Let Theology and Sociology Interact!

Grace Davie
Department of Theology and Religion, University of Exeter
Amory Building, Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK
G.R.C.Davie@Exeter.ac.uk


I have very much enjoyed re-visiting Robin Gill’s work, a selection of which has been gathered into three volumes under the general title of Sociological Theology, together with extensive new material. The individual titles of these volumes reveal the abiding themes of Gill’s writing: Theology in a Social Context, Theology Shaped by Society and Society Shaped by Theology. All three, but the first in particular, rest on the assumption that sociology and theology are commensurate disciplines: properly understood, each can contribute to a better understanding of the other. Problems arise, however, when this condition is not met, a situation which leads to unfounded and at times rather wild accusations. Robin Gill is one of a relatively small group of scholars who have been professionally trained in both disciplines and can recognize their relative merits. His reflections are all the more pertinent because of this.

This review considers each volume in turn before concluding with some general remarks – my initial aim in this respect has been to display the range of Gill’s writing. Volume 1 is divided into three parts. The first argues that a proper understanding of the social context is a prerequisite for good theology. I agree. The second part develops Gill’s earlier work on fundamentalism, which initially appeared when the topic was a relatively new field of study – a fact which is hard to appreciate in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The third returns to the social context and more especially to the question of secularization; it also contains a chapter on virtue ethics. Many of these essays have been subject to judicious updating. This is not an easy task, but if anything I would have preferred a little more revision. That said I know from experience that once you start altering a text, it is very hard to know
where to stop. There comes a point, moreover, where the original essay can no longer sustain the new material and simply falls apart.

One point, however, is clear: the world has changed since many of these essays were initially published. The place of religion, moreover, has been radically re-assessed as the predictions of the stronger versions of the secularization theory have been called into question. Such revisions are considerably more convincing in some parts of the world than in others, but even in Britain the situation is more complex than many scholars had assumed. Robin Gill appreciated this at a relatively early stage. With this in mind he painstakingly established long-term longitudinal data relating to both religious belief and religious practice. Thus armed he was in a position to re-consider different bodies of secularization theory. He labels these the secularization, persistence and separation paradigms (see Chapter 10). The first of these maintains that secularization is broadly speaking concomitant with modernization. The process takes place differently in different societies but there is a degree of inevitability built into it: to be modern means to be secular. This way of thinking is associated with the work of Brian Wilson, Peter Berger (at least in his earlier publications)\(^1\) and Steve Bruce. Proponents of the persistence paradigm argue the reverse: that that religious beliefs and practices remain an abiding feature of the modern world. What is lacking – particularly in Europe – is sufficient organizational stimulus to create and sustain a vibrant religious culture. America is different given the presence of a free, or very much freer, market in religion. Unsurprisingly advocates of the persistence paradigm (often known as rational choice theory) tend to be found in the United States rather than in Europe.\(^2\)

The separation paradigm – which Gill associates very largely with my own writing – emphasizes the divergent patterns of ‘belief’ and ‘belonging’ that exist in many modern societies. It is quite possible for belief to persist even if belonging has declined, and indeed vice versa. The former is largely true in Britain, the latter in the Nordic countries – at least in the short term. The longer-term is less clear, a point of contention amongst sociologists. On this question, for example, I find myself in opposition to Steve Bruce. Gill himself introduces a fourth perspective which he labels ‘cultural theory’. In this, he argues for the consonance between belonging and belief: regular church going reinforces distinctive beliefs and values, which in turn sustain individual

---

1 Peter Berger’s later change of mind is well-known and widely covered in the literature. See note 2.

2 For more detail on both these approaches and their major protagonists, see Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage, 2013).