

## Sociologist Fallen among the Secular Theologians

DAVID MARTIN spoke on the BBC Third Programme in 1968, shortly before demythologizers of 1972 began their corrosion of the Catholic Church in Australia. It was in *The Listener* of 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1968, and has been printed twice before in our Catechetical Newsletters, nn. 11 & 161 (1987 & 1999).

He was a lecturer in sociology at the London School of Economics, an Anglican layman, and author of *Tracts against the Times*.

ONE OF THE PERSONS whom secularising theologians most delight to honour at their conferences is the sociologist. They believe that he is one of those 'modern men' with whom and about whom they wish to discuss. And they have a fair expectation that he will have something pretty funereal to tell them: why the Church is dying and must die. No doubt he can also be prodded into dilating on the character and dilemma of modern man, confirming in his own inimitable sociological jargon the pregnant obscurities of Tillich and Bonhoeffer. However it has not escaped my notice, moving from conference to conference, that I am usually the next-but-one most conservative person present. Maybe the theologians who picked on me were just unlucky, and it is indeed true that with more care they could have lighted on plenty of sociologists capable of fulfilling their most masochistic anticipations. But if I have been something of an atypical mistake, there is no doubt that there is nearly always one person present more conservative than myself: and he is generally a physical scientist, a biochemist perhaps, or worst of all a physicist. I don't mean politically conservative; I mean theologically conservative. So it would seem that while the theologians joyfully proclaim the death of God and the death of the Church in the name of 'modern man', the only two modern men present watch the whole exercise with sad and wondering eyes.

### MODERN MAN — A FIGMENT

NO ONE NEED DOUBT that man's rational control of the environment is vastly increased, and maybe this magnificent creature of the theological imagination does exist, or at any rate scattered fragments of his body. Nevertheless he is barely known to empirical sociology. He makes only a marginal impact on the Gallup polls, which more usually document gullibility, illogicality, insecurity and rank superstition. Hence I am encouraged to

carry my vulgar empiricism not only to the point of asking, "Who is modern man?" but in addition: "Where is modern man?" I even asked one theologian just how many examples of modern secular man were extant. "What," he said, "in a percentage?"

Yes, I replied, confirming his worst suspicions. The incident confirmed mine as well. Theologians never lose their habits: not anyway, their habits of mind. They know modern man exists *de fide*. Who so gross a sceptic as not to believe in modern man? In a style reminiscent of Marxist theology, all who do not confirm to the thesis are suffering from 'false consciousness': they are just behind.

I said just now that theological habits do not die, even when God and the Church have been safely buried. Secularising theologians are still preachers and do not bear genuine contradiction. They have asked for signs of a secular society and signs have been given them. That means gathering evidence, like a music-hall comedian gathering jokes on the way to the theatre. "A pop star said the other day..." "A little boy of my acquaintance said..." And "Don't you think it significant?" Or, "I saw an operation on TV the other day and it brought home to me..." and so on. Evidence *en passant*. As a Cambridge don neatly put it, "Modern Man is a clergyman's friend who has just lost his faith."

### STATISTICS

ABOVE ALL, they make mincemeat with statistics about the Church. Don't bother them with complicated facts; let's get on with dismantling obstreperous institutions or celebrating the arrival of the secular city. Of course there are statistics which document certain forms of institutional decline, but the central point is that the secularising theologian often just doesn't like institutions. Like most of us most of the time — indeed like the typical 'modern man' — he decides what he likes and then rustles up the evidence. Show him any evidence on the other side and he flatly tells you the polls must be wrong, people must be lying. He knows the Churches are dying, and he is still a clergyman, and should know. Sociologist, stick to your last!

I am talking about a small group, however widespread their journalistic éclat, and not all the attitudes described apply to all of them. The common Existentialist theme, however, is there

and it links itself to a whole group of progressive middle-class attitudes.

### ROLES AND RITUALS

THERE IS A FEAR of stereotypes and of images, and a sensitivity to the restricting power of roles, as well as to the rigidities of structure. The word 'structure' is as frequent as the word 'secular'. Above all, perhaps, there is the search for authenticity, based on a feeling that middle-class existence just isn't real. Put on your tie or your clerical collar and you become ontologically deprived. Only a man in dungarees bouncing a pneumatic drill into the concrete has 'ultimate reality'.

Almost all the conferences have suggested to me that certain clergy do indeed seek to be engaged in something 'real', not perhaps with a pneumatic drill but with an occupation embodying ascertainable results. They are anxious to step outside the restricted roles a parson is allowed to play, particularly perhaps in a female-dominated milieu. As one young chaplain burst out: "The Women's Bright Hour is the dregs of the Church."

The horror of roles, and of the repetitious rituals (religious and otherwise) in which they are embedded, was nicely illustrated in an incident occurring at a conference especially convened to announce the death of the Church. This same incident also illustrated the importance of roles. It happened like this. Some of those really determined to finish the Church off attacked a proposal to celebrate Holy Communion at the conference. The arguments proceeded merrily and violently until two coloured delegates rose, arguing in favour of a celebration, and incidentally, dropping the reminder that they happened to be the servers. The progressive mind agonised, caught between the desire to eliminate a ritual and the patent illiberality of depriving coloured persons of an honourable role. It was decided to celebrate, but at the same time to de-clericalise the occasion: the officiating minister wore an open-necked shirt — just to give it that necessary touch of ultimate reality.

### BUREAUCRACY

OF COURSE, there were those ready to go further than celebrating in open-necked shirts. Their aim was continuously to mint fresh symbols: in short, to translate Holy Communion into a once-for-all 'happening'. Much of the same impulses arise in relation to 'structure', particularly bureaucratic

structure. The outcry about bureaucracy arises from every part of the political and religious spectrum — though most of the complaints I hear in my institution come from what I can only call the anarcho-Buddhist Left. But the particular complaint of the secularising theologian is paradoxical, because what Max Weber called “Rational Bureaucracy” is not only highly secular but also a necessary aspect of modern social structure. To object to it is to assert a radically religious drive which refuses to come to terms with the world. Genuine human existence and authentic personal life in modern communities depend on bureaucracy. Bureaucratic structure is an essential precondition of authenticity, not a barrier to it.

This radically *religious* attitude is partly suggested by the Bishop of Woolwich’s demand that structures must be ‘stripped’ for action, because 90% of current effort is spent on mere maintenance, and the other 10% on real activity. Yet 90% of effort in most organisations is concerned with maintenance, and the other 10% depends on it to exist. He has a point in that some structures are maladapted, but one just cannot be doing ‘real’ things much more than 10% of the time. I work in a university and by comparison the Church shows up quite well: one-tenth inspiration and nine-tenths bureaucratic perspiration is quite a good ratio. Conspicuous ‘waste’ is inherent in productivity, even scientific productivity. Perpetual *agape* in the Church is about as possible as perpetual *eros* in marriage. Only a clergyman — or an actor or a London School of Economics student — expects that much ‘reality’.

## CONFERENCES: A NEW RITUAL

**A** RELATED POINT came up in an interesting way at a conference organised by the Methodist Renewal Group. This was the second such conference and it occurred to some that there might easily be a third. Conferring has acquired its own momentum; it was now an annual ritual. However, others saw conferences as a necessary means for promoting their viewpoint as a definite pressure group within the Methodist Church. This meant not only a secretary, but organisation, perhaps even officials. Bureaucracy! Immediately heated discussion ensued as to whether or not purity would be compromised by an attempt to organise, pressurise and promote. So the conference divided into two mildly acrimonious halves. Divisiveness had definitely made its appearance: the snake was in the grass.

My most recent conference was

with the Dutch Catholics, and they have the Methodists outstripped for radicalism every time. In their case one must reckon not only with Tillich but also with the French theologians and Vatican II. Not, indeed, that they lack secular theologians of their own, but whereas elsewhere the effects of Vatican II sank in but slowly, in Holland the internal communication lines of Catholicism were so good (they even have their own TV) and the level of understanding so relatively high that a trickle turned into a flood which hollowed out vast chasms in traditional orthodoxy. The Dutch Catholic level of intensity contrasted quite noticeably with the Anglican level of intensity. I can only suppose that we in England have abandoned dogmatic theology for so long and are so used to the vagaries of conscience and experimental religion that the Existentialist mode makes a much smaller ripple on an ancient tide.

Put another way, most Protestant countries in the Anglo-Saxon ambit have been so used to religious vacuity that another cloud of Existentialist dust barely disturbs the clarity of their theological vision. But for those only lately inured to clear and distinct ideas like Thomism, or to the firm exercise of authority, the effect is startling. Just as Catholics who cease to be conservative often become Marxists, so those who cease to be Thomists easily embrace the most extreme Existentialist fashion. They are experts at excluding the middle.

## MODERNIST REVOLUTION

**J**UST HOW EXTREME, I intend to illustrate. I began by a polite peripheral inquiry as to how a modern Catholic might view a pious practice in indulgences: so many days’ remission of purgatory and so on. My Dutch friend listened with unfeigned surprise and then said: “Don’t be ridiculous.” I murmured apologetically. He went on: “Maybe there are such practices but they are of no interest to us.” “But,” I said, “in Rome there are many churches which proclaim indulgences in a dozen or so languages, at least three of which I can read.” “Oh,” he said impatiently, “I don’t know what they do in Rome.” Another illuminating instance arose in relation to demons and angels. An exegete was asked whether or not he believed in demons. He replied that he did not because it was possible to locate the point at which demons enter the Jewish world-view from external sources. Somebody, almost certainly an Anglican, rose to say: “You can’t do that with angels.” “Oh yes, I can and I do,” came the answer. Of course he could “do that with angels,” but the principle of exclusion is plainly

perilous in the extreme.

A comparable radicalism exists with regard to the central mysteries of the faith. Some have given up confession. And one said: “Maybe two or three of us should just meet in the street and break bread together.” Maybe. Inevitably the ancient strategy of redefinition is brought to bear in the service of radicalism. For example, the vow of ‘poverty’ was defined as “not living above the average standard of living of the country in which you happened to be.” In such an atmosphere it seemed improper to ask about Papal infallibility. Nevertheless I did use a relaxed moment to inquire in what the *magisterium* of the Roman Church consisted in these modern days. “Oh,” said a young priest, “in the reasonableness or otherwise of what the Holy Father says. When he is sensible we are pleased; when he is not we are anxious. He is very good on Vietnam but on theological matters like celibacy most unfortunate. On this kind of issue we can only hope he says nothing at all: silence is better than a mistaken pronouncement.”

This disintegration is a reaction which may settle at a less extreme level. Clearly one cannot easily anticipate what a Dutch Catholic is likely to believe. One almost feels sympathy with those humanists who love to insist all Christians believe in absurdities so as to bolster their own feelings of security and intellectual superiority. Just how far things can go may be seen from a mild joke indiscreetly perpetrated by an Anglican participant in the dialogue. He asked if the Catholics intended celebrating the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther’s nailing 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. “Of course,” came the reply. You can either regard that as the only possible answer to an impertinent question or the soberest expression of intent. I think it was the latter. At any rate a solemn remembrance of those 95 theses could do no harm. In a sense it was undeniably Luther who started it all.

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

Theological Modernism matches the post-Modernist neo-Marxist Freudianists in their ‘long march of the Left’ through Australian universities, social and mass media, politics and courts (judge-made law). cf. *TakeDown: From Communism to Progressives: How the Left has sabotaged Family and Marriage*, by Dr Paul Kengor, 2015.

“Yet the lies of Melchor, the mighty & accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, Power of Terror & of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed, and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear evil fruit even unto the latest days;” *The Silmarillion*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.