



Two Sociological Approaches to Religion in Modern Britain

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This article compares the approach adopted by two recent sociological accounts of religion in modern Britain (by Bruce and Davie). Attention is drawn in broad terms to the parallels between a sociological and religious approaches, and a contrast made specifically between a sociology of religion cast in terms of a narrative of decline and diversity (or an account of the place of religion in the perspective of modernity), and one that pays primary attention to indigenous patterns of meaning. Conclusions are drawn as to the limitations of method and apprehension of the one approach, and the openness and potential for comparison of the other.

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There is a contemporary perception that, in Britain, formerly secure institutions and ways of behaving and understanding are wearing away; at the same time, corresponding to this sense of 'fraying', there is a desire to appraise what is our true situation and, indeed, who we are. If a consensus of views were possible, however, it would not be an agreement at the level of diagnosis or prognosis, but rather at one step removed: it is clear only that there is a need to make sense of things. In a context where such a need is perceived, social theory is brought to prominence,² for it is one of the tasks of social theory to consider questions of identity, of who makes up the normally unreflectingly used 'we' and, in periods of fraying, to seek continuities by discerning repetitions underlying the often bewildering experiences of reordering.

In this phase of its activity, social theory is at once descriptive and creative, for by seeking to discern order and continuity—by making sense of our condition—it is playing a modest part in the production of what it seeks. It has a future component. Social theory orders and continues, and by so doing, shares some of the characteristics of its subject matter, the social. It will therefore be contested, for if the social is made up to any extent of differing interpretations, a new interpretation—or the reiteration of a known interpretation—will itself have an effect: some 'social future' is potentially at stake in a sociological interpretation. Each account offered constitutes an intervention in the social, and so to this extent bears a resemblance to the topic of religion, which sociologists have seen as amongst the most total forms of ways of making sense of and in the world, where the 'habits for coping with reality' which are conveyed are of as great a significance as any 'truth claims'.

In this context of the erosion of certainties, two British publishers have established series that adopt a historical approach: a detailed review of the recent past is to help to situate us in the world in which we find ourselves, and indeed to help us to become ourselves. In one case, *The General Editor's Preface* claims that,

'the health and future of a liberal democracy requires that its citizens know more about the most recent past of their country than the limited knowledge possessed by British citizens, young and old, today'.³

The other series, it is true, is presented without this overt political emphasis, but still makes strong claims: the series

'is designed to fill a major gap in the available sociological sources on the contemporary world. Each book will provide a comprehensive and authoritative overview of major

issues . . . (The books) are written by acknowledged experts in their fields, and should be standard sources for many years to come'.⁴

Both statements have a sense of urgency and make a claim to importance beyond simply the scholarly value of the book; they sustain Sociology's implicit vocation to speak about human flourishing: they have a salvific intent.

Both the series have spawned a book upon the identical theme of religion in modern Britain, and so each brings together in a single volume both the form and content of a proposition about salvation or hope, although the hope propounded by each author may not be the same as the hope offered by the subject matter. Indeed, the two books form an interesting pair because, despite their common topic and although they share a common pool of primary studies upon which they draw, they offer contrasting views both of religion and of the sociological task. They each comprise a distinct interpretation and intervention. The aim of this paper is to describe and distinguish these two interpretations and to draw out their sociological implications, while at the same time elaborating the connections that are sometimes left unremarked between religious and sociological approaches. I will begin the argument, however, by taking up briefly the topic of 'making sense'.

I

A recent social anthropological account of features of contemporary English society⁵ claims that a characteristic move in the process of making sense of things—at least in an intellectual, middle class culture—is simply the making explicit of the implicit: we make sense by placing things in their (hither-to unremarked) context. Strathern calls this process 'literalization'. This at first sight banal observation exemplifies itself; such a move of itself generates complexity and diversity, for as we see better the interdependence of things, at the same time we gain a sense of being somehow more individual, more aware through our own conscious grasp of the facts of the matter. Consequently, complexity and diversity have themselves a temporal direction, a sense of the irreversibility of time built in: it appears as if, in every generation, complexity, diversity, individuality and awareness increase and, by the same token, simplicity, unity, community and tradition are being left behind. Strathern sums up her initial claim:

the processes by which the English produced a sense of complexity for themselves were alarmingly simple . . . In showing the way literalization constantly produced new perspectives, one has said all that needs to be said about the mechanism by which we once imagined ourselves in a complex world'.⁶

Strathern develops her analysis by pursuing in particular the privileging of generation and kinship as constitutive metaphors; we shall not follow her, but note instead the morally complex structure that she has described. The notion of 'making sense', the thoroughly English business of 'seeing what is the case', of being pragmatic and untheoretical, gives a framework in which change, or difference of any kind, may be classified simultaneously both as progress and as decline. It is defined as the decline of the traditional world, with its values of community and mutuality, and as the progress of modernity, the development of the individual and of consciousness. We may regret one and celebrate the other according to taste, but the overall structure, the interdependence of the elements and the single direction of time's arrow, is rarely questioned. It is a way of looking at the world that is of course localizable—the perspective of a particular group in a particular period—but which claims to be universal: taken on its own terms,

it claims to be the truth of Western Culture, on its way to becoming the truth for the whole world.

Within such a perspective, the study of society becomes defined by two tendencies, the decline of community and the rise of individualism, described in terms such as the exchange of belonging for becoming, or of status for contract, and so forth; and in such an economy of concepts, religion is perceived as in some respects the essence of what is being lost. A sociology of religion is then shaped by two matching concerns: the decline of traditional religion on the one hand, and the growth of diverse, individualistic forms of spirituality or consciousness—New Religious Movements, Cults, New Age experiments—on the other; and by the question of the relation between the two.

Bruce's *Religion in Modern Britain* (1995) is constructed entirely within this framework of decline and fragmentation (as was an earlier review⁷) and as such has an exemplary quality. The first chapter, describing the past leading to the present, charts the successive stages of a typology that develops from Church ('coextensive with society') to reforming sects (or competing versions of total truth) and thence to denominations (which accept that their's is one version of the truth), correlating each stage with a loss of collective consciousness and a growth of individual consciousness, reflected in the diversity of what one may or may not believe. Indeed, the shift can be summed up in terms of 'the decline of the supernatural' and the fulfilment of the self.⁸ The second chapter, concerned with the present, is likewise focused upon decline but in greater magnification. Bruce presents successively the statistics of contraction in clergy numbers, and ageing of the clergy; of reduction in the memberships of the major denominations, in church attendance and in Sunday schools; and of the diminishing beliefs of the population at large. He concludes:

'In size, popularity, and influence, the mainstream Christian denominations have declined markedly . . . Most British people now have no church connection and are linked to organized religion only by their infrequent attendance at *rites de passage*, by their residual respect for 'religion' (which they think is a good thing), and by their nostalgic fondness for church buildings and hymns'.⁹

Notice the temporal vector implied in the language used: declined, now, only, residual, nostalgic.

Once he broadens the story of decline into that of diversification, Bruce identifies two new factors at work:

'there are three roads to cultural diversity . . . The fragmentation of . . . (the) dominant Christian culture, beliefs and practices . . . brought by migrants . . . and innovation . . . (when) people feel free to search the global supermarket of cultures for new ideas and new perspectives'.¹⁰

This further diversity of modernity is reviewed in the two subsequent chapters. On the one hand, the presence of other faiths in 'Multi-Cultural Britain' is introduced, in terms of the importation of the traditional and communal from elsewhere, and their potential for dissolution along the lines already discussed: the Jewish potential is high; Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are being forced to revalue their religious commitments. On the other hand, there are innovations within the majority population, the New Religious Movements (sub-divided into world rejecting and world affirming groups) and New Age spirituality. Bruce comments upon the apolitical, democratic-egalitarian and individualistic character of the latter in particular, and concludes¹¹ that such individualism in the end may threaten the rational bases of society (and so, presumably, by the same token, the possibility of sociological accounts).

II

Why is this an unsatisfactory account? Bruce is rightly concerned to reject a pious optimism of the kind that chooses to see only what it wishes in the evidence, and interprets new movements in terms of the continuation of older religious impulses; yet the powerful optic of decline and diversity also proposes a narrative which selects and shapes the material in advance of any empirical investigation. By doing so, it occludes indigenous voices, whether in the past or actual, which then appear at best in fragmentary form, and often only in anomalies, lacunae and silences. Before turning to the question of indigenous voices, let us consider first the question of the sociological narrative.

Bruce's account is proposed in terms that have the trajectory of decline built in: defining the vector by its end point, there is what we might call a 'teleology of the individual consciousness' in every part. This appears in the preliminary matter of definition, of giving a content to the notion of 'religion'. Bruce poses as alternatives the possibility of religion 'providing solutions to 'ultimate problems', or answering fundamental questions of the human condition', which he refuses, and the definition of religion as 'beliefs and actions which assume the existence of supernatural beings or powers',¹² which he adopts. Yet these are common sense, broadly psychological or intellectual, definitions of religion, rather than sociological ones. Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms*, considers that to define religion either in terms of explanations of the inexplicable or in terms of spiritual or supernatural beings is to rely too heavily upon our own experience and preconceptions, and he rejects both criteria, before offering his own, seeking rather the 'compulsions which order society': an approach which might permit a different understanding of the forms of existence of the sacred in modern society, a shift in terminology reflecting a shift in perspective. Bruce is in this respect pre-Durkheimian, for his definition concerns the psychology and intellect of the individual. Any account of religion that begins with a belief in the supernatural is bound to include the endpoint of demythologizing, and in such an account the collective is identified with the unconscious and error. It will always be being left behind by the irreversible dynamic that moves towards the clarification of consciousness and truth, and the emergence of the individual.

This teleology, which places the figure of the individual within the basic definition and describes its inevitable emergence over time, explains the employment of statistics in such an account, which has two aspects. For if the individual is the real base unit, a collectivity can only be described as an aggregate, and the best way of giving an account of an aggregate is by statistics. Furthermore, the use of statistics can readily support the givenness of the parameter of decline and diversity, opposing institutions and individuals, for change is measured in terms of alteration from a fixed point, difference being perceived at once as a diminution of the known (or previously measured) and as a multiplication of the new.

The principle effect of the use of statistics is to homogenize the material for the purpose of comparison. Take the discussion of Church membership. The difficulties of estimating memberships are briefly reviewed: the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England 'traditionally count those whom they baptized', while at the other extreme, in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, people may attend all their lives without feeling sufficiently sure of their 'calling' to be admitted as full members. We are then told that:

'with various adjustments to compensate for most differences between denominations, we can estimate the present population of the United Kingdom which 'belongs' to the Christian Churches as about 14 per cent'.¹³

There is a brief nod to the self definition of the institutions, an even briefer one to the self definition of persons with respect to these institutions, and a conclusion whereby the sociologist's perspective subsumes both. This latter account does not include the former views in any simple way: one issue can reveal the arbitrariness of the process. From a table¹⁴ concerning the percentage of live births baptized in the Church of England, it appears one quarter of babies born in 1993 were baptized, while at least half their parents and two thirds of their grandparents were, so if one accepts the 'traditional count', a good deal more than 14 per cent of the population appear to come within one institutional definition of 'belonging'. Nor are we ever told to what definition of 'belonging' the 14 per cent corresponds.

We are offered a straightforward story of 'remorseless decline relative to the adult population',¹⁵ which is far from being wrong, but is radically incomplete. On the one hand, it leaves unexamined points of possible interest that do not fit. For example, lay membership of the Church of England, which has declined in absolute terms over the century to half in 1990 what it was in 1900, rose in absolute terms between 1900 and 1930, though declining in terms relative to the whole population. In the same period, the percentage of live births baptized also rose. These variations are passed over without comment. On the other hand, distinct histories are handled so as to tell the same story. Although it appears the percentage of Roman Catholics as a part of the population increases steadily over the century, the proportion of 'observant' Catholics can be shown to have declined. Baptist membership has increased, but the Baptist proportion of the population has fallen over the century. Another sample, the membership of the Church of Scotland, has held up relative to English decline, retaining 70 per cent of its 1900 figure; this is explained by existing members living longer, as opposed to recruitment, so that decline is anticipated, or only postponed.

Put more abstractly, the limits of such an approach are threefold. First, it ignores the complex self definition of each institution. Indeed, the process of homogenization extracts each case from its particular situation, collective values and history, and uses these denatured complexities to tell another, often simpler, story, one corresponding to questions asked within the particular complex situation of the enquiring (sociological) community. The statistical approach, as employed here, is unable both to deal with the various churches' self definitions, and to distinguish what one might call generative values from consequences. Recording church attendance, for example, says nothing about how the people so recorded regard attending or the act of worship and its relation to the wider society. Each Church situates itself differently with respect to the total population (and moreover with respect to the State): each represents a different (political) 'settlement', which defines its claims at both the local and the national level. A sociology of religion may find it necessary to examine both the settlements each Church represents, and the relationships between these settlements.

Second, because the statistical approach does not distinguish facts that are generative from those that are probable, it cannot distinguish significant change from dependent variations. Despite initial appearances then, this approach cannot readily measure change; rather, it generates its own chronologies. The process extracts measured units from complexes of values, continues to collect data for these units, and having noted changes in the behaviour so awkwardly monitored, seeks correlations and motivations through secondary surveys, of attitudes and the like. In this kind of process, history is effaced, and the past homogenized. Take this judgement, concerning the Creed:

'We can never be sure what went on in the minds of people of other times and cultures, but we can be pretty confident that, *until the middle of the last century*, almost everybody who recited the Creed took it at something like face value . . .'¹⁶

The past is evoked as a single state to stand in contrast with the present.

Third, to complete the circle, this approach obscures its own production as a sociological account with its own criteria. It would be possible to give a sociological or historical account of the treatment of human 'populations' as if they were natural populations, and the limits of such treatments. The question of the status of decline and flourishing is of particular importance: human populations do not necessarily affix these qualities to numerical decrease and increase respectively, they classify rather than count and, as we have seen, a statistical account may be more an act of moral classification than strictly an exercise in enumeration. To reiterate the point, a sociological account has features in common with a religious account, being, among other things, a moral ordering of the world.

III

Consideration of the sociological account leads then to the question of indigenous voices and how they emerge in the description. Four related concerns have come out of the discussion so far. First, there is the business of discerning the ordering values or compulsions that create, define and propagate any social group, of whatever order, and of distinguishing these values from the continuous variation of everyday life. Then, there is a need to recognize a political dimension, for these are values that express and create a 'polity', one particular kind of social flourishing rather than another. Third, one must distinguish how different people participate in the ordering that results, both how they take part and the parts they regard as fit for others to play. And last, there is the perception that sociological accounts are in some respects of the same kind as the accounts under consideration, and contribute to the same world. These concerns are not, by and large, raised as such by Bruce, although he gives many hints, so we must proceed by interrogations and the barest hypotheses.

A simple case to raise to complicate the story of decline would be the relation between the Roman Catholic element of the population (put at 9.1% in 1990) and 'observant' Catholics. The latter may both regard themselves as 'representing' the non or occasionally observant, and be accepted by the non-observant as doing so. There may be further complexities, the practising believer being at one and the same time in opposition to the non-observant, as being 'in good standing', and dependent upon the latter for recognition of that standing, within a shared value system. The nature of the boundary between observant and non-observant behaviour needs to be defined, and may shift, and the reasons for such shifting need to be investigated, but both kinds of person may belong together in what one might call the same 'symbolic economy', participating differently whilst recognizing at some level a symbolic division of labour.

A similar set of questions may also be posed for the Church of England data, although the population defined is different. The task of the congregation is given in the Prayer Book as 'to make prayers, and supplications, and to give thanks, for all men'. Whether or not this happens, it again raises the matter of the complex distribution of forms of participation, in this case, in a small geographically defined population, a parish (rather than a body defined by membership). Bruce alludes in passing to such questions, as for example in his summary of attitudes to the ordained clergy: 'it is a good thing that there are people like that, but we do not want to be like them';¹⁷ or in the desire for daily

prayers in school (64% in 1991)¹⁸; or in the statement that ‘most people like the idea of religion and are keen to have some taught to their children’.¹⁹ Further, his conclusion, cited earlier, that most people now are linked to organized religion only by *rites de passage*, residual respect and nostalgia for buildings, also indicates how one might view participation in the religious life: *rites de passage* may be the key (in the local perception) to ‘well formed lives’, and a ‘residual respect for religion’ and a ‘fondness for church buildings’ may go with an apprehension of self identity, of who one is, in family, neighbourhood and class terms, together with a localizing of these identities in part in a particular geography. These are brief references to an ordering of personality, society and space which, in classical sociology, is held to have an inescapable religious component:

‘It is invariably the fact that when a somewhat strong conviction is shared by a single community of people it inevitably assumes a religious character’.²⁰

The statistical approach may be incapable of studying the religious life precisely because it cannot make the particular discriminations needed in order to perceive these matters of participation in forms of social intensity (whether expressed in terms of value, identity, polity, or in other ways). Yet many points of potential interest are touched upon. For example, the social composition of church goers is considered, which shows that ‘working class adult males living in towns and cities’ are the least religious of people. Contrariwise, active participation in church going tends to be highest among women. One might then be led to examine not only degrees of participation but more exact questions of social order and meaning in local populations: the nature of the claims made by active attendance in terms of status, the division of labour between the sexes, the spectrum of forms of participation, and how these vary in different populations and localities, and how they vary too over time. It might then be possible to speculate that in some places active church going remains a clear claim to participate in the core and the core values of locally perceived social order and that, over the century, the proportion of the population who not only feel themselves to express social flourishing but also to be capable of sustaining that claim in public, has fallen. A refinement of method and approach would be needed even to pose the hypothesis with clarity, but it would permit a move away from the perspective of decline and the primacy of individual consciousness, without slipping into a pious optimism.²¹

Individual consciousness is a frail support upon which to base sociological explanation; yet Bruce is reduced to this. Although he makes the point that one should judge people less by what they assert than by what they do,²² in order—rightly—to attack the thesis that those who do not go to church still have residual beliefs, he does not then go on to discuss what sort of behaviour would or would not constitute acceptable evidence, moving on instead to attitude surveys.

Yet, in another recent book, on Northern Irish material, Bruce begins from the contrary point of view, by pointing out two failures of the survey method. First, he notes,

‘our views about complex but important matters can rarely be expressed sensibly by picking one of four choices in answer to a question asked of us by a complete stranger’.

And second, a

‘feature of surveys is that they treat all respondents as if they were of equal importance. That is, they investigate the typical, which is fine for those areas of life where the

'typical' is important but not terribly useful in settings where some people are far more insightful or influential than others and where the actions of a few can change the world of many'.²³

Bruce concludes that, under these circumstances, one has to talk to the people who can lay claim to 'vital symbols' and who

'can exert considerable influence . . . beyond their numbers because they articulate and act out responses which, to a greater or lesser extent, are found in almost all (concerned)'.²⁴

In short, one talks to the people who 'hold positions which will be taken up by a much wider . . . constituency when circumstances press them'.

The matter could scarcely be put better. Why then has this approach not been applied with respect to expressions of religious faith in Britain? Instead, we have cited results from the 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey:

'10% claim to be atheists (position 1) . . . Of the 45 who asserted that there is no God, 20 also claimed a denominational attachment, 10 believed in some sort of spirit or life force, 10 believed in life after death, and one believed in a personal God'.²⁵

These results are then attributed to the confusion, ambivalence and inconsistency of the respondents although, as one might expect, the overall pattern is 'one of increasing unbelief. The familiar account is elaborated: acknowledging 'the usual cautions about comparability', the results of a number of surveys show.

'the traditional Christian view of God . . . to be the minority one . . . The majority . . . no longer accept the traditional teachings of the Christian Churches'.²⁶

In 1951, 71 per cent agreed that 'Jesus Christ is the Son of God'; in 1965, 64 per cent, and in 1982, only 43 per cent. 'Further evidence of the lessening popularity of what were once core Christian beliefs' is presented in tabular form.

The survey results pose the problem in a succinct form: in an account of this sort, the views, interpretations, commitments and practices of the people concerned appear largely as unexpected silences, apparent confusions or downright contradictions. Yet these anomalies may be symptoms of a meeting of incommensurate forms of interpretation, symptoms therefore which pose a fundamental challenge to a sociology of religion that on the one hand affirms a broad theory of the world, and on the other seeks to illustrate this theory with eclectic evidence. For this is Bruce's method in sum: a thesis illustrated by anecdotes. Take this brief paragraph as an example.

'This century has seen a marked change in (the size and) social composition of the clergy. The novels of Jane Austen in the eighteenth century and Anthony Trollope in the nineteenth show the Church as a profession thought suitable for the younger sons of the gentry and for poor but clever men on the make. . . In 1860 all the Church of England bishops had some connection with the peerage and the landed gentry. By 1960 no more than 23 of 43 had such links. Now there are none. . .'.²⁷

The succeeding paragraphs perform the same task, substituting numbers for eclectic facts. In this dialectic of social theory and illustration, there is no complex 'middle distance' in which human lives are lived, and by this omission, the sociological account

resembles the structure of many unorthodox religious descriptions of the world, which assert the existence of some imponderable power or theory, and bear witness to it through appeals to experience.²⁸ Bruce's reiteration of the decline of material institutions and the rise of the individual consciousness bears some of the marks of a gnostic spirituality, not least in his despair with respect to the world to which it leads (see above), and the paradoxical claim that, in a world where rationality is ceasing, the sociologist's consciousness nevertheless contains an establishable and communicable truth. But as we have seen, this is not the only possible account; Bruce also sets the agenda for a different approach to the sociology of religion, in which the task is, starting from 'vital symbols', to investigate their conditions of existence and workings, including the self understanding of the people who articulate and act out responses that others participate in to different degrees according to circumstances, and to map the institutional and other relations between these different parties.

IV

In *Religion in Britain since 1945* (1994), Davie covers much the same ground as does Bruce, but at the same time proposes another perspective, raising another set of questions.²⁹ In his brief 'Foreword', David Martin sums these up; Davie 'takes into account the inner life and interior narrative of the life of religious institutions'; she emphasizes the diversity of 'regional climates' in Britain, setting Britain both in a European and an English-speaking international context; and she notes that the collapse of grand narrative may itself apply to the concept of 'secularization'.³⁰ We are offered instead an account that is 'incomplete' or open, concerned less with decline than with the ambiguities of religion, its political and cultural effects, its geographical distributions and continuities through time.

Davie does not eliminate the two polar concepts of institutional decline and increase in individual consciousness, but she reshapes and recombines them in her principle innovation, the characterization of contemporary religious belief as 'believing without belonging'. She introduces this notion by focusing upon the increasing mismatch between the statistics relating to religious practice and those indicating levels of religious beliefs,³¹ a move which assumes that in order to generate numbers, one has to look to categories of the mind, not vice versa. By pointing to the modalities of indigenous belief, she raises the question of differential participation in belief, which then appears through a range of topics, such as the existence of parishes, the practice of bringing infants to baptism, the expressed preference for religious education and interest in religious broadcasting, as well as the results of surveys, attitudes towards religious professionals, and the role of cathedrals. In Davie's view, the crucial challenge to the Churches is not a move towards a secular society but rather the drift of belief from any orthodoxy.³² A related issue follows from this: is there a minimum size for the active religious minority to be effective in society,³³ and what factors might determine this effectiveness?

A refocussing of interest therefore takes place, away from matters of consciousness and psychology, and towards a more sociological set of questions. One of the merits of Davie's book is its constant meditation upon the variety of ways that populations relate to bodies of believers, taking into account both geographical variations and the different significance that the various Churches represent. A blindness produced by the process of homogenization is to treat the different churches as interchangeable, or equivalent, an approach which ignores their different forms of existence on the ground, and which generates such 'problems' (which we have met) with respect to the population at large

as the self ascription of non-observant Catholics, or the widespread participation in Church of England rites of passage, or the abiding significance of chapel membership in non-church settings. Davie's approach allows her to pass over the statistical materials giving a more sensitive and open account.

We have also touched on the way the process of homogenization tends to ignore the Churches' various self definitions. Davie is aware not only of the reception of religion, but also of the proactive rather than simply reflective, potential of religion.³⁴ Religion, in this respect resembling social science, is a form of collective self-imagining, presenting visions of social flourishing; of right social order and of what it is to be human. In this respect, all versions of religion are political, a matter which Davie raises, not only calling attention to the political impact of the statements made by some Church leaders, but also referring to the various (in my term) 'political settlements' represented by the different Churches. Perhaps the major difference that separates the Churches concerns how they relate in imagination and in practice both to the local population and to the State. This is more important than doctrinal differences, and may indeed give the latter distinctions their force. It is at this level that the Churches are not simply not equivalent, but possibly incommensurable. Davie combines an understanding of degrees of participation and the distributions of belief within the population at local and wider scale with glimpses of a symbolic economy in which the Churches take part both locally and nationally. By virtue of their histories and their own self-definitions, the Churches play distinct and different roles from one another at both these levels. This is frequently passed over by sociological accounts of religion which tend to treat all 'denominations' as equivalent and to a great extent comparable: all versions of the 'Christian religion'. Atheists and agnostics on the one hand, and ecumenists on the other, concur in this treatment, though for different motives. Davie can offer more nuanced historical accounts of the different traditions, without falling into essentialism; in her chapter on 'Establishment' she overtly raises the question of the different political tasks of the various Churches, concentrating in particular upon the potential and continuing 'vocation' (again, my term) of the Anglican Church.

Having focused upon matters in this way, upon differential participation in religion, upon the proactive potential of the self-definition of believers, upon the various religious settlements and their role in the wider self-understanding of the society and its institutions, it is unsurprising that Davie has the basis for possible comparisons with European constellations of forms of participation, self-imagining and identity; she offers the way to a comparative approach, pointing repeatedly to the wider European context, in which the peculiarities and anomalies of the British case (nominalism rather than secularism, for example) may appear. For the same reasons, she is relatively unconcerned with the problems of decline: change does not necessarily imply worse or better for religion.³⁵ The focus has moved from the consideration of abstract theory illustrated by empirical examples to an intermediate scale, at which theoretical accounts are noted for what they are, situated human products, on a par with the phenomena in which they deal. The continuities are then situated very differently, not in the overarching narratives, nor in the individual psyche, but in the processes by which (and the scale at which) humans collectively make sense, both reflectively and actively.

Davie's sociological account shows the traces of an 'Anglican' mind. It expresses a view of differentiation of tasks and differential participation, and a vision of political settlement, that would not gain agreement in every quarter. (Indeed, I have seen her taken to task by a distinguished Roman Catholic colleague on this point). It may be in accordance with this vision that she does not develop her insights to the extent of

making a clear break with other styles of approach. Yet her account offers a pointer as to how to develop a sociological description of the significance of religion in modern Britain, nuanced, varied and open to the future. She does so by taking seriously what I have called the political implications of the forms of the religious life: both politics and religion lie within the wider 'field' of ways of imagining social flourishing and shaping identity, a field which thereby includes social theory as well. Rather than opting for an 'objective' perspective of institutional decline matched by the rise of the (ultimately irrational) individual consciousness, a renewed sociology of religion may place itself within the picture, as one account among several competing interpretations, a minor player but with a real stake.

Notes

- 1 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, Oxford, Blackwell 1994 xiii+226 pp. (Making Contemporary Britain Series). Steve Bruce *Religion in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995 xii+143 pp. (Oxford Modern Britain Series).
- 2 *pace* Taylor, C. 1985 'Social theory as practice', in *Philosophy and the human sciences*, Philosophical Papers Vol. 2 Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- 3 Davie 1994: x.
- 4 Bruce 1995: v.
- 5 Strathern, M. *After Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 6 Strathern, 8, 1992.
- 7 Wallis, R. and Bruce, S. 'Religion: the British contribution', *British Journal of Sociology*, 40 1989 493–520.
- 8 Bruce 1995: 15ff
- 9 *ibid.*, 70.
- 10 *ibid.*, 95.
- 11 *ibid.*, 135.
- 12 *ibid.*, viii.
- 13 *ibid.*, 35.
- 14 *ibid.*, 59.
- 15 *ibid.*, 37.
- 16 *ibid.*, 16—italics added.
- 17 *ibid.*, 34.
- 18 *ibid.*, 53.
- 19 *ibid.*, 54.
- 20 Durkheim, E. *The Division of Labour*, 1991, p. 119.
- 21 cf. Jenkins—forthcoming.
- 22 Bruce *op. cit.* 47.
- 23 Bruce, S. *The Edge of the Union* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994 p. 1.
- 24 *ibid.*, 2.
- 25 Bruce 1995: 48.
- 26 *ibid.*, 50.
- 27 *ibid.*, 32.
- 28 cf. Jenkins 1992.
- 29 Davie has more space at her disposal to produce a more nuanced account; Bruce has announced a longer book—entitled *From Cathedrals to Cults: Religion in the Modern World*—of which the essay under consideration is a shortened version. But it is not suggested that he intends to move away from the framework of decline and diversity—encapsulated in the title—and to work more in the spirit of his Ulster study.
- 30 Davie 1994: viii–ix.
- 31 *ibid.*, 4.
- 32 *ibid.*, xii; cf. 70; 107–8.
- 33 *ibid.*, 107.
- 34 *ibid.*, 9.
- 35 *ibid.*, 193.

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