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Faith, Social Structure and Theology: A Review

J.R. Boyd

It may be that not all readers of this journal have had their attention so forcefully drawn to these three significant books /1 as to peruse them and respond to what is no less than a revolution in theological perspective. This comment will begin with the latest of the three, "Faith in Christ". Its subject is belief in the divine humanity of Christ in our society today. Other issues are dealt with more technically and substantially in the other two. Dr Gill has his doctorate (in Christology) from London University and his M.Soc.Sc from Birmingham University. This qualifies him most unusually to write from within each of the disciplines of theology and sociology. He lectures in the department of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology of Edinburgh University and is an ordained Anglican priest. He has come to believe that theology needs to take up into its system the serious regard for sociology that it has long had for history and philosophy. He sees theology as affected, and to some degree, determined by its social context; at the same time, society may be influenced, and to some extent determined by theology.

This small book, "Faith in Christ", is concerned, as he says, "with a single issue - namely, whether or not supposed changes in Western society require Christians to alter the way in which they have traditionally expressed their faith in Christ." Note the phrase, "supposed changes". If it is assumed (and the assumption becomes very general) that changes of attitude to the transcendent render it necessary to avoid mythical terms, then one must start "from below", with Jesus Christ, as the

1. The books are:

- Robin Gill, Social Content of Theology, Mowbray 1975
Theology and Social Structure, 1977
Faith in Christ, 1978
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outstanding human, rather than "from above", with him as the Son of God and incarnate revelation of the sovereign God. This is not the place to follow Gill's argument in detail. It is enough to state that, after showing the radical consequences of assuming such a thorough secularisation of society, he examines the views of those who give other religions a position similar to Christianity or who regard the Church as having declining weight in our society. He concludes that there is much more continuing debate on these issues and that they are far from settled. "Within recent years", we are told, "a group of scholars has argued, not that the process of religious decline in the West is being halted, but that it never existed at all." They find a remarkable persistence of religion generally and not least in the Western world. Gill does not go all the way with these views but notes a remarkable element of confusion as to whether attendance is an indicator of decline in religious faith when it decreases, or whether it may be merely the sorting out of those whose faith is nominal from those who are committed.

Again it has been thought obnoxious that "intolerant" claims by Christians should be pressed as to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ among the world's faiths. Yet in NT times, it was possible to "speak the truth in love" and nevertheless to make similar claims, at a time when there were many other faiths around. Disrespect for others and their views may take the shape of refusing to tell them the full story of what one believes, and is not to be equated with watering down the rich mixture of one's convictions sincerely held. It is well known that the forms which credal expression took in the early centuries of the Church can be directly related to the social and cultural conditions met at that time and with the contemporary controversies and circumstances of those days. Gill is therefore led to combine two approaches - "from below" and "from above" - as each having both strengths and weaknesses. "A faith which combines these two approaches could effectively eliminate their weaknesses.... A use of both approaches would seem to be more desirable than a use of either approach on its own."

In his earlier books, Gill was criticized on the ground that he related mainly ethical questions to sociological scrutiny and ignored more doctrinal aspects of theology. His deep concern is with the hermeneutical question. How can theologians (and those moved to faith, utterance or action by their thought) understand and be understood as clearly as possible in their social context? He urges "interaction" between those who aim at precise definition in theology and those whose concern is with sociological definition. His first book in the series aimed at developing a methodology whereby such mutual contact could be effected.

Gill's "Social Context of Theology" took shape at a time when secularisation was raging. It was a decade when the mass media brought to light in full colour all sorts of ideas which previously had often been thought unsuitable for public debate. We have, for example, "The Honest to God Debate", sparked off by an Anglican Bishop's book (J.A.T. Robinson) in 1963 and Harvey Cox's "Secular City". Such writers took the social context seriously to their great credit. Gill, however argues that they failed to examine the assumptions as to the extent of secularisation. Sometimes philosophic ventures and stances of the intellectuals determined the context within which they wrote and they made little or no use of the resources to hand in sociology, just as a politician might do for the society which he represents. Gill quotes David Martin, that the sociologist can be useful to those who need to know what the social situation is, was or will be. Such analysis may also bring out what could be. Yet the sociologist as such is not competent to state what ought to be, something which is for the politician or theologian to put forward. "If theologians are to be concerned with the social context of theology - with the way people think within the particular societies in which they are operating - then they must expect to fail in their task if they ignore the critical perspective offered by sociologists."

The study of social determinants, Gill insists, does not call into question the validity of theological positions thus obtained. Earlier sociologists by their

positivist approach had made theologians suspicious and apprehensive of them. Theologians such as E.L. Mascall, J.L. Newbigin and A.M. Ramsey, proceeded without reference to sociology in dealing with sociological subjects, e.g., the secularisation of society. Gill is also critical of those sociologists who proceed without reference to theology. Both disciplines must interact in dialogue. He ends the book, "It is only by a long and painful path that the theologian can provide an adequate socio-theological correlation. The theologian, even as a theologian, is obliged to make certain assumptions about the society in which he is placed. If he fails to do so, he may fail to communicate to that society. But if he attempts to do so, he is faced with numerous difficulties. It has been the aim of this book to explore some of these difficulties."

We pause at this point to reflect on the development of sociology into a valid academic discipline from 1907, when the first inaugural lecture was given by a professor of sociology, to 1962 when only the third chair of sociology was set up at the University of Leicester. There has also been a remarkably deep and widespread interest among sociologists in matters of religion. From 1953-1973 Michael Hill can name over fifty books published in this field. Much of this writing has dealt with the more obvious social aspects - the readily quantifiable factors by which religion is found in institutions and can readily be observed by those who profess it. Dr Gill, in something of an aside, deals with "religious sociology", used by the churches as a tool for their administrative and missionary assessment of situations.

Finally, we turn to the third book, "Theology and Social Structures". Here Dr Gill deals less with the wider issues of sociology of religion than with theology. He defines theology as "the written and critical explication of the 'sequelae' of individual religious beliefs and of the correlations and interactions between religious beliefs in general." Theology is demonstrably a human product and as such properly subject to the sociology of knowledge in the same way as science or other academic approach. Gill argues that "any

systematic analysis of the social structure of theology must be based upon an interactionist perspective", bringing out the social determinants of theology and theology's independent social significance. Thus, once constructed, theology may be seen to determine society through the writings of theologians, preaching, listening, and those outside aware of its insights. Among the subjects dealt with are theology in relation to war or to abortion where, it is suggested, theology affects them as much as sociology. As for the theological insights in relation to God's call to work as in Calvinist writings, Weber claimed they had a powerful influence on the development of the spirit of capitalism. Thus he expected to find theology exercising a strong influence upon society. Again, Gill argues that the pacifist stand of C.E. Raven, based on his theology, gave social respectability to conscientious objection in World War II.

An editorial review of "Theology and Social Structure" (ET, 1978), after some criticisms, had this to say: "This is a valuable pioneering work in a field renowned for its difficulty and it deserves to be subjected to a careful analysis and critical appraisal. Theologians should read it, for great damage was done to the Church by theologians and church leaders who imagined that they had to allow sociological factors a large place in their decision-making and were too readily influenced by current and transient fashions." So the scene is set for interaction between Theology and Sociology and can only be for the benefit of both.

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