THE RETURN OF RELIGIOUS SOCIOLOGY

RACHAEL L. E. KOHN

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is perhaps misleading, for it might be argued that, either explicitly or implicitly, religious sociology never left the discipline. There has been, however, a discernible rise in its popularity among sociologists of religion in the last few years, enough that Franz H. Mueller, President Emeritus of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, recently warned in a letter to its members that "there is NO such thing as Catholic or Christian sociology, and that we can serve our highest ideals best if we do a good job as genuine sociologists . . ." (Mueller 1988: 8). The inclusion of this letter in the ASR newsletter suggests its importance as an issue in the discipline, but it also comes after the election to the editorship of the Association's journal, an avowed supporter of religious sociology, William Swatos (1987).

This issue has already shown its divisive potential within the discipline, although there have been few direct challenges to it in recent literature. This paper proposes to give an historical overview of what amounts to a revival of a 19th century movement in the sociology of religion. Of course, it is a new expression of an apologetic perspective which developed from the contemporary religious scene, in particular the efflorescence of religious movements in the late 60s and 70s,
which has provided a stable diet of data for sociologists in North America, England, and Europe, for the past fifteen years.

In this paper, I shall sketch the original religious sociology movement, its demise and replacement with the sociology of religion, and finally the reemergence in a new form of religious sociology in recent times. The last part of the paper will be concerned with the specific and general problems which this new movement poses for the sociology of religion.

THE EARLY MOVEMENT

To speak of religious sociology at the turn of the century is to distinguish it from the sociological study of religion. From its early days, excluding the presociological work of Auguste Comte and Saint Simon, the sociology of religion has been methodologically agnostic (its critics would say atheistic), in its examination of religion as one of a variety of societal features.

Sociology's founders on the Continent were, understandably, intrigued with religion, for the late 19th and early 20th Centuries in Europe had seen tremendous confrontations not only between religious groups, largely as a symptom or cause of the divisive pan-national movements, but also between atheistic Marxist Communism and traditional religion. The power as well as the function of religion were of critical importance to sociology's founding fathers, Weber and Durkheim, respectively, while parallels between religious and non-religious groups, such as sects and secret societies, were sought by Georg Simmel. The aim of such studies was avowedly explanatory and not prescriptive, while the method was consciously "scientific."

To submit human society to a clinical, dispassionate study, which purported to be comparable to the method of the natural sciences, raised questions about the relationship between facts and values, a relationship which was known to be intimate but was also believed to be, for purposes of investigation, separable. The champion of this separation in sociology, Max Weber (1949: 54), was aware of their instrumental relationship, in so far as he paralleled them to "means and ends," but he was adamant that "an empirical science cannot tell anyone what he should do—but rather what he can do—and under certain circumstances—what he wishes to do" (see also 1949: 51-2).

While much has been written, particularly by Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, and Michael Polanyi, that has undermined the