definition is inclusive to the extent of covering systems of ideas such as nationalism, communism, and so on. It would, like many functionalist definitions, seem to do so. And although his analysis admits of the possibility of dysfunctions, it retains a lingering functionalism in many respects and lacks a dynamic aspect which would allow us to understand the role that religion plays in social change and social conflict. To put it another way, it overlooks the issue of power and authority in relation to religion (Asad, 1983). There is no analysis in Geertz's essay of the processes by which symbols induce the moods and motivations they are alleged to. Here we must attend, Asad argues, to the social process involving authoritative practices, disciplines and discourses which give force to religious ideas and symbols. Geertz's account relies upon an assumed efficacy implied to lie inherently in the symbols themselves and in culture and upon mental states produced by such symbols and by rituals.

Clearly, Geertz's approach is one which is influenced by and attempts to synthesise many of the insights of previous approaches including intellectualism and emotionalism. Similar in this respect is the approach of Peter Berger.

## PETER BERGER

In his major theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion Berger (1973) argues that society is a dialectical phenomenon in that it is at one and the same time a human product and an external reality that acts back upon its human creators. The process by which we create our own social world through mental and physical activity, experience this social world as an external and independent reality and find ourselves shaped by it, is one in which a meaningful order is imposed upon experience. Such a meaningful order Berger terms a *nomos*. 'Men are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality' (ibid., p. 31).

The *nomos* is a social product; it is socially constructed. Isolation from society undermines a sense of order and those who become so isolated tend to lose their footing in reality. Their experience becomes disordered; it becomes *anomic*. The *nomos*, then, is a shield against the terror that ensues when the world threatens to appear to be without order and meaning. Experiences such as death are a severe threat to the sense of order. Death is not simply a disruption of the continuity of relationships, it threatens the basic assumptions upon which the social order rests.

The *nomos* is usually seen as being 'in the nature of things', a taken-for-granted, obviously true picture of reality as it actually is. Although humanly constructed, it is seen as a natural phenomenon and part of a world beyond and transcending human will, capacities and history. It is religion which upholds this sense of the sheer reality and naturalness of the humanly constructed *nomos*. The *nomos* is, through religion, given a sacred character and becomes a sacred *cosmos*. It is sacred because it is seen as mysterious and vastly powerful. 'Religion

is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established' (ibid., p. 34); 'it is the audacious attempt to conceive the entire universe as humanly significant' (ibid., p. 37).

Berger goes on to show how religion brings human society into relation with this sacred cosmos, how it locates human society in a wider cosmic picture and in the process legitimates the social order. Such legitimation may take a variety of forms but always the precarious and transitory constructions of human activity are given the semblance of ultimate security and permanence.

The relationship between religion and society is important in another way. Religious conceptions of the world are underpinned and maintained as credible by a specific set of social processes which constitute what Berger calls a 'plausibility structure'. These are the social processes by which religious views are promoted, disseminated, defended, or assumed. If this plausibility structure is undermined or weakened, religious convictions can easily lose their hold on the mind.

Because human social arrangements, roles, obligations and institutions are so precarious we need to be constantly reminded of what we must do and of the meanings embodied in our culture and institutions. It is ritual that does this reminding. In ritual the continuity between the present and the societal tradition is ensured; the experience of the individual is placed in the context of a history.

Religion does not simply legitimate and make sense of the social order. It makes sense of experiences which might otherwise be disruptive and disordering. It legitimates marginal situations and experiences – those which are at the limits of everyday ordinary experience. Included here are such things as sleep and dreams, death, catastrophes, war, social upheaval, the taking of life, suffering and evil. Religious explanations of such things Berger calls, following Weber, theodicies. It is the role of theodicy to combat anomie. Religion 'has been one of the most effective bulwarks against anomie throughout human history' (ibid., p. 94).

Because of its very power to overcome anomie, however, it is also one of the most powerful forces of alienation in human life. That view which sees the world as external to the individual and which determines human beings and which forgets that they also change and determine their world, in short, an alienated world-view, is precisely the view which serves to maintain an ordered and meaningful view of reality and which prevents anomie. It is the alienating power of religion which gives it its power to ensure stability and continuity of the tenuous formations of social reality:

The humanly made world is explained in terms that deny its human production. ... Whatever may be the 'ultimate' merits of religious explanations of the universe at large, their empirical tendency has been to falsify man's consciousness of that part of the universe shaped by his own activity, namely the sociocultural world.

(ibid., p. 96)

Berger, however, warns against a one-sided approach on this point. Because of the dialectical relationship between man and society it is possible that religion can be not just a force which alienates but also a force which may de-alienate and which can legitimate de-alienation; 'religious perspectives may withdraw the status of sanctity from institutions that were previously assigned this status by means of religious legitimation. ... One may say therefore, that religion appears in history both as a world-maintaining and as a world-shaking force' (ibid., pp. 105, 106).

Berger's approach is clearly an ingenious synthesis of Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist insights. There are two main criticisms that might be made of it. First, it does not confront the possibility that the need for meaning might be the product of a specific type of social situation or relationship to nature as a Marxist approach would maintain. In other words it assumes this is an inherent and universal human need which is independent of specific social or other conditions. It does not, therefore, tell us much about why a religious outlook occurs in some situations and in some individuals but not in others. It also means that Berger's approach retains a lingering functionalism in its emphasis upon the order-promoting role which, despite the qualifications, remains predominant in the approach.

Second, it does not address the question of whether modern society can continue effectively while an alienated world-view prevails. One might argue that a modern society can only progress and can only prevent anomie by overcoming an alienated world-view.

## THOMAS LUCKMANN

The approach of Luckmann, a close associate of Berger, to religion also emphasises meaning. Religion, for Luckmann, is coextensive with social life itself. The modern Western trend towards secularisation is interpreted by him as merely a decline in *traditional* religious forms and institutions not in religion *per se*. Certain fundamental questions and problems still confront and always will confront human beings. These questions and problems relate to what he calls the dominant, overarching values, their social-structural basis and the functioning of these values in the life of the individual.

Luckmann sets out in *The Invisible Religion* (1967) to determine the 'anthropological conditions' of religion by which he means those conditions which underlie all religion, conditions which are universal aspects of human beings and of human life. These underlying conditions give rise to a whole variety of specific religious manifestations, that is to say particular religions and religious institutions, the specificity of which is related to prevailing circumstances in each case. Luckmann is concerned, however, with the religious impulse before it assumes its varied historical forms, each of which is just one way in which a fundamental process in human life becomes institutionalised into a concrete form.

Each is just one institutionalisation of the general process by which a 'symbolic universe' is socially constructed and related to the world of everyday life.

Symbolic universes are systems of meaning by which everyday life is brought into relation with a transcendent reality. They are meaningful systems because they are socially constructed and supported. The process by which this comes about is possible only for beings which transcend their biological nature; in other words, it is possible only for human beings because they are self-aware and capable of reflecting on their experience. They can do this because they are social creatures who must interact with others in ways which require that they take the part of the other in order to anticipate the other's reactions to their own actions, and thereby shape their own actions accordingly. This allows them to see themselves as others see them and in the process they acquire a sense of self.

Luckmann sees this process of the acquisition of a sense of self as essentially a religious process. It is coextensive with socialisation of the child. In the process of socialisation the child is also presented with a picture of reality, a world-view, which embodies the symbolic universe that gives meaning to reality and to the existence of the individual, locating the self within this symbolic universe. In short, in past societies this has generally been accomplished through a religious system in the traditional understanding of the term. In present society it is achieved through ideas such as self-realisation, self-expression, and individual autonomy which are not generally thought of as constituting religious values but which are religious in a wider and fundamental sense.

The central problem with Luckmann's approach is that it is not clear why we should accept that the transcendence of biological nature is fundamentally a religious process. What is religious about it? Religion and socialisation are, of course, closely interwoven in most traditional societies but it does not follow that socialisation is inherently religious in character. Religion need not enter into the process. Even if Luckmann is right that what is distinctively human is the transcendence of biological nature and of self, and that this is what makes it possible for human beings to be moral creatures and to develop universalistic values, it does not follow that this makes human life *inherently* religious except by simply calling all this 'religion'.



# 15 Secularisation

## INTRODUCTION

For meaning theorists the process of secularisation in modern industrial societies is problematic, as it is for all theories that locate the source of religion in the human condition. In Berger's case, if religion provides the bulwark against alienation, how is secularisation possible? Many theorists including Luckmann have simply attempted to deny that secularisation is taking place at all. It is an illusion generated by the decline of traditional forms of religion. In place of these forms, however, new forms are growing up continuously, these theorists argue. Although he has changed his view more recently, for most of his career, Berger, however, has never denied the facts of secularisation and was for many years one of the leading theorists of this phenomenon. Before examining his views, however, some background discussion is necessary. In this chapter, also, other views on the process of secularisation will be contrasted with those of meaning theorists such as Berger.

The demise of religion in modern society has been predicted by many theorists, especially those writing in the nineteenth century. Tylor, Frazer, Marx, and later Freud, all expected religion to fade away as science came to dominate the way of thinking of contemporary society. Others, who thought of religion in more functional terms, foresaw the disappearance of religion in the familiar and traditional forms to be replaced by something based upon non-supernaturalistic and non-transcendental foundations. Comte invented a new religion based upon the rational and scientific foundations of the new science of sociology to fill the vacuum. Durkheim saw the beginnings of a new functional equivalent to religion emerging in the values of the French Revolution.

Many more recent theorists have rejected such ideas, holding that religion is as much a part of modern society as it has been of any society in the past, while often acknowledging that its specific forms may indeed change. Bellah (1971), for example, has argued that the notion of secularisation forms part of a theory of modern society stemming originally from the Enlightenment reaction to the Christian religious tradition characterised by a strong cognitive bias and emphasis on orthodox belief. The theory of progressive secularisation functions to some extent, Bellah argues, as a myth which creates an emotionally coherent picture

of reality. In this sense it is itself a religious doctrine rather than a scientific one. Since religion performs essential social functions, it will again move into the centre of our cultural preoccupations, Bellah believes. Many other theorists, particularly in recent years, have, in the face of the rise of many new religious movements and of fundamentalism, come to similar conclusions (Crippen, 1988; Davie, 1994; Douglas, 1983; Glasner, 1977; Glock and Bellah, 1976; Greeley, 1973, 1989; Hadden, 1987; Luckmann, 1967, 1990; Martin, 1965b, 1991; Stark, 1999; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1987; Warner, 1993; Wuthnow, 1976a, 1976b). For some theorists of this persuasion, also, religion will not lose its transcendental character, despite the rationalism and scientific and technological basis of modern society.

On the other hand, the secularisation thesis continues to receive just as much support and the arguments of its opponents have been equally subjected to criticism even if some of this acknowledges that secularisation may not be an inevitable or uniform process (Berger, 1973; Bruce, 1992a, 1995a, 1996a, 1996b; Dobbelaere, 1981, 1987, 1999; Lechner, 1991; Wilson, 1966, 1982, 1985, 1992, 1998). Others see the process as complex, identifying both secularising and resistant or even anti-secularising forces (Beyer, 1997, 1999; Brown, 1992; Campbell, 1972, 1982; Casanova, 1994; Chavez, 1994; Demerath and Williams, 1992; Duke and Johnson, 1992; Fenn, 1972, 1978, 1981; Hellemans, 1998; Lambert, 1999; Martin, 1978; Sharot, 1989; Sommerville, 1998; Voyé, 1999; Yamane, 1997).

The debate over secularisation thus presents us with a decidedly odd situation. What is alleged to have been a fundamental change characterising modern society is alleged by others not to have taken place at all. It is rather as if economic historians were in deep dispute as to whether the industrial revolution ever actually occurred. It is as if a very large and indisputably solid object has been spirited away as if by magic – first you see it, now you don't. Clearly, as the citations above indicate, a very extensive literature has been generated by this debate which has revealed a remarkable intensity. There has been a tendency for each side to charge the other with ideological bias or wishful thinking. It is probably true that those who support the secularisation thesis are not themselves much attracted by religion while those who oppose it are more religiously oriented. Some have argued for the abandonment of the term or the concept (Martin, 1965b; Hadden, 1987; Stark, 1999; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994),<sup>1</sup> sometimes on the grounds that it is a weapon used by those opposed to religion to undermine it. This is no more necessarily true than it would be to say that an extraordinarily broad concept of religion has been the weapon of those who find the very idea of the secularisation of contemporary society an uncongenial one.

## **THE MEANING OF 'SECULARISATION'**

It is this question of how religion is conceptualised that lies to a considerable extent at the heart of the debate. Whether modern society is secularised or undergoing a process of secularisation depends very much on what one means

by religion and, therefore, by secularisation. Much of the debate over the question of secularisation stems from the fact that there are radically different conceptions of what religion is. Wilson (1982) points out that those who use functionalist definitions tend to reject the secularisation thesis while those using substantive definitions are more likely to support it. Some have defined religion in such inclusive terms that there would always be something which would count as religion. For such writers secularisation is an impossibility as it is ruled out almost by definition. Such inclusive definitions, however, are, as we have seen, highly problematic.

Even when one defines religion in a more restrictive way, disagreement remains on the question of the meaning of secularisation. The term has been used in a number of different ways. A useful survey is provided by Shiner (1966). Shiner distinguishes six meanings or uses of the term. The first refers to the decline of religion whereby previously accepted religious symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and significance, culminating in a society without religion. The second refers to greater conformity with 'this world' in which attention is turned away from the supernatural and towards the exigencies of this life and its problems. Religious concerns and groups become indistinguishable from social concerns and non-religious groups. Third, secularisation may mean the disengagement of society from religion. Here religion withdraws to its own separate sphere and becomes a matter for private life, acquires a wholly inward character and ceases to influence any aspect of social life outside of religion itself. Fourth, religion may undergo a transposition of religious beliefs and institutions into non-religious forms. This involves the transformation of knowledge, behaviour and institutions that were once thought to be grounded in divine power into phenomena of purely human creation and responsibility – a kind of anthropologised religion. The fifth meaning is that of desacralisation of the world. The world loses its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational-causal explanation and manipulation in which the supernatural plays no part. Finally, secularisation may mean simply movement from a 'sacred' to a 'secular' society in the sense of an abandonment of any commitment to traditional values and practices, the acceptance of change and the founding of all decisions and actions on a rational and utilitarian basis. Clearly this usage is far wider than any which refer only to an altered position of religion in society.

These meanings are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive. The diversity, however, is linked to the diversity of meanings of religion and leads Shiner, echoing Martin (1965b), to say that the appropriate conclusion to come to is that the term should be dropped entirely. While a diversity of meanings of the term causes considerable confusion in the ongoing debate on the question of secularisation, it seems somewhat premature to abandon the concept altogether. Certainly, as Hanson (1997) points out, such definitional diversity leads to much misunderstanding and talking past one another. One theorist will often criticise the arguments of another on the basis of a quite different understanding of what is meant by secularisation and with scant regard to the fact that the target of

criticism holds an entirely different conception of it. However, a core meaning of the term in the usages of the main theorists of secularisation can be discerned.

From an extensive review of theories of secularisation Tschannen (1991) concludes that three core elements can be discerned which he terms differentiation, rationalisation and worldliness. Associated with these are a number of related processes, namely, autonomisation, privatisation, generalisation, pluralisation and collapse of the world-view. Differentiation is, according to Tschannen's analysis, fundamental, explicitly or implicitly, to all secularisation theories. The other elements are common but not entirely universal.

Taking the most important, differentiation, first, this means the process by which religion and religious institutions become differentiated from other spheres. An obvious example is the separation of Church and state. Rationalisation refers to the process by which, once separated from religion, other social institutions operate upon principles rationally related to their specific social functions and independently of religious values and criteria. Economic life, for example, increasingly in the modern world came to be dominated by the logic of the market and by rational calculation. Finally, such processes impact back upon religion itself which becomes less concerned with transcendental matters and more worldly in its outlook. It seeks less to save souls and more to provide psychological comfort.

Differentiation leads to religion losing its social influence over many aspects of society. It no longer dominates the educational system, for example. Autonomisation refers to this process by which social institutions become autonomous and free of the influence of religion. The result is an increasing privatisation of religion which becomes a matter of individual choice and conscience rather than of publicly upheld duty and obligation. On the other hand, religion may take on a more general and diffuse role (generalisation) as, for example, in sacralising the institutions of the state and government in what has been called civil religion. However, religious institutions lose the monopoly or near monopoly position they once held and religious pluralism comes to prevail. Finally, religious affiliation and practice decline.

Rationalisation is associated with an increasingly scientific outlook, a weakening plausibility of religious beliefs and progressive rejection of them. As a result, a more worldly ethos prevails.

Many of these elements of the notion of secularisation are close to some of Shiner's different meanings of the term. What the core elements of the notion do not necessarily imply, though, according to Tschannen, is the disappearance of religion. This is something that has been emphasised by most leading theorists of secularisation. What is implied, and this seems to encapsulate what is central to the notion in most usages, as Chavez (1994) and Yamane (1997) argue, is the declining authority of religion. This echoes very closely the definition proposed by Wilson many years ago, namely, that secularisation refers to 'the process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance' (1966, p. 14). It is also reminiscent of Berger's equally long-standing conception of secularisation as the process by which sectors of society and

culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols (Berger, 1973).

This is not, of course, to say that the notion is a simple or straightforward one or that for more precise consideration of its various aspects, other concepts or terms are not required. The difference between Wilson's and Berger's definitions is largely the inclusion of culture as opposed to social institutions by the latter. Berger is quite explicit that secularisation goes beyond merely the relegation of religion to the private sphere to include the decline of personal religious belief and perspectives whereas Wilson has tended to be somewhat ambiguous on this point. Secularisation, in any case, may thus be seen to affect various spheres of social life and dimensions of society and behaviour and perhaps differentially. Particularly fruitful in this respect have been Dobbelaere's contributions to the debate (1981, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1999). He distinguishes three dimensions of secularisation corresponding to three levels of social analysis, that of the whole society, that of religious institutions and organisations and that of the individual. He uses the term 'laicisation' to refer to secularisation at the societal level which involves differentiation of religion and religious institutions from other sectors of society. The term 'religious change' refers to secularisation at the level of religious institutions whereby they lose some of their specifically religious character to become more worldly Chavez (1994) calls this 'internal secularisation'. For the individual level the term 'religious involvement' is used and secularisation at this level involves the decline of personal religious belief and individual activity such as membership of and participation in churches and denominations. Secularisation at any of these levels can vary independently. In Dobbelaere's view it is primarily secularisation at the societal level that is identified with the secularisation thesis, clearly implying no necessary disappearance of religion or decline in personal religiosity though these processes may well accompany the removal of religion from the centre of society.

## AN IMPIOUS PAST?

Disagreement about whether or not secularisation is occurring is not only a matter of terms and concepts. Clearly, to claim religion is in decline entails comparisons with the past. There is much dispute about whether contemporary society is less religious than past societies, whatever one understands by religion. It is argued by some that we have a false view of the religious nature of past societies and that there was as much irreligion then as there is today. The notion of an 'age of faith' is an illusion created partly as a result of concentrating on the religious beliefs and attitudes of the elite, of which we have more abundant information, and failing to look at those of the ordinary people (Goodridge, 1975; Douglas, 1983; Stark, 1999; Stark *et al.*, 1995; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, 1995). Against this, writers like Wilson (1982, 1992, 1998), Bruce (1995b, 1995c, 1997) and Hanson (1997) have replied that such a view tends to be founded on the assumption that secularisation is the same thing as de-Christianisation. The

claim that the past was just as secular as the present, and therefore the present just as religious as the past, actually amounts to the claim that the past was no more Christian than the present and the present, therefore, no less Christian than the past. But the survival of paganism and 'folk religion' in ostensibly Christian societies testifies to their more religious character than contemporary society. On the basis of not very sound evidence that the medieval peasantry were not very Christian, it is assumed by the 'impious past' theorists that they were not involved in religion at all. If this were so, we would have to conclude that prior to the Christianisation of Europe there was a total absence of any participation in religion. It will hardly do, either, to dismiss the paganism, folk religion and magical beliefs and practices of the past as not being true religion as Turner (1991b) does. To do so would, by implication, exclude the belief systems of most tribal societies from the category of 'religion' and unduly restrict it solely to the world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Even then, there would be serious problems in dealing with folk and popular interpretations of these.

Turner, however, does not take a straightforward anti-secularisation stance. Both the secularisation and anti-secularisation theorists are right up to a point, he argues. In the feudal era Catholic Christianity was very much the ethos of the upper class or nobility but remained weak among the peasants. There was and was not a golden age of religiosity against which one can contrast the present situation. This was the golden age of elite religiosity which functioned largely to provide an ideological prop for the system of property rights and inheritance. It aided the land-owning class in controlling sexuality, especially of women, in such a way as to bolster the property distribution system based upon primogeniture designed to maintain the concentration of land ownership in the hands of the nobility. The landless peasantry found little to attract them in Catholicism and remained often indifferent or even hostile to it and wedded to pagan or folk practices of a superstitious or magical kind (see also Abercrombie *et al.*, 1980).

While acknowledging very probable differences between elite and peasant belief and practice, one can hardly consider this a very strong argument against the secularisation thesis for the reason already stated. It is, in any case, somewhat dubious to argue that the influence of Catholic Christianity in the feudal era was based primarily on considerations of property transference. While it may have been put to this use by the land-owning class and while this may have entailed a certain interpretation of Christian teaching, it is misleading and a one-sided analysis to claim that this is the essential role of medieval Christianity. We have only to think of the cult of the Virgin Mary and of the saints to see that it had great significance as a popular form of belief and practice which addressed the concerns of ordinary peasants as it continues to do in many rural peasant communities today, especially in the Third World and developing countries. And just as it may often flourish alongside indigenous pagan and folk beliefs and practices in these regions, so it probably coexisted similarly with pagan and folk religion in the feudal era in Europe.

A second line of criticism of the impious past position concerns the use of historical data by those who advocate this view. Bruce (1995b, 1997) and Hanson, (1997) accuse them of rather partial, exaggerated and methodologically unsound readings of historical work on the religiosity of the past and of ignoring a wealth of evidence that does not fit their thesis. Such disputes are difficult to resolve, partly due to scarcity of reliable data but partly also due to the pervasive problem of what exactly is meant by secularisation and the corollary of that – how to measure it. Stark *et al.* base their views upon a rational choice approach to the study of religion. In understanding variations in the strength of religion in society, they apply a supply-side analysis (see Chapter 16) by which religious participation is increased by religious pluralism and decreased by religious monopoly. Religiosity is thus measured by participation in religious organisations. The pagan, private and unorganised religious proclivities of the masses are thus discounted since this is not actual participation but merely latent religiosity not realised in organised form since there are no attractive products available in an open religious market (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, 1995). As Beyer (1998) points out, when rational choice theory speaks of religion it means organised religion. The rational choice approach is not easily applied outside contexts of relatively complex, voluntaristic, pluralistic societies in which the notion of individual choice between alternative organisations has some meaning and is a reality. For Bruce, on the other hand (1995b), it is any kind of religiosity whether organised or not and regardless of the form of organisation that counts. Stark and Iannaccone's view also illegitimately discounts and underestimates the capacity of ordinary people to provide or organise for themselves their own forms and versions of religion outside more institutionalised officially sanctioned frameworks. They are able, in other words, to supply religious services for themselves regardless of the state of the religious market.

## PRIVATISED SPIRITUALITY?

It is precisely this popular 'DIY' form of religious activity in the contemporary world that forms the other arm of the criticism of the secularisation thesis that those opposed to it tend to stress. They emphasise the prevalence of many private and individual practices in modern society outside the context of organised religion – private prayer, superstition, listening to religious broadcasts on the radio, an interest in astrology and reading one's horoscope in magazines, alternative holistic therapies and personal growth regimes, conceptions of the spirituality of nature and the sacredness of the planetary ecosystem, and so on. The umbrella term 'New Age' is often used to encompass much of this diversity. Again, the question of the definition of religion arises here. The tendency to favour extremely broad definitions on the part of some of those who deny that secularisation is a particular feature of contemporary society allows inclusion of these forms of activity.



A problem with this argument, as Wilson (1976) has pointed out, is that if the alleged religiosity underlying such private activities does not find expression in any institutionalised or collective form, that in itself testifies to the precarious position of religion in contemporary society. Wilson acknowledges that many individuals may, in fact, retain some form of private religious belief or practice in a largely secularised society. Secularisation is the process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance. Loss of social significance, however, may or may not be associated with the demise of private religiosity. Whether all of the diverse array of activities mentioned in the previous paragraph count as religion or not, even private religion, is highly debatable. Some argue that they are the new religious phenomena of our age which are replacing traditional forms. Klass, for example, (1995) sees the emergence of what he calls the post-rationalist movement as a product of the clash between religion which accepts all the tenets of modern science, scientific religion, on the one hand, and fundamentalist religion, on the other. Post-rationalism rejects the dogmatism of both sides, seeking a middle way between the authority of established science and reliance on the binding authority of a traditional teaching and body of scripture. Our disinclination to see much of what is included in New Age or in post-rationalism, or whatever term is used, as religion is simply due to its unfamiliarity and our deeply rooted rather Western tendency to equate religion with the traditional mainline churches. Wilson (1976) and Bruce (1996a, 1996b), on the other hand, consider that whether religious or not, and often they are not, these practices are largely ephemeral and have little social significance.

The extent to which religion has lost or is losing its social significance is, of course, an empirical question but it is very difficult to find reliable means of measuring this. It is even more difficult to measure the extent of personal and private religiosity. Figures for church attendance and affiliation are notoriously unreliable as indicators of religious convictions or of the significance of religion in the lives of those who attend. In the United States, for example, church attendance is far higher than in Britain and most European countries but this may be so because in the United States attendance at church indicates membership of the community, adherence to the values of the society and nation, and respectability, much more so than it does in Britain (Herberg, 1956; Wilson, 1966, 1982). To some extent certain American churches and denominations have been internally secularised (Luckmann, 1967, p. 36), even the more conservative and fundamentalist churches and denominations (Bruce, 1996b). The meaning of church attendance varies across different religious traditions and churches and in different places so that comparisons of rates of attendance may be very deceptive indicators (Wilson, 1992, 1998). In so far as church attendance indicates anything, then, a decline does not necessarily or in itself indicate a decline of religion *per se*. Davie (1994), for example, characterises the situation in contemporary Britain as one of 'believing without belonging'. However, attempts to ascertain beliefs through surveys can yield

equally misleading results. Replies to questions about belief in God, for example, may indicate as much about the way the respondent thinks it appropriate to reply or how he or she has learnt to respond to such questions as it does about inner personal convictions.

## MEASURING SECULARISATION

Bearing in mind such problems, the indicators that have been used would appear to show that religion, in general terms, is in decline in most Western industrial societies, at least in so far as they are Christian. The decline is, however, far from uniform, there are fluctuations over time and notable apparent exceptions to the trend, in particular in the United States. Acquaviva (1979) concludes from a survey of the data relating to Latin America as well as the United States and Europe, in short, the whole Christian world, that 'everywhere and in all departments, the dynamic of religious practice reveals a weakening of ecclesial religiosity and, within certain limits, of every type of religious belief, including the belief in God' (ibid., p. 83). A statistically sophisticated cohort analysis of data relating to Holland, the United States and Japan (Sasaki and Suzuki, 1987), which controlled for age and periodic fluctuation, found that membership and attendance of religious organisations had declined over the previous seven decades very significantly in Holland, to a considerable extent for the younger cohorts in the United States but not for the older cohorts in the United States and not at all in Japan. Hout and Greeley (1987) found a relatively stable pattern of church attendance in the United States over the past fifty years confirming what numerous surveys had shown, namely that US rates were very much higher than those for Europe – around 40 per cent for Protestants and above 50 per cent for Catholics. A decline during the late 1960s and the early 1970s was largely due to a decline in attendance of Catholics which they attribute to disaffection as a result of *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical which reiterated the ban on artificial birth control. By 1975 the decline had ceased. A number of subsequent studies confirmed Hout and Greeley's findings.<sup>2</sup>

Studies such as these rely upon self-reported attendance. Hadaway *et al.* (1993) question the reliability of this data for the United States. They set out to ascertain how self-reported attendance relates to actual attendance, measuring the latter by direct observation. They conclude that actual attendance is close to half that of reported attendance, grossly inflating the figures for church attendance that most studies have relied upon. While this tells us nothing about change over time, it is possible that actual attendance has declined but reported attendance has not for reasons of social respectability. This would be consistent with a general weakening of the major mainstream denominations and a slowing down in the growth of the more conservative groups. Criticism of this study focused largely upon methodological questions relating to the sample used, the reliability of the data and so on (Caplow, 1998; Hout and Greeley, 1998; Woodbery, 1998). This elicited fresh evidence from Hadaway *et al.* (1998) supporting their position.

While not definitive, these studies cast very serious doubt on the previously accepted picture of level of church attendance in the United States but leave the question of how it has changed over time very much open.

Attendance figures for Europe are generally much lower. World Values Survey data ranges from 2 to 3 per cent for Iceland up to 81 per cent for Ireland. Generally, Protestant Scandinavia shows the lowest rates, Catholic countries the highest with the rest of Protestant Europe somewhere between. In Britain attendance was above 30 per cent in 1850 declining to about 10 per cent today (Bruce, 1996a, 1996b).

As for membership of religious bodies, Finke and Stark (Finke, 1992; Finke and Stark, 1992) claim that for the United States at the time of the American Revolution relatively few of the population were churched but that since then the figure has grown steadily to around 60 per cent. Again, this is a much higher figure than for most European countries which have generally experienced a marked decline in church membership. For Britain the figure has declined from around 27 per cent in 1850 to around 12 per cent today (Bruce, 1996a, 1996b).

Religious beliefs and assent to religious doctrines are generally higher than those for attendance and also membership and remain relatively high for most countries. There is evidence of decline, however. Gill *et al.* (1998) analysed a very large number of surveys dating back to the 1920s, concluding that considerable erosion of traditional religious beliefs has occurred, most particularly belief in God and especially a personal God, life after death, the devil and the authority of the Bible. A range of other, non-Christian, beliefs such as superstitions, astrology, etc. have, however, shown remarkable stability or, in some cases, for example, reincarnation, even growth. In America the proportion of the population believing in God has remained steadily well above 90 per cent as has assent to most traditional religious beliefs (Finke, 1992).

What most indicators show, then, is a marked decline of religious affiliation and traditional belief in Europe with much less decline, if any, in the United States, Japan and, to the extent that data exist, many non-Christian parts of the world.

## **THEORIES OF SECULARISATION**

### **Introduction**

Turning to theories and explanations, first, of the overall trend towards secularity, the process has generally been linked to modernity and the degree of industrialisation. This relationship is, however, far from simple. The correlation between industrialisation and secularisation is by no means perfect. The United States, for example, is one of the most industrialised nations but, as we have seen, is far from being the most secularised. Much the same could be said of Japan. To the extent that secularisation is a consequence of the complex social change associated with, or, indeed, which has contributed to, the process of

industrialisation and modernisation, to understand why it has occurred we have to take a very broad historical and comparative perspective.

Explanations of the process will naturally depend upon the type of theory of the role of religion in society one favours. The explanation for the weakening or disappearance of religion depends upon one's account of why it was present in the first place. If religion is explained as the result of or reaction to deprivation and oppression, then the explanation of secularisation will refer to the growth of affluence and democracy. If it is the result of lack of understanding, then secularisation is the consequence of the growth of science. If it is the product of fear and uncertainty, secularisation is the result of our growing ability to explain and control the natural world. If it is a neurotic response to life's circumstances on a collective scale, then secularisation is the consequence of the fact that we have as a species reached a mature stage of development. If it is what holds society together, then secularisation is the result of the fact that some more appropriate set of values is required in modern circumstances. If religion was the way in which men and women gave meaning to their existence, then secularisation may be the consequence of a crisis of meaning or the process by which new ways of providing such meaning, more appropriate to prevailing conditions, are sought. It follows, finally, that if we do not have an entirely satisfactory theory of religion, then we shall not have a fully satisfactory theory of secularisation either.

On the other hand, if we could understand what it is about contemporary society that tends to weaken religion, we may gain a better understanding of the presence and strength of religion in past and other societies. The question of secularisation is, then, of crucial theoretical significance. Secularisation, although linked to industrialisation and urbanisation, must be seen in terms of the more fundamental and broad social change that has both promoted and resulted from these developments. Perhaps the dominant view, stemming from Weber, is that it is the growth of rationality in the West which is the key to the process of secularisation. This would explain the fact that it is Protestant countries that have been the most affected. There are two aspects to this approach, each of which is somewhat differently emphasised by various theorists. First, there are those factors which are internal to Christianity which, in Weber's view, culminated in Protestantism and especially Calvinistic Protestantism. Second, there are those factors external to Christianity and which are associated with the growth and development of modes of thought and ways of viewing the world which are an alternative to Christianity or indeed religion in general.

### **Peter Berger**

The set of factors internal to the Christian tradition is stressed by Berger in his influential analysis (1973). Berger is concerned with 'the question of the extent to which the Western religious tradition may have carried the seeds of secularisation within it' (*ibid.*, p. 116). This does not mean that he thinks that Christianity has an automatic inherent tendency to develop in the direction of secularisation. He

acknowledges that there must be many relevant factors involved which are external to the religious tradition, that is, social and economic factors. In his view, however, such factors have their effect not so much upon religion in general but upon Christianity in particular. They bring about and promote tendencies already inherent within the Christian tradition. In a particular kind of social environment Christianity manifests tendencies towards secularisation whereas in the case of other religions such tendencies are absent and these religions are not therefore subject to the secularisation process, even when development, modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation take hold in those societies. In this sense, Christianity can be said to be its own gravedigger.

According to Berger, these tendencies within Christianity go back to its very roots which were, of course, in Judaism. They were 'contained' by Catholicism but unleashed by the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was associated with a changing class structure and the replacement of feudalism. In its turn it released the forces of secularisation within Christianity.

This thesis is, of course, strongly reminiscent of Max Weber and Berger follows him very closely in his analysis. All one has to do is to substitute 'rationality' for 'secularising forces' and one has Weber's essential thesis on the development of Christianity and of European society.

Berger, then, emphasises the tendency associated with increased rationality which Weber termed the 'disenchantment of the world'. Judaism had rejected magic, mysticism and so on and this was taken over by Christianity as was the ethical rationality of Judaism. The early Christian Church, in Berger's view, took a retrogressive step. It watered down the monotheism of Judaism. It re-established a degree of mysticism and re-introduced sacramental and magical elements but the forces promoting rationality were too strong to be wholly eliminated. The inner-worldly ethic was retained and preserved in the tradition. Also, the radical nature of Christianity, its tendency to seek to transform the world, was preserved through the Middle Ages by those groups who found in it inspiration, hope and justification for rebellion. The ethical nature of early Christianity, and its concern for justice, were never forgotten.

The rationalising tendencies of Christianity were to culminate in Protestantism and in particular Calvinism, the most rational form of religion to emerge in human history, according to Weber – at least in terms of formal rationality. It is this very rationalism of Protestantism that lies behind secularisation in Berger's view. Protestantism was, therefore, the prelude to secularisation. 'Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary' (*ibid.*, p. 117).

Protestantism disposed of the sacramental and ritual aspects of Catholicism to a large extent. It divested itself of mystery, miracle and magic. Its conception of God was of an absolutely transcendental being who, although he had created the world, remained wholly separate from it. Berger argues that this radical separation of the sacred and profane spheres in Protestantism was of great significance. Protestantism reduced the relationship and contact between God and man to such an extent that it did not take very much to sever the tenuous link entirely. This tendency goes

right back to the very earliest developments in the Judeo-Christian tradition: 'the roots of secularisation are to be found in the earliest available sources for the religion of ancient Israel' (*ibid.*, p. 119). Paradoxically, however, it was the great religious revival and intensification of religion which we know as the Reformation which sowed the seeds for the demise of religion.

Another crucial factor central to the Christian tradition is the type of religious organisation that it developed, namely, the Church. If Berger is right about this, it is somewhat ironic since it was this aspect of Christianity which Kautsky (1925) emphasised as accounting for the tremendous success of Christianity in spreading throughout and surviving in the Roman world. The church type of organisation eventually led in the direction of secularisation, according to Berger, because this type of organisation entailed an inherent potential institutional specialisation of religion. This has not been a common characteristic in the history of religions. Its implications were that other spheres of life could be and were progressively relegated to a separate and profane realm and thereby removed from the jurisdiction of the sacred. This meant that these other spheres could more readily become subject to the process of rationalisation and the application of new ideas, knowledge and science. The Church became less and less significant for the conduct of life and less and less convincing as an interpretation of the world.

The loss of the monopoly of religious matters by one organisation, the process of denominationalisation associated again with Protestantism, has also played an important part in promoting secularisation. Wilson (1966) agrees with Berger on this point but considers this not simply to have played an important causal role in promoting secularisation but also as being a consequence of it. In Wilson's view, Methodism was of considerable significance in Britain from the point of view of rationalisation because it attracted the working classes. It promoted, consequently, everything associated with ascetic Protestantism among a whole new social stratum. It facilitated the acquisition of an inner discipline in the new social order among this stratum in place of the external discipline of the regulated life of the community that was disappearing as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

Religious pluralism has not only aided the spread of the rationalising tendency, it has also had a more direct effect in leading many away from religion. The situation where one can choose between one religious interpretation and another, where rival interpretations and organisations compete in the 'market place' of religions, as Berger puts it, is likely to result in a devaluation or loss of authority for the religious view generally. The pluralistic situation where one can choose one's religion is also a situation where one can choose no religion at all. When a single religious doctrine and organisation come to dominate to the exclusion of all others, it rarely tolerates the emergence of a non-religious view on the part of whole groups, and often even of individuals, within the society.

Berger's theory of secularisation has been very persuasive and would fit the fact that it is the Christian world and particularly the Protestant world that has undergone the greatest degree of secularisation. On the other hand, he does perhaps over-emphasise the factors internal to Christianity. The importance of the church type of organisation and of religious pluralism might be acknowledged,

but to say that secularisation is the outcome of inherent tendencies only unleashed by certain social changes after more than 1500 years of containment by Catholicism is very difficult to accept. It would seem equally true to say that it is these social changes which are fundamental but that they affect, however, Christian countries and societies much more than others. On the other hand, it may well be that Christianity has itself contributed to or in some way facilitated, perhaps failed to inhibit, these very social developments. In short, the relationship is much more complex than Berger's theory supposes.

Also, we should not forget that religious pluralism may have impeded, to some extent, the process of secularisation in providing a non-establishment religious outlet for the disaffected and the working class. Methodism not only promoted rationality, Wilson (1966) acknowledges, but constituted an important religious revival. Nevertheless, in the long run, according to this view, pluralism has promoted secularisation rather than religion. The secularisation process has passed through a phase of religious pluralism and the latter must be seen as an important aspect of the process.

The point has been reinforced by Bruce (1990, 1996b) who also tackles the obvious question that is raised, namely why the United States, noted for its pluralism, shows such vitality in its religious life. Bruce argues that while the United States is pluralist in a very general and abstract sense, that is, at the level of the whole society, it is not at all pluralistic at the local level. The conservative and Protestant south, for example, cannot be said to be pluralist as far as religion is concerned; far less so than much of Europe. In the United States it has been possible for various groups to create their own, relatively insulated sub-cultures, aided in the modern context by the openness of broadcasting which allows great localism.

### **Pluralism and piety**

In recent years the idea that pluralism promotes secularisation has come under serious challenge from several theorists of the rational choice persuasion. Stark, Finke and Iannacone have argued strenuously quite the opposite position to that of Berger, namely, that pluralism promotes religious involvement and it is religious monopoly that undermines it. *Contra* Bruce they argue that the United States demonstrates high religious involvement and vitality precisely because it is pluralist. They favour a supply-side approach to this. They assume that the demand for religion is on the whole very stable. People always seek and need religious answers to the eternal problems of life. That is to say they are always latently if not actively religious. Whether they are religiously active or not will depend upon whether their latent religiosity is mobilised by providers of religious products. If the religious market is so structured as to offer a wide variety of choice of religious products and services in competition with one another, potential consumers become actual consumers. Competition between suppliers ensures that the products on offer appeal to consumers and that



religious 'firms' cater to distinct groups of clientele, thus collectively meeting the whole range of religious preferences. Competition means they must actively seek to recruit members, adopting a range of strategies to attract them. Monopolistic supply and regulation of the religious market promote neglect of and indifference to such preferences and to recruitment. Monopolistic organisations are unable to cater to the diversity of religious and spiritual needs in the community which leads to withdrawal from or non-participation in them. It is not just that there is much on offer in a pluralist situation but that it is zealously promoted and marketed. These propositions have been tested using statistical data in a number of contexts (Finke, 1990, 1992, 1997; Finke and Stark, 1988, 1989, 1999; Iannaccone, 1991; Chavez and Cann, 1992; Stark *et al.*, 1995; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994; Hamberg and Pettersson, 1994). This work has stimulated much criticism and debate and a number of empirical studies which have either not supported the findings of the rational choice theorists; have found them to hold only in some circumstances; and in some cases have found instead in favour of the traditional hypothesis that pluralism does undermine religious participation (Breault, 1989; Land, Deane and Blau, 1991; Blau *et al.*, 1992; Bruce, 1992b, 1995b, 1996b, 2000; Beyer, 1997; Verweij *et al.*, 1997; Olson, 1998, 1999; Olson and Hadaway, 1998; Perl and Olson, 2000). Both sides have questioned the methods and interpretations of the other with regard to such things as how diversity is measured, how vitality or participation is measured, the units of analysis to be used, and so on.

While these mushrooming empirical studies leave the whole question of pluralism and religious vitality undecided, the rational choice approach has certainly injected new vigour into the secularisation debate and led to new questions being asked and new sources of data being tapped and analysed. We may well be inclined to agree with Bruce on whether pluralism is positively associated with religious vitality; 'sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't' (1995c, p. 520), depending upon the circumstances. However, even if it is only sometimes, this is in itself an important revision to the position that has for so long been dominant. Similarly, Breault (1989) acknowledges that pluralism might undermine religion far less in very conservative communities and regions.

The rational choice theorists have in turn been led to refine, on occasions, some of their more sweeping claims. For example, Finke and Stark (1988, 1989) relax somewhat their claim that religious monopoly always undermines religious involvement and vitality. In circumstances where a religiously homogeneous, geographically concentrated minority group is surrounded by a majority of different and essentially hostile religious persuasion, religion often receives strong support as the focal point of integration and solidarity. This was very much the case in Ireland and Poland and regarding Catholics in America and Mormons in Utah. This can be seen as a situation in which other, non-religious benefits such as solidarity and integration are provided by religious organisations, rendering any inferiority in the religious benefits irrelevant (Sherkat, 1997). Another refinement was introduced in response to criticisms that it is not only monopoly and regulation that constrain religious choice but also a variety of social factors

(Bruce, 1992b, 1993). For example, empirical studies of religious pluralism and vitality have never been able to explain high attendance in Catholic countries and communities. This may be due to certain social and political factors prevailing in those areas as Chavez and Cann acknowledge (1992). The rational choice theorists see this in terms of market distortions arising from such factors (Stark *et al.*, 1996).<sup>3</sup>

Findings contrary to the expectations of rational choice theory have led Finke and Stark (Finke *et al.*, 1996; Finke and Stark, 1998) to concede that pluralism may not have much effect on religious involvement above certain levels. Its effect would seem to operate only at relatively low levels, somewhere between monopoly and a moderate amount of pluralism. At higher levels increased pluralism will not have much effect since it cannot increase levels of competition among religious firms. They have thus been led to qualify their view of pluralism as an adequate measure of competition. Beyer (1999) considers that a weakness of the rational choice position is that it has, in fact, no satisfactory measure of it other than success.

Beyer's analysis of Canadian data (1997) leads him to conclude that in the relationship between pluralism and religious vitality, the direction of causation can be the reverse of that assumed by the rational choice theorists. Growth of religious denominations occurred in Canada in a context of pluralistic competition and in the second half of the nineteenth century in the absence of state regulation. Catholicism flourished once state restrictions upon it had been removed after 1840. On the other hand, before 1850 growth of religious denominations occurred against a background of state regulation. It was such growth that brought the end of state regulation rather than the end of state regulation stimulating growth. The same point is argued by Bruce in the cases of Britain, Australia and the United States (1999) and for the Nordic states (2000). Also, deregulation in the Nordic area has not produced a religious revival. The rational choice response to this point, that there is always a considerable time lag after deregulation before the market develops sufficiently to stimulate religious revival, is not very persuasive, given the time that has passed since deregulation. It is also a very convenient device that can be used to protect the theory from uncomfortable facts and, therefore, any possibility of refutation. We cannot understand, Bruce argues, patterns of religious activity if we do not take into account ethnic and national identity and theology. One might add a whole host of factors to these such as historical circumstances, political structures, systems of class and status, and so on as Martin (1978) does.<sup>4</sup> The sluggishness of Europe to produce a vibrant religious market may well be due to such factors. The social, cultural and historical factors that determine what people seek from religion, how or whether they seek to participate in organised religion, the forces which have shaped religious markets, and so on, are highly variable and must be taken into account in understanding different patterns of religious activity across communities and nations (Ammerman, 1997; Neitz and Mueser, 1997).

Beyer (1997) points out that if conventional secularisation theory falsely universalises the European experience, then the rational choice approach runs the risk of replacing it merely with an American provincialism. It is, he points out (1998), quoting Simpson (1990, p. 371), not just American but ‘gloriously American’. Understanding can best be furthered in Beyer’s view by using each perspective to correct the other. His analysis of the situation in Canada shows that in some respects the market model works but not in others. The debate about pluralism and other aspects of rational choice theory is thus proving highly stimulative and fruitful and promises to further our understanding considerably as more studies are carried out.

### **Bryan Wilson**

Turning now to Wilson’s seminal contribution to secularisation theory – whereas Berger stressed the inherent secularising forces of Christianity, Wilson focuses primarily upon those factors external to Christianity itself, namely modernity, science and technology, industrialisation and urbanisation. Again, it is the growth of rationality that plays the central role, he believes, but in his analysis, as in that of most writers who emphasise such external factors, it is not any rationalising forces inherent in Christianity that are central but the autonomous growth of scientific knowledge and method. The argument is that this has undermined the credibility of religious interpretations of the world. Particularly important is the application of the scientific method or approach to society, a factor which Berger also stresses in a later work (1971). The promise of religion has been undermined in its millennial aspects and so has its capacity to legitimate and justify the social order.

Again, the separation and the institutional specialisation of religion are important here. People look to political institutions and processes for justice and for better conditions, not to the Church or to the life hereafter. The state is expected to provide for those in need. The Church has lost its educational role and with it its ability to promote its message and itself. The role of the Church in defining moral standards has declined now that parliaments and politicians increasingly concern themselves with such questions. The Church retains mainly its role in performing the major *rites de passage* and even this is declining steadily.

A further factor stressed by Wilson (1976, 1982) is the decline of community in the modern urban setting and consequent change in the locus and nature of social control. In true communities social control has a moral and religious basis, whereas in the modern, rational, technical and bureaucratic world, control is impersonal and removed from its former moral and ethical basis. Religion loses its significance in such a setting as do the communal values which traditionally received expression in the form of collective rituals and religious celebrations.

Wilson’s followers, Wallis and Bruce (Wallis and Bruce, 1992; Bruce, 1996b) have summarised the overall approach usefully under the headings of social differentiation, societalisation and rationalisation. The first refers to the emergence of specialised spheres and the separation of religious and other social institutions,

already discussed in considering the meaning of secularisation and which Tschannen (1991) identifies as central to most understandings of it. Societalisation refers to decline of community and the growth in scale and bureaucratisation of many spheres of life that Wilson stresses. Rationalisation refers to the prominence of the scientific world-view and technology. Since these are processes that accompany modernity wherever it comes to prevail, then secularisation can be expected to follow but with certain exceptions. These concern specific circumstances which prevent modernity exerting the normal effect upon religion. Religion remains socially significant when it has work to do other than relating the individual to the supernatural (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, p. 17). There are two types of other work which religion continues to have to do, namely, cultural defence and the management of cultural transition. The first is where religion provides a defence against the erosion of a national, local, ethnic or other culture. Poland and Ireland, both north and south are examples of this. In the United States, southern and mid-western Protestantism are other instances. Cultural transition is a process which usually confronts migrant communities which find themselves in a minority ethnic situation. It is a process in which religion and religious organisations often play an important part by easing adjustment and providing support and an integrating focus. This factor explains much of the vitality of religion in the United States. Asian immigrants to Britain similarly look to their religious traditions in order to express their identity and to promote solidarity. Rapid social change also entails cultural transition. In this way we might understand religious revivals such as the rise of non-conformist denominations, particularly Methodism during the early period of industrialisation in Britain.

Despite the importance of these processes, there is a central weakness in the modernisation thesis. Some of the processes referred to are, perhaps, only secondary and not fundamental in accounting for secularisation. In particular, the growth of alternative interpretations of the world of a materialist and scientific kind is itself a part or aspect of the very process of change of which the decline of religion is also a part. It is simply the other side of the coin. The rise of science is no more the cause of the decline of religion than the decline of religion, or at least certain forms of religion, is the facilitating factor allowing the rise of science. The growth of one and the decline of the other are part of the same process. Both are the result of deeply rooted underlying changes.

Of course, it is certainly true that the spread of science has helped to undermine religion. Once science came to have the prestige that it won and to form the basis of so many aspects of life, it could not but help call religious views of the world into question. However, this is so not so much because of anything inherently contradictory in a scientific outlook and a religious one. As has been emphasised many times in this book, religion does not necessarily, at least in any fundamental sense, address the same kind of question or problem that science does. Religion does not necessarily ask how things in the natural world are connected or related empirically. It may be solely concerned with the question why things are the way they are, given that they are that way. Science may reveal to us the way the

world is constructed but the questions about the meaning of the world and of human existence remain. It has sometimes been said that science does not tell us anything that we really want to know. It depends of course on what we do really want to know or think knowable and it does not follow that religion can tell us this either but the point is that they need not necessarily come into conflict with one another (Bellah, 1971; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

They need not but in fact they generally have in the Western tradition because religious doctrine has sought to pronounce on empirical matters and on the basis of scripture rather than on the basis of empirical evidence. It was bound to lose and be discredited in these struggles; that over the position of the earth in the solar system and over evolution being notable examples.

Wilson is well aware of these points but does not draw the appropriate conclusions from them. For him it is simply that religion suffered a loss of prestige. The crucial point, however, is that while this is true, it is not the fundamental process. It is not an inevitable consequence that religion or even Christianity need be undermined by the growth of science. Specific doctrines may indeed be so undermined but not necessarily the religious view of the world if it can adjust and modify its doctrines. Evolution, for example, may still present a mystery which for some requires a religious interpretation. The essential point is that science does not just appear from nowhere. The critical, open, sceptical attitude which characterises science is a recent phenomenon which seems to have arisen in specific social and historical conditions – the same social and historical conditions that initiated the long road towards secularisation. It was not simply the result of a slow accumulation of knowledge and evidence about the natural world. For hundreds of years little scientific progress was made in Europe which, under the domination of medieval Catholicism, remained less open to new ideas, less innovative and less original in thought than the ancient Greeks had been. Science quite suddenly burst forth in the early modern era.

Marx and Engels argued that it was the decline of feudalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie which, despite the Reformation, and indeed if Berger is right, to some extent also because of it, were the reasons that religious views of the world and legitimations of the social order received a serious blow. The bourgeoisie laid the foundations for materialism even if they retained a religious outlook. Only the final great upheaval of the bourgeois revolution, the French Revolution, managed to cast off the religious outlook completely. But the bourgeois revolutions paved the way for materialism and the rejection of religious modes of thought, thereby creating the possibility of science. This period witnessed the growth of the scientific approach to the world and advances in all spheres of knowledge. It was an age in which atheism became possible for some.

In the field of politics it was no longer doctrine and scripture that were seen to legitimate governments and regimes but citizens. The divine right of kings was rejected. The affairs of this mundane world were increasingly seen as having nothing to do with God or religion. The social order was no longer seen as ordained by God but as a matter of contract, agreements or decisions made by human beings. In other words, the materialist approach

develops alongside the decline of religion which both facilitates it and is a consequence of it.

Just as the central elements of traditional secularisation theory, such as the 'golden age' and the importance of pluralism, have been subject to assault by the rational choice theorists, so has the thesis that modernity, science, technology, industrialisation and urbanisation are inimical to religion. Much of this attack, at least as far as empirical studies are concerned, has been centred upon the relationship between urbanisation and religion. In many ways it is in cities that secular values might be expected to flourish. It is cities that have been associated with rationality, science and technology and which exhibit most extensively the characteristics of modernity. The assumption that cities are less religious than rural and other areas has, however, been strenuously challenged by several studies (Brown, 1992; Finke, 1992; Finke and Stark, 1988). Again the measure of religious vitality is active participation in religious organisations. Finke and Stark conclude from an analysis of data relating to American cities in 1906 that 'the received wisdom about the relationship between cities and religion is a nostalgic myth' (*ibid.*, p. 41). They found a higher rate of religious participation in cities than in rural areas. The reasons for this are, once again, that in cities access to churches is easier and there is greater choice. In other words, the conditions of supply produce greater participation. This claim is challenged by Breault (1989) in an analysis of more contemporary data. He found no real differences between city and countryside, suggesting that the relationship between urbanisation and religion is historically variable. In the case of Britain, Brown (1992) shows that between 1840 and approximately 1920 indexes of urbanisation and church attendance increase alongside one another but after 1920 the latter falls off markedly while the former does not. Conventional secularisation theorists have conceded the point that industrialisation, especially in its early stages in which traditional communities and ways of life are seriously disrupted, may indeed stimulate religious revivals (Wallis and Bruce, 1992). Hellemans (1998) takes the view that secularisation is not so much a product of modernity as of advanced modernity since the decline in religious activity in the more secularised countries is very much a twentieth-century rather than a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Differentiation of religious institutions, furthermore, has often given the churches a degree of autonomy and independence that has allowed them to prosper. Again, each side of this debate questions the reliability of the other's data, methods and interpretations and the result is as yet inconclusive but the challenge to the secularisation theory has raised intriguing questions and stimulated new research.

## **PATTERNS OF SECULARISATION**

One conclusion that can certainly be drawn from these studies and this debate, however, is that the process of secularisation is far from a uniform, continuous or

even, perhaps, irreversible one. Nor has the pattern of secularisation been an even or homogeneous one across different societies. The process of secularisation is greatly affected by the surrounding social context, or the religious history of the country.

The sociologist who has paid most attention to the different patterns of secularisation, David Martin (1978), bases his analysis primarily upon the degree of religious pluralism or of religious monopoly present in the society but incorporates, also, a wide range of variables in his account including the strength of religious minorities and their geographical dispersion, the relationship between religious groupings and the dominant elites and the inherent character of the various religious traditions. The main types of situation distinguished by Martin are, first, that of total monopoly where the tradition is Catholic; second, the duopolistic type where a Protestant church is the major organisation but with a large Catholic minority; third, the still more pluralistic situation exemplified by England with a large state church and a wide range of dissenting and other groups; fourth, the fully pluralist but Protestant-dominated case such as the United States; and finally those countries that have no Catholic presence including Scandinavia and the Orthodox countries. Martin traces the complex implications of the changing role of religion in society in each of these types and the diverse consequences of this changing role for many aspects of public and private life.<sup>5</sup>

If secularisation is far from uniform in its impact across countries, societies and communities, it is also, according to some, far from uniform in its impact over time. Nor is it, for these theorists, an irreversible process. There have been religious revivals and declines and the graph of religiosity has its peaks and troughs. There may be long-range cycles of rise and decline of religion and of particular religions. The rise of the new religious movements and Christian fundamentalism are the developments most often pointed to as evidence of this. Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985) have argued that secularisation is a self-limiting process. Nor is it anything new in their view. It is part of the normal cycle of religious development. Duke and Johnson (1992), on the basis of an analysis of patterns of long-term religious change across a wide variety of societies, conclude that the secularising trends we observe in modern Europe and elsewhere are not due to modernisation as such but to the decline of traditional religion which is simply a part of the normal pattern of cyclical change. New religions usually grow to take the place of the declining ones and may well do so in the case of the Western secularised societies.

Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985) consider the process of denominationalisation by which sects progressively lose their sectarian character and move in the direction of becoming churches to be part of the process of secularisation. Ultimately, churches decline as a result of their tendency to develop ever more extreme worldliness, engendering the emergence of revived religious groups (sects) or new innovative developments (cults). While acknowledging that the rise of science stimulated an unprecedented, rapid and extreme degree of secularisation in contemporary society, Stark and Bainbridge argue that science cannot fulfil many central human needs and desires. It cannot remove all suffering and injustice in this life; it cannot offer an escape from individual extinction; it



cannot make human existence meaningful. Only God can do these things in people's eyes. Religion, then, will not only survive and rise to prominence again, it will be transcendental or supernaturalist in form. Furthermore, it is more likely to be the innovative cult movements rather than the sectarian revivals of established traditions that will flourish since the latter can only come up against, in their turn, the same forces which have brought about a degree of secularisation in the first place. The new cult movements, however, are generally free of the deficiencies of the older traditions which have made them inappropriate to the needs of an altered social situation.

## **SECULARISATION AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

Signs of the continued central importance of religion and its potential reinvigoration are found by Stark and Bainbridge in the fact that those who report no religious affiliation or belief in their surveys are more likely to accept or show interest in some form of unorthodox or fringe supernaturalism such as astrology, yoga and Transcendental Meditation. Americans who have grown up in non-religious homes are more likely to belong to a religious denomination than not to. And although the more secularised American denominations are in decline, the least secularised are not. Finally, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of hundreds of new religious movements.

Stark and Bainbridge reject the charge of Wilson (1976) and Fenn (1978) that the new sects and cults are marginal, insignificant 'consumer items' in the religious supermarket. Such a view fails to see the potential importance of new religions and is rooted in Christian-Judaic parochialism. It also stems from a failure to distinguish between different types of cult. Stark and Bainbridge consider that it is what they call the cult movement that is significant rather than what they term the audience cult and the client cult. The audience cult has no formal organisation and is a form of consumer activity. Its doctrines and ideas are disseminated and consumed through magazines, books, and the media. An example might be UFO enthusiasts. The client cult is rather more organised but only to the extent that the typical services offered – teachings, therapies, and so on – are offered on the basis of a practitioner–client relationship requiring some degree of organisation on the practitioner's side but none among the clientele. Both of these differ from the fully organised cult movement which differs from the sect only in that it is a new group standing quite outside older and more established religious traditions. Stark and Bainbridge's theories apply only to cult movements. The tendency to conflate cult movements, audience and client cults has led others, Stark and Bainbridge claim, mistakenly to assess all cults, including cult movements, as trivial and marginal phenomena.

Stark and Bainbridge offer empirical verification of their theory in the form of two derivative hypotheses which can be tested using data they have gathered.

The first hypothesis holds that cults will abound where conventional churches are weakest because in these areas a greater proportion of the population, free from attachment to established churches, perhaps as a result of geographical mobility, will be able to experiment with new ideas. The second hypothesis holds that there will be a greater incidence of sectarian revival than new cultic experiments where the traditional churches are relatively strong. Stark and Bainbridge find their hypotheses confirmed by their data and conclude that cult and sect formation are not functional alternatives to secularisation but different responses.<sup>6</sup> Secularisation has greatly undermined the traditional churches but it has not produced an irreligious population, only an unchurched one. Even in areas of low church membership, belief in the supernatural remains high.

Stark and Bainbridge may be criticised on the ground that, whatever the strength of the correlations they find, the numbers involved in new cults and sects remains extremely low and insignificant (Bibby and Weaver, 1985; Lechner, 1991; Wallis and Bruce, 1984). Against this Melton (1993) shows that new sects, cults and movements have been founded at an accelerating rate in the United States and, while a few do disappear, most of them continue to survive and to flourish. Melton's argument is based entirely upon the number of new sects and cults. The crucial statistic, however, as Lechner, Wallis and Bruce point out, is the ratio of recruits to the new movements to the loss of membership of the older mainstream denominations and sects. This loss is far greater than the increase in numbers involved in the new movements at least as far as Europe is concerned. Stark and Bainbridge's analysis, even if it applies to the United States, would seem to be somewhat ethnocentric.

Anticipating this, Stark and Bainbridge are careful to point out that they do not think that the new sects and cults are filling the gap left by the churches; only that to the degree that a population is unchurched will there be efforts to fill the void. This still leaves them rather open to the criticism that such efforts will remain precisely that – efforts rather than achievements. They also fail to address the question of why it is that audience and client cults have mushroomed in recent decades. It is these, perhaps, rather than cult movements, that are coming to typify the modern spiritual scene, leading us to question their rejection of Wilson's claim that it is the very marginality of these phenomena which testifies to the degree to which religion finds difficulty retaining any hold in the contemporary situation. Stark and Bainbridge take refuge in the claim that we do not know whether some, or perhaps only one, of these new movements will take off in the future just as new movements have in the past. This is, however, to enter into speculation and cannot in itself support their theory. Also, as Dobbelaere (1987) points out, we should not forget that most of the world religions only took root among the masses with the help of rulers. Since then the structures of society have changed in such a way that it is extremely unlikely that the historical processes which led to state promotion and dissemination of particular religious systems will ever be repeated. Even if many efforts continue to be made by individuals and groups to promote new religions, none may succeed to any great extent. It may be, to use an analogy from Berger (1971), that the supernatural cannot rise

above the status of a rumour. It may be that the contemporary predicament is that people do need and desire the kind of promises that religion has traditionally offered but find all the alternatives, old and new, no longer credible.

Rather similar to Stark and Bainbridge's emphasis on the potential significance of the new cult movements is Campbell's view of the role of the cultic milieu (1972, 1982). Whereas specific cults are generally transitory, the cultic milieu is, he claims, a constant feature of society. It is characterised by seekership and there has been a major shift in contemporary society away from commitment to specific doctrines and dogmas and towards seekership or, in other words, a valuation of personal intellectual and spiritual growth. This is reminiscent of 'epistemological individualism' (Wallis, 1984; see Chapter 17). Rationalisation, then, does not, in Campbell's view, promote permanent secularisation but may actually strengthen the superstitious, esoteric, spiritual and mystical tendencies in modern culture. Even those who acknowledge the superiority of science are not usually in a position to judge between orthodox and heterodox claims and are likely to accept beliefs in flying saucers, extrasensory perception and a whole host of other quasiscientific beliefs. Sharot (1989) points out that since what characterises science is its acknowledgement that it does not have all the answers and probably never will, it leaves much territory for magical ideas to occupy since these can claim to explain what science cannot. In so far as people may not come to wholly endorse the scientific world-view, and it is unlikely that they will, they will be susceptible to all manner of magical and mystical beliefs. Such beliefs are likely to be highly individualistic and fragmentary. This is because, Bibby and Weaver (1985) argue, in contemporary industrialised societies individuals play a variety of specialised roles which are not amenable to legitimation by overarching meaning systems.

Luckmann (1967) has also characterised contemporary societies as having no need for such overarching systems of values because they do not need religious legitimation. Religion becomes an aspect of private life, of individual choice from a variety of alternatives which can be constructed into a personally satisfying system. This leads Luckmann to argue that modern societies are witnessing a profound change in the location of the religious; away from the 'great transcendences' concerned with other-worldly matters, life and death and towards the 'little transcendences' of life which concern self-realisation, self-expression and personal freedoms (1990).

Arguments such as those of Campbell and Luckmann are open to the charge that Wilson makes against those who point to the new sectarian and cultic movements as a source of religious revival. This is the more so given the fact that these little transcendences are most likely to find their expression in somewhat ephemeral cultic forms which Stark and Bainbridge agree are unlikely to develop into major religious forms due to their reliance on magical elements.

## Richard Fenn

It is this lack of overarching values or the necessity for them in integrating modern social systems that is stressed by Fenn in his extensive discussion of the secularisation process (1972, 1978, 1981). Fenn's work has its roots in a dialogue with the functionalist view of religion as the essential integrating and legitimating force in society. He rejects the assumption that modern societies like the United States must be held together by systems of overarching values, in which case there is no necessity for any religious legitimation of the social order. Fenn discusses the process of secularisation in terms of the boundary between the sacred and profane in society. It is a boundary which various groups, collectivities, organisations and individuals seek, for their own various purposes, to determine. Secularisation, then, is a process of struggle, dispute, conflict, or negotiation, involving social actors who attempt to press their own claims and views of reality and is not an automatic or evolutionary process. It is a complex and contradictory process which at each stage is liable to conflicting tendencies. For these reasons it is, therefore, reversible.

Fenn discerns five stages in the process of secularisation. The first is the differentiation of religious roles and institutions which begins very early and of which the emergence of a distinct priesthood is a part but which continues throughout the history of religion. The second stage consists in the demand for clarification of the boundary between religious and secular issues. Secular structures are generally differentiated from religious ones well before the spheres of jurisdiction of these religious and secular institutions have become clear. They may never, in fact, become wholly distinct but remain blurred. This blurring of the distinction between the sacred and profane is itself something that may be promoted by the very process of secularisation itself. The third stage involves the development of generalised religious symbols which transcend the interests of the various components of society. In the American context, Fenn is referring here to the development of what has been called the 'civil religion' (Bellah, 1967).<sup>7</sup> In stage four, minority and idiosyncratic 'definitions of the situation' emerge. Political authority is secularised but there is a dispersion of the sacred as many groups seek legitimacy on religious grounds. Finally, in stage five there is a separation of individual from corporate life.

At several stages the contradictory nature of the process can be seen. The emergence of a civil religion is a stage of the process and yet also a form of desecularisation. In attempting to determine definitions of situations the state may seek to curb religious autonomy and restrict the scope of religion, especially sectarian forms, and yet at the same time seek to borrow the authority of sacred themes and principles in order to legitimate itself.

Fenn suggests that the form of religious culture which is perhaps most compatible with modernity is that which grants a limited scope to the sacred and which promotes a low degree of integration between corporate and individual value systems. It is occult and esoteric religion which best exemplifies this type of religious culture. It can be practised without coming into conflict with everyday occupational roles since it confines itself to very particular times, places, objects,

and issues. It provides an ecstatic and magical form of activity and an opportunity to indulge in the irrational against the enforced rationality of formal and bureaucratically structured organisations and roles of everyday life. Clearly Fenn is close to Campbell in this view and the notion of 'epistemological individualism' (Wallis, 1984) would also fit well here. A recent study which exemplifies Fenn's points empirically and insightfully (Luhmann, 1989) shows how followers of witchcraft and magic in London and the surrounding areas of south-eastern England are for the most part well-educated, well-qualified professionals, many of whom are scientifically trained and employed in such industries as computers and as research chemists.

Fenn goes further than writers such as Campbell and Wallis, however, in emphasising the difficulties that religious cultures with overarching value systems, which give a very wide scope to the sacred and which require a high degree of congruence between the private and the corporate spheres, can present in contemporary society. A religious culture of this kind generates conflicts and tensions in societies in which technical rationality dominates, and which are not and cannot be integrated by overarching values.

For Fenn, then, religion may persist in modern society but with a very different role and character. Secularisation actually produces a distinctive religious style appropriate to modern circumstances (Beckford, 1989, p. 116):

Secularisation does not drive religion from modern society but rather fosters a type of religion which has no major functions for the entire society. ... The affinity between secular societies and certain types of sectarian religiosity, then, derives from the tendency of both to foster the disengagements of the individual's deepest motivations and highest values from the areas of political and economic action.

(Fenn, 1972, p. 31)

There are many advantages in Fenn's approach, particularly his emphasis on secularisation as the boundary between sacred and secular being a matter of social contest and the complex and often contradictory nature of the process. There is a worrying aspect to his work, however, which stems from his very deliberate eschewal of any attempt to define his terms and concepts clearly or to directly address central debates. He considers that any attempt to define too precisely what religion or secularisation mean would fail to reflect the ambiguous and highly contested meanings these terms have in everyday life. He abdicates any responsibility to state as precisely as he can what he means by religion and secularisation by declaring his intention to put such difficulties themselves at the core of his analysis since they provide critical information as to the nature of secularisation which is 'lost by analysts who use only satisfyingly clear concepts with adequate boundaries' (1978, p. 29). A technically adequate vocabulary is of little use, he claims, in interpreting the contradictory aspects of secularisation. There is much confusion in such claims. It may be true that critical information might be overlooked in the desire to fix concepts precisely but it does not follow

that one's own vocabulary can be vague, loose and contradictory in confronting the issues. Fenn confuses the contradictory nature of the process of secularisation with the contradictory nature of the concepts that have been used to describe it and with the contradictions that exist within and between discussions, debates and theories about it. How could Fenn know that the contradictions and disagreements about the meaning of secularisation can provide useful information about the nature of the process unless he knows what the process in essence is? His conception is, in fact, left to a large extent implicit apart from the characterisation of it as the separation of the sacred from the secular. Such a conception is clearly related to the more inclusive definitions of religion which are associated with Durkheimian and functionalist approaches in which Fenn's roots clearly lie and with which he has not entirely broken, despite his criticisms of the functionalist account of religion.

It is this conceptual ambiguity in Fenn's work that may underlie his characterisation of the process of secularisation as contradictory and therefore reversible. For example, the desecularising tendencies of stage three, with the emergence of a civil religion, clearly assume an inclusive conception of religion whereas the secularising aspects of this phase presuppose a more restrictive conception. It is not clear, therefore, if Fenn is showing that the process of secularisation is in reality contradictory and ambivalent or whether he is showing that it can be seen as such when one takes into account the conflicting conceptions of religion that underlie debates about secularisation. We are not sure to what extent he is attempting to further our understanding of the process of secularisation *per se* or our understanding of what has been said about it and debated – a discussion of theories and views of secularisation. It would seem that what he is actually doing is more the latter than the former. In this respect his work may be enlightening but it is misleading if it pretends to be other than this.

A final point about Fenn's work is that it is largely applicable only to the United States. Indeed, most discussions of secularisation are addressed to the Christian Western world. Much less has been said on the question of the extent to which non-Christian and non-Western countries are or are not undergoing such a process and why. Comparing Europe, North America and the Middle East, Martin (1991) concludes that secularisation is largely a European phenomenon. He relates this to the struggles between the churches and secular forces in the history of Europe in the early modern era which discredited religion to an extent not experienced elsewhere. These struggles are, however, now at an end, he claims, perhaps leaving religion some space once again.

Casanova (1994) takes a similar view and documents just how effectively religion has in many instances begun to occupy the more public regions of that space. Beyer (1994) has explored the impact of globalisation on religion, which, while tending to promote its privatisation to some extent, nevertheless simultaneously provides opportunities for it to play a public role in certain contexts. The new Christian right, liberation theology, Islamic revivalism, and militant Zionism are clear examples that he analyses. Less obviously, environmentalism also, he argues, provides scope for the re-entry of religious orientations and

sentiments into public life. Voyé (1999) notes how prominent leading representatives of the churches in otherwise highly secularised contexts are on various commissions set up to look at ethical issues, for example, relating to new bio-technologies. It is as if only religion retains the requisite level of competence to judge these matters. This is a good example of how religion may be increasingly becoming what Beckford (1989) has characterised as a cultural resource. No longer institutionalised, it has the flexibility and adaptability to be put to many purposes often in combination with a variety of other ideas and beliefs which are less clearly religious but which might claim to be, or not at least object to being labelled, 'spiritual'.

## RELIGION IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The vitality of religion in many parts of the non-Western world leads many to cast doubt upon the likelihood that it will undergo a process similar to that seen in the West. Pereira de Queiroz (1989) argues that in the case of Brazil the rise of the new and often syncretistic sects and in particular Umbanda, which has become almost a new national religion rivalling Catholicism, tells against the thesis that industrialisation and modernisation will bring about a similar decline of religion that the West and the developed world have witnessed. On the other hand the process of industrialisation, especially in the early stages, frequently generates religious revivals and it could be argued that what we observe in the developing world today is reminiscent of England in the early nineteenth century (Bruce, 1996b). Brazil is a country which is clearly in the early stages of industrialisation. The striking growth of Protestantism in Latin America generally, so well described by Martin (1990), may similarly be attributed to the social changes stemming from the modernisation process; a 'transformative process' (Martin, 1995, 1998; De Mola, 2000). In Africa, according to Jules-Rosette (1989), the reaction to industrial change has often been to seek novel ways to create a sense of religious unity and group identity through the integration of the sacred into everyday life.

In the Islamic world does fundamentalism represent a challenge to the secularisation thesis as Stark (1999) believes or is it better understood as a reaction to Western power and influence and the work of cultural defence against it? In developing countries we would expect that the educated and professional groups would be most likely to espouse the values and ethos associated with rationalisation and less likely to be actively religious. However, in the case of Indonesia, Tamney (1979) finds that such groups are the most religious and pious. On the other hand, religion receives official support in Indonesia and in legitimating it the political elite there create an association between religious piety and modernisation, on the one hand, and traditional, popular religious forms with backwardness, on the other. Also, Islam became a symbol of freedom against Dutch rule and highly prestigious as a consequence. In Malaysia Islamic fundamentalism is the counterpart of the new religious movements that have affected the West, Regan argues (1989). It has generated a new religious feel to



the culture which has come to characterise almost every aspect of modern life. Arjomand (1989) shows that the political ideology of Islamic fundamentalism in its various forms, most of which have rejected Western models of liberalism, nationalism and socialism, is very much a modern development which seems to run counter to earlier expectations of growing secularism and materialism as the forces of development took effect. Indeed, reformist,<sup>8</sup> 'puritan' Islam, in the sense of the rejection of popular and folk forms, is not necessarily incompatible with certain aspects of modernity even if it opposes much of the culture associated with modernity in the West (Gellner, 1992; Turner, 1991a).<sup>9</sup>

While it may be agreed that evidence from the developing world might lead us to question whether secularisation is the inevitable consequence of modernisation and industrialisation, it is far from conclusive. Many of these societies have hardly yet industrialised to the extent that Britain had when Methodism and other nonconformist denominations made their great advance among the new industrial working classes. Today Methodism is among the most rapidly declining of denominations. Martin (1991) warns proponents of the secularisation thesis, however, against too much reliance upon this sort of alibi and also against the tendency to dismiss intensified religiosity in Eastern Europe as essentially nationalism and only incidentally religion.

The fact is that we do not yet know if secularisation is a specifically Western or a specifically Christian phenomenon or if it is a phenomenon of industrialisation or of some wider process of modernisation. It is unlikely to be simply the result of industrialisation. Non-Christian and non-Western countries, therefore, may only experience it if their industrialisation is accompanied by westernisation or modernisation along Western lines. If secularisation is specifically a Christian phenomenon, they are certainly unlikely to undergo it since westernisation, if it occurs at all, is unlikely to mean Christianisation.

## CONCLUSION

The supply-side challenge to the assumption that pluralism undermines religion, that the past was as religious as supposed, that modernity and industrialisation are incompatible with religion and the general emphasis upon the continuing survival of religious belief, have led many sociologists of religion to conclude that the secularisation thesis is dead. Others have strenuously opposed such a conclusion but for the anti-secularisation theorists, especially in the United States, the old paradigm for understanding religion in the modern world has for the most part given way to a new one (Warner, 1993). Rather than assuming secularisation to be an inevitable and (eventually) universal concomitant of modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation, it is seen by such writers as a highly variable and entirely reversible phenomenon contingent upon a variety of factors which are on the whole due to the state of the prevailing religious market rather than to progressive processes of change and development. Whereas the old paradigm saw the United States as the exception to the general trend of

secularisation associated with modernity, industrialisation and technology – American exceptionalism – the new paradigm treats it as one variant in a range of possibilities. Rather than the United States lagging behind Europe and other industrial societies for particular local reasons, its religious vitality is seen as potentially a model for any society, should religious market conditions elsewhere come to resemble those of the United States. The persistence in European nations of relatively high levels of belief in the face of low levels of participation is taken as evidence of potential demand (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). According to this view, the situation could change dramatically if the supply side in Europe were to become as active as it is in the United States in catering to this potential demand. On the other hand, as Bruce (2000) has pointed out, the conditions for such supply-side vigour have been around now for some time and we are yet to see much activity beyond the peripheral and the fringe. The jury is still out.

## 16 Religion and rational choice

Rational choice theory has been encountered quite extensively in discussing secularisation. It is perhaps the most systematic recent attempt to provide a general theory of religion. It shares much in common with several of the theoretical approaches discussed in earlier chapters. In some ways it might be classified as an intellectualist theory, given its emphasis on achieving rewards, while in others it is reminiscent of emotionalist approaches. To some extent it echoes the emphasis on deprivation that is characteristic of Marxist theory. It has certainly sought to integrate the insights of many of these approaches.

### STARK AND BAINBRIDGE

The earliest statement of the rational choice approach was set out by Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985, 1987).<sup>1</sup> In later work Stark has modified and extended his position somewhat (1999) and others have made, and continue to make, important contributions. Their work has generated intense debate and criticism. To begin, however, with Stark and Bainbridge's original systematic statement of the approach.<sup>2</sup> They present what they consider to be a deductive theory of religion (1980b, 1987) in that it is derived from a general theory, of human nature and action constructed from a small number of basic axioms concerning the fundamental characteristics of individuals and small groups and a larger number of propositions either derived from these axioms or elsewhere. The approach relies very heavily on exchange theory which is based on the principle that all, or nearly all, human interactions can be treated as a form of exchange. This basic and very general theory is then developed further to account for a wide range of specific forms of religion and in particular is applied to the understanding of the emergence and development of sects and cults. And, as we saw in the previous chapter, they also apply their ideas extensively to the understanding of the process of secularisation and what they claim is a process of desecularisation in contemporary Western Christian societies. Space does not permit a detailed presentation of the theory from first principles here. We shall take up the account at the point at which religion enters the picture, referring back to prior propositions as necessary.

Religion, Stark and Bainbridge argue, is essentially an attempt to gratify desires or, as they put it, secure rewards. Rewards are defined as anything which human beings desire and are willing to incur some cost to obtain. Rewards include very specific and limited things as well as the most general things such as solutions to questions of ultimate meaning and even unreal or non-existent things, conditions or states. Costs are anything that people attempt to avoid. Thus it follows that a cost will be accepted in order to secure a reward if the reward is valued more highly than the cost. Stark and Bainbridge see rewards and costs as complementary. If a reward is foregone, it is equivalent to a cost while if a potential cost is avoided, it is equivalent to a reward.

For Stark and Bainbridge religion is the attempt to secure desired rewards in the absence of alternative means. In discussing their views on secularisation, it was seen that they consider religion to be a universal and inevitable feature of human societies since life by its very nature entails deprivations of various kinds which can never be satisfied by mundane means. This is a fundamental axiom in their system. The rewards to which religious belief and behaviour are addressed are those of a very general kind. In order to obtain rewards, human beings seek and develop what Stark and Bainbridge call explanations, namely, statements about how and why rewards may be obtained and costs incurred. Since explanations tell people how to obtain rewards, they are themselves desirable and also, therefore, rewards in themselves. Religion deals in a particular type of explanation, that which involves supernatural assumptions. By supernatural, Stark and Bainbridge mean forces believed to be beyond or outside nature which are able to overrule natural physical forces.

Religion inevitably tends towards supernaturalism because certain rewards are not easily obtainable, especially since they include things which may not or do not even exist. In the absence of the actual reward, explanations may be accepted which posit attainment of the reward in the distant future or in some other non-verifiable context. Such explanations Stark and Bainbridge call 'compensators'. These compensators are treated as if they were themselves rewards but are, in fact, hopes for and promises of future rewards. There is a tendency, where rewards are strongly desired yet difficult to obtain, to accept compensators which are not readily susceptible to unambiguous verification. Rival explanations which are easier to verify tend to be found false and are rejected, leaving the field to those which are more difficult to verify and therefore to disprove.

Very general compensators, that is those that promise very general rewards, can only be supported by explanations that make reference to the supernatural. That is to say, religion provides a set of beliefs about how very general rewards can be obtained as well as a set of compensators in the face of the impossibility of attaining such rewards here and now. An example used by Stark and Bainbridge is that of the desire for immortality. The uncertainty of attainment of this aim leads to compensators being invented, the validity of which cannot be determined empirically but which must be accepted on faith.

Compensators are not, however, necessarily religious in character. Religion is a system of compensators of a high level of generality based upon supernatural assumptions. Certain goals require explanations and compensators of a supernatural kind – they are simply that kind of desire or question. These are the questions of ultimate meaning and purpose in life and the world. In this respect Stark and Bainbridge are close to the meaning theorists discussed in Chapter 14. For this reason they dismiss the idea that their theory is essentially a deprivation theory. Deprivation may play an important role in stimulating religious endeavour but it is by no means the only or the most significant factor. Those who are least deprived still seek answers and solutions to fundamental existential questions; they still seek explanations and compensators of a very high level of generality. Some deprivations such as the inevitability of death are shared by rich and poor alike. Also, as Weber pointed out, religious commitment may be inspired not only by the hope of overcoming deprivation but may also be an expression and justification of privilege.

More specific desires which cannot be fulfilled and for which compensators are devised are, according to Stark and Bainbridge, magical in nature. The distinction between general and specific compensators allows them to distinguish between magic and religion. Magic does not concern itself with the meaning of the universe but with the manipulation of reality for specific ends. Being so concerned with specific goals it is vulnerable to empirical test in a way in which religious claims are not. It tends to flourish, therefore, in circumstances in which people lack effective and economical means for subjecting claims to empirical test. Magical beliefs are distinguished from scientific beliefs on the basis that their claims are held without regard for empirical evidence of their truth ‘and which are found wanting if they are properly evaluated’ (1987, p. 41). Magic offers only compensators, then, because it does not provide real rewards but promises of reward which are false. Magic is not based upon compensators which are supernatural in kind: only religion offers this. Stark and Bainbridge are able to identify, therefore, many contemporary forms of magic flourishing in Western, rational, technological society which are often based upon scientific-sounding ideas but which are not supported by evidence. They include what Stark and Bainbridge call pseudosciences and pseudotherapies which provide compensators for a wide range of specific desires but do not make reference to the supernatural.

In *A Theory of Religion* Stark and Bainbridge go on to develop the core theory in various ways, including derivations of beliefs in gods and spirits and the emergence of religious specialists and organisations. These are derived from a general theory of social structure and culture. All the details of this need not be set out here but simply that in the process of the development of social structure and culture, according to Stark and Bainbridge, specific cultural specialisations emerge and evolve into cultural systems, one of which is concerned with religion. Similarly, when societies reach a certain size and level of complexity, specific social organisations emerge, including religious organisations.

Early in the development of religious conceptions the idea of gods emerges. Gods are supernatural beings who share with humans the attributes of having consciousness and desires. In seeking certain rewards, beings such as this are imagined who are able to provide the desired rewards. Since Stark and Bainbridge's theory is based upon exchange theory, they naturally present the relationship that worshippers have with their gods in terms of an exchange relationship. They postulate that when humans cannot satisfy their desires themselves they will seek to satisfy them by entering into exchange relationships with other human beings. When other human beings are unable to satisfy them, they will tend to invent the compensator that there are supernatural exchange partners who can satisfy these desires. Since humans seek rewards from the gods by exchanging with them, it follows that gods must be like other exchange partners in having desires which humans can satisfy. Thus the gods make demands upon people in return for rewards, either immediate or eventual. Since many rewards are not in any other way attainable, the gods tend to be seen as powerful in relation to humans who are seen to be dependent upon them. However, Stark and Bainbridge point out, perceiving themselves to be following Malinowski, people will only enter into exchanges with gods if no cheaper or more efficient alternative for the satisfaction of their desires exists.

With the growth in size and complexity of society, religious specialists tend to emerge. In order to understand how and why this is so, Stark and Bainbridge utilise a further basic postulate of their system, namely, that explanations as to how rewards can be obtained and of the value of compensators must be evaluated before they can be accepted. Explanations vary with respect to how easy or difficult it is to evaluate them and the costs involved in doing so. Very general explanations and compensators which offer very general rewards, and this includes religious explanations and compensators, are the most difficult to evaluate. It becomes impossible for any individual to evaluate all the explanations on offer. People come to rely upon those they trust to carry out such evaluation and will accept explanations evaluated by them. Some come to specialise in certain areas and religion is one area where such specialisation is particularly likely. This is because in most other areas of life explanations and compensators are much more subject to the possibility of empirical testing and assessment. The propositions of religion are very often not so susceptible. In other areas, then, specialisation cannot emerge until sound empirical knowledge has been established. For example, mining and metalworking are fields where specialisation is impossible until sound knowledge and technique have been developed. Religion as a specialisation is not constrained in this way. For this reason, Stark and Bainbridge argue, religion will be one of the first specialisms to emerge in human society.

Once such specialists emerge, they will tend to combine in organisations which will seek a religious monopoly. This is because the authority of explanations will be greater to the extent that there are no competing explanations and disagreements about such things. Competition tends to undermine the value of explanations. Such a monopoly generally requires the dominant religious organisation to establish a close alliance with the state,

since it is the state in such societies that wields sufficient power to enforce a monopoly. At this point Stark and Bainbridge explore relationships between Church and state.

Since Stark and Bainbridge base their approach on exchange theory, they speak of religious specialists and organisations as exchanging rewards, explanations and compensators with others. Religious specialists, or priests, claim to mediate between human beings and the gods, communicating to people what it is the gods require of them in return for the rewards and compensators the gods offer. In this way priests and religious organisations come to have considerable power in society and influence over norms and standards of behaviour. Since the rewards of religion are often things which can only be achieved in the long term, even after death, the relationship between priests and religious organisations, on the one hand, and worshippers, on the other, tends to be a permanent and enduring one. Consequently, religious organisations tend to be enduring and relatively permanent. The relationship that worshippers have with them tends to take the form of commitment, and usually lifelong commitment, rather than periodic patronage for specific ends as they arise. This makes religious specialists and organisations especially influential, powerful and able to control and set standards for behaviour. They come to play a very central and important social role.

Stark and Bainbridge postulate that the more complex a society becomes, the greater the scope of the explanations which make up its culture. This applies to its religious explanations also and it follows from this that gods come to have greater scope, the more complex are the society and culture. They come to govern more and more aspects of life and to offer greater rewards and compensators. An aspect of the development of complexity is systematisation. Higher-order explanations are developed which subsume and account for lower-order explanations. Explanations of more general scope emerge. This, again, applies to religious explanations with the consequence that the gods come to govern wider aspects of reality and life. The result is that increasingly fewer gods of increasingly greater scope are worshipped.

Magic, in contrast to religion, does not tend to throw up specialist organisations because it offers very specific rather than very general compensators like religion. Specific compensators are highly susceptible to disconfirmation and for this reason long-term exchange relationships between magical specialists and clients cannot develop. If long-term, relatively stable exchange relationships cannot develop, then an organisation will not develop. Durkheim was right to characterise religion as having no church. Magic involves individual practitioners, each with a fluctuating clientele with whom they exchange for very limited and specific purposes and this differentiates magic from religion.

While early on magic and religion tend to be closely associated, as society becomes more complex, they tend to become increasingly differentiated in terms of specialists and organisation. Religion does usually offer specific rewards to some extent but to offer too much of this kind risks religion being discredited through disconfirmation of its specific explanations and compensators. Over time



religious specialists will tend to reduce the amount of magic they supply, leaving others to specialise in the provision of this type of compensator. The roles of magician and priest, then, tend to become increasingly differentiated, as do religious and magical cultures generally.

Nevertheless, a variety of relationships between magical and religious cultures is possible and in many societies and religious traditions there is a degree of overlap between them. Where religion continues to provide supernaturally based specific compensators, it will tend to oppose supernaturally based magic outside its own system. On the other hand, if religion has more or less relinquished the provision of supernaturally based specific compensators, it will tolerate their provision by specialists outside its own organisation. The first situation is characteristic of Catholicism and the second of orthodox Buddhism and Taoism.

These latter instances are extreme developments, Stark and Bainbridge argue, in which God has become infinite in scope and one in number and therefore loses all interest in this world. An impersonal principle such as the Tao cannot provide rewards and compensators and cannot act as an exchange partner. People, however, require an active God who can provide compensators for intense desires. Consequently, if a religion evolves to the point where it has only one god of infinite scope and is unable to provide specific supernatural compensators, it will have little to offer most people. It can no longer render evil meaningful in human terms. Evil becomes simply a natural feature of the world which people must bear the burden of attempting to vanquish on their own. The depersonalisation and desacralisation of evil in contemporary liberal Protestantism are, significantly, accompanied by a dramatic fall in support.

The greater part of Stark and Bainbridge's *A Theory of Religion* is devoted to a discussion of the way in which religious organisations and traditions tend to divide, that is, religious schism, and to the way in which new rival and alternative religions rise up in opposition to established ones. In short, it is devoted to the study of sectarian and cult movements. This is more familiar territory for Stark and Bainbridge since much of their previous work has been devoted to these topics. This work, and its formal systematisation in *A Theory of Religion*, will be examined in the next chapter, along with other relevant contributions to the study of sects and cults. To conclude this chapter their general theoretical approach will be discussed and assessed.

## CRITICISMS OF STARK AND BAINBRIDGE

Stark and Bainbridge's attempt to set out an extensive, systematic, deductive theory of religion which explains all of its fundamental characteristics and general development is sufficiently ambitious (there are a total of 344 empirical propositions and 104 definitions of concepts) that it is bound, as they themselves fully acknowledge, to contain flaws, inconsistencies and gaps. There are, indeed, many aspects which appear problematic such as the fundamental assumption that all humans by nature desire answers to existential and ultimate issues. This

overlooks the fact that such desires may not be the product of human nature but socially determined and culturally variable (Bibby and Weaver, 1985). Another example is the proposition that the most general compensators can be supported only by supernatural explanations which Stark and Bainbridge say is self-evidently true. They go on to say that since to seek the purpose of life is to presuppose that it has a purpose and since this implies the existence of intentions and motives and therefore a consciousness, then the necessary conclusion is that some conscious agent is at work to which intentions, motives and purposes will be attributed. This is by no means self-evident. To say that people seek a purpose in life or the purpose of life may imply no more than that they seek meaning in it and, in doing, so they may well arrive at conclusions which do not suppose the existence of some supernatural realm, divinity or principle (Bibby and Weaver, 1985). Some religious traditions, notably Buddhism, do not place the supernatural at the centre of their systems. It is debatable whether conceptions of the supernatural are part of orthodox Buddhism at all.

This raises the question of Stark and Bainbridge's equation of religion with belief in the supernatural. They say very little in justification of their use of such a definition and simply brush aside the issues, claiming that the problems, especially in relation to Buddhism, have been adequately dealt with by Spiro (1966). However, this will not do as the discussion of the problems with such a definition in Chapter 1 demonstrated. In any case, Spiro, as indicated in that discussion, is careful not to define religion in terms of the supernatural, preferring the term superhuman, which is, in any case, not without its own difficulties.

A second example of breakdown in deductive logic concerns the proposition that human beings will tend to conceptualise supernatural sources of rewards and costs as gods (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987, p. 82). This may or may not be true but it is a notion not derived in any clear way by Stark and Bainbridge from their axioms and other propositions but merely asserted. Seeking great and difficult rewards, human beings, Stark and Bainbridge assert, simply imagine supernatural exchange partners who can deliver these rewards with no account of why this should be so. The underlying assumption seems to lie in the commitment to the use of the approach of exchange theory. Since all human interaction is some form of exchange, rewards can only be obtained through entering into exchange relationships. If one can enter into exchange relationships with certain beings to obtain rewards of a general type, then these beings must have a will and purposes like those of human beings and must, therefore, have the characteristics of gods. None of this is, however, clearly stated. And in any case, while such reasoning might explain why belief in supernatural sources of reward will tend to take the form of gods, it still fails to account for why people come to think that they can get the rewards they desire from supernatural sources in the first place. As Guthrie puts it, it fails to 'explain how wishful fantasies become plausible enough to satisfy us' (1996, p. 413). Guthrie also point out that it fails to explain why religious belief postulates not just gods but fearful aspects such as demons, devils and hells that threaten rather than reward. One might add that gods themselves are not always benevolent but often punitive.

There are many other examples of gaps in the chain of reasoning in Stark and Bainbridge's account. Those mentioned here might have been chosen at random. To be fair to Stark and Bainbridge, they do not pretend that their theory is any way near complete and acknowledge that there will be gaps which they invite others to fill. However, those mentioned here do concern rather central aspects of the theory and have been focused upon for that reason.

Aside from its lacunae, the approach has attracted criticism for its very reliance on exchange theory *per se*. This is not the place to undertake a general critique of this theoretical approach. In terms of its application to religion, however, we might question whether the activities that constitute religion can successfully and completely be described solely in terms of the language of exchange and rational choice. In discussing secularisation, it was observed that many critics consider that the rational choice approach neglects social, political and historical factors. The focus is on individual decision-making outside of any social and cultural context (Ellison, 1995). Bruce (1993) stresses the essential difference between religion and consumer products. One does not change one's religion according to what is on offer in the market like one changes the make of car one drives. In fact, religion is often the sort of thing one ideally does not change at all since a central aspect of it is precisely commitment.

Chavez (1995) points out that the apparently systematic, deductive structure of rational choice theory is highly deceptive. Very little can be deduced from its basic axioms and it has to introduce a wealth of substantive propositions and assumptions, upon the adequacy of which it will crucially depend. In claiming that their theory seeks to incorporate the insights of earlier theoretical approaches, Stark and Bainbridge are acknowledging precisely this fact. Sherkat (1997) shares the view that social and cultural factors are important. Markets are always embedded in social relations and religious markets particularly so. They are not comprised of freely choosing independent actors or competitive firms. Also, Sherkat reminds us, preferences are not the same as choices. Whatever our preferences might be, our choices, including our religious choices, are shaped by the actions of those around us and do not match what we would prefer to do.

Perhaps one of the chief difficulties, however, with Stark and Bainbridge's approach, as Wallis and Bruce have pointed out (Wallis and Bruce, 1984; Wallis, 1984, pp. 62–3), concerns the central notion of a compensator. It is not at all clear why many religious beliefs should constitute compensation of some kind. In what sense is belief in immortality a compensation for anything? Such a belief may give comfort in the face of the threat of meaninglessness that death seems to hold for us but this is not the same thing as a compensation for the fact of mortality but a denial of it or of the significance it might otherwise have. Use of the notion of compensation betrays on the part of Stark and Bainbridge, according to Wallis, an assumption that real rewards can only be material and immediate. Non-material and long-term goals become simply compensators for what cannot be attained now rather than things desired for their own sake. This is to imply that what religion offers is essentially unsatisfactory and only acceptable in the face of an inability to obtain what is really desired. The approach illegitimately introduces

a substantive atheism into the analysis of religion rather than methodological atheism.

This claim, however, does something of a disservice to Stark and Bainbridge, who do not quite say what Wallis accuses them of. What they do say is that such things as the belief that one can achieve immortality stem from desires which cannot be satisfied in the way everyday and mundane desires can. In this sense immortality is a kind of reward. A reward for Stark and Bainbridge is simply anything which is desired and which something will be sacrificed to obtain. Stark and Bainbridge define a compensator as the postulate of a reward according to explanations which are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation. A compensator is resorted to when a desire cannot be fulfilled. 'Compensator' is, perhaps, an unfortunate choice of term since it tends to be interpreted in the sense of a substitute for what people really want but cannot get. It carries the connotation of consolation prize. Stark and Bainbridge do not, however, use the term in quite this way. They are careful to point out that a compensator is a promise of the reward and not a substitute of something else for it. As with a promise, one cannot be sure that it will be kept. Evaluation of it is necessary and not always easy. Religion promises, among other things, very general rewards, one might say of the transcendental kind and these are, of course, extremely difficult to evaluate with any certainty precisely because they are not of a material or mundane nature.

It is significant, then, that in his later and extended formulation (1999), Stark drops the term compensator entirely with no substantial consequences for the approach. In an earlier account of the origins and long gestation of the theory he and Bainbridge ultimately published in *A Theory of Religion* (1987), Stark reveals that they never much liked the term because of its negative connotations but simply could not come up with a better one. In his 1999 formulation Stark is able to dispense with any special term for religious rewards. The relevant proposition now becomes 'to the degree that rewards are scarce, or are not directly available at all, humans will tend to formulate and accept explanations for obtaining the reward in the distant future or in some other non-verifiable context' (ibid., p. 268). For the most part, religious rewards are actually, if not exclusively, other-worldly in the sense that they can be obtained only in a non-empirical and usually posthumous context.

The real problem, then, is not that Stark and Bainbridge's theory sees religion as offering compensation for something that cannot be obtained but why it is that explanations which cannot be unambiguously evaluated, or evaluated at all, will be accepted. It is the problem of why people will accept explanations which promise rewards only in another world and posthumously. Contrast Stark and Bainbridge's approach with that of a meaning theorist such as Weber, with whom, in claiming that their approach is not a deprivation theory, Stark and Bainbridge consider that they agree. In the face of gross injustice, of suffering, of inevitable death, life threatens to appear without meaning. Religion places these aspects of life in a context where they make sense. The force of a belief in immortality, for example, is that it makes physical death appear to be

part of a world which is not senseless. Another belief which may have such force is that of reincarnation or the extinction of the self in a state of *nirvana*. Of course, the idea of immortality in a heaven or paradise or of *nirvana* may well be thought by believers to be a highly desirable thing, but the real force of such ideas may be their capacity to make sense of an otherwise apparently meaningless reality. The language of reward and cost simply does not do justice to these conceptions. For this reason, it is difficult to see why such ideas will be accepted as promises of reward, as compensations. It is difficult to see why people should simply imagine the existence of powerful exchange partners who can, if the terms are right, satisfy all desires. It is easier to see why this belief might come about as a means of making sense of things rather than simply as a means of concretely securing something, although it may well be seen in both ways at the same time. It is because its primary role is to make sense of things and not to secure rewards that it does not matter too much, if at all, if it is difficult to evaluate unambiguously in the way that accounts of how to achieve mundane goals can be evaluated.

There is a certain slipperiness in Stark and Bainbridge's use of the concept of reward. Not only is everlasting life in paradise a reward but so is the explanation of how it can be attained and the sense of meaning it can give to life. Explanations and meaning are in a sense rewards but they are not rewards in quite the same way that paradise is. An explanation of how it can be attained is a means to an end and the meaning that this explanation gives to life is not a posthumous reward but one that is enjoyed in this life, here and now. This has important implications for how we understand religion. In making sense of things, religion, as Weber stresses (Collins, 1997), confronts the problem of evil and of ethics. The rational choice approach has little to say about this aspect of religion. Ethics and moral sentiments are about community and solidarity, as Durkheim taught us. Again, rational choice theory neglects this whole dimension of religion. Religion is thus about punishment as well as reward. This is why it postulates threatening entities such as devils, as Guthrie (1996) points out, and why its gods are often as punitive as they are benevolent.

It is in relation to this question of evaluation of religious promises that Wallis and Bruce (1984) offer a rather more telling criticism of Stark and Bainbridge. They are guilty of what Wallis and Bruce call explanatory dualism. In distinguishing the rewards that religion offers, as opposed to those of mundane techniques or science, Stark and Bainbridge say they are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation. This basis for making such a distinction Wallis and Bruce find problematic. It does not accord with contemporary philosophy of science, which holds that conclusive verification of scientific claims is not possible. Even unequivocal falsification of scientific propositions is questionable according to Wallis and Bruce's understanding of the philosophy of science. In any case, many scientific propositions, whether or not they are verifiable or falsifiable in principle, are not so in practice. This does not make them religious propositions. Conversely, there are many religious claims that may be in principle as verifiable as scientific ones.

The difference between science and religion lies not in the ease or difficulty of the empirical verifiability of their respective propositions, according to Wallis and Bruce (*ibid.*), but in the fact that science, at least as a social practice and at the institutional level, encourages empirical testing and disconfirmation while religion seeks to protect its claims from disconfirmation. One might add the point here that many religious claims are, in any case, not the kind of claims for which empirical verification is appropriate. In so far as religious statements are expressions of the meaning of things, the question of empirical verification is irrelevant.

Stark and Bainbridge, then, treat scientific propositions as if they were unproblematic with regard to verification and the reasons people have for believing them are similarly seen as unproblematic. They are believed because they are true. Religious beliefs are those which are problematic in this respect and, if people espouse them, there must be some special reason for this which it is the task of the sociologist to uncover. Because the beliefs do not accord with the sociological observer's view of the world, there must be some pathology behind them or some sociological or psychological factor which has impaired the normal propensity to accept only what is clearly true. But it is simply not relevant to an understanding of the beliefs of, say, the Trobriand Islanders or the Azande that they do not accord with those of a Western observer. To place our own disagreement with them at the centre of our analysis, as Stark and Bainbridge do, is likely to lead to misunderstanding and distorted accounts of religious systems.

Also, Stark and Bainbridge's discussion of magic and how it differs from religion is very unsatisfactory. Magic deals in specific rather than general compensators seeking to secure concrete rewards (although it too may be bound up with the attempt to see the world in terms which are meaningful and we should not overlook this aspect of it). However, precisely to the extent that it does seek concrete rewards, the notion of compensation is misapplied to it. Unlike religion, magic does not really offer the reward eventually at some deferred time but offers it now. Those who practise magic do so because they believe that it delivers concrete benefits immediately. They are not in their own minds accepting compensators in the face of a lack of techniques for securing what is desired but using special techniques to actually secure those desires.

The reason that Stark and Bainbridge believe that magic deals in compensators is because they think of magic as false technique. Magic, they say, refers to specific compensators that promise to provide desired rewards without regard for evidence concerning the designated means. Here the criticism that Wallis and Bruce make of their explanatory dualism is equally if not even more pertinent. From the point of view of the practitioners of magic, as was made clear in Chapter 3, there is very good evidence that it actually secures and not simply promises rewards. One might not share their view about the evidence but that is hardly relevant. The relevant questions are not why do the practitioners of magic use it in the face of *our* awareness of an absence of any evidence that it works but on what basis do *they* believe that there *is* evidence that it works and what processes underlie their conviction that the magical beliefs are acceptable? Evans-Pritchard's classic study

of the Azande is addressed very much to this question. Even then, all this, of course, assumes that magic is best conceived as consisting of empirical techniques which are not based upon evidence. If one accepts a position like that of the symbolists discussed in Chapter 3, then Stark and Bainbridge's understanding of magic is even more off the mark. Certainly, their account fails to do justice to, even to mention, the crucial symbolic dimension of magical behaviour. They seem unaware of the relevant anthropological literature and to have a shaky picture of tribal religion in general.

Finally, on a number of points of evidence, Stark and Bainbridge's generalisations seem to be wanting. One example relates again to tribal religion, with respect to which they claim that in the simpler cultures the gods are minute and very numerous such that nearly every rock, tree, stream or plant is thought to be inhabited by a supernatural being of limited and local power. This completely ignores or is entirely ignorant of the fact that, in some of the simplest societies, the Congo pygmies, for example, religious ideas are little developed at all and they are far from the animists that Stark and Bainbridge's proposition would lead us to expect them to be.

At the other end of the scale, their claim that the impersonal principle of divinity of Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Taoism, which is incapable of entering into exchanges with humans, leads to only a few having any real interest in these religions seems very wide of the mark, especially in the case of Buddhism. Certainly, Buddhism tends to leave magic to magicians, as Stark and Bainbridge rightly point out. Perhaps one could say the same of philosophical Taoism, although the magicians concerned here are very much Taoist magicians. However, the prediction that would follow from Stark and Bainbridge's claim is that Buddhism should by now be one of the world's weakest and most rapidly declining religions, which it clearly is not.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

A number of theorists who have been attracted to the rational choice approach, in particular Finke and Iannaccone, have worked with Stark in recent years in developing and applying it to a wide range of religious phenomena. The last chapter examined their work relating to the secularisation thesis and religious mobilisation. In the next chapter we shall examine their work on religious organisations, sects and cults. In terms of the general approach, Iannaccone (1997) has sought to extend it, drawing particularly upon the work of the economist Becker (1976). This acknowledges that many religious goods are not commodities distributed through markets but what are termed in economic theory 'household commodities'. These are things produced by people themselves for their own consumption, such as meals, entertainment, recreation, cleaning, and so on. They require the use of scarce resources and time and are therefore subject to the same cost-benefit calculations that any behaviour that seeks to maximise outcomes is subject to. Many religious goods are often of this kind; they can be produced by



consumers themselves as in the case of praying, Bible study, charity work, volunteering for church duties, and so on, or they can be obtained from suppliers in return for donations and material and financial support. Just as better-off families will tend to spend more on eating out than less well-off families, so, Iannaccone predicts, better-off families will obtain their religious satisfactions less by direct participation and more through making donations. Survey data support this contention (Iannaccone, 1990).

Another idea introduced by Iannaccone is that of religious capital. This is the accumulated stock of religious knowledge, skills, sensitivities, investments in relationships, and anything that is enhanced by experience gained through participation in religion. The greater this stock of capital, Iannaccone suggests, the greater will be the satisfaction an individual derives from subsequent religious activity. One gets more out of certain things the more experience and knowledge one has of them. This yields such predictions that converts to a religious group will more often be from younger age groups than older ones since the young have little religious capital that would be lost by converting. Also, the old will tend to participate more in their religious group than the young. These predictions are also supported by empirical data (*ibid.*).

Developing Stark and Bainbridge's point about the inherent uncertainty of religious rewards, Iannaccone applies the economic theory of risky commodities to religion (1992a). This allows a number of testable predictions relating to religious groups such as sects. Also on the subject of sects and religious movements, Finke and Iannaccone (1993) have argued that a supply-side economic model allows us to understand many of their features. In general the rational choice theorists tend to emphasise the supply side rather than the demand side. Contrary to the common assumption that religion changes in response to changes in the desires and needs of religious consumers, according to Finke and Iannaccone it changes as a result of developments in the supply of religious commodities. Rational choice economic models take preferences as relatively fixed and given. Human beings generally want the same things: security, comfort, material well-being, entertainment, and so on. They tend to ignore how preferences are determined, since in their eyes this is largely down to biology and universal aspects of human nature. In the case of religion in particular, as noted in discussing Stark and Bainbridge's original formulation, it is assumed that there is a universal need for some system of beliefs which offers otherwise unobtainable rewards. This emphasis on the supply side has been noted in discussing the work of the rational choice theorists on pluralism and religious vitality in the last chapter. It also underlies their approach to the understanding of aspects of sects, for example, their relative strictness of observance, social isolation, and so on. Since the next chapter is devoted to the study of sects, cults and religious movements, this topic will be taken up there. To conclude here this discussion of rational choice theory, the objections to it mentioned above in discussing Stark and Bainbridge's formulation apply equally, of course, to the extensions to it that Iannaccone offers and particularly the way it ignores social, political and historical factors. In a defence against

such critics Iannaccone (1995) acknowledges that it may indeed be, in a sense, unrealistic and oversimplifying but justifies it as at least systematic, rigorous and testable and likely, therefore, to lead to a better understanding. This is rarely true, in his view, of any alternative approach.

The debate about the application of rational choice and economic theory to spheres of human activity outside that of economic behaviour strictly understood is, of course, a broad and continuing one and by no means confined to the area of the sociology of religion. If it proves successful in other fields, its appeal will be enhanced in the sociology of religion and we can expect to see more of it. On the other hand, it may well be that a degree of success in the field of the study of religion will do more than anything to enhance its power and prestige in the social sciences generally, should, of course, it enjoy such success.

There is much more that could be said about Stark and Bainbridge's rich and extensive contribution to the general theory of religion but it is their work on sectarian and cult movements to which the next chapter turns.

# 17 Sects, cults and movements

## INTRODUCTION

Religious sects have attracted an enormous amount of interest from sociologists as have the new religious movements (NRMs) which have mushroomed in the industrial societies of the West in recent decades. This is not simply because they have been important aspects of religious history in all the great religious traditions of the world or because many of the important religious traditions themselves began as sectarian breakaways or schisms from established traditions but also because sects have a fascination in their own right. Sects are in many ways religious experiments which offer the sociologist an opportunity to study religiosity in its purest forms uncontaminated by the complexities of motive, organisation and doctrine which characterise the long-established churches and denominations. Sects also offer the opportunity to study what are often radically new ideas and beliefs, styles of organisation and life and the processes by which they emerge. Since a large proportion of their membership may be very recent converts, they offer an opportunity to study the process of conversion to unorthodox and 'deviant' beliefs and practices and how such 'deviance' is maintained against the pressures of the wider society. They offer insights into religious change and the emergence of new religious traditions. They are, in short, something of a laboratory for the sociologist of religion.

Sectarian movements and schisms have often been bound up with social divisions and conflicts. This is particularly true of the older sectarian movements within Christianity. To this extent the study of sects is also the study of social divisions. It also involves the study of attempts to build ideal societies, free of the imperfections of the dominant surrounding social milieu, which attempt to embody religious ideals, values and principles in some form of concrete social organisation. Sects have often attempted to order human social relationships in new ways and to socialise new generations in their values and patterns of life.

This chapter will focus on aspects of the sociological study of sectarianism and of cult movements which have been discussed by Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 1987) and other rational choice theorists. In particular, it will discuss the general processes by which sectarian schisms occur and cult movements arise, the process of conversion to sects and cults and the patterns of their internal

evolution and development. Before looking at the application of rational choice to the study of religious movements, however, it is necessary to outline previous work in the field, including the historical background to the sociology of sectarianism since this has greatly influenced the course of subsequent debates.

## **ERNST TROELTSCH**

A pioneer in the sociological study of sectarianism, Ernst Troeltsch followed his friend Max Weber to a considerable extent in his characterisation of the nature of the sect in relation to the Church. Weber characterised the Church as an institution which administers religious sacraments and as a result has a form of power which enables it to maintain order. The threat of withdrawing sacramental benefits gives it this 'hierocratic power'. The Church is thus like a political association. In theory, membership is compulsory and all-embracing. At least no special act of joining or special qualification is required. Members are born into the Church.

The sect, on the other hand, is a voluntary association. It makes no claim to regulate the religious lives and behaviour of those who do not wish to be considered members. Membership is in fact restricted to those who are qualified to be members. This requires some test of religious or ethical eligibility such as proof of religious commitment. Normally members are not born into the sect. The children of existing members usually have to make a positive commitment when old enough to do so.

Weber thought that sects usually tend to develop into churches. This is related to his notion of the routinisation of charisma. In the sect, charisma is attached to a religious leader whereas in the Church it is attached to an office or offices. The charisma attached to the individual becomes attached to an office as leaders succeed one another over time. As new generations of believers replace older generations, a new basis of order thus comes to prevail; charismatic authority is replaced by traditional or legal-rational authority.

Troeltsch accepted this general analysis of Weber but developed and amplified it (1931). Starting from the assumption that different religious outlooks will be realised in different types of social organisation, and working largely in the context of Christianity, he distinguished two broad tendencies in early Christianity which led to two rather different types of religious organisation. One emphasised the free equal community of believers idealistically attempting to realise Christian values such as brotherly love without regard to the rest of society. This attitude tended to play down organisation and hierarchy. The other emphasised the independent organised community which attempted to make use of the surrounding institutions for its own ends. The former was a radical tendency and the latter a more conservative one. While the conservative tendency associated with the Church came to dominate, the radical tendency was far from eradicated, showing itself in various ways, for example, in monasticism.

These two tendencies underlie Troeltsch's understanding of the distinctions between Church and sect. The former, he said, is an overwhelmingly conservative

institution which largely accepts the secular order and seeks to dominate the masses. It is, therefore, in principle at least, universal; 'it desires to cover the whole life of humanity' (*ibid.*, p. 331). It utilises the state and the ruling classes and becomes an integral part of the social order. In doing so, the Church in many respects becomes dependent on the ruling classes.

The sect is a small grouping which aspires to an inward perfection and aims at direct personal fellowship between its members. It renounces any idea of dominating the world and is either indifferent or hostile to it and to the state and society which is either avoided or to be replaced by an alternative society. Sects spring from the lower classes or those who feel oppressed by the state and by society.

Troeltsch considered that despite the fact that established churches have branded the sects as departures from true Christianity, they do in many ways embrace the early ideals of the Gospels and of primitive Christianity. This makes them of great significance in the study of the sociological consequences of Christian thought, with which Troeltsch's major study was largely concerned. Their importance is evident in the role they played in the disintegration of the medieval social order.

The main stream of development, however, has been along the lines of the Church-type of organisation which represents the longing for a universal, all-embracing ideal involving leadership of the masses and domination of society and culture. It naturally claimed a monopoly of sacramental grace. To achieve this it had to seek accommodation with the secular order.

Whenever the Church managed to establish to a significant extent its claim to be the sole dispenser of sacramental grace, the sectarian impulse in Christianity would come to the fore. The sects repudiated the claims of the Church to control divine grace through the sacraments and emphasised instead the religious value of daily life and personal relationships. The sects attacked the role of the Church in aiding the state and in furthering the interests, as they saw it, of the dominant classes. They tended to attack what they saw as injustice. Thus, Troeltsch saw the sects as largely protest movements.

Out of this clash between Church and sect a third type of religious orientation tended to develop, which Troeltsch called mysticism. Here doctrine and worship give way to purely personal and inward experience and conviction. He links this mysticism to the growth of individualism in the medieval towns. It is characterised by a free fellowship of believers with little organisation or structure. Emphasis is placed on ideas and not on worship. New ideas and modern views of the world are incorporated into the belief system. The following tends to be middle class and prosperous.

## **TYPES OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION**

There are obvious limitations and difficulties with Troeltsch's scheme, based exclusively as it is on the history of sectarianism within the Christian tradition and

during only a certain part of its history. Historically, Christian sectarianism may in some periods have been bound up with and a response to class divisions and tensions. The equation of sect with lower class and Church with middle or dominant class cannot be upheld today or for the religious movements of more recent times. Nor are contemporary or recent sectarian movements breakaways from established churches. Troeltsch's categories, furthermore, do not exhaust the variety of religious organisations that we observe in contemporary society. The denomination, for example, is clearly not at all like Troeltsch's mysticism but stands somewhere between Church and sect while in certain respects it is unlike either.

The denomination as a further category for classifying types of religious organisation was added to the typology by Niebuhr (1957),<sup>1</sup> who saw the departure from traditional and socially dominant religious doctrines and forms of organisation as a product of changing social and economic circumstances. Sectarianism was for him a product of increased division and differentiation in society. Different social classes or occupational groups adapted religious forms to suit them. In other words, we have a pluralistic situation.

Niebuhr thought, however, that the sect was not capable of surviving for long as an adaptation to a new situation. It would either reconcile itself to prevailing circumstances, at least to some extent, or it would suffer dissolution. Sects, also, tend only to exist for one generation. The second generation become members for very different reasons and out of very different motives to the first. They are born into the sect even if they do have to formally express a desire and intention to affiliate in adult life. The sect, Niebuhr said, becomes in this way a denomination or even a Church.

One factor which aids this process is that sectarian asceticism often makes sect members better off financially and this tends to pull them in the direction of worldly concerns. The religious forms of the poor eventually become middle-class organisations due to the social mobility of their members.

The fundamental characteristic of the denomination in Niebuhr's formulation is that it is not universalistic in the sense of seeking to incorporate the whole population. It is essentially a middle-class and respectable form of religious organisation and style of worship which differs from the sect in that it has a separate ministry. It emphasises individualism as a fundamental value and associated with this is the goal of personal salvation. Its lack of universalism is associated, in contrast to the sect, with tolerance and coexistence with other religious groups rather than antagonism.

Niebuhr's classification of religious organisations has since been much adapted and augmented. The concept of the cult corresponding to Troeltsch's mysticism has been added, as well as other types. In some reformulations of his typology six categories are distinguished and in others seven. The whole debate has become somewhat tedious and sterile. What is more interesting is the discussion of the processes of change in sects and religious organisations as they evolve and develop.

Niebuhr's claim, for example, that the process by which the sect becomes a denomination is primarily one in which the majority of the membership changes

its class position, has been challenged. Liston Pope (1942), in a study of a textile area of North Carolina, found that denominationalisation had less to do with change in socio-economic status of the membership but simply with success in recruitment and growth in size. As a sect grows, it acquires a sense that it can exert more influence in the community and the attractions of this often lead it away from its more sectarian attitudes towards more compromising and accommodating views. It may well attract more well-to-do adherents as a result and so change its social composition this way rather than its original membership achieving affluence and social position. There was little evidence for this in Pope's case study. If anything, those who became more prosperous were likely to leave the sect and to adopt a more socially acceptable religious affiliation. The process of denominationalisation, he argued, is a complex one and he proposed a whole series of criteria by which we may chart the development from sect to denomination.

Wilson (1990) has pointed out that Niebuhr overlooked the fact of the uniqueness of the American context in which there was no established Church, no fixed status hierarchy and where upward mobility of the individual and of religious organisations was very common. Also, Wilson argues, the distinction between first- and second-generation members is somewhat misleading. Sects which are growing make new converts all the time who tend to be more rigorous in maintaining the purity of the sect's ideology and practice than the longer-term or second-generation members and who may act as a force working against denominationalising tendencies.

Pope's ideas have been developed further by Milton Yinger who has in fact proposed several different typologies of religious organisation (1957, 1970).<sup>2</sup> What is more interesting than these typologies, however, is his discussion of the differing relationship of sect and Church to the world (1946). Yinger argues that both risk losing any possibility of influencing the world and the wider society and thereby undermine their religious goals – the Church, by making too great an accommodation to the secular world such that its religious message is lost, and the sect by its exclusiveness and radicalism. Whereas the Church may risk debasing its message to the point where it makes no difference to the conduct of life, the sect may risk having too few adherents to have any impact.

The Church must therefore set out to express its religious principles in such a way that those with power in society can be brought under its influence. Yinger finds this to be the case with both Calvinism and Catholicism, for example. The sect, on the other hand, must take on a less sectarian and more Church-like character in order to win a substantial following. It has to become what Yinger calls an established sect.

Another major contribution to this debate is that of Bryan Wilson (1970). He characterises the sect as a voluntary association with a strong sense of self-identity. Membership depends upon merit or some kind of qualification such as knowledge or acceptance of doctrine or of conversion evidenced by some form of religious experience. The sect is exclusive and regards itself as an elite in sole possession of the truth. It is separated from the wider society and at odds with prevailing



orthodoxy. Certain standards of behaviour are required of members and expulsion may follow any serious or persistent failure to live by them. Regular procedures for expulsion will exist. The commitment of the sectarian is always more total than that of the non-sectarian and he or she is always more distinctly characterised in terms of religious affiliation. The sect has no distinct or professional ministry.

The denomination, while also a voluntary association, has only formal procedures for admission and rarely any procedures for expulsion. It has a less distinct sense of self-awareness and is less exclusive. It admits to being one valid religious movement among others and makes no claim to exclusive possession of the truth. It is not separated from the wider society and its teachings and practices are less distinctive. It has a professional and distinct ministry and is not unduly antagonistic to prevailing orthodoxy.

The key dimensions of Wilson's characterisation centre on the separateness and distinctiveness of the sect and its claim to possess the truth. These have been utilised by Robertson (1970) to derive a fourfold classification of religious organisations. Robertson's classification uses, then, two sets of distinctions to generate four categories: first, inclusive membership, that is, membership open to anyone, as opposed to exclusive membership where some test or qualification of eligibility is required; and, second, what Robertson calls the self-conceived basis of legitimacy, which takes the form of either a claim to sole possession of truth or where other groups are acknowledged also to possess the essential truth.<sup>3</sup> The four types of organisation may be represented as shown in Figure 2.

This classification does not imply any linear relationship between the categories or that there is a linear development process from one to another (an assumption which has weakened many classificatory schemes). In some ways sects are more like churches than they are like denominations and in others they are more like denominations. Sects may not always develop into denominations or churches but may take the form of the institutionalised sect.

		Self-conceived basis of legitimacy	
		Pluralistically legitimate	Uniquely legitimate
Membership principle	Exclusive	Institutionalized sect	Sect
	Inclusive	Denomination	Church

*Figure 2* Typology of religious organisations

*Source:* Robertson (1970, p. 123)

In fact, there may be complex trajectories through Robertson's conceptual space and the sect-to-denomination pattern may, as a number of students of sectarianism have pointed out, be untypical (Martin, 1962; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Iannaccone, 1988). On the whole, Martin (1962) argues, sects generally do succeed in maintaining their sectarian character while denominations have for the most part never been sects but have possessed their denominational characteristics from the beginning. Typical examples would be the Methodists, Congregationalists and General Baptists. Perhaps Martin goes slightly too far in claiming the sect-to-denomination pattern is atypical. It might be more fruitful to regard it as one among a number of patterns. Also, the church-to-denomination pattern is perhaps one which occurs only in a situation of relative religious tolerance and pluralism. Where this is lacking, alternative or rival creeds and organisations are likely to be more sectarian in character.

## **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SCHISMATIC MOVEMENTS**

Previous theories of sectarianism have tended to focus on the internal dynamics of development in religious organisations and have neglected the external environment. Werner Stark (1967) attempted to remedy this to some extent in setting the process of sect emergence in the context of the relationship between Church and state. The essential problem he addresses is why some societies show much greater tendency to sect proliferation than others. Sectarianism, according to Stark, tends to flourish whenever the relationship between Church and state is such that the Church makes extensive compromises with the worldly values of the state. This occurs most often when the boundaries of the jurisdiction of the Church coincide with those of the state, or in other words when the Church is a national church, an 'established' Church, as Stark calls it.

When the Church is wider than any one nation-state in its jurisdiction, when it is what Stark calls a 'universal Church', compromise with and accommodation to secular authorities are less likely than in the case of the national Church since the universal Church is not dependent on any one secular authority. Compromise leads to disaffection and this tends to produce a proliferation of sects. In the case of the universal Church, while some degree of compromise with secular authorities may be necessary, sectarian impulses can more easily be channelled internally into monasticism and various religious orders or groups.

Stark considers that since the Reformation there has only been one genuinely universal Church – the Roman Catholic Church. There has been a much weaker tendency to sectarianism in Catholic countries than in others. Conversely, sectarianism has been most prevalent in Russia and in England where there were firmly established churches closely allied to the state.

Stark's thesis has been criticised by Scharf (1970) on the grounds that in many Catholic countries the Church has been just as established as the Church was in Tsarist Russia or in England. The Anglican Church, furthermore, was no more

established than were the Lutheran Churches in a number of northern European countries during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet sectarianism was not nearly so prevalent in the latter as in the former.

A point one might add is that the repression of rival religious creeds and organisations was much more intense in Catholic countries while in non-Catholic countries a much greater degree of religious freedom prevailed. Also, the tendency of the Catholic Church to accommodate different strands and styles of religiosity within itself is perhaps as much a cause of its survival as a universal Church as it is a consequence of its universality. If there is anything in Stark's thesis, it may be that the flexibility of the Catholic Church did result from its relative independence of any particular political regime which allowed it to accommodate a variety of different movements, such as Jansenism, Quietism, or the Jesuits. Finally, the prevalence of sectarianism may have far more to do with social change than with the relationship between Church and state. Catholic countries did not undergo the social, political and economic changes that were associated with the rise of sectarianism in northern Europe.

The nature of the social change involved may bear upon the nature and type of sect to emerge. Also, the pattern of sect development may vary according to type of sect. Sects are very varied and diverse in character. We need a typology of sects if we are to understand such relationships and processes. The best typology to date is probably that of Wilson (1970).

## THE WILSON TYPOLOGY

The basis of Wilson's scheme is the 'kind of response to the world' that the sect adopts – a world which is seen as less than satisfactory and which it is hoped to transcend in some way. Response to the world covers doctrine, style of organisation, way of life, and so on. Wilson's types are as follows.

*Conversionist* sects emphasise evangelism and the conversion of men and women to the ideals of the sect by inducing a religious awakening in them. It is not just a question of expanding numbers but of bringing about a genuine conversion experience. It seeks to induce a 'change of heart' and by doing so bring about a better world. The test of membership is the experience of conversion which is often considered essential for salvation. It is this conversion experience which is emphasised rather than rituals and ceremonies. It is often a very intense and emotional experience. Meetings and services typically seek to re-express and re-experience this emotion. Examples include the Salvation Army and the various Pentecostal movements.

*Revolutionist or Adventist* sects believe in the imminent or at least not too far off overturn and transformation of the present world and social order. In the case of Adventist sects this upheaval will be associated with the second coming of Christ – the advent. Often the event is seen as being accompanied by the resurrection of the holy dead, an idea taken from early Christianity and the prophetic books of the Bible. Salvation is confined to the morally pure and to those who are in

possession of the truth. Often the established Church is regarded by such sectarians with great hostility and antagonism and is seen as having betrayed the true faith and as the representative of the anti-Christ. These sects are, then, millenarian in character. Typical examples are the Seventh Day Adventists, Christadelphians and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

*Introversionist* sects focus attention upon the community of believers as the essential locus for the achievement of salvation. These sects tend to isolate themselves from the wider society by setting up segregated communities or by minimising as far as possible interaction and contact between members and non-members. There is an emphasis on withdrawal from the surrounding world. Typically, these sects have no spiritual leadership or specialists. Often they have set up colonies in new territories in North and South America. Examples include the Hutterites and the Amish.

*Manipulationist* or *Gnostic* sects emphasise a body of esoteric knowledge which, it is alleged, enables members or followers to attain important goals, often material as much as spiritual, in this life. The knowledge involved is often of a mystical kind requiring long study through which enlightenment slowly comes.

With this type of sect there is usually no community or congregation of a regular or permanent character. Meetings are simply gatherings of individuals who share an interests in the beliefs. Typically the membership is transitory or fluctuating. These sects tend to flourish in the impersonal atmosphere of the large city. There is an emphasis on the production and dissemination of literature rather than on evangelism or emotional meetings. Examples are Christian Science and Scientology.

*Thaumaturgical* sects are based on a belief in an ability to work wonders and miracles and by such means cure sickness, solve problems, overcome difficulties, and so on. They grow up around a medium, magician, faith healer or miracle worker. The membership may be the clientele of such a person which is relatively permanently attached to him or her as believers. Spiritualism would be an example.

*Reformist* sects are devoted to good works and the alleviation of social problems. Typically, they have developed from some other type. The Quakers are an example of a sect which became reformist after having been through revolutionist and introversionist stages. The reformist sect emphasises conscience.

*Utopian* sects frequently found colonies or communities which are usually communistic and designed to provide a model for social transformation or reconstruction. They seek to lead the way in bringing about a new world order founded on religious and moral values. This type of sect does not seek to abandon the world like the introversionist type or overthrow it like the revolutionist sect but to set an example for it. Examples include the Oneida community and the early Bruderhof groups.

Finally, there are a number of sects which do not fit any of the above types very well. Most sects are not entirely pure in type but there are some which seem to cut across the categories to a much greater extent. Usually they are sects which are highly flexible in their beliefs and practices, not emphasising any one of the

basic orientations towards salvation in particular. Often such sects are centred on charismatic individuals or messianic leaders. The most notable example, Wilson notes, is that of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints – the Mormons. This sect embodies elements of adventism, introversionism and conversionism. It combines a puritan work ethic with a distinctively worldly attitude to recreation and entertainment. It combines a somewhat Church-like form of organisation with an emphasis on lay participation in missionary work.

Wilson (1967) attempts to show how different conditions tend to generate different types of sect and how the various types have differing developmental tendencies.

Wilson's typology has been put to empirical test by Welch (1977) who finds from an examination of the features of a large number of sects that introversionist, manipulationist and thaumaturgical types are clearly distinguishable. The remaining types did not clearly emerge as distinct on the basis of Wilson's criterion of 'response to the world'. Welch suggests that the use of this single dimension, under which is subsumed aspects such as type of doctrine and organisation, results in considerable loss of discriminatory capacity for the typology. Despite its faults, however, Wilson's typology is yet to be supplanted by anything better and it has helped to generate some important insights into sect emergence and development.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF SECT EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT**

In general, sects tend to arise, according to Wilson, as a result of 'stresses and tensions differentially experienced within the total society' (1970, p. 31). The immediate factors which stimulate sectarianism are associated in his view with rapid social change and its effects on particular groups in the society. Particularly important are changes in economic position resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation. Certain groups find themselves outside the main economic and status categories – they become displaced by social change and seek to interpret and to understand their situation by means of transcendental religious modes of thought. It is insecurity and anxiety, then, that promote sectarianism, according to Wilson.

He makes the generalisation that sudden change tends to produce the response of conversionism. Longer-lasting deprivation tends to promote either revolutionist or introversionist sects. The political and social circumstances within which sects arise have an indirect influence upon them. In an environment which is hostile and intolerant, sects will tend to become clandestine and will be, understandably, more hostile in their turn to the wider society. They may seek to avoid persecution by migration and this may necessitate the adoption of a communitarian organisation. Circumstances such as these inhibit tendencies towards denominationalisation.

Democratic, pluralistic and relatively tolerant environments, on the other hand, have very different consequences for the way the sect tends to develop. In the United States, for example, a situation of rapid social change, immigration of many different ethnic and linguistic groups, consequent absence of established traditions and of a stable class structure, sects tended to proliferate and very frequently developed into denominations. On the whole, when conditions are changing and unstable, factors external to the sect itself have the greatest influence on the way it develops. When circumstances are settled, it is the internal characteristics of the sect which are most important.

Applying these generalisations to the specific types of sect Wilson finds that it is conversionist sects that tend to be promoted by a situation of religious tolerance and pluralism but it is these sects which tend to lose their sectarian character most readily. Because they are evangelistic and revivalist, they tend to produce trained or expert preachers or teachers. Inevitably a gap between these full-time specialists and the ordinary membership grows up. Preachers develop into ministers and the sect takes the route of denominationalisation.

Revolutionist and introversionist sects reject formal organisation more radically than conversionist sects. Being less evangelistic, they need it less and have not tended to so readily become denominationalised.

The problem of organisation and its character and style is one of the main issues, then, around which tensions are likely to arise as the sect develops. Other issues which generate tensions concern the degree of isolation that is to be maintained from the wider society, the response to the demands of governments and the law, and the means of socialising new generations into the values of the sect.

From this analysis Wilson concludes that the tendency towards denominationalisation is greatest in those sects:

with a general democratic ethic, which stress simple affirmation of intense subjective experience as a criterion of admission, which stand in the orthodox fundamentalist tradition, which emphasise evangelism and use revivalist techniques and which seek to accommodate groups dislocated by rapid social change.

(Wilson, 1967, p. 44)

Wilson, then, greatly modifies the picture of sect origin and development that we had from Troeltsch and Niebuhr by bringing in the factors of external environment and internal sect character. Denominationalising tendencies appear no longer to be always or typically due to generational change or to upward socio-economic mobility of sect members. He also provides a useful typology of the sect which aids us more than simply clarifying the question of denominationalisation. However, his analysis of the type of circumstance which promotes different types of sect, while taking us some way forward, remains rudimentary. His emphasis on stresses deriving from industrial and economic development is too narrow.

## RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

Other writers on the subject have sought to broaden this idea of stress to encompass a wider range of situations. Aberle (1962) and Glock (1964) have emphasised *relative* deprivation of various types underlying different types of sectarian response. The term 'relative deprivation' highlights the fact that a sense of deprivation is always relative to some level of expectation that is not fulfilled. The affluent and prosperous can still feel deprived relative to a level of expectation that is not being met, for example, during periods of economic stagnation or decline.

Aberle distinguishes four different types of deprivation: material, social position (prestige), where the behaviour of others is not seen as right or correct, and in terms of a sense of personal worth. Glock distinguishes five types: economic, social, organismic (mental and physical health), ethical (dominant values have no meaning) and psychic (lack of a personal sense of meaning).

A religious response to these forms of deprivation is more likely, Glock argues, 'where the nature of the deprivation is inaccurately perceived or where those experiencing the deprivation are not in a position to work directly at eliminating the causes' (1964, p. 29). The different types of deprivation tend to promote different types of religious movement. 'Generally speaking religious movements emerge as sects where they are stimulated by economic deprivation, as churches where the deprivation is social and as cults where it is psychic' (*ibid.*, p. 33).

This seems far too sweeping a generalisation and is not borne out by later work, especially on the more recent religious movements which have tended to recruit predominantly among the better-off and relatively well-educated younger middle-class sector of the community, but by no means exclusively by any one type of movement, either sect, Church or cult. Nor are Aberle's or Glock's typologies of deprivation entirely satisfactory in terms of clarity and precise meaning of the different types. Finally, relative deprivation theory rarely, as Beckford has pointed out (1975), establishes that the alleged sense of deprivation was actually felt or experienced by those who join. It is all too often simply assumed that it was felt. To be a valid explanation, the relative deprivation theory must establish independently of the fact of joining the sect that the deprivation was in fact experienced. This is, in most cases, very difficult to do. It is, in fact, very difficult to be sure about anything characterising the state or situation of converts prior to their conversion since the sect's ideology may itself influence the members' own perceptions of this. It may provide the member with what are regarded as valid and acceptable accounts of conversion and the reasons for it which lead the convert to reassess and reinterpret the circumstances, feelings and motives that are said to have prevailed before conversion. There are serious difficulties, then, with retrospective accounts of circumstances prior to conversion and of the reasons for conversion (Taylor, 1976, 1978; Beckford, 1978; Pilarzyk, 1978; Snow and Phillips, 1980; Snow and Machalek, 1984; Greil and Rudy, 1984).

What is valuable in Glock's discussion, however, is the reminder that deprivation is not always material and that non-material deprivation may be as



important, if not more so, in understanding the emergence and growth of religious movements. As Weber pointed out, ideal interests as much as material interests govern our conduct.

## THE INTEGRATIVE HYPOTHESIS

Religious sects and movements are often, however, much more than responses to relative deprivation of one kind or another. They may offer solutions to problems which are frequently not simply transcendental in character or which allow followers to interpret meaningfully their situation but which provide real concrete benefits in this world and life. It is often argued that they can assist their members to adapt to changed circumstances in beneficial ways. They may provide a sense of identity and community where these things have been lost or are threatened. They can generate a sense of self-respect. Very often they provide some of their members with an opportunity to achieve a position of responsibility, authority and status that would be denied them in the wider world outside the sect. Membership in an exclusive sect can generate a sense of importance and purpose in life. Finally, by providing social support, the sect may foster the development of the self-discipline necessary to succeed in life, to break with previous patterns of conduct which prevented this, to reject deviant patterns of behaviour, to reform and reintegrate with mainstream society or to overcome weaknesses. It may provide mutual support and aid in a situation of uncertainty and vulnerability so that members can overcome temporary setbacks, and so on. There has been a wide range of versions of the 'integrative hypothesis' as it is often known (Carrier, 1965; Robbins and Anthony, 1972; Moody, 1974; Robbins *et al.*, 1975; Johnson, 1976; Tipton, 1982).

A similar point that has often been made, especially with regard to the newer religious movements, is that whether or not they aid the individual to adapt they may be integrative for the society as a whole. Robbins *et al.* (1975) distinguish between adaptive and marginal movements, and point out that many of the new religious movements which have been particularly successful in attracting young people are not really as 'integrative' in the sense of re-assimilating converts into conventional educational and occupational roles after a period of counter-cultural rebellion as some have claimed. Some movements lock the convert into social marginality, they argue. They tend to remove them from conventional pursuits and life-styles, sometimes through communal patterns of living. On the other hand, it is true that they are often very successful in reducing or eliminating the use of drugs among converts. They may also redirect activity away from political radicalism and provide legitimation for not engaging in normal economic activity in a situation where the size of the required labour force is falling and a proportion of the population is surplus to requirements. In this sense they may be integrative for the society, performing 'tension-management' functions. We must be careful, however, Robbins, Anthony and Curtis warn, not to fall into the reductionist trap, as many

do, of treating such integrative consequences as origins, mistaking them for latent motivations for conversion, of taking social consequences as being the essence of these movements – all frequent faults of the functionalist approach.

Wallis (1984) goes considerably further in challenging the integrative hypothesis. There is little or no evidence, he claims, that many of the new religious movements assisted converts in coming off drugs or weaned them away from political radicalism. They had, for the most part, already become disillusioned with drugs and given them up and were never particularly attracted by or involved in political radicalism. Perhaps Robbins, Anthony and Curtis have not taken sufficiently seriously their own warnings about avoiding an unduly reductionist approach. The integrative hypothesis, whether it is the individual or the society that is being integrated, seems to be based upon the assumption that sect membership is always the consequence of personal or social difficulties.

The importance of many of the factors discussed above in the emergence and growth of religious movements can be seen in a number of studies. Gilbert's study of Methodism (1976) and other non-conformist groups (Congregational Church, Particular Baptists, New Connection General Baptists) in England, for example, shows how their followers were making a claim to status on a new basis and a rejection of established norms.

In the early eighteenth century the established Church in England was weak, negligent of its pastoral responsibilities and incapable of providing for the religious needs of most ordinary working people. There was, consequently, a great deal of irreligion in England. This led to revivalist campaigns to bring Christian teaching to the people, such as that of John Wesley. Conversions were largely made among the artisan and labouring classes in the manufacturing districts of the North East, the textile areas of the Midlands and the West Riding of Yorkshire, among Cornish tin miners and the domestic craftsmen of the West Country wool trade, in seaports, fishing villages and in a few agricultural areas – those characterised by extensive freeholding in land. It had some success, also, among coal miners and the lower middle classes.

In general, then, Methodism spread among the skilled and semi-skilled working class. It was much less successful among the unskilled and poorer sections of the working class, the unemployed and destitute, or the inhabitants of the very large urban areas such as London and Manchester.

Gilbert interprets this movement in terms of the changes that came about as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the altered position of the Anglican Church. Traditional authority structures had begun to break down at the time Wesley began his mission. Personal integration into a stable community gave way to the anomie of the industrial town. The Church became identified with the old order and the traditional ruling classes, having the function of preserving the status quo. It had always done this but it had never caused serious disaffection when society had been less divided. Now the Church was perceived to a much greater extent to be an instrument of class domination.

Dissent, consequently, spread easily but was most successful where the Church was weakest. This was the case in many large parishes where the Church had been particularly neglectful of its pastoral duties. There were often insufficient seats in churches for more than a small fraction of the population. Also, where people were not dependent upon the traditionally dominant members of the community, the squires and local gentry, it was possible for them to choose an alternative religious affiliation. Where they were dependent upon the squires as the main employers and landlords, they were compelled to retain their allegiance to the Church. Such dependency did not prevail in the industrial towns where the employer was a middle-class manufacturer, in mining areas, or in rural areas where land was held in freehold.

Gilbert interprets the spread of non-conformity at this time as a form of protest on the part of the new working class and lower middle class against their conditions and at the same time a declaration of independence. It expressed the aspirations of these classes and a new set of values conducive to their self-betterment by their own efforts. It was a symbolic rejection of the values of the social system which ascribed status largely in terms of inherited landed wealth and family background. It was making a claim to status on an entirely new basis.

At the same time, Gilbert argues, it legitimated the economic aspirations of these classes. Its values were functional for those who wished to improve themselves but who had to do so as workers, artisans and small businessmen. It tended to preach the 'spirit of capitalism' and the work ethic.

An aid in promoting the self-discipline required for self-improvement was the tight Methodist community which gave social support and in which any backsliding or yielding to temptation was carefully watched for and corrected. It also provided community and mutual aid, important during a time when the state provided no safety net.

Because Methodism had such characteristics, some writers have explained the stability of the political order in this country in terms of the impact of Methodism. Working-class radicalism and revolutionary movements have been absent or muted in Britain. This has been attributed by some to the influence of Methodism and this has given rise to considerable debate on the issue.

The historian Elie Halévy was the first to interpret the role of Methodism in this way (1942). Methodism, he argued, prevented the polarisation of society into antagonistic classes by enabling lower middle-class followers to achieve economic success and upward mobility. For many this provided a means of transition to eventual full identification with the Anglican establishment. In other societies the lack of such a channel of upward mobility and traditional aristocratic restrictions upon the bourgeoisie led to radical and revolutionary responses. Also, the leaders of the trade unions and prominent members of the labour movement in Britain were frequently non-conformist. These leaders did not see the labour movement so strongly in class terms and were not particularly radical.

Those who have taken up Halévy's ideas either emphasise the beneficial role of this stabilising impact or, in the case of more radical or Marxist authors, the opiate-like character of Methodism in reconciling workers to their fate and

promoting attitudes and behaviour conducive to the capitalist system. They regret the alleged effects of Methodism in making workers submissive and disciplined factory fodder. Thompson (1968), for example, claims that Methodism embraced not only many members of the working class but also many self-made mill owners and manufacturers. The appeal of Methodism to the latter was its emphasis on the work ethic and methodical discipline in all aspects of life. This made compliant and good factory workers. Workers adopted it because of indoctrination and because it provided a sense of community. Also, Thompson suggests, workers turned to religion, especially non-conformist religion, after periods of political and industrial defeat and consequent repression. It was to some extent a 'chiliasm of despair' (*ibid.*, p. 427).

Thompson's empirical data on this point have been criticised as somewhat suspect by Hobsbawm (1964), who considers that religious revivals and upsurges in political activity ran parallel to one another. Workers tended to adopt either a religious or a political response during periods of difficulty.

Thompson and Hobsbawm may each be partly right. Gilbert claims that in the early period religious revivals did tend to follow political defeats but in the later period religious and political activity tended to coincide. Gilbert, however, emphasises the adaptive role of Methodism for the new industrial class in the circumstances brought about by the Industrial Revolution. It enabled many of them to raise themselves from their harsh conditions by sheer hard work and self-reliance, thereby generating self-respect and status.

Methodism seems to have provided a wide range of benefits. Other sects are more specific in the kind of benefit they provide. Schwartz's (1970) comparative study of Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals in the United States contrasts the different ways in which these sects may aid in adaptation. The Seventh Day Adventists, Schwartz found, were, on the whole, hard-working frugal and concerned with improving their material position. This is puzzling since they believe in the imminent destruction of the material world and the last judgement. On the other hand, the Pentecostals had a rather resigned and passive attitude towards material improvement. This too is puzzling since they believe that God is available for direct aid and assistance in this life but did not seem interested in enlisting this aid.

Both the Seventh Day Adventists and the Pentecostals were marginal middle class but differed greatly in their perceptions of the possibility of upward social mobility. Both were very concerned about respectability but interpreted this in different ways. Both suffered from status deprivation and accompanying anxiety; they felt excluded from middle-class social circles, for example.

Schwartz claims that both sects provided ways of dealing with these status problems in developing ideologies which had adaptive consequences for their adherents. Seventh Day Adventists, he claims, had developed, surprisingly, a modern-day version of the Protestant ethic supported by a millennial eschatology. One should not, Schwartz concludes, place too much emphasis on formal doctrine but analyse also the practical ideology of the sect. Exclusive focus on formal doctrine weakens, he argues, Wilson's typology of sects.

The Pentecostals emphasise direct experience of the divinity, an experience which sets them apart as special in relation to others and which goes beyond mere worldly success. A person's spiritual accomplishments are thought to be far more important than economic ones. There was, consequently, no emphasis on the work ethic.

Schwartz does not know why some were converted to Seventh Day Adventism and others to Pentecostalism but having been converted, the ideologies of the sects shaped their understanding of their situation, provided solutions, and determined motivations and conduct, differently in each case. In other words, it is not simply the needs, desires or problems of the members that explain their affiliation and acceptance of the beliefs. To a large extent, it is sect affiliation which generates dispositions and motives.

The difficulty that Schwartz had in determining why some joined one sect and others another raises the general question of why individuals come to be attracted to a particular sect. Several studies have given us reason to doubt that there is any answer to this question other than chance. It may simply be a question of chance exposure to one or other sect ideology or influence at a particularly appropriate time. This is something we might conclude, for example, from Beckford's study (1975) of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Beckford found Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain to be predominantly upper working class and lower middle class, that is from the whole middle range of the class spectrum but not from either extremes. They showed no particular sign of relative deprivation, status inconsistency and so on. There seemed to be little basis in such things for explaining Jehovah's Witness membership. Rather, it seemed that the Jehovah's Witnesses created the basis for their own following and the grounds for their own attractiveness through door-to-door evangelism.

Recruits to the Witnesses were not unduly disaffected and not really actively seeking solutions to pressing problems. They did tend to perceive the modern world as failing to conform to their own standards and values. They tended to be traditionalists and mostly had a religious upbringing but had become disillusioned with their original religious organisation.

Their conversion was very much a matter of evangelistic kindling in them of a deeper concern with these and other questions of a moral and transcendental nature, of their awakening to problems that they had been only dimly aware of previously. Once this has been accomplished, the Witness solution is proposed.

Initial contact with potential converts is generally made through door-to-door visits. After an initial conversation the potential convert may agree to further visits. Contact of this kind may continue for some time with the original contacts and with other members. Potential converts come to know these people fairly well and this familiarity promotes trust and respect for their views. Slowly potential converts are brought into greater contact with the group of Witnesses through participation in meetings, social events and Bible study groups. As the potential recruit gets to know existing members better, he or she is more inclined to accept what they say and begins to redefine the former situation in terms of the Jehovah's Witness ideology.

## RATIONAL CHOICE, SECTS AND CULTS

Stark and Bainbridge (1987)<sup>4</sup> have attempted to integrate many of the findings of earlier work on the study of sects which this chapter has reviewed into their theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter. Their approach, they claim, has the advantage of bringing together in a systematic way what were a large number of previously 'orphan' propositions into a coherent system. The discussion of their contribution here will of necessity have to be a somewhat simplified one which skirts some of the complexities of their arguments in presenting, hopefully, its essentials.

Stark and Bainbridge deviate from most writers on the subject of sectarianism in the way they define the concept of sect. They are critical of most previous typologies of religious organisations on the grounds that they have generally tended to use a wide range of criteria, of which few are essential features of the phenomena in question but which are correlates not found in every instance. The result is confusion, a multiplicity of rival definitions and typologies and the inhibition of sound theorising. Stark and Bainbridge advocate defining concepts in terms of relatively few essential criteria which all instances share. In the case of sects they use, following Johnson (1963), the criteria of deviance and breakaway from an established religious organisation. Cults in contrast, while also deviant, are entirely new movements which are not schisms from established religious organisations (Stark and Bainbridge, 1979, 1985, 1987). Both stand in a relationship of tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment.

The tendency towards sectarian schism is derived by Stark and Bainbridge from the fact that the membership of any religious organisation is bound to be internally differentiated. Particularly important in this respect are divisions between the better and worse off and between the more and less powerful, both in terms of the rewards they receive within the wider society and within the religious organisation and the positions they hold in such organisations. Thus there is always potential for conflict within organisations, including religious organisations. Sect movements stem from such conflict and occur when certain conditions favour it. Broadly speaking, schismatic sect movements will tend to occur when the relatively deprived members perceive that the potential gains from breaking away outweigh the potential costs. The greater the degree of stratification within religious organisations, the more likely this is to be the case. Sectarianism, therefore, tends to be prominent only in the more stratified societies.

The relatively deprived members of religious groups will tend to place greater emphasis on compensators since they cannot secure as many rewards as the relatively privileged. The latter, in contrast, will tend to play down the provision of compensators by the religious organisation. The relatively deprived members will also tend to be less inclined to conform with general social norms and will tend to seek to promote a greater degree of tension between the religious group and the wider society. The opposite is the case, of course, with the relatively privileged members. A degree of antagonism is the result, leading to an avoidance of relationships between those at either end of the spectrum and rather different

patterns of behaviour in each case – a process which Stark and Bainbridge term antagonism, separation and difference.

There are four possible outcomes of the struggle, according to Stark and Bainbridge. First, forces will balance one another and the group will maintain unity and cohesion at an equilibrium level of tension with the society. Second, the group may split into two, each section moving in opposite directions, one churchward and one sectward. Third, the relatively powerful may prevail and the whole group will move churchward – a very common pattern. And, finally, a relatively dissatisfied majority may be successful in moving the whole group sectward, a relatively rare occurrence requiring rather special circumstances.

Since the third and fourth alternatives are more concerned with sect evolution and development, we shall not concern ourselves with them here. Clearly, the churchward tendency is very reminiscent of the process of denomination-alisation emphasised by Troeltsch and Niebuhr and is an example of Stark and Bainbridge's claim that their systematic approach integrates many earlier findings.

Remaining with the fundamental process of schism, the fact that tensions exist within religious organisations gives those who are able to lead breakaway movements the opportunity of doing so if the circumstances are right. Those who lead such breakaways are usually those who are likely, as leaders of smaller organisations, to achieve positions of power and authority more rewarding than those they enjoyed in the parent organisation. As Stark and Bainbridge put it, it may be better to be a bishop of a sect than an assistant pastor of a rural congregation of a large, reputable organisation.

The form of the schismatic movement is likely to be such as to preserve as far as possible the investments in terms of compensators that have previously been made in the parent organisation. Too great a breakaway from the fundamental teachings of the group is likely to threaten those investments. The relatively deprived who tend to break away are particularly unwilling to jeopardise investments. For this reason the sect generally sees itself as preserving the original teachings and principles of the tradition which they see the parent body as having watered down or abandoned.

Whether or not the costs of breaking away outweigh the benefits is determined by many factors, not least the surrounding climate. Where it is tolerant of deviant religious organisations the costs will be less than where it is repressive towards them. In some societies deviant groups have been heavily persecuted. In such circumstances it is not likely that sectarian breakaway movements will emerge very frequently as was the case with Catholic societies during the Middle Ages – the point made above in criticism of Werner Stark.

Similarly, rapid social change may stimulate sectarian schism if it worsens conditions for some members of religious organisations. They may have more to gain by leaving than they had before. Again, the relative stability of Catholic societies compared to Protestant ones was a factor mentioned above in criticism of Werner Stark's thesis concerning the absence of sectarianism in the Catholic countries.



Finally, on the question of schism, if the relatively privileged section of a religious organisation finds the organisation to be in a greater state of tension with the surrounding society than it would wish, and feels stigmatised by this, it may seek to break away. Its members might do this if they are not strong enough to move the whole organisation churchward. Normally they would tend to defect as individuals and join more reputable religious organisations but there may be circumstances which prevent this. One is where their religious affiliation is linked to their identity as an ethnic or racial group. They may not be able to join other more reputable groups because of this. The outcome is likely to be the Church movement.

Iannaccone (1988, 1992a, 1992b, 1995) has supplemented and Stark (1996) has revised Stark and Bainbridge's original analysis of sectarianism, applying the rational choice approach to the understanding of such typical features of sects as their strictness, conservatism, high levels of participation, relatively low socio-economic social base and why these characteristics tend to go together. By the use of formal economic modelling, Iannaccone claims to base the church-sect distinction on a firmer theoretical foundation. The features of sects are derived from the problem that faces all voluntary organisation and congregational groups, namely, that of the free rider. Collectively provided benefits can be enjoyed or consumed by some without a corresponding input of effort, resources, and so on. If the benefits are received regardless of contribution, there is a strong temptation to take them without contributing. One way of overcoming this, and the way that sectarian groups find most effective, is to make costly demands upon the membership in order to discourage those who are likely to contribute only minimally. Costs of a distinctive kind are imposed upon members such as different dress, dietary and other prohibitions, segregated lifestyles and strict and regulated behavioural standards which differentiate members from the wider community. These are gratuitous costs, sacrifices and stigmatisations which are imposed largely to discourage the half-hearted. Those who value the religious and spiritual benefits the sect has to offer will be prepared to undertake them. They will tend to be disproportionately of lower social status and class since such people have less to lose in separating themselves from normal society. Bainbridge (1997) provides a persuasive summary of empirical evidence which supports this claim. Since the sect requires members to segregate themselves in certain important respects from the wider society, it must provide its members with all those gratifications, such as socialisation and friendships, that were previously derived from involvement in the wider society. Sect members tend, therefore, to have high levels of participation in the life of the sect. The barriers that such strictness erects require some kind of conversion and crossing of the barrier for membership. Strict behavioural standards are not compatible with social change and adaptation to it and, consequently, promote conservatism.

For the most part rational choice analysis of sectarianism ties in well with other work such as that discussed at the beginning of this chapter, as these theorists would readily acknowledge. Their approach, they claim, integrates a wide range

of previous findings within a more systematic theoretical framework. However, there are a number of criticisms that might be made of it. One concerns the very definition of the concept of sect itself, which might be seen as a rather retrograde step in relation to Robertson's definition. Of course, this might be considered to be a largely terminological matter and not particularly serious, albeit tending to generate confusion. The whole question of terminology and definition of concepts in this area is, however, so confused in any case that Stark and Bainbridge's somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term 'sect' hardly matters. Since they only follow the suggestion of Johnson made some time ago, they are not adding anything new to what is already a confused situation. As long as we remember that Stark and Bainbridge are talking about schismatic movements when they talk about sects, rather than the whole range of phenomena that others include under this term, we shall not run into too much difficulty. Whether the conceptual distinction between sects and cults that Stark and Bainbridge make is a fruitful one, and this boils down to the question of whether schismatic and novel movements are best explained differently or in a similar way, is a more substantive matter which we shall take up later in this chapter. Other points that might be made about their approach and the relevance of other work to it are best left until after an examination of their account of cult emergence, given that they treat many types of religious group that others call sects separately under the concept of cult.

The process of sect development, we have seen, is one of schism in the face of social division and stratification for Stark and Bainbridge. The process of emergence of novel religious beliefs and organisations, that is, of cults, is quite different, according to their analysis. They set out three mutually compatible models of the process of cult emergence: the psychopathology, entrepreneur and subculture-evolution models.

The psychopathology model holds that mentally ill persons invent novel compensators and accept them as rewards. Mental illness frees individuals from conventional understandings and can allow considerable creativity. If this seems a bold and somewhat implausible claim, it is important to note Stark and Bainbridge's definition of mental illness, namely 'the imputed condition of any human mind that repeatedly fails to conform to the propositions of the prevailing theory of human action' (1987, p. 159). Being an imputed condition it is an explanation of conduct which does not conform to what is normally expected in the society – an explanation which guides interaction with such persons in ways which do not presuppose that their behaviour will be like that of most people. Since this is the case, they are relatively free to devise novel patterns of action and ideas.

On the other hand, for most people who might be labelled mentally ill, this is a circumstance which greatly inhibits the social acceptance of what they invent. Furthermore, those who do not conform to the behavioural expectations of the society are not likely to be able to carry out the tasks required to establish any kind of social organisation or group such as a cult. Stark and Bainbridge speculate that they may, however, go through a period of illness during which they are

highly creative and innovative and during which they create wholly new compensators and religious ideas which they are subsequently able to persuade others to listen to and to embody in a new organisation when they have recovered normality.

The second, entrepreneurial, model recognises that cults are in many respects like businesses. They are created by individuals with entrepreneurial flair because such individuals believe they can profit from them. They profit by offering new compensators in return for rewards from their followers. The rewards they receive are in many cases financial but may be intangible things such as prestige, admiration and power. Usually, cult leaders of this kind have had experience of the benefits that cult leadership may bring. Prior involvement in one or more cults also gives them the skills and know-how necessary to establish and run a successful cult. Very often they utilise elements of the belief systems of cults of which they have previous experience, integrating them into a new synthesis and adding perhaps some new elements of their own. Cults, therefore, have a tendency to cluster in lineages such that one can trace the lines of descent and cross-influences. Cult leaders, however, are not always, as this model might lead one to presuppose at first sight, cynical and manipulative in this. Stark and Bainbridge distinguish between honest cult founders who offer only those compensators which they themselves personally accept and dishonest ones who do not accept themselves what they offer to others.

The third model of cult emergence that Stark and Bainbridge offer is that termed the subculture-evolution model. This draws upon sociological work on deviant subcultures including delinquent subcultures. In such groups, which are relatively isolated from the surrounding society in terms of rewarding interactions and exchanges, novel explanations and therefore novel compensators may develop by a process of incremental generation. This is a process by which new compensators are collectively invented and developed through a series of small steps consisting of exchanges. If the process goes on for a long time, quite new subcultural types of cult can emerge. Stark and Bainbridge argue that such groups will tend to generate compensators of an increasingly general kind and thus qualify as religious cults.

Religious cults often begin as magical cults. A magical cult is one that offers specific compensators but not of a supernatural kind. The process centres on the tendency of the members of some subcultural groups to become highly dependent upon one another as a result of their relative isolation from the conventional society. Such a group may experience what Stark and Bainbridge call social implosion by which a high degree of closure is stimulated.

These models of cult formation are clearly somewhat controversial. It stretches credibility somewhat to suggest that many cults are established by the mentally ill, even given Stark and Bainbridge's definition of that condition. They seem to have been influenced in developing this model by work on spirit possession and shamanism in which hysterical-like behaviour is attributed in some societies to invasion of the individual by powerful, demanding spirits. They cite the work of Lewis (1971) in this context and particularly such examples as the Sar or Zar cults

of Ethiopia, the Sudan, Somalia and neighbouring areas. In these cults downtrodden and oppressed individuals, usually women, become possessed and some become regular shamans. What they fail to note, however, is that Lewis specifically repudiates the suggestion that possessed persons or shamans are mentally ill. Lewis analyses the Zar cult and those like it in terms of rebellion and what he terms 'oblique redressive strategies' (*ibid.*, p. 88). 'We cannot', Lewis says, 'meaningfully reduce shamanism and spirit possession as total cultural phenomena to expressions of private fantasies of psychotic individuals' (*ibid.*, p. 186).

Lewis prefers to see spirit possession as a culturally defined initiation ritual for those who feel called to the vocation or profession of shaman – an initiation ritual which testifies to the candidate's ability to contact and deal successfully with dangerous and powerful forces. The crucial thing is that a successful shaman must control his spirits and his behaviour. He is not usually a person whose behaviour is beyond his own control in the way that a mentally disturbed person is. Lewis emphasises that spirit possession and shamanism conform to a culturally defined pattern and are not the idiosyncratic actions of individuals.

Stark and Bainbridge's reasoning in their development of the subcultural-evolution model of cult emergence is somewhat obscure. It is difficult to see why in a subcultural group the members will begin to develop compensators of a very general kind. This is asserted by Stark and Bainbridge rather than derived from their postulates and no evidence is provided for this sort of process. Even more problematic is that in claiming that the generation of general compensators makes such a group religious, they seem to forget that, by their own definition of religion, the compensators have to be supernatural in character. Without this they are only magical cults. It is true that they say religious cults often evolve out of purely magical ones but they do not establish that this is so or make it clear why it is.

Finally, while the entrepreneurial model is perhaps less difficult to accept, one problem that it does throw up concerns the distinction between sects and cults and its relevance for understanding the various types of religious organisation collectively covered by these concepts and the processes which produce religious pluralism. Cults established by entrepreneurs tend to cluster in lineages and have strong family resemblances, Stark and Bainbridge tell us. To the extent that this is true, and it does seem to be true of many cults, we might be led to question the distinction between cult and sect that Stark and Bainbridge make.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that some cults are quite similar to other pre-existing ones, they are not novel. Are they not therefore sects? Stark and Bainbridge acknowledge that breakaway groups from a cult are not in fact novel and qualify as sects if they retain much of the original set of ideas. But how novel does a religious group have to be to qualify as a cult? Stark and Bainbridge would probably answer this point by saying that their analysis applies to relatively pure types of each and that in reality there will be many mixed types. Their distinction between sect and cult is not necessarily to be taken as a categorical one but as referring to a continuum.

This is fair enough but the point is that their distinction is not in terms of the character of the respective groups concerned but in terms of their origins. The

consequence is that cult A and sect B may be very alike while cult C and cult D or sect E and sect F may be very different from one another. Stark and Bainbridge's treatment of them, however, is as very different sorts of phenomena in the first case and as similar in the second. The sort of group that they see emerging from schismatic tendencies will, they seem to assume, be quite different from that established by mentally ill individuals, entrepreneurs or through subcultural incremental compensator-generation. In reality, religious movements of the kind covered by the terms sect and cult do not seem to fall into this dichotomy. Groups such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), otherwise known as the Hare Krishna people, a cult in Stark and Bainbridge's terms since it is not a breakaway group but an imported one and therefore something wholly new in the social context,<sup>6</sup> on the one hand, and the Children of God, subsequently known as the Family, a Christian sect, on the other, share many features in common. If anything, it is sects such as the Family that might very well be included in the entrepreneurial model rather than cults such as ISKCON which does not seem to fit any of these models. Other groups such as the Unification Church (Moonies) are again difficult to fit anywhere into the scheme. In many respects it is a Christian group but in others highly novel and it is difficult to see how it could be understood either as a breakaway sect or a cult in Stark and Bainbridge's terms. Again, while highly sectarian by many understandings of this term, since it is rather like groups such as the Watchtower Movement or the Family, it might better be seen in terms of entrepreneurship than sectarian schism.

All this can be seen more clearly when we consider the empirical work that has been carried out on some of the new religious movements that mushroomed in Western societies in the decades after World War II and especially in the late 1960s and 1970s.

## THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Since World War II, and particularly since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Western world has witnessed the emergence of an enormous variety of sects, cults and movements which have often been very controversial and have attracted a great deal of media as well as academic attention. The Moonies, Children of God (now the Family), Jesus People, Divine Light Mission, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, Rastafarians, Transcendental Meditation, Rajneeshes, Nichiren Shoshu and The People's Temple are among the better known. Many have looked to or have been derived or imported from Eastern societies embodying the mysticism typical of many Eastern religions. In many respects they differ markedly from the sectarian schismatic movements of earlier periods.<sup>7</sup>

Many of them have attracted controversy because of their alleged techniques of recruitment, life-styles and values which have often seemed to run directly counter to those of the wider society. They have been accused of brainwashing,

kidnapping, of using hypnosis and other mind-control techniques and drugs. They have been charged with destroying the careers, prospects and lives of converts, of manipulation of the young, of immorality and exploitation. A whole academic industry seems to have grown up concerned with these movements and the issues which surround them. A recent survey described the literature on theories and research relating to them as a 'morass' and that relating to conversion to them as 'formidably vast' (Robbins, 1988).

Many explanations for the rise of these new religious movements (NRMs) have been proffered in recent years. Prominent have been those which have attributed this rise to a crisis in values or norms in modern Western industrial societies and particularly in the United States where the NRMs have flourished most vigorously. Bellah (1976) has argued that the NRMs are a more effective successor movement to the counter-cultural rebellion of the 1960s against the materialist utilitarian individualism of modern consumer society and the technical rationality of a scientifically dominated culture. Glock similarly points to the dominance of scientific and social scientific perspectives which have undermined the emphasis on individualism, personal responsibility and super-naturalism of traditional world-views (Glock and Bellah, 1976a). This is to some extent supported by Wuthnow's empirical investigations (1976a) which have discerned a decline in theism and individualism and rise of social scientific perspectives, all of which have allowed greater experimentation in all areas of life including politics and lifestyles as well as religion. The result has been a rise in mysticism and a 'consciousness reformation'. This thesis has been criticised by Bainbridge and Stark (1981; see also Stark and Bainbridge, 1985) on the basis of a reworking of the original data and data of their own.

Other writers have placed the emphasis on an alleged normative and moral ambiguity of contemporary culture (Anthony and Robbins, 1982; Bird, 1979) associated with its pluralism and high degree of differentiation which has undermined traditional moral absolutism. A further line of explanation is that which focuses on an alleged decline of civil religion, especially in the United States (Anthony and Robbins, 1982; Bellah, 1976). Anthony and Robbins see two strategies for coping with the decline in American civil religion. One, typified by the Unification Church which seeks a 'revitalised synthesis of political and religious values', they refer to as the 'civil religion sects'. The other, more mystical, therapeutically oriented and Human Potential type of movement resists the intrusion of political and civic concerns and values into spiritual life. Rather, it emphasises individual self-transformation and realisation, a process which entails an underlying monistic unity and order, obviating the need for any stress on political unity. Such movements have often attracted in consequence the label of 'narcissistic'.

The decline of community in modern urban industrial and mobile societies is the focus of still other theories of the rise of the NRMs (Anthony and Robbins, 1974; Gordon, 1974; Marx and Ellison, 1975; Robbins and Anthony, 1978). Involvement in a movement and membership of a group may provide this sense of community. For many young people the close bonding, fellowship

and sense of community that many of the NRMs provide, especially those which advocate communal living, are deeply attractive. Gordon sees them as to some extent surrogate families. Marx and Ellison argue that the non-communal groups, even the more individualistic and less sectarian Human Potential groups, serve as part-time quasi-communities expressing a partial utopianism. They can provide the expressive, emotional and indeed ecstatic sort of experience of fellowship that seems to be lacking in the wider society, combining familial with universalistic values. Such experience is often legitimated and understood as an expression of the divine and of spiritual force operating in the lives of the members (Anthony and Robbins, 1974; Peterson and Mauss, 1973; Robbins and Anthony, 1978).

Similar to the quest-for-community approach is that which emphasises the search for identity in the modern impersonal world dominated by bureaucratic structures and characterised by a fragmentation of social roles. Many of the NRMs promote a holistic conception of self. This is particularly true of the therapeutic movements and mystical cults (Anthony *et al.*, 1978; Beckford, 1984, 1985, 1992; Westley, 1978, 1983). Implicitly incorporating many of the above approaches, but less specific in identifying any one particular aspect of modern life, is Hunter's (1981) claim that the NRMs, are an 'anthropological protest against modernity' (*ibid.*, p. 7).

While all of these approaches outlined seem to make relevant points and to add something to our understanding of the NRMs, there are three main difficulties with them. They are generally not well founded empirically; they have difficulty explaining the timing of the upsurge of the NRMs; and they tend to over-generalise from specific instances to what is a very diverse set of movements and groups.

While there is a wealth of empirical studies of specific movements and groups, most of the attempts to explain the rise of the NRMs have made little use of them, and have been content to speculate in very broad and general terms about the macro-sociological developments in modern society that they allege account for their rise. As Barker has put it:

While those who have not read sociological accounts of the new religions might still be at a loss to understand why anyone joins the movements, those who have read some of the sociological literature could well be at a loss to understand why *all* young adults are not members, so all-encompassing are some of the explanations.

(Barker, 1986, p. 338)

Second, the changes in Western industrial societies which have led to this religious outbreak have been in progress for a long time. Why should the religious outbreak of the NRMs have occurred only in the late 1960s and 1970s? Only Glock seems to be aware of this problem (Glock and Bellah, 1976). A head of steam for change in religious and spiritual life was building up, he argues, but it required some trigger event to spark off the process. This was provided by the war in Vietnam



which gave rise first to the counter-culture and through this stimulated the growth of the NRMs.

The problem with this is that it is perhaps too great an assumption that the NRMs are all offspring of the counter-cultural rebellion against the Vietnam War (see below). It is, in any case, a dubious claim that the counter-culture can be entirely attributed to the impact of the war. The theory, furthermore, and this would also apply to all of those outlined above, cannot account for the decline of the NRMs during the 1980s since the sociocultural changes referred to continue.

If it is difficult to account for the timing of the rise of the NRMs, it may be because, as some have pointed out, that they are not as new as has been supposed. If this is the case, many theorists have been looking for an explanation for something that has not happened. Melton (1987; see also Pritchard, 1976), for example, claims that 'the blossoming of the alternative religions in the 1970s is not so much a new event in Western culture as the continuation of the flowering of occult mysticism and Eastern thought that began in the nineteenth century' (1987, pp. 47–8). Melton admits that there was a very rapid spread of such movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s but explains this in terms of the development of new missionary zeal on the part of many Eastern religions at the time, the spread of information about Eastern religions, the emergence of parapsychology, psychedelic drugs and humanistic psychology. Magnifying and hastening the effect was the rescinding in the United States of the Oriental Exclusion Act which allowed many Eastern religious teachers and leaders to enter the country. Finke and Iannaccone (1993) also emphasise this in their supply-side analysis of the effects of deregulation of the religious market-place.

Of course, Melton's arguments could be turned in favour of the crisis-of-modernity theories. If the NRMs are not, in fact, new at all, then the problem of explaining the timing of their emergence disappears. They have been growing in Western society alongside the socio-economic changes that ensued during the nineteenth century when Eastern mystical traditions began to receive attention in the West. However, while this may have prepared the ground, as Melton argues, for some of the more mystically oriented movements that took hold in the late 1960s, by no means are all of the NRMs of oriental provenance and even some of those that are so geographically are not so in terms of doctrine. This is true of one of the most prominent, the Unification Church, which emerged in Korea but which is to a considerable degree Christian in outlook, or at least claims to be. Melton's point is well taken but it tends to overlook the diversity of NRMs.

It is this tendency of crisis-of-modernity theories to overlook diversity which is the third major problem they have. The NRMs might, of course, be seen as different reactions, to or strategies for dealing with, the problems of modernity as some theories claim,<sup>8</sup> but they fail to tell us why some strategies are adopted by some groups and other strategies by other groups. There are, in any case, more promising approaches which may help us to understand this diversity, which focus not so much on the crisis of modern Western society as on its ever increasing pluralism, individualism and market-oriented character.

The diversity of these movements has led to several attempts to classify them in some ordered and systematic manner which will aid understanding. Perhaps the most useful has been that of Wallis (1984) who uses a trichotomous scheme of world-rejecting, world-affirming, and world-accommodating movements.

The world-rejecting type finds the present material world and social order unsatisfactory, corrupt, and unspiritual. It advocates devotion to a god or guru and a denial of self. Such movements often adopt a communal life-style. Groups such as Krishna Consciousness and the Children of God are typical of this type. They are more clearly religious than the world-affirming movements. These are oriented much more to the individual, teaching that personal success, power or fulfilment can be released through the techniques and practices taught by the movement. Essentially this life and world are seen as perfectly acceptable in principle. That which is not satisfactory in the world can be changed by changing individuals not social structures. Usually, such movements involve no, or only very loose, organisation and no collective worship or Church. These movements are often little like religions in the conventional sense and often claim not to be religions. Included would be Scientology, Transcendental Meditation and est (Erhard Seminar Training).

Finally, world-accommodating movements are more traditionally oriented religious movements but which address the individual and the personal interior life rather than the social order. Collective ritual is usually central and there is often an emphasis on personal religious experience of some kind. They are very often protests against a perceived loss of vitality of established traditional religious bodies. Neo-Pentecostalism would be an example. Wallis sees this as not a pure type and says very little more about them in his study. A number of new religious movements, such as the Jesus People and the Divine Light Mission, do not fit neatly into these categories but embody elements of more than one type and to differing degrees.

World-rejecting movements have recruited mainly among young adults of middle-class background. Judah (1974) found that 85 per cent of Krishna Consciousness members in the United States were under 26 and only 3 per cent were over 30. They were mostly of upper middle-class background. Again in the United States, Ellwood (1973) reports that participants in the Jesus Movement were mostly between 14 and 24 and of middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Barker (1984) found that in Britain the average age at which recruits joined the Moonies was 23 and that the average age of first-generation converts was around 27. About 80 per cent of members were between 19 and 30 and again they were predominantly of middle-class origin.

It is not surprising that there has been much puzzlement as to why well-educated young people from comfortable middle-class backgrounds with every opportunity and good prospects in life should give up all this to join communistic and somewhat deviant religious 'cults'. It seemed particularly difficult to understand when some of these cults required them to spend their time and energies street-selling to raise money, or disseminating literature, and when membership involved suppression of their self-identity in devoting themselves

to a guru or leader. It is perhaps not really surprising that these movements were charged with brainwashing, mind-control techniques and the undermining of the converts' independence and will. How else could such obviously irrational behaviour be explained?

The relative youth of converts to the world-rejecting movements suggests that they were, in fact, one manifestation of the experimentalism and rebellion of young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many studies of the NRMs, especially in the United States, have found a strong counter-cultural link, in that a high proportion of members in some groups had previously been involved in the hippie, drop-out, drug counter-culture of this period (Downton, 1979; Ellwood, 1973; Judah, 1974). Sects such as the Divine Light Mission, the Children of God and ISKCON are interpreted by these authors respectively as in part embodying a retention of certain counter-cultural values – the rejection of 'straight', respectable society – typical of a large section of youth at the time. Such rejection, however, was translated by the NRMs into a new idiom which itself rejected the anarchic, ill-disciplined and ultimately self-destructive life-style of the counter-culture. Tipton's comparative study of three groups brings this out particularly strongly (1982).

Tipton compares three very different groups in California: the Living World Fellowship, a fundamentalist Christian group; a Zen meditation group; and est or Erhard Seminar Training, one of the Human Potential therapeutic groups. In order to understand this new and largely middle-class (the Living World Fellowship was not as middle class as the others) form of spirituality (or quasirituality in the case of est), one has to understand, according to Tipton, why youth rebelled against 'straight' society in the 1960s and why its alternative, the counter-culture, was found inadequate as a basis for a new and different life-style.

The rebellion of youth was essentially against the materialism of modern culture, the bureaucratic impersonality of modern life, the lack of community and the lack of authenticity and spontaneity in a world which required much role-playing. The timing of the rebellion can be explained in terms of the outcome of a series of developments that had occurred in the preceding decade or two. There had been an enormous increase in educational provision and particularly in higher education. Greatly increased numbers were involved for longer periods. While in higher education young people enjoyed considerable free time and were free from responsibilities. They tended to be idealistic and liberal on social questions and political matters. Opposition to the war in Vietnam was a factor here. Affluence had increased after a sustained period of unparalleled growth and there were few worries about ultimately getting a job or having a career. Despite this affluence, the young, while involved in higher education, however, had relatively low material standards of life which encouraged the rejection of materialism. It was, nevertheless, possible to live relatively well without a job or career for most of them, given their freedom from family and personal responsibilities. Finally, the decline of community and fragmentation of relationships had rapidly intensified as a result of economic boom and increased

mobility. The result was the counter-culture with its emphasis on spontaneity, love, freedom, permissiveness and communal life-styles.

The counter-culture, however, led to personal disorganisation, bad experiences with drugs, chaos in and souring of personal relationships, mental illness, and ultimate isolation, mistrust and loneliness. The final irony was the thorough-going commercialisation and exploitation of the counter-culture and its degeneration into mere fashion. The sects began to recruit dramatically from this point on.

They retained much that had characterised the counter-culture. They also rejected materialism, they often retained its communalism and they rejected subordination to bureaucratic authority. What was different about them was that they entailed subordination of the self to a discipline, order or regime, the acceptance of the charismatic authority of a guru or spiritual leader and the devaluation of self in relation to the group or movement. The sects turned counter-cultural values on their head and translated them into a new idiom. Freedom and spontaneity, they taught, were only real if they involved freely chosen submission to some order and discipline. Hippie freedom was seen as illusory and unable to satisfy. It was subordination to authority which claimed it by right that should be rejected. Subordination to exemplary charismatic authority was not really subordination but ultimately liberating. Self-fulfilment is only truly such when it is devoted to the ends of the group not to satisfying the whims of the individual.

Tipton's analysis, though enlightening and suggestive, is perhaps overstated. He provides no evidence that the motives of converts for joining were as he says they were (Wallis, 1984). If a number of the movements did recruit heavily among ex-participants in the counter-culture, this is not so of others (Barker, 1984; Wallis, 1984), while Rochford (1985) found that while early recruits to ISKCON had been involved, later recruits had no participation in it at all. Nor do the doctrines of all these movements embody particularly counter-cultural values (Wallis, 1984). Tipton rather over-stretches the otherwise fruitful thesis that the NRMs represent a translation of counter-cultural values into a new idiom. That he is inclined to over-generalise is shown by his inclusion of a Human Potential type of movement in his analysis, namely, est, which is hardly anti-materialist. Wallis (1984) finds the roots of this world-affirming type of movement in social and personal circumstances very different from those underlying attraction to the world-rejecting sects.

Recruits to the world-affirming type of movement are generally older than those to the world-rejecting type (Alfred, 1976; Babbie and Stone, 1977; Ellwood, 1973; Stone, 1976; Wallis, 1984). The average age of participants in Human Potential groups was found by Stone to be 35. Ellwood reports that, of the membership of Nichiren Shoshu, 17 per cent were under 20, 40 per cent between 21 and 30 and 43 per cent over 30. Babbie and Stone found graduates of est to have a median age of 33 and an average age of 36. Recruits to this type of movement are generally even more predominantly middle class and affluent than those to the world-rejecting movements. Many of them are professionally

qualified and had generally embarked upon their careers. Unlike recruits to the world-rejecting movements, then, they are certainly not marginal but affluent, respectable and well integrated into mainstream society. It is perhaps even more puzzling why they should become involved in alternative religious and quasi-religious movements.

While studies of such movements have often found recruits to have had personal problems such as illness, financial difficulties or problems with personal relationships, the movements primarily seem to offer self-realisation, fulfilment and self-improvement. Their promise lies in the knowledge, techniques and recipes they offer for 'reducing the gap between aspiration and reality' (Wallis, 1984, p. 51). They offer power, status, self-confidence, personal attractiveness and interpersonal competence to those who feel they lack them in sufficient degree or who want more of them. It is such things that define personal adequacy and give significance to a person's existence in contemporary culture. The movements offer a means of overcoming feelings of personal inadequacy to those who are relatively successful and privileged – a clear case of relative deprivation. In contrast to world-rejecting movements, the world-affirming movements do not favour subordination of the self but the celebration of the self, spiritual growth and the unleashing of hidden potential. Worldly success is not scorned by such movements which are to a large extent an outgrowth of the achievement orientation of contemporary capitalism and which uphold values largely compatible with it. On the other hand, they seem also to offer something more than mere worldly success. Those who enjoy a fair measure of it may find that it leaves a gap in their lives; they may experience a general sense of malaise. Such movements often seek to combine worldly success with the search for meaning. In this they are to some extent a reaction to those same aspects of modern life which the counter-culture and the world-rejecting movements found unsatisfactory – its bureaucratic impersonality, role-playing and lack of authenticity, its instrumental values, the lack of community and personal fellowship in a situation of social and geographical mobility, and so on – on the part of a section of the population which is, however, to a far greater extent locked into mainstream society and institutions.

To this extent the world-affirming movements may have a better future than the world-rejecting movements. They may be more compatible with the conditions of modern life and the values of contemporary society. They require a much lower level of commitment than the world-rejecting movements, are less stigmatising and may offer, as Marx and Ellison (1975) say of the Human Potential groups, a sense of community and fellowship on a part-time basis rather than the less attractive full-time ventures in utopianism that the world-rejecting movements offer. They do not require subordination to the authority of a leader or of a text or doctrine to the same degree as world-rejecting movements but uphold the much more congenial idea in individualistic modern society of the authority of personal experience (Stone, 1976).

This 'epistemological individualism' (Wallis, 1984, 1985a, 1985b) is associated with a tendency to commodification of what the world-affirming movements

have to offer, which again is highly compatible with the contemporary situation. In market situations, however, the consumer is sovereign and the result is precariousness in the face of changes in taste and fashion. The reaction to this is product differentiation and eclecticism in order to broaden market appeal. This produces proliferation and a tendency towards transitoriness. Commercialisation of the cult market and its consequences are a direct outcome of epistemological individualism, according to Wallis. Heelas (1987), however, questions whether Wallis's market theory applies to some groups.

The world-affirming, spiritual growth, Human Potential movements may well be the religions or quasi-religions of the future. It is questionable whether they are religions or merely use 'the language and trappings of religion' (Zaretsky and Leone, 1974, p. xx). Many, in fact, certainly do not present themselves as such but rather as techniques, therapies, and so on. It might be argued, however, that they have a spiritual dimension. To the extent that they flourish in contemporary society they may give cause to question the assumption that contemporary society is thoroughly secular in character.

## CONVERSION

### **The brainwashing controversy**

One reason that the NRMs have attracted so much attention is the controversial methods of recruitment some employ; and particularly the world-rejecting movements. Allegations have often been made against them that they brainwash converts or use coercive and manipulative methods. In this section the debate surrounding this issue will be examined leading us on to a more general discussion of the processes of conversion to religious groups.

The recruitment techniques used by some of the NRMs are certainly seductive. For example, at Moonie workshops potential converts experienced effusive protestations of profound liking, constant attention, praise and unceasing expression of warm feeling towards them; what the Moonies refer to as 'love bombing'. The Children of God sanctioned the practice of 'flirty fishing', whereby female members of the group were encouraged to offer sexual favours to potential recruits if by so doing they were reasonably convinced there was a good chance of making the conversion and thereby saving a soul. Whether they go beyond this to use forms of mind control, hypnosis, drugs, social isolation, and physical restraint, as has been alleged, is much more controversial. One point to note at the outset is that, whatever the differences in the recruitment methods of some of the NRMs compared to those of the past, charges of coercive and manipulative conversion are nothing new. They were made against many sectarian movements in the past (Bromley and Shupe, 1981; Hampshire and Beckford, 1983; Miller, 1983). When otherwise perfectly ordinary individuals are attracted to what appear to others to be strange and bizarre sectarian groups, it seems to them this can

only be explained in terms of some kind of manipulation or coercive technique. Converts appeared to have been robbed of their mental autonomy and capacity for critical thought and free choice, the modern idiom for which is the charge of brainwashing (Snow and Machalek, 1984). Such charges, according to Richardson and Kilbourne (1983), are also a means of denigrating movements seen as threatening to established institutions. 'Atrocity stories' of brainwashing and mind control also provide a justification for the use of drastic methods which have been used by families of converts to get them out of the sects, including kidnapping and 'deprogramming' (Bromley *et al.*, 1983). In portraying the convert as a brainwashed zombie, actions are justified which deny him or her the normal rights of a rational and responsible citizen (Robbins *et al.*, 1983). Often such atrocity stories come from those who have been deprogrammed themselves, providing an alibi for their own seduction (Shupe and Bromley, 1981). Such accounts are frequently the basis for those sociological treatments, and even more so of a number of psychological analyses, which have to some extent supported the coercive conversion hypothesis. They are, of course, not only a rather unreliable basis on which to found such an approach but also subject to the problem of retrospective interpretation of the reasons for their conversion.

Deprogramming has of course attracted the counter-charge from the sects that it is constitutes the real brainwashing not the original conversion which was freely entered into. In this way they have often been able, paradoxically, to generate greater solidarity within the organisation and to bind their members to the sect all the more firmly (Barker, 1983).

For the most part sociologists who have studied the NRMs empirically have found no evidence for the brainwashing or coercive conversion charge (Barker, 1984; Bromley and Shupe, 1981; Downton, 1979). Barker's study of the Moonies in particular has delivered the *coup de grâce* to the brainwashing charge. Barker studied those who failed to be converted as well as those who were. If brainwashing were involved, one would expect a relatively high rate of conversion among those initially exposed to Moonie influence. What Barker found was that of those who attended Moonie two-day workshops, nine out of ten did not join.

Even more striking is the fact that after two years of involvement with and membership in the organisation, only about 5 per cent of those initially attracted were still members. Barker found no attempt to coerce them to remain in the movement, to prevent them leaving by physical controls, or to isolate them from the countervailing influences of the surrounding society. Nor were the converts those who might be thought to be most vulnerable – the young, the socially isolated, those not succeeding in their lives. These tended not to join at all or to join only temporarily. Even where the young and socially unanchored do predominate among recruits, this does not support the brainwashing charge since such persons are perhaps easy targets. As Robbins (1985) points out, one might suspect it more if it were middle-aged executives with strong family ties that were prominent among converts.

This is not to say that the recruitment techniques used by the Moonies are not highly active, intensive, persuasive and perhaps even manipulative, but the fact



that converts may be seduced by the techniques does not mean that they have been coerced. And if some proponents of the coercion thesis mean little more than seductive persuasion by the term 'coercion', this is to broaden the notion so greatly that almost any vigorous set of recruitment practices becomes coercive (Robbins, 1985).

The charge of coercive conversion is by no means the only one that has been made against some of the NRMs. There has often been a very tense relationship between them and the wider society which has shown a generalised hostility to many of them. The nature and strength of social reaction to them have, however, varied from one society to another. The whole question of societal reaction to the sects has itself become the object of sociological enquiry with interesting and important results. As much can be learned through studying our reaction to sectarian movements as can be learned from studying the movements themselves. Space permits only the briefest mention of the subject here but note should be taken of Shupe and Bromley's study of the anti-cult movements in the United States (1980) and particularly of Beckford's (1985) extensive treatment, which develops a theoretical framework for the understanding of the relationship between sect and society. The central notion of this framework is the sect's 'mode of insertion into society', that is to say the complex of relationships between the sect and its members, on the one hand, between sect and the external society on the other, and interrelationship between these dimensions. The framework facilitates analysis of the sources of tension and conflict which fuel controversies about the sects and enables the author to discern different patterns of conflict including how different sects tend to give rise to different kinds of social concern. One great advantage of Beckford's approach is that it enables him to examine what is distinctive and controversial about some of the contemporary movements' recruitment practices without falling into the trap of necessarily implying coercive or manipulative methods.

If sects and cults do not brainwash recruits, what, then, have sociologists to say generally about the process of conversion to religious groups? Can we explain why those who join do so?

### **The process of conversion**

Conversion generally refers to something more than simply joining a particular group or movement for which the term recruitment is more often used. Conversion involves a relatively radical change in perspective. Of course, there are many shades of variation between these two extremes (Snow and Machalek, 1984; Robbins, 1988). For the most part this section is concerned with radical change or change which lies somewhere towards the radical end of the spectrum. The issue of where recruitment ends and conversion begins will not be explored here although the theoretical significance of this issue should not be forgotten since membership of a group does not necessarily mean conversion to its essential tenets. As will be apparent, some form of membership in a group *prior* to acceptance of its doctrines

is not at all uncommon. Nor does membership always lead to conversion. It may indicate merely compliance without conviction or reaffirmation of existing beliefs and values (Snow and Machalek, 1984). Membership, then, cannot be taken as evidence of conversion having taken place.

A number of theorists of sects and movements have attempted to develop a model of the actual process by which conversion takes place. One of the most influential has been that of Lofland and Stark (1965).<sup>9</sup> This looks at conversion in terms of predisposing conditions, stages or phases and was developed through a study of the Unification Church, better known as the 'Moonies', in their early days in the United States (Lofland, 1981) although in that study Lofland refers to them as the Divine Precepts. Early converts to the Moonies were largely white, Protestant, young, lower middle class. The stages which marked their conversion are not really temporal stages, especially the earlier ones which are rather background factors or predisposing conditions, but should be seen in the value-added sense. If all seven 'stages' are gone through, then conversion is complete. If potential converts do not pass beyond a given stage before the last, full conversion does not take place.

Lofland and Stark refer to the first condition as that of *tension* which refers to a felt discrepancy between some desired ideal state and the actual circumstances in which the potential converts find themselves. A very wide variety of such circumstances were found to characterise converts to the Moonies.

The second condition is that of the *type of problem-solving perspective* characteristic of the convert. They had a marked propensity to impose religious meanings upon events. All seemed surprisingly uninformed about conventional solutions to problems such as psychiatric or political perspectives for defining the nature of problems.

Third, comes the condition of *seekership*. All found conventional religious solutions inadequate and had come to see themselves as religious seekers, searching for some more satisfying truth. Many had drifted from one group to another, had explored the occult milieu and read mystical and magical literature. Many believed that unseen forces of a supernatural kind intervene constantly in human affairs and that nothing happens which is not the result of God's or Satan's purposes. They tended to believe that it was possible to explain all of human history in such terms.

Converts had all reached a *turning point* in their lives or were about to reach it. Old lines of action were either complete, had failed or had been abruptly disrupted in some way.

For conversion to take place it was necessary that *cult affective bonds* be established between potential converts and one or more members of the sect. Such personal bonds of friendship would typically develop *before* conversion and *before* the convert had accepted the beliefs of the sect. This came later.

The penultimate condition was that *extra-cult affective bonds* had to be fragile and weak otherwise full conversion would be inhibited.

Finally, *intensive interaction* with sect members completed the conversion process and rendered the convert a 'deployable agent' of the sect. Such intensive

interaction entailed the curtailment or severance of contact with non-sect members, in this case by physical isolation and segregation ensuing from the sect's communal life-style.

Despite the fact that Lofland and Stark made no claims that their model applied generally to all groups, it has frequently been taken to do so. Many studies have shown some of these 'stages' to be present but while conversion to some sects involves some of the conditions of Lofland and Stark's model, it is very questionable whether conversion to all sects involves all of them. Greil and Rudy (1984) surveyed some ten case studies to test the model. It seems to fit some groups and circumstances better than others and some of its stages seem relevant while many are questionable, a point which Lofland himself concedes in a later article (1977).

One problem concerns the claim that converts experience some personal difficulty prior to involvement with the group. None of the studies provide any information about the degree of experienced personal difficulty or tension of the general population against which to compare the reported degree of personal tension among converts. There is no basis for assessing whether it is higher among the latter prior to conversion than in the population generally. There is, again, the problem of retrospective reinterpretation of circumstances of life prior to conversion. The same problem affects the notion that converts have reached a turning point in their lives. What counts for them as a turning point may depend to a large extent upon the sect's own ideas of what produces conversion. Lofland himself, in his later article, also admits that most of us are at a turning point of some kind at many times in our life.

As for the problem-seeking-perspective aspect of the model, Greil and Rudy question whether this is at all surprising or amounts to very much. All it says is that people join religious movements whose ideologies make sense to them. In any case, there is evidence that the role of prior dispositions varies according to the conversion strategies and structure of the sect.

Also variable is the extent to which the convert can be characterised as a seeker. This seems to be the case where the sect requires a communal life-style, tends to be stigmatised by the wider community and when conversion involves a radical discontinuity of social roles. Lofland (1977) acknowledges that the later development of the Divine Principles showed a broadening of the range of people attracted among whom many could not be characterised as religious seekers.

Neutralisation of extra-cult affective bonds, while important in a large proportion of cases, is not universally necessary. Again it seems most important where the sect involves a radical transformation of social roles and the sacrifice of social respectability.

This leaves the establishment of affective bonds and intensive interaction as two aspects of Lofland and Stark's model which seem to be universally or nearly universally applicable. Those cases where the former seemed to be absent are probably not instances of true conversion at all. This was probably so in an

apparently contrary case, Greil and Rudy point out – that of the Mormons (Seggar and Kunz, 1972).

Greil and Rudy and others have also emphasised the fact that assent to a set of doctrines is often a gradual process which comes about only as a result of becoming committed to an organisation and a group prior to conversion in the sense of a radical change in beliefs (1984, p. 318). Another way of putting this is to say that conversion is not simply something that happens to people but something which they themselves have actively to accomplish (Taylor, 1976, 1978; Beckford, 1978; Strauss, 1979). This involves learning the sub-cultural norms of the sect, its language and how to operate within its structures and practices. To some extent the way to become converted is to act and to speak as if converted.

Bromley and Shupe (1979) express the point in terms of a distinction between the ‘motivational’ model of conversion, which has tended to predominate, and an alternative ‘role theory’ model which they propose and which overcomes the deficiencies of the former.<sup>10</sup>

The motivational model is couched in terms of the needs, motives, dispositions or psychological states of the convert prior to conversion and the way in which the beliefs of the sect address these prior circumstances. The problem with it is that it has singularly failed to find any convincing relationship between the latter and the prior circumstances, characteristics or attributes of converts, if indeed it is able to ascertain them at all given the problem of retrospective interpretation.<sup>11</sup> The motivational model is also unable to explain the often apparently sudden nature of conversion to sects which, in some recent instances such as that of the Moonies, have been the object of much publicity, criticism and charges of brainwashing and mental manipulation. The motivational model is forced to postulate an extreme individual pathology to account for this or to assume some kind of manipulation.

The motivational model, then, has tended to over-psychologise the process of conversion and has ignored the role of social processes and social interaction in a context of group norms. The role theory model, on the other hand, is founded on the idea that conversion is fundamentally a social process by which the individual’s needs are not only met but also *shaped* by the group. This shaping takes place through involvement and interaction with group members prior to acceptance of teachings and beliefs which is *preceded*, therefore, by the development of certain behavioural patterns. As Bromley and Shupe put it, ‘it is the assumption of the member role which produces dramatic behavioural change and the appearance of deep personal commitment’ (1986, p. 175).

This approach would overcome many of the problems of earlier attempts to ascertain what it is about converts to religious sects that differentiates them from non-joiners of religious sects. The answer is perhaps that nothing does so. Explanations based upon the assumption that there must be may simply have been asking the wrong questions.

Notwithstanding the importance of attending to conversion as a social process, other studies have raised doubts as to the importance of intensive interaction between potential converts and sect members. Balch and Taylor (1978) studied a

small flying saucer cult in the western United States which was founded in the mid-seventies by a middle-aged man and woman known as Bo and Peep.<sup>12</sup> Bo and Peep created their flying saucer cult in the state of Oregon very quickly simply by placing advertisements for meetings on the question of flying saucers in the local press. At these meetings they would announce their message that the saucers were, in fact, craft from an advanced extra-terrestrial civilisation. The crews of these craft had taken human bodies in order to lead a movement of the chosen who would be spiritually regenerated in preparation for the salvation that the saucer people would bring to believers before the occurrence of a great catastrophe. Bo and Peep made 150 converts in a very short time; 100 from only four meetings. No cult affective bonds were established at all. In fact Bo and Peep positively discouraged them, requiring members to maintain only minimal contact with one another. Followers were required to give up their existing way of life and all existing attachments and relationships as well as their property, to wander the countryside in pairs or small 'families', each camping at some distance from one another or travelling and proselytising separately.

Conversion to this type of movement seems not to require the establishment of cult affective bonds or intensive interaction because those who are attracted to them operate in what Campbell (1972) has called the 'cultic milieu'. The cultic milieu is the cultural underground of a society consisting in deviant and overlapping but diverse belief systems and associated practices. It is characterised by a common consciousness of deviancy or unorthodoxy and above all by seekership. Balch and Taylor report that 'before they joined, members of the UFO cult shared a metaphysical world-view in which reincarnation, disincarnate spirits, psychic powers, lost continents, flying saucers, and ascended masters are taken for granted' (1978, p. 54). Participants in the cultic milieu typically try out many different movements, joining and leaving relatively easily. Abandonment of a particular cult is not seen as wholly invalidating its doctrines. Each tends to be seen as just one among a whole variety of valid ways of approaching deeper truths and each involvement is seen to be a 'growth experience'.

Balch and Taylor suggest that one reason why researchers of sects, cults and religious movements have emphasised cult affective bonds and intensive interaction is that they regard the beliefs and practices of such movements as deviant and hold that the maintenance of a deviant perspective on the world requires strong social support and insulation from the dominant beliefs of the surrounding social milieu, in other words, a strong plausibility structure. Their observations suggest that this may not be so for those steeped in the cultic milieu. Snow and Machalek (1982) have questioned that it is for anyone. Drawing on the work of Borhek and Curtis (1975), they point out that belief systems can be remarkably impervious to contradiction of evidence, social pressures, and so on. They do not believe that apparently contrary evidence poses any great threat to a belief system through cognitive dissonance as Festinger argued in his famous study of a flying saucer cult (1956). Festinger observed that when the prophecy of a major catastrophe and rescue by the flying saucers of the believers did not occur at the appointed time, the reaction was not abandonment of the beliefs but

intensification of them and of the proselytising effort. By such activity the cognitive dissonance generated by the discrepancy between commitment to the beliefs and reality was removed or reduced.

The supposed fragility of unconventional beliefs is often illusory, Snow and Machalek argue. There is no cognitive dissonance to overcome since the discrepancy between belief and reality is simply not perceived to be such or not acknowledged. Beliefs not only often embody aspects which protect them from disconfirmatory evidence but may even turn such evidence into confirmation of the belief system. Snow and Machalek might almost be quoting from Evans-Pritchard's study of Azande magic and witchcraft in writing this, though they do not cite this work. There is a certain paradox here. The point of Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande is that it shows how important social processes are in upholding a wholly *non-deviant* belief system. The problem seems to stem from the fact that while Snow and Machalek may be right that cognitive dissonance may not arise in the case of deviant belief systems, it does not follow from this that plausibility structures are not significant in the maintenance of them.

In any case, it may be that conversion to *sects* follows a rather different pattern to that of conversion to *cults* such as that studied by Balch and Taylor. This raises the vexed question of the definition of the cult, about which there is little agreement. The concept of the cult, as previously noted, is associated with Troeltsch's concept of mysticism. Few theorists have made this to central their definition, however. Various criteria have been used to distinguish the cult, including individualism, looseness of organisation, deviancy of belief and practice, ephemerality, originating from outside the established religious traditions of the society, and so on. Nelson (1968) considers that the main defining characteristics of cults that have been distinguished are their basis in mystical, psychic or ecstatic experiences; that they make a fundamental break with the religious traditions of the societies in which they arise (Glock and Stark, 1965; Stark and Bainbridge, 1979, 1985); and that they are concerned mainly with the problems of individuals rather than with those of social groups (Martin, 1965a; Wallis, 1975). Campbell (1977), finding these criteria deficient, favours a definition of the cult in terms of what he calls the mystic collectivity. This includes all those who hold to the tenets of mystical religion and who, thereby, have a sense of common solidarity and obligation even though they do not all interact with one another. Mystical religion is defined in terms of its specific doctrinal content in which such beliefs as the spiritual unity of all things, spiritual evolution and polymorphism are central.

Whatever the merits of these various conceptions, what is clear is that cults and sects, being very different in nature, may involve rather different patterns of conversion. Lofland and Stark's model may be more applicable to the sect, a category to which by most definitions groups such as the Moonies belong, while for the cult the pattern may be more like that described by Balch and Taylor. These authors, in fact, recognise that in some ways what they describe is not a process of conversion at all since it does not involve a radical change in identity. Acceptance of Bo and Peep's message was for 'converts' to the UFO cult merely the extension of their spiritual quest, a reaffirmation of their seekership. It was,

perhaps a 'cultic alternation' rather than a conversion. These are distinct processes which Pilarzyk (1978) discerned as differentiating the pattern of affiliation to the Divine Light Mission compared to that to ISKCON. It may be argued, also, that there is a plausibility structure and a social process which upholds the cultic milieu. While it does not involve intensive face-to-face interaction, it does rest upon a network of communications and media for the dissemination of its ideas, such as magazines, conventions, and so on. The discourse that takes place through such means provides the social reinforcement for the beliefs or in other words the necessary plausibility structure. The absence of intensive interaction is not necessarily the absence of such a structure.

The matter may be even more complex than simply differing patterns of conversion between sect and cult. Lofland and Skonovd (1983) have distinguished six patterns of conversion and five major dimensions along which these patterns differ from one another. The latter are the degree of social pressure involved, the temporal duration of the conversion process, the level of affective arousal involved, the type of affective content, and whether belief precedes or follows conversion. The various patterns are described as *intellectual*, *mystical*, *experimental*, *affectional*, *revivalist*, and *coercive*.

Such proliferation of conversion models has led to disquiet among some theorists. Greil and Rudy (1984) feel that it is less than helpful and casts doubt on the whole enterprise of seeking one or some limited number of models of the conversion process. There are as many processes, they argue, as there are organisational contexts in which conversion takes place. The real problem with the type of model developed by Lofland and Stark, they suggest, is not that it is not general enough; its faults lie in the fact that in being a process model it is essentially descriptive of ideal-typical sequences. Machalek and Snow (1985) agree on the essentially descriptive nature of such models which do not thereby help to *explain* conversion. Clearly, the process of conversion is complex and varied and there is much more to be said about it than can be covered here, and to be discovered through future research.

## Networks

The role of interpersonal networks is a further aspect of conversion that has received considerable attention. Studies of social movements have found that recruitment to them often flows along channels of personal contact. Initial exposure to the movement's ideas is often through relatives, neighbours, friends or work associates (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Heirich, 1977; Stark and Bainbridge, 1980c). Many movements seem not to recruit very successfully at all through channels such as advertising in the media, leafleting, street evangelism, and so on. The question of which sect or movement someone joins may depend, then, upon the relatively chance factor of exposure to its ideas. The moral of this is that we should not perhaps place too much emphasis on structural location or



type of relative deprivation in attempting to explain why one set of individuals joins one sect and another set some other sect.

Not all those who have a personal link with a sect member, however, become converts. Snow *et al.* (1980) claim that the process is structured by certain 'socio-spatial' factors. Drawing on various studies and their own empirical data, they argue that the reason some join a movement rather than others, once they have been introduced to it, can be explained in terms of 'structural availability'. Potential converts have more time at their disposal and more discretion over how they use it and are less bound up within relationships inhibitive of commitment to the movement. Snow *et al.* are somewhat dismissive of the idea that certain social-psychological attributes or dispositions of the convert which relate to the movement's distinctive doctrines in a way that gives them a particular appeal, explains who joins. Like Bromley and Shupe (1979), they reject the motivational model.

The data support this contention, these authors claim, and in particular their own material comparing converts to ISKCON and Nichiren Shoshu of America (NSA). The latter recruit mainly off the streets and the former through social networks. It is significant that NSA has been very much more successful than ISKCON. As for the apparent exceptions of those groups which have had considerable success without the utilisation of pre-existing network contacts, Snow *et al.* suggest that they manage to establish in the process of evangelism an 'emergent personal tie' with the potential convert.

This idea has attracted fierce criticism from Wallis and Bruce (1982), who argue that one does not need recourse to the factor of recruitment strategy to explain why NSA has been more successful than ISKCON. The latter requires a total commitment to the group and a radical change in life-style which few people feel able or inclined to undertake. NSA seeks general social acceptance and respectability and membership of it is wholly compatible with a normal life-style. Furthermore, Snow *et al.* forget that recruitment strategies are not independent of goals and beliefs about the world. NSA members, in seeking and valuing respectability, find street evangelism difficult and embarrassing and are not much good at it while ISKCON care little about respectability and normality and have, in any case, no other option.

This opportunistic orientation to recruitment of world-rejecting movements which suffer a large degree of hostility from the surrounding society is something that Rochford (1985) has also emphasised. He found that both, social network ties and contacts in public places, were important in ISKCON's recruitment strategy and both were used varied widely according to location. Rochford concludes that neither a movement's belief system nor its life-style necessarily determine its recruitment strategies; it depends upon its ability to adapt to specific local socio-spatial environments.

Finally, Wallis and Bruce are scathing on the question of 'emergent' personal ties. They consider that this renders the thesis vacuous since it converts every form of recruitment into supporting evidence for the network thesis. Of course personal ties grow up between convert and existing members. It is difficult to see

how they could or would not. Who would join a movement who found its membership so unlikeable that no such ties could be contemplated? The question is 'whether people are most likely to be drawn in by pre-existing interpersonal ties not ones formed precisely for the purpose of recruitment' (1982, p. 105).

Wallis and Bruce's criticism, however, may be somewhat overstated. Snow *et al.*'s error seems to lie more in straying from the personal network hypothesis into the area of cult (or sect) affective bonds. It may well be the case that a prior personal link with the convert is not always necessary for conversion to take place but that in the case of certain types of sect, as already noted, the gradual establishment of personal ties and affective bonds is necessary for the generation of sufficient respect and trust before the ideas and beliefs of the sect will be accepted. As Wallis and Bruce themselves say, it is not merely contacts through a network that count but the legitimacy with which they are endowed.

Nevertheless, Wallis and Bruce seem right to reject the notion that it is simply exposure and availability alone which determine conversion. Availability is not a fixed attribute. Whether someone is available or not is not simply a matter of disposable time and freedom from other, incompatible, commitments; it is also a function of what is on offer and its appeal. One might add that availability is not simply something that happens to characterise someone's circumstances. People *make* themselves available to a greater or lesser degree. The causal process model of conversion has been criticised for not giving due weight to this and for seeing the convert as playing too passive a role in the process of conversion (Strauss, 1976, 1979; Richardson, 1985), another point which Lofland concedes in his later article (1977).

Some converts remain members of a sect or cult most or all of their lives while others leave sooner or later after joining. The factors which determine this have received considerable attention. One is the extent to which members of the sect are socially isolated from non-sect members and from the wider community. A communal life-style is one of the things that, of course, tends to promote this and is characteristic of many sects. Second, sects are often said to foster an emotional dependence of members upon the group. To the extent that strong cult affective bonds grow, this may be so. Some of the new religious movements have been said to promote this emotional dependence through the use of psychological and psychoanalytic techniques (Wallis, 1976).

It has been seen that sect members may achieve status and prestige through their membership. Belonging to a small exclusive group which has sole possession of deep truths can generate a sense of importance and significance. O'Toole (1975) describes how in what might be called a political sect (a group of followers of the ideas of a Canadian Marxist theorist, Daniel De Leon), what was important was to preserve the exclusivity and purity of doctrine. Although ostensibly the group sought to recruit as many followers as possible and regularly distributed pamphlets with this purpose, too many new recruits would have threatened this exclusivity and purity. The pamphlets were thus distributed in a desultory fashion and in places where they were quite unlikely to attract new recruits.

It has also been seen, finally, that sects may offer those whose chances of responsibility and authority in the wider world are low compared to the opportunity to achieve such things within the sect. In short, sect membership may offer them a career and even a measure of prosperity in some cases where they become full-time paid officials. This is the case for some, for example, in Scientology (Wallis, 1976).

## 18 Conclusion

It is a commonplace in the social sciences to observe that theories are never superseded. New ones and new interpretations of old ones are simply added to the existing stock. This is no less true of the sociology of religion than for any other area of sociology and yet to say this is not to say that no progress has been made. While none of the theories surveyed in this book can be said to be even close to satisfactory, each has something to contribute. The insights of each approach have largely been retained in the more recent endeavours to provide an overall theory and particularly in meaning theories. This type of approach has the added advantage, also, that it is probably closer to the believer's own understanding of his or her belief, practice and experience. It avoids the rather crude rejection of religious claims as always plainly false that intellectualist and emotionalist theories have often tended to make while at the same time being less dismissive of the believer's own account of his or her belief than some sociological, particularly functionalist, theories. To say that religion is the way people seek to give meaning to their lives is not something that many believers would disagree with, although in any specific instance they may agree rather less with the sociologist's account of why they seek to provide that meaning and of what underlies the specific ways they seek to provide it.

Meaning theories in synthesising the insights of intellectualist, emotionalist and sociological approaches have at least in part transcended the problems of each of them. Intellectualist approaches neglect the emotional dimension of religiosity. Emotionalist approaches throw out the baby with the bath water in dispensing with the explanatory role of religious belief. Religion is, among other things, an attempt to understand but this desire to understand is not, as far as religious belief is concerned, motivated wholly by intellectual puzzlement or curiosity about the world, nor necessarily by a need to manipulate material reality the better to deal with it and to survive and prosper within it. The need to understand stems from emotional sources and may in certain circumstances reach a high degree of intensity. Not to understand is to be bewildered, confused and threatened. The human psyche is such that uncertainty, feelings of unfamiliarity and a sense of the alien are deeply disquieting and discomfiting. We do not just seek to understand our world and our place in it out of mere interest and curiosity; we need to know who and what we are and what place we occupy within the

world. Religion seeks answers to existential questions which go to the heart of our sense of identity, worth and purpose. Such things are of vital significance to us. As Berger (1973) states, we are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality. Whether we are congenitally so compelled or whether it is possible to live without such a sense of order, it is certainly the case that many or most members of almost all known societies have sought such a sense of order and often with such energy and compulsion that it is difficult to deny that it must stem from emotional drives and needs which seem deeply rooted in the human condition. While it may be admitted that some may not feel the force of this need or feel it to a lesser extent than others, and perhaps this is increasingly the case in contemporary society, many seem unable to live without it being met in some way. Even in contemporary industrial society, one suspects that while the unacceptability and implausibility of traditional religious messages, not to mention the competing attractions that modern affluence and a relatively secure existence provide, preclude many people from giving much attention to such questions, they lurk, nevertheless, in the background like unwelcome guests at the party. The however distant but nagging spectre of death, for example, can never be entirely dispelled. The inevitability of death is, of course, something that most theories of religion point to. Death may not so much be feared because it is the unknown or because it brings an end to the individual, but rather because it threatens to make the life the individual does have and live pointless and senseless while living it. To know why we live and why we die is not just intellectually satisfying but allays that potential inner disquiet that otherwise comes from the awful realisation that our individual existence may be quite without any point or purpose. Not that religion is solely about providing meaning, however. We should not forget that, as often as it claims to be able to explain and make things seem meaningful, it claims also to be able to do things for us. It may, for example, offer us eternal life and, in some sense or other, the vanquishing of death. To the extent that rational choice theory is also very much a synthesis of theoretical perspectives that have gone before it is, perhaps, this emphasis upon what religion is perceived to be able to deliver that is one of its strongest points.

In providing meaning, religion is often said not simply to address existential questions relating to the individual but also to play a central social role. It provides justification for actions and legitimation of practices, customs and social arrangements. Sociological approaches to religion have usually stressed its role in upholding the social order. It is certainly clear that religious systems have generally been locked into the wider social order. To explain the world in ways that make it meaningful, inevitably entails explaining also the social order in a meaningful way and thereby legitimating it. Thus religion has a social as well as an individual dimension. On the other hand, in the light of the situation of religion in many contemporary industrial societies, one might question the extent to which this dimension of religion is fundamental. Cognisance of this is, perhaps, what underlies a tendency discerned by Segal (1986) which he refers to as the desociologising of the study of religion. Turner (1991b) has suggested that in modern society it is no longer essential to link systems of belief which provide

personal meaning with the institutions of public regulation and legitimation. Religion thus becomes privatised and reduced to a 'range of stylistic options' (*ibid.*, p. 240). The sociology of religion has conventionally tended to assume that social cohesion requires an interlinking of personal and public orders of meaning. The lesson that can be drawn from the study of religion in modern society is that systems for the maintenance of public order, control and legitimation may follow quite separate paths from those which uphold a personal sense of meaning.

Berger (1979) observes that modernity inevitably promotes pluralism and pluralism leads to fragmentation and the weakening of beliefs dependent upon social support. Modern, some would say post-modern, conditions are characterised by 'unstable, incohesive, unreliable plausibility structures' (*ibid.*, p. 19). The individual seeking religious answers is forced to pick and choose, and is, consequently, thrown back upon him or herself such that the subjective dimension is heavily accentuated. There is no certainty in such a world since that is the product of support and maintenance on a societal level.

Nevertheless, while one might acknowledge that religious beliefs become inevitably precarious in such conditions, religion is still essentially a social enterprise rather than a purely individual one as the study of sectarianism amply demonstrates. However much they owe to the insights and revelations of innovative individuals, systems of belief which provide personal meaning are always collectively developed and socially supported even if sometimes on a very small scale. Historically, those that have predominated in a society have tended to be those that are supported by the most powerful and influential groups in that society. As Marx said, the ruling ideas are in any age the ideas of its ruling class. Weber shows how each major religious tradition has its social carrier which is in most cases the dominant group in the society. Questions of meaning, furthermore, often stem from a sense of injustice or discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. Since such matters are bound up with patterns of social advantage and disadvantage, religious answers to such questions inevitably address and reflect aspects of the social order.

Each culture and each society, structured diversely as they are, will produce different sorts of answers to questions of meaning. There may be various interpretations of the dominant religious tradition and often, particularly in modern societies, quite different sub-cultures with wholly different answers to the relevant questions. Religious diversity through history and across and within cultures is truly remarkable and testimony to the inventiveness of the human mind and imagination. Only a small part of that diversity has been touched upon in this book. The selection of substantive topics was that which best illustrates, in the author's opinion, the application of theories. While other selections could have been made, the fact that, out of the rich diversity of religious experience, this particular selection seemed clearly the most obvious one, demonstrates the as yet undeveloped state of theory in the sociology of religion and the little that has so far been done, relatively speaking, in applying theoretical approaches to the understanding of substantive questions. Where theory has been most closely

applied, it has been in a rather narrow field confined largely to Christianity and even then to specific aspects of this tradition. Little has been done in the sphere of the world religions generally, with the monolithic exception of the work of Max Weber, only a small part of which it has been possible to discuss here. It is mainly anthropologists who have examined traditions other than that of Christianity and from the perspective one would expect of anthropology, namely participant observation of the small, usually village community.<sup>1</sup> Few scholars have aspired to match the broad comparative and historical sweep of Weber. The sociology of religion will need to address this deficiency if it is to advance. There can be no substitute for comparative study in any branch of sociology, least of all in the sphere of religion.



# Notes

## 1 Introduction

- 1 For a review of the range of stances that are taken and a critical discussion of debates on this issue see Johnson (1977).
- 2 For a discussion of this view see Byrne (1988).
- 3 A radical version of this kind of rejection of the sociological enterprise in relation to religion as it is usually understood is that of relativism. For example, Winch (1964) reprinted in Wilson (1970).

Largely founded upon an interpretation of the philosophy of Wittgenstein, this view denies that it is possible to evaluate the claims of any system of religious thought in terms of universally applicable concepts and categories. If religious or spiritual entities are claimed by the external observer to be unreal, for example, the response of these theorists is to say that the concept of 'reality' used in such a statement is one which takes its sense and meaning from a particular mode of discourse, probably a scientific or at least a secular one. The claims concerning the reality of spiritual entities in particular religious systems, on the other hand, each utilise notions of 'reality' which take their sense and meaning within that particular context within which scientific notions of reality have no meaning and are illegitimately applied.

There are many problems with such an attempt to relativise thoroughly all belief systems and render them immune from treatment by a generalising social science but two interrelated ones are particularly serious. Both stem from the exaggeration of the distinctness of different modes of discourse. If there is a fundamental unity among human beings, does this not mean that despite great cultural differences we all share certain fundamental and universal cognitive traits, such that there are universal conceptions and meanings?

The first type of criticism stemming from such a claim is that if it were not so it would be impossible for us to even understand what other peoples' beliefs actually were or to translate their statements into our own language. This implies the paradox that if Winch *et al.* were correct, it would be impossible to know that they were correct. (See the relevant contributions to Wilson (1970) for a fuller discussion along these lines and in particular those of Lukes and Hollis.)

The second type of criticism is that belief systems are not as self-contained and insulated from one another as Winch's view would seem to imply. There is a considerable overlap between different systems of religious belief and between religious belief and other systems of ideas. Even within a particular system of religious belief there are different schools of thought, interpretations and understandings (Hill, 1973, p. 11). The fact that a particular school of thought may well replace and supersede an earlier one poses insurmountable problems for Winch since it entails the rejection by the new of the old. To be consistent, Winch would have to argue that it is just as illegitimate for a religious tradition of thought to reject past beliefs as incorrect or

false as it is for social science to do so. But this would be to deny the possibility of change and development in a system of beliefs. Gellner puts it this way:

either the Christians were wrong or the pagans were; either the Reformation Church was wrong or the Reformers were in supposing it to be wrong; either those addicted to superstition were wrong or the rationalists were wrong .... One way or another, *someone* must be wrong!

(Gellner, 1974, p. 142)

In other words, it is misleading to postulate the existence of radically distinct modes of discourse with no point of contact between them. In a sense, all human discourse constitutes a unity despite the different concerns it may have, the different concepts it may use and the different linguistic conventions and usages which govern it.

- 4 Much the same is advocated by Smart (1973) who uses the term 'bracketed realism' to designate the stance of bracketing alongside the question of the reality of gods and religious entities while acknowledging their reality for believers and the consequently real effects upon their lives.
- 5 It might better be termed 'methodological agnosticism' since 'methodological atheism' seems to imply, as Towler (1974, p. 2) has pointed out, that for the purposes of sociological investigation and as a working hypothesis, if not in any absolute sense, religious claims are assumed to be false. 'Methodological agnosticism', on the other hand, would imply that no view need be assumed one way or the other on the matter.
- 6 Similarly, Turner (1991b) accuses Bellah of ducking the issue of the truth claims of religion with his notion of 'symbolic realism' in an attempt to place religion in an inviolable position as a reality *sui generis*. This is, Turner argues, one solution among others to the crisis of religion, rooted back in the nineteenth century, in which religion appeared to be necessary but false.
- 7 For a recent contribution to the debate over whether Buddhism is or is not theistic, see Orru and Wang (1992). They challenge the contention that Buddhism is not theistic since it holds that in order to reach nirvana one has to overcome death conceived in the form of Mara, the god of death. For this and other reasons, concepts of the supramundane are central to Buddhist teaching, according to Orru and Wang. On the other hand, it does not make a very clear distinction between sacred and profane. This basis of Durkheim's definition of religion, then, is not particularly applicable to Buddhism, ironically, and he would have done better to stick to the criterion of belief in the supramundane or supernatural.
- 8 For a number of recent attempts to define religion in this general vein see the contributions to Platvoet and Molendijk (1999), in particular Cox, Hanegraaff, Platvoet and Snoek. Cox speaks of a 'non-falsifiable alternate reality' (p. 272), Hanegraaff of a 'meta-empirical framework of meaning' (p. 371), Platvoet of postulated 'or metaempirical, non-verifiable/non falsifiable, or supernatural' beings (p. 262) and Snoek of 'a second (dimension or layer of) reality besides the empirically verifiable one' (p. 327).

## 2 Religion and reason

- 1 For useful treatments of this theoretical approach see Morris (1987, Chapter 3, pp. 91–106), O'Toole (1984, Chapter 3, pp. 52–62), Preus (1987, Chapters 6 and 7) and Thrower (1999, Chapter 6).
- 2 It consisted of twelve large volumes.
- 3 Strictly speaking, this is zoomorphism rather than anthropomorphism. We often attribute animal characteristics to things which are not animals rather than human characteristics. A closely related notion which Guthrie distinguishes from

anthropomorphism is animism which is the tendency to perceive inanimate objects as in some respects animate but not necessarily with specifically human characteristics. Animism is also an important factor in religion as well as anthropomorphism, according to Guthrie.

4 See also Boyer (1994).

### 3 **Magic**

1 See, for example Heelas (1996, York (1995) and Hanegraaff (1996). O'Keefe (1982) in particular considers magic to be universal in human societies. This conclusion he derives from his very novel theory of magic as the means by which the individual protects him or herself from the pressures of society expressed in the form of religion which come to suffocate individuality. For O'Keefe magic derives from religion, reversing the almost taken-for-granted sequence that Frazer, Freud and others postulated. It expropriates religious symbolism and modifies it in ways which suspend the normal frameworks of understanding in order to facilitate the redefinition of experience. O'Keefe's study is a synthesis of Durkheimian, Freudian and other insights which stand too far outside the parameters of the debates discussed in the present chapter to include in any more substantial way than in the form of a note.

### 4 **Religion and emotion**

1 Useful summaries and critical discussions of the emotionalists can be found in Morris (1987, Chapter 4, pp. 141–51) and Preus (1987, Chapter 9).

2 Otto and those who follow him such as Eliade (1969) claim that experience of the numinous is prior to, more fundamental than and independent of any belief or conceptual understanding of the experience. However this experience is interpreted, according to Otto, and whatever beliefs are derived from it, the experience itself is of something specifically religious which is prior to belief. The problem with this notion is that in order to identify the experience as religious, one cannot but have reference to some idea of what constitutes the religious, namely some belief or theory. Religious experience is thus constituted by religious concepts and beliefs (Proudfoot, 1985).

3 For introductory discussions of Freud (and Jung), see Morris (1987, Chapter 4, pp. 151–81), Clarke and Byrne (1993, Chapter 8), Preus (1987, Chapter 9) and Thrower (1999, Chapter 7, pp. 143–57). For more extensive discussion of Freud on religion, see Alston (1964) and Philp (1974) and for an extension of his ideas Rizzuto (1979). A good general introductory discussion of Jung can be found in Storr (1973). For Jung's work on religion, see Hostie (1957).

4 The anthropologist Vic Turner has adopted this approach in much of his work. See for example 'Symbols in Ndembu Ritual', in Max Gluckman (1964) and 'Ritual Symbolism among the Ndembu', in Fortes and Dieterlen (1965).

5 Some of the evidence is usefully summarised in Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997). See also Harrington and Whiting (1972) and for a cross-cultural study which finds against the Freudian hypothesis, Swanson (1960).

6 See, for example, the references in Spiro (1966).

### 5 **Buddhism**

1 Sanskrit versions of terms are often used by authors rather than the Pali versions. Here the Pali versions are used when the term is first introduced and the Sanskrit version is given in brackets. Thereafter the Sanskrit version is used.

2 For similar instances in Sri Lankan Buddhism, see Obeyesekere (1968) and Gombrich (1971).

- 3 Although the other-worldliness of Buddhism generally can sometimes be overstated. Silber reminds us that this is often the case in his assessment of this aspect of Buddhism:

The opposition to mortification, the assumption of the perfectibility of man in the here and now, the tension between nirvana and karma, and between renunciation and worldly involvement, as well as the ambiguous attitude to kingship and social order, all indicate that Buddhism entails a certain tolerance, and even an affirmation, of worldliness alongside its systematic cultivation of renunciation.

(1995, p. 63)

## 6 Religion and ideology: Karl Marx

- 1 Good general discussions of the Marxist approach to religion can be found in Clarke and Byrne (1993, Chapter 6), Morris (1987, Chapter 1, pp. 23–50), O’Toole (1984, Chapter 3, pp. 63–75), Plamenatz (1975, Chapter 9), Preus (1987, Chapter 9) and Thrower (1999, Chapter 8, pp. 161–82). For more extensive discussion, see McKown (1975).

## 7 The coming of the millennium

- 1 Excluded from the discussion here are millennial sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists which are a somewhat different phenomenon and which do not have the characteristics of the rather more ephemeral and temporary movements which are the concern of this chapter.
- 2 This accompaniment of military action by millennial expectations is, in fact, quite common in many parts of the world as Wilson’s (1975) careful and detailed comparative study shows. The early stages of culture contact and conflict during which military resistance seems feasible are often marked by prophetic and millennial backing of military resistance. When this is seen to have entirely failed, then the millennialism tends to become more thoroughly religious and the sole means of deliverance.

## 8 Religion and solidarity: Emile Durkheim

- 1 Useful overviews of Durkheim on religion are Clarke and Byrne (1993, Chapter 8), Morris (1987, Chapter 3, pp. 106–22), O’Toole (1984, Chapter 4), Preus (1987, Chapter 8), and Thrower (1999, Chapter 8, pp. 183–98). For an extended discussion, see Pickering (1984).

## 9 The birth of the gods

- 1 See also Swanson (1967) for an application of Durkheim’s ideas to the Protestant Reformation.
- 2 This is what Marx meant by alienation. Swanson, however, lists alienation as a separate cause of the decline of religion. It is not clear what Swanson means by alienation – presumably he is thinking of some kind of exclusion from social groups rather than Marx’s use of the term.
- 3 See, for example, Gluckman (1972). There is a very extensive literature on witchcraft. For a summary and discussion, see Hamilton (1998).
- 4 For a fuller discussion of this theme in the emergence of the world religions, see Hamilton (1998).

**10 Religion and solidarity: the functionalists**

- 1 The relevant articles are 'Totemism' and 'Tabu' which, together with the original article on 'Religion and society' are reprinted in Radcliffe-Brown (1952a, b) *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. For a discussion of classical functionalism in relation to religion, see Morris (1987, Chapter 3, pp. 122–31).

**11 Taboos and rituals**

- 1 This is a point which Turner also makes in his meticulous analysis of Ndembu ritual (1968).
- 2 See also Ray (1973) and Rappaport (1979) for analyses of the performative dimension of ritual.
- 3 There is an extensive literature on the subject of initiation, much of which is not directly concerned with the religious nature of the rituals involved. For psychogenic approaches which emphasise male envy of female procreative powers, see Mead (1949) and Bettelheim (1954). An extensive debate has been concerned with the claim that initiation arises from the need to establish male identity and to separate the young male from the female world (Whiting *et al.*, 1958; Young, 1962, 1965; Cohen, 1964; Whiting, 1960; Burton and Whiting, 1961; Kitahara, 1974). For a sociogenic approach which stresses political conflicts rather than social function, see Paige and Paige (1981). For a comparative study of women's initiation which takes an ambivalent stance regarding their social functions and their role in relations of power and domination, see Lincoln (1991).
- 4 Turner has written much more extensively on the subject of ritual than the limited discussion here can indicate. In this body of work he developed a range of very suggestive ideas centred in particular on the liminal or transitional stage in *rites de passage*. In this stage a sense of community or 'communitas' may be generated which can provide often radical alternative bases for relationships to the established structures of society. See Turner (1974b, 1974c). For a critical discussion, see Morris (1987, pp. 252–63).
- 5 For an appreciative assessment of Douglas's work in the sociology of religion, see Spickard (1991).

**12 Religion and rationality: Max Weber**

- 1 See Morris (1987, Chapter 2) and O'Toole (1984, Chapter 5) for useful general discussions of Weber's general approach to religion.
- 2 For an exposition and development of Weber's conceptual categories, see Schluchter (1981, 1987).

**13 The Protestant ethic debate**

- 1 The Marxist thesis that Protestantism was a product of capitalism cannot be discussed here nor the critics of Weber's thesis, Marxist or otherwise, who have argued that the causation is the other way round to that claimed by Weber or that, given the mutual effects of one upon the other, it is the effect of capitalism upon Protestantism that is the more significant. For these points of view see Engels' 'The Peasant War in Germany' (Engels, 1965), 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' and 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' (in Marx and Engels, 1957); Kautsky (1988); Tawney (1938); Hill (1961, 1963, 1966). For a discussion and criticism of this approach see Marshall (1980, pp. 254–9).
- 2 I am grateful to Bryan Wilson for pointing this out in a personal communication.

- 3 The essay 'The Protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism', in Weber (1970a).

## 15 Secularisation

- 1 Martin has more recently relinquished this position as the title of his comparative treatise on the question indicates (Martin, 1978).
- 2 Greeley (1989); Chavez (1989, 1991); Firebaugh and Harley (1991).
- 3 For a more extensive discussion of how social factors introduce market imperfections which can, nevertheless, in his view be analysed in terms of economic theory, see Sherkat (1997).
- 4 See page 205.
- 5 For an attempt to test some of Martin's more general hypotheses, see Giorgi (1992).
- 6 Stark (1996) has since altered and simplified his position on this, now holding that both sects and cults will flourish where churches and conventional religious organisations are weak.
- 7 While the notion of a 'civil religion' is one that goes back as far as Rousseau, the most influential contemporary formulation of it is that of Bellah (1967). Bellah argued that alongside the mainstream religious traditions in the United States there exists a distinct and well-institutionalised civil religion. In the United States religious pluralism, the absence of any established church or religious tradition and the consequent relegation of religion to the private sphere meant that the legitimation of the State and of the political system had to be accomplished by the emergence of this distinct civil religion. The civil religion, however, draws upon themes common to the major religious traditions present in the society such as belief in God and the importance of God for the destiny of the community. Public ceremonial, respect for the flag, the reverence surrounding certain fundamental 'scriptures' such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address testify to the sacred character of much of public and political life. The civil religion has its own martyrs, sacred places and events, its own solemn rituals and symbols. A particular feature of the American civil religion is that the United States has a God-guided mission in human history. In the British context, a similar argument has been put forward relating to public and state ceremonials such as the coronation of a new monarch, Remembrance Day Service, and so on (Shils and Young, 1953). The clearly Durkheimian thesis of the existence of a civil religion has attracted much debate. For a telling criticism of it see Lukes (1975) who questions its underlying assumption of value consensus and the necessity for this in integrating a society and its neglect of the role of sentiments and practices constituting such a civil religion in upholding a structure of power and privilege. Turner (1991b) criticises the thesis on the grounds that it conflates prevalence with cultural dominance and confuses frequency with social effects. One cannot assume from the prominence and visibility of the symbols and rituals of the so-called civil religion that it necessarily fulfils central social functions rather than having only somewhat trivial social effects.

In the United States the notion of an American civil religion enjoyed considerable prominence in the sociology of religion throughout the 1970s but interest waned thereafter, largely due to the vagueness of the concept and an apparently inherent lack of clarity and precision. Bellah himself has of late played down the significance of the idea as a recent essay shows (1990). In this he notes that 'the term civil religion has spread far beyond any coherent concept, or at least beyond anything I ever meant by it' (*ibid.*, p. 35.) He goes on to say that while the claim that there is a civil religion in America is justified, it is formal in the scarcity and abstraction of its tenets and marginal in that it has no official support in the legal and constitutional order (*ibid.*, p. 41).

For a discussion of the career of the concept and the history of the debate concerning it in the United States, see Mathisen (1989).

- 8 Such terms are in some ways preferable to 'fundamentalist' which in the context of Islam can have misleading connotations.
- 9 For a review of this debate, see Hamilton (1998).

## 16 Religion and rational choice

- 1 The core theory is presented originally in their article of 1980b. It is much developed and Telaborated in their subsequent book of 1987.
- 2 Stark's later, slightly amended restatement of the theory will be discussed in the next chapter. Most of the additional elements fill out and extend aspects of the original statement rather than introducing anything fundamentally new.

## 17 Sects, cults and movements

- 1 For a discussion of Niebuhr, see Eister (1973).
- 2 The proliferation of terms and concepts in this area and the resulting confusion have led Beckford (1973) to advocate abandonment altogether of the sect, denomination, church terminology. This seems a little extreme, however.
- 3 Wallis (1976) uses a very similar approach but replaces the inclusive/exclusive dimension with a respectable/deviant dimension. This yields four types: uniquely legitimate/respectable (church); uniquely legitimate/deviant (sect); pluralistically legitimate/respectable (denomination); and pluralistically legitimate/deviant (cult). Bruce (1996b) follows Wallis in adopting this typology.
- 4 See also Stark (1996) for a revised statement of the model.
- 5 For the main contributions to the question of the definition of the term 'cult' other than those already mentioned, see Campbell (1977, 1982); Glock and Stark (1965); Martin (1965a); Nelson (1968); Wallis (1975).
- 6 Stark and Bainbridge decline to discuss the question of imported groups in their general theoretical treatment (1987) but clearly include such groups as cults in their earlier work (1985).
- 7 For a useful discussion of continuities and contrasts with earlier sectarian movements, see Wilson (1993).
- 8 For a useful survey of discussions of the relationship between the NRMs and modernity, see Dawson (1998).
- 9 Rambo's (1993) book-length discussion of conversion, for example, is organised around a stage model similar to and stimulated by that of Lofland and Stark.
- 10 Later they applied the role model to disaffiliation from as well as conversion to NRMs (Bromley and Shupe, 1986).
- 11 Ullman (1982, 1989) reports that among recruits to a range of NRMs, there was a significantly higher level of emotional stress and turmoil in childhood than among a control group. In particular, the father of converts was largely absent during their childhood or was felt to be rejecting of them.
- 12 This cult was later to hit the headlines when thirty-nine of its members committed suicide at Rancho Santa Fe, 35 miles north of San Diego, California. By then it had become known as Heaven's Gate and its leader, Marshall Applewhite (Peep had died in 1983) had taken the name of Do.

## 18 Conclusion

- 1 For an extensive review of this work, see Hamilton (1998).



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