

## SOCIOLOGY AND SALVATION: DO WE NEED A CATHOLIC SOCIOLOGY?

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**T**HIS ARTICLE wants to interpret 50 years of an intellectual current: 50 years of Catholic interest in sociology. It is not intended as a historical study, an account of the contributions to sociology made by American Catholics over the last 50 years, though this would have been a stimulating topic. Instead, the essay offers an interpretation. Looking at the past here serves a systematic interest. Examining this history from a particular perspective, I discern in the intellectual development three types of Catholic involvement in sociological studies, where each type corresponds to a particular phase of the American economy. In the 30s and 40s American Catholics promoted their own Catholic sociology; from the 50s on they welcomed the ascending functionalist sociology and dropped the idea of a Catholic sociology; in the 80s some of them, at odds with the current orientation of capitalism, moved beyond functionalism and looked upon society from the perspective of its victims.

This article pursues a point of view. The statement I want to make is ultimately a theological one.

### I

From its beginning in the early 20th century, American sociology was guided by a mechanistic, evolutionary concept of society. The spirit of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer was alive and well. This is how Gibson Winter describes the mechanistic model that underlay the sociology of the American scholar Graham Sumner, whose work set the tone for more than a generation:

The mechanistic model postulates a set of instinctive forces playing upon one another in an environment; these forces move against one another within the limitations set by the environment; various resolutions of force furnish modes of adaptation, and the most suitable moves lead to survival; hence the construction of laws which express these suitable modes of adaptation enables the scientist to discern the order inscribed in the process.<sup>1</sup>

Winter suggests that this paradigm of the social process corresponds to the mechanism of free market. Here competing parties, seeking their

<sup>1</sup> Gibson Winter, *Elements for a Social Ethic* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 8.

own interests, create conflicts that necessitate modes of adaptation, that are resolved by the most suitable moves leading to victory, and that are ruled by what scientists discover as the law of supply and demand operative within it. American pragmatism tried to free social science from the mechanistic model of externally related forces and reinstate the human being as an active, responsible subject, but this perspective, according to Winter,<sup>2</sup> was never fully integrated into American sociology. Sociology remained positivistic.

As Catholic higher education developed in America and sociology was introduced into Catholic colleges, Catholic professors found it impossible to join the mainstream of American sociology. They were keenly aware that their study of society was guided by a different understanding of the human being. They engaged in what they called Catholic sociology. In the 30s they decided to found the American Catholic Sociological Society (ACSS)—this took place in 1937—and in 1940 they began to publish the *American Catholic Sociological Review* (ACSR). While these professors recognized that there could be no Catholic mathematics, they strongly defended the need for a Catholic sociology. None of these scholars were great theoreticians, yet their intuitions were often profound.

The first volumes of ACSR contain papers and articles written by Catholic sociologists that offer sets of arguments to explain why the dominant American sociology deserved to be rejected and why Catholics should pursue their own sociology, in keeping with the Church's social teaching.<sup>3</sup> I summarize these arguments under three headings.

First, the Catholic scholars criticized the concept of the human being presupposed by the secular sociology of their day. They rejected its implicit determinism and evolutionism. For theological reasons they believed that people were free to make responsible decisions and that the future of society depended on these decisions. They also affirmed the religious dimension of human existence: people had ears to hear the call of God. They thus repudiated the dominant sociology, which entertained a reductionist view of religion and tended to interpret religion as a premodern phenomenon to be left behind by the evolutionary process.

Second, the Catholic sociologists objected to the perception of the social process implicit in the dominant sociology. The positivists regarded

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 15-22.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the Catholic sociologists publishing in the early volumes of ACSR were A. H. Clemens, James Connell, Francis Friedel, S.M., Paul H. Furfey, Ralph Gallagher, S.J., Howard Jensen, Robert Hartnett, S.J., Raymond McGowan, Franz Mueller, Raymond Murray, C.S.C., Sr. Mary Consilia O'Brien, O.P., and Eva Ross. Cf. also Paul H. Furfey, *The Scope and Method of Sociology* (New York: Harper, 1953), and Eva Ross, *Fundamental Sociology* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1939).

society as an interacting system of atomistic individuals, which they tried to understand scientifically, using the inductive method, taking into account only external, quantifiable factors and disregarding the internal, nonquantifiable ones, such as people's intentions. The Catholic sociologists, relying on the concept of society derived from Catholic social teaching, recognized the spiritual dimension of society, the social bonds that united the members, and the symbols that defined their identity and their common vision.

Third, the Catholic sociologists found fault with the dominant sociology because of the absence of an explicit social-ethics perspective. What did they mean by this? They regarded their own work as scientific. They fully embraced the inductive method and defended the relative autonomy of sociology against conservative Catholic members of their college communities who opposed the presence of social science in the college curriculum. They loved what they called "the facts." They actually did not totally overcome their own positivistic prejudice. They made an excessively simple distinction between "the facts" to be obtained by empirical research and "the social philosophy" derived from an intellectual tradition that interpreted the facts and brought them together in a synthetic perspective. They repeatedly complained that American sociology was strong on facts but weak on philosophy: American sociology had no explicit social-ethics perspective. For the Catholic sociologists the social-ethics perspective was defined by the philosophy derived from the Church's social teaching.

What did this social ethics mean in practical terms? In the 30s and 40s Catholics who took papal social teaching seriously—and this included the Catholic sociologists—were ardent supporters of the New Deal. Thus Catholic sociologists were reform-minded. They engaged in social studies to arrive at a better understanding of society's ills, and they hoped that by their teaching they would contribute to the reform of American society.<sup>4</sup> Catholic sociology was value-laden and action-oriented.

I note in passing that despite their criticism of American sociology, the mood of the Catholic sociologists was upbeat and optimistic. They shared in the vigor of American society. Thus they had little sympathy for the pessimistic analyses offered by Pitirim Sorokin, famous American sociologist of European origin, who assigned American society to "the sensate phase" of civilization and described the tragic symptoms of its pervasive cultural corruption.<sup>5</sup> Sorokin's article in the second volume of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Robert Hartnett, "A Postwar Reconstruction Program for the American Catholic Sociological Society," *ACSR* 4 (1943) 102-9.

<sup>5</sup> Pitirim Sorokin, "Dualism, Chaotic Syncretism, Quantitative Colossalism, and Diminishing Creativeness of Contemporary Sensate Culture," *ACSR* 2 (1941) 3-22.

the ACSR found no echo among the Catholic sociologists: the only reference to it in the subsequent issues was critical.<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic sociologists were reliable but not brilliant. Today we read them with great sympathy. They saw themselves as a minority of believing intellectuals swimming against the stream of the dominant culture. But belonging to what was then the Catholic subculture, they lacked the training and the self-confidence to take on mainstream American sociology directly and refute its theories and presuppositions in a rational, systematic way. Had they been able to do this, they might have discovered that even without reference to divine revelation and the Catholic tradition it would have been possible to offer a rational defense of their three demands: an alternative concept of the human that recognized the spiritual core, a paradigm of the social process that took into account values and symbols, and the need for an explicit social-ethics dimension.

A last remark about these Catholic sociologists: their studies had no reflex impact on their theological ideas. Their work was guided by Catholic theology but did not generate new reflection in theology. For them the relation between theology and sociology was a one-way street.

## II

In the 50s, America was steadily moving in the direction of welfare capitalism. During those years a new sociology achieved wide recognition in the United States. The new approach was called structural functionalism, because it assumed that the various subsystems (structures) of the complex interaction system (society) exercised specific functions—functions that enabled society as a whole to adapt to the changing environment and preserve the social equilibrium whenever challenged and acted upon by historical forces. Here society was seen as a cybernetic, self-adaptive, self-corrective social system. In this process the cultural subsystem, which included ethical values and religious symbols, exercised an important function in stabilizing the social order and aiding individuals to integrate smoothly into the roles assigned to them by society.

Talcott Parsons, the most famous among structural functionalists,<sup>7</sup> provided a sociological theory that reconciled positivistic, quantitative research with an appreciation of cultural and religious factors. In the light of his sociology the conflict between science and religion appeared

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Leo Martin, S.J., "The Problem of War Causation," *ACSR* 3 (1942) 231-43.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. esp. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free, 1951), and his "Systems Analysis: The Social System," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 15, 458-72. For a useful, critical introduction, cf. Irving Zeitlin, *Rethinking Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 17-60.

to be overcome.<sup>8</sup>

It is no wonder that Catholics were greatly impressed by the new sociology. Here the image of the human being included the spiritual dimension; here the paradigm of the social process assigned an important role to values and symbols; and because functionalism saw in increasing differentiation and integration an evolutionary drift, it represented, in the American context, a reformist social philosophy, supporting the movement toward welfare capitalism and a more just income distribution.

Under these conditions Catholics became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of a Catholic sociology. They were now able to join the dominant sociology without compromising their religious convictions. In the early 60s the ACSS became the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) and the quarterly *ACSR* took the name of *Sociological Analysis*. In his presidential address of 1962 John Hughes paid tribute to the impact of functionalism. "Sociologists have a professional preoccupation with the functional utility of human activities. They are engaged in a constant search for purposes, manifest and latent, which are served by social behaviour."<sup>9</sup> This quotation actually reveals, beyond the intention of its author, the ambiguity of functionalist theory: its implicit utilitarianism and the absence of transcendence despite the affirmation of religious values.

Before examining the limitations of functionalism, I wish to recognize the intellectual creativity it released among Catholic sociologists. As an example let me mention Thomas O'Dea, who occasionally wrote from a specifically Catholic perspective while most of his work represented sociological science universally accepted at American universities. Thus he was invited by Prentice-Hall Publishers to write a textbook on the sociology of religion for their multivolume college series on sociology.<sup>10</sup> In this volume O'Dea initiated the reader into functionalist theory, without disguising its unresolved questions and possible shortcomings. Human life, O'Dea observes, is marked by contingency and death. For most people life is also painfully affected by powerlessness and scarcity. It is religion, O'Dea proposes, that enables people to cope with these challenges, persevere in the roles they play in their social setting, and thus become instruments serving the equilibrium of society. Religion protects society from breakdown.

O'Dea mentions six functions of religion.<sup>11</sup> Religion offers support and

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Siebert, "Parsons' Analytical Theory of Religion as Ultimate Reality," in *Sociology and Human Destiny*, ed. Gregory Baum (New York: Seabury, 1980) 27-53, 28.

<sup>9</sup> *ACSR* 24 (1963) 285.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 13-15.

consolation to people during times of disappointment; religion communicates a sense of security under conditions of uncertainty; religion confirms the accepted norms of society as religious duties and thus stabilizes the social order, despite the unequal distribution of rewards; religion communicates a social vision that at times releases reformist impulses in society; religion in many cases provides people with a collective identity; and religion helps people as they move through the phases of their life cycle and teaches them how to die. Thus, because religion makes people peaceful, resourceful, and stable, it fulfils an all-important, irreplaceable function in society.

In line with functionalist theory, Andrew Greeley offered a more concrete analysis of the power of religion in American society. He followed the inspiration of Alexis de Tocqueville, who already in the 1830s observed that under the impact of American egalitarian society the Christian religion underwent a significant transformation.<sup>12</sup> While the religion of the established churches in Europe undergirded the unity of their respective countries and thus exercised a certain political function, the religion of the many churches in the U.S., none of which were established, exercised a very different function, one that affected people's personal lives more directly.

Tocqueville saw America as an individualistic, egalitarian, and market-oriented society, characterized by an extraordinary social mobility, vertical and horizontal, that detached people from the communities into which they were born and set them on the lonely path toward success. In this social context the denominational network of small congregations, spread over the whole country, provided people with a sense of community and social identity and offered them a message of love that restrained their ambition and self-preoccupation. This humanizing function of religion, Tocqueville believed, was the reason why Americans were so faithful in their religious practice.

In line with Tocqueville's analysis, Greeley praised "the genius of American religion": religion in America responded in a creative way to the needs of the emerging modern, industrial society. While industrialization fostered the secularization of society in Europe, this was not the case in America. Pluralistic, denominational religion supplied people with what Greeley called "a sense of belonging" and "a source of meaning."<sup>13</sup> Belonging, because being at home in a church gave them something resembling a tribal identity. And meaning, because the transcendent

<sup>12</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 2 (New York: Random House, 1945) 21-33.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1972) 102-7.

message gave their life a purpose beyond the short-range preoccupations generated by the business-oriented culture.

It is interesting to compare the functionalist interpretation of American religion offered by Greeley, the Catholic, with that given by Parsons, the Protestant. Parsons also rejected the theory of secularization defended by many European sociologists, according to which industrialization was inevitably accompanied by the waning of religion. What was taking place in modern society, Parsons argued, was a process of differentiation, a process of specialization and integration operative in all large institutions, including the churches.<sup>14</sup> Many functions exercised by the churches in the past—such as community-building, commemorating great events, teaching, counseling, providing recreation—were increasingly fulfilled by secular institutions, thus allowing religion to exercise its one essential function: “the formation of conscience.” Parsons believed that the formation of conscience, the will to do the right thing at all times, was the essential personal motivation that made modern society work effectively. Complex institutions of government, industry, and business depended on the reliability of each person working in them on whatever level; and since it was impossible to supervise each person’s work, it was on the conscience of each, on their will to do the right thing, that depended the entire society with its many interacting organizations. Parsons argued that religion was alive and well in America because the Christian and Jewish tradition created the motivation that constituted the heart of the American system.

I note that the Protestant Parsons located the power of religion in the shaping of the mind, while the Catholic Greeley, heir of a more communitarian and more mystical tradition, defined the function of American religion as creating community and providing transcendent meaning beyond one’s daily work.

To prepare us for the critical observations to be made further on, I wish to contrast Greeley’s functionalist approach to American religion with the analysis of two other social thinkers. Tocqueville, we saw, believed that religion was important because it allowed people to integrate and be well in the American public. This was the line of thought explored by Greeley. But Tocqueville also argued that religion was important for another reason: religion rooted people in an ancient tradition; it enabled them to resist the pressure of public opinion and thus escape the cultural conformism which, according to Tocqueville, characterized egalitarian societies.<sup>15</sup> For Tocqueville religion was a social source of freedom.

<sup>14</sup> Talcott Parsons, “Christianity and Modern Industrial Society,” in *Religion, Culture and Society*, ed. L. Schneider (New York: John Wiley, 1964) 273–98.

<sup>15</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy* 23.

Because it transcended society, it enabled believers to stand against the received set of values. In fact, Tocqueville feared that if the increasingly powerful government ever acquired the skills to manipulate public opinion, American democracy, despite its liberal philosophy, could become a despotic political system. In such a system the people, bent on complying with public opinion, would accept government policy and obey government regulations willingly and joyfully, believing themselves to be free and unconstrained. Tocqueville was afraid of the perfectly balanced social system in which people had internalized the public norms. He regarded religion as a bulwark of independent thought.

It is also instructive to contrast Greeley's positive interpretation of American denominational religion with the more negative interpretation given by Richard Niebuhr. Greeley assigned the formation of denominations to the genius of American religion adapting itself creatively to meet the needs of a modern society. By contrast, Niebuhr argued that the denominational structure came into being because the American churches were unable to bridge the social tensions produced in them by the complexity of American society: the tensions between the towns of the East coast and the moving Western frontier, between the North and the South, between white and black, rich and poor, immigrant groups and the established elites. For Niebuhr the proliferation of denominations was the social product of the churches' failure to transcend, in the name of Christ, the tearing conflicts created by a sinful world.<sup>16</sup>

Structural functionalism, I have noted, concentrates on the unifying and interconnecting elements of society and tends to interpret conflicts and social struggles as temporary strains produced by the effort of society to adapt itself to new historical circumstances. This American sociology understands differences of power largely in terms of the different functions exercised by the various sectors of society in the service of increasing social equilibrium. Cultural values, including religion, make people readily accept their role and the roles of others in society. Legitimate power is thus not experienced by them as domination but as an aspect of differentiation, the division of functions promoting the well-being of society as a whole.

The functionalist understanding of hierarchy has a certain affinity with the organic, corporatist idea of society proposed by the Church's social teaching—at least until the early 70s. It also reflects the traditional self-understanding of the Church as a hierarchical body, an "unequal society," in which the members, located on different levels, know their place and through the interplay of authority and obedience serve the

<sup>16</sup> This is the thesis of Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Living Age, 1957).



well-being of the whole. In my opinion it is an abiding Catholic intuition—shared even by contemporary egalitarian Catholics—that a co-operative society is a historical possibility, a society in which the aspirations of individuals are fully reconciled with the requirements of the common good. By nature and by grace this is the destiny of society.

The question remains whether this image is a useful paradigm for interpreting existing social orders or whether it is a utopia serving as guide for social action in the world and the reform of ecclesiastical institutions.

### III

While the Catholic sociology of the 30s and 40s had no reflex impact on Catholic theology, functionalist sociology offered many opportunities for creative dialogue with Catholic theology. If it is true that religion stabilizes, pacifies, and humanizes society and that religious symbols guide the social order and influence individual behavior, then it should be possible to express the meaning of divine revelation in a language that accounts for its impact on social and personal life. Such an approach to theology had a certain affinity with Karl Rahner's transcendental theology, which sought to articulate the meaning of dogma in terms of its revealing, saving, and sanctifying power. Seen in this perspective, the symbols of religion are not "weak," images calling forth feeling, but "strong," essential elements in the self-constitution of society and its members. Greeley has pursued this theological approach in an imaginative way, even if his writings have not always satisfied the expectations of professional theologians. In several books he has tried to articulate the Christian message in terms of its transformative impact on people living in America.<sup>17</sup> Here he made ample use of the six functions of religion outlined by O'Dea. If the role of religion is to serve the well-being of men and women in society, then sociological reflection can make an important contribution to defining the Church's mission in the world. In his *The New Agenda*,<sup>18</sup> published after Vatican II, Greeley used this method to define and contrast two pastoral projects of the Church, the preconciliar and the conciliar; and in several subsequent publications he employed the same sociological reasoning to make proposals for the Church's pastoral policies.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Jesus Myth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971); *What Modern Catholics Believe about God* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1971); *The Sinai Myth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972); *The Mary Myth* (New York: Seabury, 1977); *The Great Mysteries* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

<sup>18</sup> Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Greeley and Mary Greeley Durkin, *How to Save the Catholic Church* (New York: Viking, 1984).

What is presupposed in this interchange between sociology and theology is that divine revelation as God's saving and sanctifying word addressed this concrete society in order to rescue its members from their anomie and perfect the social order for the well-being of all. The perspective is here incarnational. Further on I shall ask what happens when God's word is heard first of all as judgment on the world—the eschatological perspective.

It is of interest to the theologian that Parsons makes religion disappear in the formation of conscience, a purely this-worldly function, while Greeley defends divine transcendence and human ecstasy. For him America is a nation of mystics.<sup>20</sup> Yet these experiences of otherness made people more truly human and hence served the well-being of the nation as a whole. In this perspective divine otherness did not interrupt the well-tempered society.

#### IV

Parsons' functionalism was vehemently attacked in the late 50s and the 60s by sociologists who perceived society in more conflictual terms. They provided a critique from the political Left. C. Wright Mills<sup>21</sup> and later Alvin Gouldner<sup>22</sup> brought forth other arguments against structural functionalism, arguments that are of special interest to theologians. These scholars showed that Parsons' sociology never really moved beyond utilitarianism. While Parsons appreciated nonutilitarian values, he recognized them in his system only for their social utility. Even though Parsons took people's interior life seriously, he thought that their subjectivity was engendered by society's effort to adapt to new conditions and preserve the social equilibrium. Thus people's experience that they acted freely was an illusion: acting within them was the cybernetic social system following its own necessity. The interacting harmony of society was theoretically assured by eliminating human freedom. Parsons never escaped the assumptions of positivism and determinism. He believed that objective and value-free sociological research was able to uncover the laws operative in society that accounted for social development and people's personal behavior.

Catholic sociologists such as O'Dea and Greeley who followed the functionalist approach did not endorse these Parsonsian presupposi-

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Greeley, *Come, Blow Your Mind with Me* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971); *Unsecular Man* (New York: Schocken, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Avon, 1970).

tions,<sup>23</sup> just as Christian thinkers who make use of Marxist paradigms do not accept Marx's ontological presuppositions. With Parsons the Catholic sociologists acknowledged society's trend toward differentiation, integration, and social equilibrium, but they did this not because they accepted the evolutionary, determinist thrust of the social system (and the elimination of personal freedom), but because they shared what I have called the Catholic intuition, the belief that a co-operative social order reconciling personal aspirations with service of the common good was a historical possibility and in fact the high destiny of society.

Mills and Gouldner criticized Parsons' structural functionalism also because of its political implications. The focus on social harmony and interaction tended to make invisible the social conflicts and struggles initiated by groups and classes disfavored in society. In presenting society as a self-corrective, cybernetic social system and dismissing discontent and disruption as temporary strains during periods of adaptation, structural functionalism exercised an ideological role. It provided a social theory that legitimated the existing order. Arguing against Parsons, Mills and Gouldner defended a conflictual view of society. Karl Marx had pointed to the class-divided nature of feudal and capitalist society; and according to some, even Max Weber, with no sympathy for socialism, saw society divided between the dominant structures defended by the elites and the countervailing movements supported by the underprivileged. Mills and Gouldner argued that it was more rational, more faithful to the social reality, to abandon the functionalist perspective in favor of "a conflict sociology" of one kind or another.

A careful reading of Talcott Parsons' entire work reveals that the distinguished American sociologist designed his social theory with its cybernetic, evolutionary thrust as an alternative to the Marxist theory of history that exercised such a strong appeal to classes, peoples, and nations situated at the margin.<sup>24</sup> According to Parsons, the principle of differentiation, the application of reason to social development and adaptation, generated an evolutionary trend in human history that culminated in industrial, capitalist society, ever moving self-correctively toward greater social co-operation and harmony. This evolution reached its high point in American society.

American sociologists became deeply divided over methodology. Functionalists and conflict theorists argued with one another. Conflict theorists were not united among themselves. Scientific Marxists, for instance, remained wholly within the positivistic, utilitarian intellectual tradition,

<sup>23</sup> Cf. O'Dea's critique of Parsons in Thomas O'Dea, *Society and the Study of Religion* (New York: Basic, 1970) 221-34.

<sup>24</sup> This theme is developed throughout Gouldner's *Coming Crisis*, e.g. 176-85.

while cultural Marxists and non-Marxist conflict theorists often defended a more humanistic understanding of the human being. Were these debates among sociologists conflicts over values that deserved the serious attention of philosophers and ethicists? Or were they politically inspired squabbles produced by ideological distortion on both sides? Yes to the first question was said, among others, by theologians influenced by the emerging liberation theology. Yes to the second question was said by certain sociologists who, in reliance on phenomenology, tried to transcend the debate between Right and Left and find a value-free entry into the sociological analysis of social action.<sup>25</sup>

The work of these symbolic interactionists, as they are sometimes called, is indeed very interesting. Some of their social theories, because of the claim to value-neutrality, have been employed as reliable concepts by Christian thinkers in specifically Christian reflections. I am thinking especially of Peter Berger<sup>26</sup> and Gibson Winter.<sup>27</sup> Yet this article is not the place to examine whether symbolic interactionism really succeeded in providing an entry into a value-free analysis of social action, or whether the claim to value-neutrality actually trivialized the material inequality characteristic of American society and hence represented a value-laden theoretical strategy. In the rest of this article I will defend the position that, under present conditions in particular, the truth about society is

<sup>25</sup> Developing an aspect of Max Weber's thought, Alfred Schutz produced a sociology of everyday life in which the world appeared as an intersubjective creation. People constituted their world not through labor as Marx believed, but through meaning. The everyday-life world, Schutz claimed, can be known objectively, and this knowledge provides the basic truth about reality, back to which every specialized science, including sociology, refers. Cf. Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1967); German original, 1932). Schutz's phenomenological sociology influenced many American sociologists, e.g. Peter Berger and Gibson Winter.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967); Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *Sociology Reinterpreted* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981). For Berger's Christian reflections, see, e.g., his essays in *Facing Up to Modernity* (New York: Basic, 1977). For a critical evaluation, see G. Baum, "Peter Berger's Unfinished Symphony," in *Sociology and Human Destiny*, ed. G. Baum (New York: Seabury, 1980) 110-29.

<sup>27</sup> In his *Elements for a Social Ethic* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) Winter tries to transcend the debate between functionalism and conflict sociology by following Schutz into the sociology of everyday life. The world is created by meaning, and social conflicts are caused by the clash of meaning paradigms. Winter applies this theoretical approach in his *Liberating Creation* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). E.g., he interprets the conflict over the land between the transnational corporations and the native peoples in Western Canada not as a case of domination but as "a conflict between root metaphors of historical development" (98). By contrast, conflict sociology is used in a statement on American society made by a Chicago Reflection Group, to which Winter himself belonged: cf. *Theology in the Americas*, ed. Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 215-41.

not available to the researcher who wishes to remain objective. Truth demands commitment, even in the social sciences.

## V

In the late 70s and the 80s welfare capitalism entered into a severe crisis. The Keynesian economic policies, that had come to be adopted by all developed capitalist countries, did not seem to work any longer. What began to take place as a response was a reorganization of capitalism on the global level, a process that has been evaluated in different ways. The topic is a controversial one.

I find convincing, for reasons that will become apparent later, the analysis of these changes offered in the ecclesiastical documents of John Paul II and the American and Canadian Catholic bishops. According to *Laborem exercens*, capitalism has passed through an early "free enterprise" phase that caused enormous suffering among workers, and later through a "welfare state" phase that was more willing to share the wealth produced with society.<sup>28</sup> At this time, the pope argues, capitalism is entering a new phase, one that threatens to widen the gap between rich and poor countries and between rich and poor even in the developed countries. Capitalism, according to the Canadian bishops, has become a new ball game.<sup>29</sup> The unwritten contract that existed between the capitalist elite and society, guaranteeing full employment, welfare legislation, and respect for labor organizations, has been abrogated. Capitalism is being reorganized around privately-owned, giant, transnational corporations that are able to shift capital and relocate industries in parts of the world where labor is cheap, safety regulations minimal, and unionization forbidden by law. These transnationals are often strong enough to force a national government to serve their economic interests. The omnipresent international competition forces governments to adopt economic policies that will make the national economies "lean and efficient" to become competitive on the world market. What is demanded is a flexible and docile work force, the reduction of welfare spending, and the indifference of government to the growing sector of the deprived.

In their long pastoral letter on the economy the American Catholic bishops have analyzed the growing sector of the deprived, in some regions

<sup>28</sup> *Laborem exercens* mentions the present turning point in sec. 1 and the preceding phases in sec. 8: *Origins* 11 (1981) 227, 231. Cf. Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on Laborem exercens* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 31-35.

<sup>29</sup> "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis" (Dec. 22, 1982), in *Do Justice! The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops*, ed. E. F. Sheridan (Toronto: Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1986) 399-408.

reaching into the middle class.<sup>30</sup> The Canadian bishops, in a series of shorter pastoral messages, have focused more directly on the systemic causes of these social developments.<sup>31</sup> They have provided an ethical critique of capitalism. And in his *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) John Paul II has argued that the misery and the hopelessness of the Third World countries of the South is to a large extent the result of the ideologies that determine the economic and political policies adopted by the capitalist and communist powers of the North.<sup>32</sup> The ideological and political competition between the two superpowers and the ensuing world-wide conflicts generate the nuclear-arms race, arms production, and the sale of arms; and the growth-orientation of capitalism, increasingly imitated by communist countries, unfailingly moves the global society toward a life-threatening ecological crisis. We are a civilization, John Paul II tells us, that is "oriented toward death rather than life."<sup>33</sup>

If this is true, if as a civilization we are indeed oriented toward death, then we must listen anew to the words of Jesus, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt 4:17). To articulate the meaning of this message for the U.S. and Western society as a whole is the task of a First World liberation theology.

If this reading of the signs of the times is correct, why is it that so few people are aware of it? The new phase of capitalism is accompanied by a "neoconservative" culture that blesses and legitimates it. Thanks to the dominant cultural symbols, people become increasingly concerned with their private lives. In his *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah has distinguished between "utilitarian individualism" that makes people work for material success and "expressive individualism" that makes them concentrate on their own subjectivity.<sup>34</sup> For both types life is what you put into it. People reach the economic, social, and cultural level they have merited. Society is an open playing field, and if people find themselves at the margin, it is probably their own fault. Neoconservative culture tries to reconcile us with inequality. It wants to give society a good conscience despite the widening sector of the deprived. The social passion so widely experienced in the 60s has come to be regarded as naive and unrealistic. Passionate concern for social justice, peace, disarmament,

<sup>30</sup> *Economic Justice for All*, the sections on employment and poverty, nos. 136-215, *Origins* 16 (1986) 426-32.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Baum and Duncan Cameron, *Ethics and Economics: Canada's Catholic Bishops on the Economic Crisis* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1984).

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Baum, "The Anti-Cold War Encyclical," *Ecumenist* 26 (July/Aug. 1988) 65-74.

<sup>33</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 24, in *Origins* 17 (1988) 649.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 147-48.

clean water, fresh air, and a sustainable society is not regarded as a realistic response to the orientation toward death, but as a stubborn and irrational utopianism, dangerous even because it makes people yearn for what they can never have. Today's neoconservative culture has little use for the Church's contemporary social teaching. Competition, not compassion and solidarity, is the rule of life.

The neoconservative culture even mobilizes religion to legitimate the existing order. Well known are the spokesmen of the so-called New Christian Right and, on a different intellectual level and appealing to a different sector of society, the Catholic and Protestant academics hired by various neoconservative research institutes. There are even secular social scientists, committed to neoconservative politics, who advocate a return to religion in order to make the present social order work more efficiently.

As an example, allow me to refer to Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.<sup>36</sup> Bell argues that the decline of the American economy is related to the cultural tension between the hard work and dedication demanded by the capitalist economy and the pleasure and instant satisfaction offered to people by contemporary culture. Industry and hedonism do not walk hand in hand. Bell does not ask himself the question whether contemporary hedonism may possibly be created by the capitalist economy in search of wider markets, transforming people into customers and consumers. For Bell culture is largely independent of the economic base. He believes that a new culture of self-sacrifice and self-limitation would make the American economy more productive and more efficient. Since people's desire for satisfaction is so great, it is only religion, the relation to the sacred, that could overcome the present hedonistic, cultural trend. Thus, for the sake of the American capitalism, Bell advocates a return to religion among the people.

What interests me in the present article is the official reaction of the Catholic Church and the other Christian churches to this new situation. They have produced a reasoned, religiously-based critique of the present order. Catholic social teaching, in particular, has used as a guiding principle of thought and action the so-called "preferential option for the poor," a principle that is—as we shall see—theologically grounded and at the same time sociologically relevant. Where did this principle come from? And what does it mean?

In the 60s, following the Vatican Council, the Latin American bishops tried to understand from a Christian perspective the situation of the

<sup>36</sup> New York: Basic, 1976. Cf. G. Baum, "Religion and Capitalism according to Bell," *Ecumenist* 14 (May/June 1976) 59–62.

people on their continent.<sup>36</sup> They realized that the Church's traditional social teaching with its organic concept of society was not very helpful. (I noted above a certain affinity of this organic concept with structural functionalism.) Latin American society was not organic. It was deeply divided between a small developed sector and the great masses living in destitution. During the 60s these masses in many parts of the continent became organized in social movements that sought to liberate the people from their plight. To interpret this situation, some form of conflict sociology was necessary. To understand Latin America from a Christian perspective, the bishops argued, echoing here the call of the base communities and liberation theology, it had to be looked at from the viewpoint of the poor and in solidarity with them.

The comfortable classes of Latin America, including the clergy, have tended to look upon society from their own perspective. They recognized the presence of the poor masses, but they felt that this was simply part of the earthly reality—an unfortunate part, it was true, but a condition that could not be altered. What the Latin American bishops' conferences of Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) demanded was a conversion of the Catholic people, including the Church, to the perspective of the poor. What precisely this conversion entails we shall examine further on.

Did the option for the poor have anything to say to Catholics living in the U.S. and other developed countries? These countries were, after all, welfare societies: they were not split into two unequal sectors, as were the Latin American societies. Still, liberation theologians from Latin America pleaded with their colleagues from the U.S. to develop a "holistic" theological evaluation of their great nation.<sup>37</sup> By this they meant that Americans could not understand their own country unless they were willing to look at the economic and political power it exercises in Latin America and, in fact, the world as a whole. Marie Augusta Neal argued convincingly that one of the illusions fostered by Parsons' structural functionalism was the idea that a national society was a self-contained social system that could be understood by analyzing its internal interactions.<sup>38</sup> In actual fact, Neal argued, a nation had economic and political links of domination or dependency to other parts of the world and hence

<sup>36</sup> For the important documents of the Medellín Conference (1968), cf. Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 445–76. For the document of the Puebla Conference (1979), cf. John Eagleson, ed., *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979). An interpretation of these ecclesiastical texts is offered in Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> See the report on the 1975 Theology in the Americas Conference at Detroit, *Theology in the Americas* (n. 27 above) 406.

<sup>38</sup> Marie Augusta Neal, *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 36–37.



could not be correctly understood apart from these links.

The World Synod of Bishops of 1971, looking at the world situation, decided to adopt the preferential option, its sociological and its theological dimension.<sup>39</sup> The synod recognized in the world systems of domination seeking ever-greater power and movements of liberation struggling to create conditions of justice. The bishops declared themselves in solidarity with these struggles for justice. Moreover, the synod acknowledged that their critical perception of the world and their solidarity with the poor was their response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Why? Because the redemption which Jesus brought included the liberation of people from the conditions of oppression.

As capitalism moved into its present phase, certain ecclesiastical documents began to adopt the preferential option even in the context of the developed world. John Paul II's *Laborem exercens* (1981) looked upon workers and other wage earners as deprived of their human right to participate in ownership and decision-making. The encyclical proposed that this deprived sector was the historical agent of social reconstruction in the industrialized capitalist and communist societies, and called for the solidarity of workers supported by the solidarity of all who love justice, including the Church itself.<sup>40</sup> The Canadian and American bishops adopted the preferential option, even if not in identically the same sense.<sup>41</sup> The Canadian bishops defined the option as did Medellín and Puebla. "As Christians we are called to follow Jesus by identifying with the victims of injustice, by analyzing the dominant attitude and structures that cause human suffering, and by actively supporting the poor and oppressed in their struggles to transform society."<sup>42</sup>

The preferential option is of central importance in this article. If I had the space, I would deal at length with its theological foundation and reply to the difficulties that have been raised against it. A vindication of its biblical basis is presented in the American bishops' pastoral on economic justice.<sup>43</sup> It would be possible to show that the option is also in keeping with the Christian tradition. The Church has always advocated what may be called "the compassionate option" for the poor: respect for the poor, almsgiving, and other forms of assistance. The Church has also

<sup>39</sup> Gremillion, *Gospel of Justice* (n. 36 above) 513-29, 514. For an interpretation cf. G. Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 14-19.

<sup>40</sup> *Laborem exercens*, no. 8, in *Origins* 11 (1981) 231. Cf. Baum, *Priority of Labor* (n. 28 above) 41-56.

<sup>41</sup> For a comparison between the perspectives taken by the American and Canadian Catholic bishops, see G. Baum, "A Canadian Perspective on the U.S. Pastoral," *Christianity and Crisis* 45 (1985) 516-18.

<sup>42</sup> "Ethical Reflections" (n. 29 above) 399-400.

<sup>43</sup> *Origins* 16 (1986) 415-16.

praised "the ascetical option" for the poor: the option for the simple life, in solidarity with the poor and in total reliance on God. This option has found expression especially in religious life. In the 20th century the Church has defended the "missionary option" for the poor: priests and bishops should live simple, unadorned lives, to increase the credibility of their message. Puebla advocated "the pastoral option" for the poor: it called upon dioceses and other church bodies to give priority to the poor in the use of their pastoral resources, including personnel, institutions, and finances. Finally, Puebla called for the conversion of the Church to the preferential option for the poor.<sup>44</sup> This option was to orient the Church's social ministry. This option did not dispense people from the options previously mentioned; these retain their full validity. *The preferential option was here defined as the double commitment, implicit in Christian discipleship, to look upon society from the perspective of the marginalized—the hermeneutical dimension—and to stand in solidarity with their struggle against oppression—the activist dimension.*

One must guard against certain misunderstandings. Elsewhere I have shown that the preferential option is not a patronizing gesture of the bishops bending down to the lower classes.<sup>45</sup> The option has meaning for all, including the poor: the poor must recognize God's presence among them, opt for themselves, overcome the false and degrading self-understanding communicated to them by the dominant culture, and discover their call to action. Nor is the preferential option a commitment to populism. It does not imply a romantic idealization of the ideas and attitudes held by the underprivileged. Listening to the poor means learning to take seriously their plight, looking at society from their marginal position, and searching for the structural causes of their suffering.

It is also important to show that the preferential option is a transcendent principle. It remains operative in, through, and after a radical social transformation; for as soon as new groups are being pushed to the margin, the preferential option calls for solidarity with them. It is useful to compare the preferential option with the option for the proletariat and the option for the nation. The latter are both preferential options; both constitute a double commitment: they create a new perspective for seeing the social reality and generate acts of solidarity in the political order. There are undoubtedly historical conditions when it is right and just to opt for the emancipation of the proletariat or the free self-determination of a nation in bondage. But these two preferential options do not generate their own critical self-reflection. If they are stubbornly clung to in new

<sup>44</sup> Final document, nos. 1134–52, in *Puebla and Beyond* (n. 36 above) 264–66.

<sup>45</sup> G. Baum, "Option for the Powerless," *Ecumenist* 26 (Nov./Dec. 1987) 5–11.

historical situations, they can give rise to new forms of oppression and eventually become idols demanding even the sacrifice of human beings. By contrast, the preferential option for the poor is not an ideology; it is the bearer of a transcendent principle and hence generates ever-new, critical historical judgments.

In the Puebla document ideology was defined as a set of ideas and ideals that represented the aspiration of only one sector of society and hence could not claim to represent the totality.<sup>46</sup> Ideologies become myths when they forget their limited character and claim to speak for the whole. Yet the preferential option for the poor, Puebla insists, is not an ideology. Why? Because it represents a praxis that aims at the transformation of society and the promotion of its common good. The poor are not an "interest group" in society whose claims must be balanced by those of other interest groups. The poor reveal the injustice inscribed in the whole of the social order. They bring to light the contradictions of society. Their marginalization harms them and, in a different way, damages the whole of society: it distorts society's perception of itself, gives an ideological twist to the dominant culture, creates an insensitive, hardhearted, egotistical, self-serving population, deaf to the voice of God. Thus racism not only inflicts burdens on the despised race; it also generates in the majority a culture of contempt, injustice, and violence that spills over into every aspect of their social and political life. Similarly, the subjugation of women not only inflicts injustices on the female part of the population; it also prompts men to adopt a false self-definition and embrace a love of domination that endangers society as a whole.

The preferential option for the poor serves the common good of society. It does not aim at the victory of one sector of society over another. Nor is it inspired by the illusory hope that a sinless society is an earthly possibility. What the option does reflect is what I have called the Catholic intuition that the reconciliation of personal aspirations and service to the common good is society's high destiny—by nature and by grace.

## VI

In the context of this article it is important to emphasize that the preferential option is also a sociological principle: it calls for a reading of society from below. I have called this the hermeneutic dimension. Theologians who follow the preferential option are therefore bound to enter into dialogue with sociology. For their specific purposes structural functionalism has little to offer. What interests them instead is some form of conflict sociology. But since the poor, for them, are not an economic class but include all people pushed to the margin by economic, cultural,

<sup>46</sup> Puebla document, no. 536, in *Puebla and Beyond* (n. 36 above) 198–99.

social, and political forces, they will be uncomfortable with conflict sociologies that define oppression in economic terms and favor quantification and positivism.

Theologians who follow the preferential option have great sympathy for the Catholic sociologists of the 30s and 40s who for reasons of their faith stood apart from the dominant sociology. I recalled their critical observations on a previous page. Following the Catholic social teaching of that time, they were reformists, supporters of the New Deal, intellectuals who studied and taught sociology to promote social justice. Since Catholic social teaching also made them antisocialist and prejudiced them against Marxist theories of any kind, they did not explore the usefulness of a sociology of oppression. What puzzles the contemporary reader is that, despite their critique of positivism, these Catholic sociologists tended to believe in "facts." Sociology was for them fact-finding combined with social philosophy.

In light of the preferential option, facts become somewhat more problematic.<sup>47</sup> There are, of course, harmless situations where facts are clear. For instance, how many cannons were used in this battle? Here the correspondence theory of truth is perfectly valid. But when we turn to the important historical events, the situation is quite different. The American Revolution was certainly a fact, but to answer questions such as what its contours were, when it began and ended, and what incidents were part of it, we have to make use of a theory of revolution to carve the facts out of the continuum of history. Facts already include an interpretative key. Access to historical events is always mediated by theory.

Theologians who follow the preferential option also have sympathy for the Catholic sociologists of the 50s and 60s who turned to functionalist theory with some enthusiasm. They did not endorse its positivist and determinist implications. In their eyes the cohesion that kept society together without violating people's personal aspirations was not the cybernetic mechanism of the social system but the destiny of society to reconcile personal aspirations with survival of the common good. There are historical contexts where the functionalist approach is appropriate. The question whether it is appropriate or not is actually an ethicopolitical judgment.

Even Talcott Parsons did not make use of his own methodology when he studied the emergence of German Fascism: here he employed a conflict

<sup>47</sup> The interpretative dimension of "facts" is a theme developed by the great critics of positivistic social science, including the Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In this essay I do not refer to these authors but confine myself to the experience of Christians dedicated to social justice who wrestle for an appropriate understanding of their historical situation.

sociology which, following Marx, gave priority to the economic factor.<sup>48</sup> In the 50s and 60s, when welfare capitalism promised to help the disfavored sector of society and overcome excessive economic inequality, many Americans believed that the mild reformism implicit in functionalist theory was appropriate. Today, in the new phase of capitalism, this judgment has to be revised. This at least is the viewpoint taken by those who endorse the preferential option.

Functionalist sociology, as we saw above, defended the objective, value-free character of social science. This is contested by persons following the preferential option. They are keenly aware that looking at society from below, listening to the victims, and interpreting the social reality from their perspective make an enormous difference. They realize, therefore, that reading the social reality (or a literary text) is always guided by a certain preunderstanding. Social scientists must, of course, be truthful, respect the evidence available to them, and present their conclusions with the arguments from which they are derived. Their work is scientific, their reasoning has to stand up under rational scrutiny, and in this limited sense their approach is "objective." At the same time their work is always and inevitably guided by a particular stance. This stance may derive largely unconsciously from their social location or the dominant culture. But the stance may also be chosen—such as, for instance, the preferential option.

Important historical controversies cannot be resolved by the application of the scientific method alone. Thus we read in the first draft of the American bishops' pastoral on economic justice that the scientists they consulted differed in their analyses of the causes of the growing misery in the U.S. and the world.<sup>49</sup> Some believed that fundamental structural changes were taking place in the American economy, linked to such forces as the internationalization of capital, the introduction of high technology, and new competition from other industrialized countries, leading to a deepening crisis that would produce world-wide suffering. Other experts, using the same scientific tools of analysis, saw the situation in less dramatic terms. They recognized the existence of serious problems, but they took them as the result of particular policies that had been adopted and that could be changed incrementally, rather than a deep shift in the nature of the economy. Because the scientific method alone was unable to resolve this question, the American bishops decided to leave it unanswered.

The Canadian bishops decided to reply to the question left open by

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Irving Zeitlin, *Rethinking Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 35-40.

<sup>49</sup> First draft, nos. 7-14, in *Origins* 14 (Nov. 15, 1984) 342.

the American bishops. Faced with conflicting scientific analyses, the Canadian bishops resolved the debate by attaching more importance to the scientists whose approach to the social reality was close to their own.<sup>50</sup> The scientists whom they followed undertook their research guided by "an emancipatory commitment," a secular perspective analogous to the theologically grounded option for the poor.

In the scientific studies of historical processes that pass right through us, in which we are in one way or another involved, objectivity is not a possibility; we are in fact located within the process. We are free to relate ourselves to this process as we wish, to adopt a perspective that appears responsible to us, and eventually decide upon the approach to be pursued. For some Christians the option for the poor is here the guide. There are also secular social scientists who operate out of an emancipatory perspective; they too pay attention first to the victims, they too wish to read society through its contradictions, they too entertain a conflictual perception of the social order, they too begin their analysis of society by asking for the causes of present suffering.

Even social-scientific and historical studies of past events or of contemporary situations far away from us are guided by certain questions, certain preunderstandings, and certain chosen paradigms, and therefore despite their scholarly rigor are not, strictly speaking, objective. Our perception of the past will be influenced by the manner in which we relate ourselves to our own society—in other words, by an ethicopolitical judgment. (Even listening to persons speaking excitedly about an important film they saw allows one to discern their political perspective on American society.) To enhance the scientific character of our research, we must put our cards on the table, clearly articulate our presuppositions, and offer a rational defense of them—not indeed to "prove" them but to show why they appear to us well founded.

If we endorse the preferential option for the poor, we recognize the subjective dimension in the quest for truth. Love enters into the process of knowing.<sup>51</sup> In an unjust society—the sinful world—the love of God and neighbor transforms itself into a yearning for justice and an impulse to act so that the heavy burdens be lifted from the shoulders of the victims. Truly to know society, therefore, is to recognize it in its contradictions and thus create the presupposition for its transformation. It has been the spiritual experience of many Catholics in the Americas, South

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Lind, "Ethics, Economics and Canada's Catholic Bishops," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 7 (1983) 150–66, and "An Invitation to Canadian Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 1 (1985) 17–26.

<sup>51</sup> This is one of the important themes of Matthew Lamb's *Solidarity with Victims* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); see esp. 82–88.

and North, that such transformative knowledge became available to them only after they had become engaged, after they had extended their solidarity to the poor. The knowledge of the social world is truly circular: it begins with commitment, is grounded in action, adopts the perspective of the victims, makes use of social-scientific methodologies, and generates commitment and action.<sup>52</sup>

Let us recall that in the 30s and 40s Catholic sociologists decided, for strategic reasons, to become advocates of a Catholic sociology. They objected to the sociology dominant at American universities because they disagreed with the image of the human being and the paradigm of the social process implicit in it, and because they missed an explicit social-ethical commitment. Do Catholics who follow the preferential option in the 80s and into the 90s wish to reintroduce the notion of a Catholic sociology?

The question of a Christian sociology has never disappeared among doctrinally conservative Protestants.<sup>53</sup> Protestants who defined themselves as Evangelical were suspicious of secular humanism and contemporary rationality. In their campus ministry they warned university students against sociology. Yet, over the last few years, sophisticated Christian social philosophers who think of themselves as Evangelical have engaged in a constructive criticism of contemporary sociology. They urge university students not to be afraid of sociology but to engage in a foundational dialogue with it. David Lyon's *Sociology and the Human Image*<sup>54</sup> offers an introduction to sociology, including its classical authors, paying special attention to the image of the human, the paradigm of the social process, and the social-ethical perspective implicit in different sociological theories. In this context Lyon is critical of the positivistic, deterministic, and evolutionary trends in sociology and instead calls for a sociology in keeping with the vision and values contained in the Scriptures. As ethical perspective he advocates the biblical prophetic tradition, which in his interpretation resembles the preferential option for the poor. Still, Lyon does not defend the idea of a Christian sociology. What he proposes instead is a specifically "Christian contribution" to sociological science.

The reader will not be surprised to learn that I have a certain sympathy

<sup>52</sup> A liberating hermeneutical circle was defined in Juan Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 6-34. A similar analytical circle was adopted by the Canadian bishops as the pastoral methodology for their ethical reflections: "Ethical Reflections" (n. 29 above) 412-13.

<sup>53</sup> David Lyon, "The Idea of a Christian Sociology: Some Historical Precedents and Current Concerns," *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1983) 227-42.

<sup>54</sup> London: Inter-Varsity, 1983.

with this proposal. Yet, when Lyon specifies the "Christian" perspective, it turns out that the same orientation could be pursued by believing Jewish thinkers who, following Buber and Heschel, identify with the biblical prophetic tradition. They too reject materialism and secularism, entertain the same image of the human open to God's call, share the same emancipatory commitment to justice and peace. But if this is true, does it make sense to speak of a "Christian" contribution to sociology?

Can secular thinkers, we ask, make the same contribution? To answer this question, let me compare the preferential option with a purely secular emancipatory commitment. I note that human emancipation or liberation can be understood in a variety of ways, depending on the analysis that is made of human oppression. A classical Marxist analysis is narrow: it focuses on economic domination; and if it does pay attention to other forms of oppression, it interprets them in terms derivative of the economic factor. There are other one-sided analyses that focus on a single factor—on national oppression, for instance, or the subjugation of women. A theologically one-sided analysis focuses only on the promotion of secularism and the repression of the spirit. The preferential option assigns a certain priority to the economic factor—especially after *Laborem exercens*—but in addition to this it recognizes all other structures of marginalization and cultural patterns of inferiorization. For instance, it also takes into account the burdens placed by society on the retarded and the handicapped. While a purely secular emancipatory commitment could produce the identical concern, it is likely that in many instances the theologically grounded preferential option is more sensitive to cultural domination, including the repression of the spiritual.

Second, the preferential option sees itself as serving the common good. It does not anticipate the victory of one sector of society over another nor envisage the destruction of all communal bonds. It aims at the qualitative transformation of the social order. It endorses the Catholic intuition of a reconciled society. For this reason its proponents tend to shy away from social-scientific analyses that generate disruptive or explosive action, except under special circumstances. Of course, secular commitments may be inspired by the same vision.

The great difference between the preferential option and an analogous secular commitment—a difference that does not directly affect the social analysis of society—has to do with the conscious relationship to the biblical God. For Christians the historical struggle for emancipation is not a Promethean project, not the self-salvation of the human race, not justification by works, but the human response to a divine initiative, a work of faith, an act of obedience, a form of discipleship. Here humans are not only actors or agents but also and especially recipients or



sufferers: they suffer divine grace, are empowered from within, are overwhelmed by a yearning for justice, find it existentially impossible to be reconciled to a wicked world. Secular people lack a discourse to articulate experiences of transcendence, but from many conversations with secular friends I conclude that many of them engage in the struggle for justice out of a passion that they have not chosen, do not fully understand, and regard as a surprising gift or a precious interference.

What I conclude from these reflections is that the preferential option, theologically grounded, defines an orientation from which secular thinkers are not necessarily excluded. While I have great sympathy for the position adopted by Catholic sociologists of the past and contemporary Evangelicals such as David Lyon, I do not think it would be a useful strategy in the present to call for a Catholic or Christian sociology.

## VII

I cannot close this article without referring to the impact of the preferential option on Catholic theology itself. Catholics in the 30s and 40s did not think that their approach to sociology had a reflex influence on their theology. By contrast, from the 50s on, Catholics sympathetic to functionalist sociology recognized that their sociological reflections could well affect the exercise of theology. Because the more recent preferential option is a theological and sociological principle, it is obvious that it affects theological thinking. The preferential option actually transforms theological thinking. It has generated liberation theology in Latin America and an equivalent political theology in the United States.

About these theologies I wish to make a single observation. Since theologians of this orientation follow an eschatological perspective, hear God's word first as divine judgment on the world, and are deeply impressed by the message of Jesus, "Repent, for the reign of God is at hand," they are compelled to analyze the structures of sin in which their society finds itself. They cannot speak of Jesus unless they specify the sin and the death from which Jesus saves us. Thus theology itself calls for critical social analysis. Sociology here enters into the very constitution of theology.<sup>55</sup>

What is remarkable is that this form of theologizing has already affected the Church's magisterium. The Latin American bishops believed they could not express the meaning of divine revelation for Latin America unless they first analyzed the structure of oppressions in which their continent was caught. The 1971 World Synod of Bishops recognized that the demand for social justice was an integral part of the message of

<sup>55</sup> G. Baum, *Theology and Society* (n. 39 above) 157-70.

salvation.<sup>56</sup> To announce the gospel authentically, one must articulate God's judgment on the given society. While personal sins also build the prison in which society is caught, they cannot be properly understood unless their relation to structural sins is clarified. The crimes of the poor in the ghetto cannot be understood apart from the structures of the consistent and sometimes violent marginalization inflicted on them. The notion of structural or social sin, until recently controversial in Catholic theology, has been taken up and developed in John Paul II's *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.<sup>57</sup> The orientation towards death of our civilization—world hunger, nuclear self-destruction, and ecological disaster—is here not blamed on individual sins; it is related to structural causes, to the powerful impact of economic and political institutions that are named—an impact that could be resisted but in fact is not. Personal sin enters this equation principally as nonresistance to the powerful. The theological teaching on sin and redemption contained in this encyclical has integrated the outline of a global social analysis from a particular sociological perspective, the option for the poor.

At the end of this article I readily recognize that the Catholic Church's reaction to the contemporary situation, seconded by the World Council of Churches and many individual Protestant churches, represents a minority position in the global Christian community. The preferential option goes counter to the flow of contemporary culture. The preferential option generated by small Christian communities and endorsed by Catholic social teaching has summoned forth social-justice committees in dioceses, parishes, and religious congregations and appealed to many individuals, including theologians, social scientists, priests, bishops, and activists of all kind. Together these Catholics constitute a visible, clearly defined network within the Church. The preferential option has produced new religious experiences and generated a new spirituality. This Catholic network co-operates with the corresponding cluster of organizations in the Protestant churches. The members of this network also enter easily into dialogue with the nonideological Left and nonsectarian Greens and gladly co-operate with emancipatory popular movements for peace, justice, gender equality, and the protection of the earth.

<sup>56</sup> 1971 Synod of Bishops, no. 6, in Gremillion, *Gospel of Peace* (n. 36 above) 514.

<sup>57</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, nos. 36–37, in *Origins* 17 (1988) 653. Cf. G. Baum, "Social Sin," in *The Logic of Solidarity*, ed. Robert Elsberg and Gregory Baum (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, forthcoming).