3

Sociological and Theological Perspectives

Not only can the church as empirical reality be analyzed theologically, but it can also be analyzed by other sciences. As social reality, the church can be interpreted through social sciences, and not least through sociology. The question of the relationship between theology and sociology is itself a complex subject that is outside the scope of this book. I will, therefore, limit myself to comment on two questions, each in its own way is relevant to a theological understanding of the church. The first question is about how sociology understands the nature of social reality and how this can potentially impact the theological understanding of the church. The second question concerns the relationship between sociological understanding of the human community as created by humans, and the theological notion that the church is an expression of God's work.

THE NATURE OF SOCIAL REALITY

Unlike other sciences, sociology has no particular monopoly on any area of reality. Social science, like other human sciences, is the study of humanity and the human reality. What is characteristic of sociology, however, is that it examines the human reality in a particular *perspective*, namely understood as *social reality*. Sociologists study how people interact and respond to each other, and how this interaction takes place within the framework of social groups or society as a whole.[1]

What is of interest in the context of this research is how sociologists understand the nature of social reality: what *is* society? This kind of ontological question is not, it seems, addressed by sociologists in general. Nevertheless, it is an interesting question from a theological point of

---

1. Cf. a standard textbook definition of sociology as "the study of human social life, groups and societies." Giddens, *Sociology*, 7.

view, as theology asks similar ontological questions about the nature of the church. There are certain parallels: Theologians have often spoken of the *invisible* church to express certain aspects of the church. Actually even the object of sociology: *society*, is not accessible for direct observation in its totality. People's actions, individually or as a whole, are observable, as are material aspects of society, such as buildings, objects and documents. Society *as such*, however, is not possible to observe directly—it remains "invisible."

So is there a societal reality, or is it just an illusion? One of the early sociologists who argued for society's objective existence was Emile Durkheim. Although society consists of individuals, it is more than the sum of its parts. Society can therefore be examined as an independent object, as a system with its own mechanisms and laws. These are mechanisms that seem to be relatively independent of the individual's own motivations and beliefs. Durkheim believes society can be studied "from the outside," "as things." At the same time society can be represented as a *collective consciousness*. This consciousness keeps the society together and enables the individual to act according to society's norms. In the collective consciousness religion plays a vital role. According to Durkheim, God is nothing but a symbolic expression of society itself.[2]

In contrast to Durkheim's analysis, Max Weber places greater emphasis upon the *meaning* that individuals ascribe to their actions. Rather than *explain* the societal phenomena according to certain laws, it is important to *understand* these laws. The object for the sociologist according to Weber is, not society as such, but *social action* and its meaning for individuals. Since different individuals usually have similar motives and act in similar ways, sociologists are able to *classify* and describe typical forms of social action. Social groups are not independent objects, but the result of intentional interactions between individuals. Interpreted from this point of view, the sociological task is to look for the motives that make individuals act in a certain way as constituting the group. Weber acknowledges that the individual can be guided by notions of collective entities (society, state, nation, family, etc.). For the sociologist, such concepts are only important insofar that they affect the individual's action, and cannot be perceived as objective reality.[3]

2. Frisby and Sayer, *Society*, 34–51.

3. Ibid., 54–55; 67–72. The difference between Durkheim and Weber corresponds to the general distinction in sociology between structural and agency-oriented theories.

While the weakness of Durkheim's thesis can be seen as the overshadowing of the individual, Weber runs the risk of making too little room for the structural and collective. In modern sociology, there have been various attempts to reconcile these two perspectives. An example of the uniting of the perspectives of Durkheim and Weber can be found in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's work *The Social Construction of Reality*.[4] They believe the solution lies in avoiding making the choice between an understanding of society as objective reality and society as a subjective idea. Society is characterized precisely by the fact that it is both. According to Berger and Luckmann the key to understanding this relationship is given by the sociology of knowledge, i.e. the sociological sub-discipline that deals with the social function of knowledge. In this context, *knowledge* is a broad term that includes all forms of explicit and implicit ideas about life. Such knowledge is of societal significance to the extent that we share it with other people. In fact, it is shared knowledge that makes society possible. Society exists only because people share the idea that society exists. Being a part of society is to share in the knowledge of society.[5]

The fact that society is based on the idea about society does not mean that society has no objective reality. This reality is experienced by those who would try to challenge the norms of society through a wide range of measures, from mild forms of social control, to law enforcement through the police and penal system.

A pivotal concern of Berger and Luckmann is to highlight society's human character—as a product of human activity past and present. Society is, in fact, not given once and for all, but is constantly changing through human creative activity. The basic social nature of humanity

---

Beside Durkheim, Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Jürgen Habermas, and Niclas Luhmann are examples of structure-oriented theorists. Beside Weber, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead are examples of agency-oriented theorists. Furseth and Repstad, *Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*, 47–49.

4. Berger and Luckmann position themselves as part of a group of sociologists who want to understand the relationship between the individual and structure, combining insights from a structural and agency-oriented theories (see previous footnote). Other sociologists with similar concerns include Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman. Furseth and Repstad, *Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*, 49-74.

5. For this and the following, see Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*. Cf. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*.

means people cannot live without being in interaction with other people. The *forms* of this interaction are not a given once and for all, but are something we constantly create. The forms of society will, therefore, vary greatly between different cultures and generations.

According to Berger and Luckmann society is thus an objective human reality:

> Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence in any instant of time (social order exists only and insofar as human activity continues to produce it) it is a human product.[6]

This means that any conception that society has an existence prior to, or independent of human activity, is false. Admittedly, this kind of objectification (reification) of society is very widespread. Berger and Luckmann call this kind of knowledge about society *legitimation*. These are notions that serve to justify society, social relations, and norms. Most notably religious knowledge serves such a function of legitimation. By presenting specific institutions or norms as rooted in the divine or the sacred, they are given a different authority than being just as a result of human activity. A classic example is the view of the king or ruler as appointed by God who exercises authority over his subjects on God's behalf.

Roy Bhaskar proposes an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society that has much in common with Berger and Luckmann's model. However, he disagrees with them on one important point. It is not true, he contends, that society is created by people as if there was nothing that existed before. For those who are part of society, society is experienced as a given. From this standpoint, human activity serves to reproduce and transform the given societal forms. Society is something that is given prior to the individual, yet it can also be changed through human practice. Like Berger and Luckmann, Bhaskar rejects the reification of society: while society is an objective reality, it remains dependent upon human activity.[7]

We can see that these fundamental sociological issues can also be applied to the theological context. Different sociological positions can in-

---

6. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 70.
7. Bhaskar, "Critical Realism," 212–15.

fluence theological and ecclesiological understanding. A notable example of this is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*.[8] In this work, Bonhoeffer draws upon a sociological and philosophical tradition that is not so concerned about concrete historical circumstances, but more about the constituting societal features *in* the empirical reality. This view places emphasis upon the autonomous character of society in relation to the people that belong to it. Following this line of thought, Bonhoeffer introduces the notion of a "collective person" to understand social groups in general, and the church in particular. A collective person is a group entity that functions as an individual and is therefore ontologically independent. This means, like the individual, the collective person can stand in an *I-you* relationship to another group, an individual, and to God. As an objective reality, the collective person is described by Bonheoffer as having an "objective spirit."[9]

By introducing such concepts as the collective person and objective spirit, Bonheoffer has established an ontological basis for his ecclesiology. The church differs from other societies, in so much as the collective person is Christ, and the objective spirit is the Holy Spirit. Such an ontological identification with Christ and with the Spirit makes (as I have pointed out in chapter 2) any identification with the empirical church complicated. In this case, the idea of a real church as not being identical with the empirical church, is therefore founded not only upon theological reasons, but can also be justified by a certain sociological reasoning where social reality *is reified* and is given an independent ontological status—in this case as something that is beyond experience.

Peter Berger has given a detailed analysis about the possibilities and limitations of Bonheoffer's early work. As a sociologist he criticizes Bonheoffer for taking advantage of a type of sociology that is abstract and non-empirical, by using terms such as collective person and objective spirit. Such concepts are, argues Berger, an expression of an extreme social realism, which can easily lead to a social mythology. From a sociological and empirical point of view, such concepts are unnecessary and unfounded, and do not take into account of the fact that all social phenomena are subjective and human-shaped in nature. In addition, Berger raises an important *ethical* argument against this kind of social ontology.

8. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. See chapter 2.
9. Ibid., 76–80, 97–106.

To understand institutions as analogous to persons attributes to them a value in their own right. Arguing against this claim, Berger believes institutions only have ethical value as long as they serve and protect real persons.[10] Implicitly, Berger assumes this is a warning against placing the interests of institutions over the concerns of people and as such should be applied to the church as well.

Berger argues, convincingly in my opinion, that the kind of social ontology proposed by Bonheoffer is sociologically questionable. This is true on a more general basis and specifically in relationship to the church as a social reality. Theological attempts to make the church an objective reality without reference to human experience and activity cannot be justified sociologically. Furthermore, I believe there are no independent theological reasons for such an understanding. To interpret the church in its empirical reality as a concrete human community should be sufficient.

The sociological perspective of society contributes at the same time to a theological understanding of the church as being a human community. That fact that the church is, in a certain sense, *invisible* is not something only applicable to the church, but for all human societies. There are often aspects of the church that theologians give a certain theological weight to, which from a sociological perspective it shares with other social sciences.

Another sociological point is the role that knowledge plays (in the widest sense) in maintaining society. From the viewpoint of the church, it points to *faith* as essential for the church's existence. Part of the role of theology is to interpret this faith. Belief in the church is therefore crucial for the church's (objective) existence.

A sociological perspective that is applicable to the church, as it is for society, is based upon the role of human activity. We inherit society as a given reality, whereupon we assimilate the social formations from those who have gone before us. This gives sociological meaning to the theological idea that the church exists before the faith of the individual. Such a view does not necessitate the idea of the church as a reality pre-existent to experience. Rather it points back in time to those who have gone before us, even all the way back to the first disciples who were first called by Jesus. At the same time the church has to be maintained and upheld as an ever changing reality of those who live today.

---

10. Berger, "Sociology and Ecclesiology," in particular pp. 76–78.

IS THE CHURCH A RESULT OF HUMAN WORK OR THE WORK OF GOD?

The claim that the church as human community is the result of human work seems to be in conflict with a theological understanding of church as an expression of God's action. Such a potential conflict is not peculiar to ecclesiology, but is related to the theological challenges innate in sociology's perspective on reality.

This apparent conflict between sociology and theology is discussed by Peter Berger, who besides being a sociologist also considers theological issues in his writings. Even though Berger does not discuss the issue as related directly to ecclesiology, the questions he raises are relevant to our discussion. According to Berger, sociology is an empirical science, and as such must work from what he calls a *methodological atheism*. Therefore, the sociologist *qua* sociologist has no interest in the question of God and God's relationship to the world—the fact that a sociologist might believe in God or not, should not play any role in his sociological analysis. However, the sociologist cannot exclude the possibility that the empirical data researched can in some way correspond to transcendent realities.[11]

An interesting aspect of Berger's position is it not only presupposes a certain conception of sociology, but it also presupposes a certain theological point of view as well. It is worth noting what reality status Berger assigns to theological statements, or to put this another way, how he perceives the *object* for theology. Berger thus appears to assume that theological statements refer to a transcendent, supernatural reality *beyond* the empirical reality.[12] He claims that, although religion from a sociological perspective is understood as a projection of human relationships based upon the human reality, we cannot exclude the possibility that these projections match reality "out there."[13]

From a theological point of view, I believe it is reasonable to question the claim of theology as exclusively confined to the transcendent and trans-empirical world. The idea of God's transcendence is indeed an im-

11. *Sacred Canopy*, 100, 179–85. Pål Repstad believes *methodological atheism* is too absolute and proposes instead the less provocative term *methodological agnosticism*. "Between Idealism and Reductionism," 94.

12. See also Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*. Underlining this point of view are certain theological concepts taken from neo-orthodox theology (Berger openly admits to Barth's influence).

13. *Sacred Canopy*, 181.

portant part of a Christian understanding of God. As creator of the world, God himself is not part of the world. However, this does not exclude the fact that God works in and for the world by his creative and saving work. The fact that God's saving grace is something that takes place in the world is made explicit by the incarnation of the Son and by the outpouring of the Spirit. A true theological understanding of reality is to see God's on-going work as both creator and savior of the world in the present and the world as an expression of God's handiwork. This is a central aspect of the Christian understanding of God even if it is being challenged by a closed, positivistic worldview that wants to banish God to the transcendence or the innermost depths of the soul.

It is somewhat unclear how extensive are the consequences of Berger's methodological atheism. The question is whether it is only methodological, or whether it also contains ontological implications. The fact that Berger's perspective does not exclude the possibility of a God *beyond* the world is clear. More questionable is whether this viewpoint allows for the notion of a God *in* the world.

As Robin Gill points out, Berger's sociological position is potentially, not only in conflict with theology, but also to other empirical sciences, such as psychology. By treating all phenomena as fundamentally social phenomena, makes it difficult to have a specific psychological angle about the same phenomena.[14] To get to grips with these difficulties (in terms of both theology and psychology) Gill introduces what he calls an *as if* methodology as a replacement for Berger's methodological atheism. Applying such a methodology enables the sociologist to work *as if* all human actions are socially conditioned, including religious phenomena. By appropriating a methodological and not an ontological perspective, allows for a sociological *as if* perspective, while not excluding other *as if* points of view in either psychology or theology. Theology could methodologically operate with its own *as if* outlook by examining the world *as if* God really exists.[15] Applying this to ecclesiology would mean you

---

14. Gill, *Social Context of Theology*, 32–33.

15. Ibid., 37–40. A similar complementary understanding of the relationship between theology and sociology is found in work of the sociologist of religion, David Martin (e.g., in *Reflections on Sociology and Theology*). It is important to say, that the relatively harmonious coexistence between sociology and theology remains controversial in theology. One notable proponent is John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory*), who wants to make the *contradiction* between sociology and theology succinct. Milbank believes sociology is not only methodologically atheistic, but overtly atheistic. The meta-

can both examine the church sociologically (as if it is a result of human activity) and theologically (as if God works in and through the church). It would thus be possible to work from two and not necessarily mutually exclusive, different perspectives.[16]

Whether it is possible or desirable to work from these two different perspectives largely depends upon our theological understanding of how God acts in the world and how we can experience God's acts. From a creational and incarnational theological point of view, there is reason to assert that God is not only *outside* the world (or that God only in exceptional cases intervenes through supernatural events), but is also actively present *in* the world. It does not necessarily mean God is directly accessible by experience: to recognize something as an act of God requires it being interpreted and experienced as such. In the light of faith we can, what Eberhard Jüngel calls, have an "experience with the experience."[17] This opens us up to experience God's works in the world through human activity, meaning human activity can be understood as an outworking of the work of God. Applied to the church, this means it can be understood at the same time as a result of human actions (such as sociology assumes) and as an expression of the work of God (as a theological perspective assumes). I concur with the words of Nicholas Healy, who based upon Hans Urs von Balthasar's theodramatic theory, formulates this view as follows:

> Both divine and human agency, moreover, must be understood, as in premodern theology generally, without any kind of division of labor. It is not the case, as has sometimes been assumed in modern theology, that God acts in certain areas while humans are left to act in other areas more or less alone. Human agency is *fully* constitutive of *all* human institutions and bodies, including the church.

---

narrative that sociology operates from is completely different from that of the Christian meta-narrative. Milbank would like what he calls a "Christian sociology" to replace secular sociology. Cf. Furseth and Repstad, *Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*, 203–4. Healy, in a similar fashion, would like to see an ecclesiological method based upon what he calls "a theological form of sociology." *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 166–67.

16. For example, we can find this in the work of Zygmunt Bauman (who admittedly does not mention theology in this context): "Sociology, we may conclude, is first and foremost a way of thinking about the human world; in principle one can also think about the same world in different ways" (*Thinking Sociologically*, 8). Johannes van der Ven believes sociology and theology have the same material object, but different formal objects (theology sees the church from its future in the perspective of the gospel) (*Ecclesiology in Context*, x).

17. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 182.

> At the same time, divine agency is *fully* constitutive of all such bodies, including those that are non-ecclesial and non-religious.[18]

The result of such a view means theology is able to incorporate experience. While sociology is limited to understanding this reality as only an expression of human action, theology is able to reflect upon how this can be an expression of the work of God in the world. This means that theology should not leave experience to sociology, but rather it should seek to understand it as a possible manifestation of God's work in the world.

The fact that theology can see human activity as an expression of God's work does not mean that *all* human activity is an expression of God's work. For example, human activity can also be a manifestation of that which is contrary to God's will (sin). When trying to identify and interpret God's works in the world, the church is dependent upon theological criteria as given by biblical revelation.

This brings us unto another point where sociology and theology differ, namely with regards to how the object of research is defined and delineated. The use of concepts and definitions in the sociological context is a question of what is most *suitable*. Concepts are nothing more than attempts to systematize various empirical phenomena as based upon their mutual similarities and differences. As such, there are no right or wrong concepts, only ones that are more or less applicable. When it comes to the term *church* for example, this is used in various ways without one meaning being more correct than another.

A common sociological usage of the term church is given in the well known *church-sect typology* as developed in the work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch. They define *church* as one of several different social forms of Christian groups, namely a religious institution which is open to, and seeks to dominate the wider society, whereas a *sect* is defined as a small group that cuts itself off from the local community.[19] In applying this definition to the first century Christian fellowship would mean the church would probably have to be understood as a sect and not a church. Whether or not we use such concepts is, in a sociological context, a matter

18. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 66–67. Van der Ven articulates this as "the principle of noncompetition," i.e. God and human actions do not exclude or replace one another: "God does not cancel out the activities of people in the church, but inspires, intensifies, and orients them. God gives to the people to form the church themselves, to do the church themselves" (*Ecclesiology in Context*, xiv).

19. Cf. Furseth and Repstad, *Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*, 133–40.

of preference. There is, for example, nothing in the way of constructing a sociological term *church* which includes both *church* and *sect* as defined by Weber and Troeltsch. For the interdisciplinary cooperation between sociology and theology it may even be suitable to refer to the same phenomenon using the same term. However, the use of shared terminology is no precondition for this type of cooperation, as theological and sociological concepts will never be fully compatible.

Sociologically speaking, it is of equal importance to *differentiate* as it is to *define* concepts. For sociology, it is important to examine the various variants of the phenomenon of the church, rather than make sharp demarcations of what is church, and what is not. It may also be of interest to show how some Christian groups have similarities with non-Christian groups, as they do with other Christian groups.

From a theological point of view, to define the concept *church* is not just a matter of preference. Theologically, it is necessary to talk about the church in the singular: *the* church. As God is one, it follows that there is only one church of God. The question is how this notion of the one church can relate to the empirical diversity of Christian churches and groups. The theological concept of the church, in this context, means *more* than a particular classification or definition of specific empirical phenomena. Such an appraisal is based upon the idea that the church has a certain real character beyond such classifications, namely the church as a fellowship where Jesus is present. Theology cannot, therefore, be restricted to the classification of empirical data, as it needs a criterion to distinguish between church and non-church. The need for such a criterion is also used for traditional theological discussions about the *marks of the church* (*notae ecclesiae*). According to a Lutheran understanding, the Word and sacrament are the primary marks of the church, and thus the bearer of the presence of Jesus.[20] While from a sociological perspective there will be no fundamental difference between the church and any other religious community, whereas from a theological perspective, gathering in the name of Jesus marks the church as a unique expression of God's saving presence in the world.

---

20. For further discussion about this issue within the context of Lutheranism see Lathrop and Wengert, *Christian Assembly*.