New Blackfriars

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Further remembrances: John Orme Mills

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For reasons of space, Timothy Radcliffe's vivid, sympathetic and insightful appreciation of John Orme Mills (May 2011) did not contain recognition of his pioneering efforts to advance a dialogue between sociology and theology, a hazardous venture and one that deserves better recognition than he received in this life. As a theologian, he had a range, an originality and a sense of vision that gave him a self-confidence to explore the troubled symbiosis between these two disciplines, seemingly born to be at war with each other.

Radcliffe touches on his regime as editor of *New Blackfriars* (1984–1991) and mentions his vigorous editing of material submitted. As the recipient of four editorial responses to essays of mine, one can vouch for his meticulous attention to detail, but also the volcanic eruptions which these contributions generated occasionally, properties of character which made him an exacting but wonderful editor to deal with. For instance when acting as a guest editor for a special issue of *New Blackfriars* on *The Enchantment of Sociology* (March 1997), his editorial commenced with the statement that 'I shook with rage as I read some of the things' in the study. But having so loosened his inhibitions, what followed was a masterful, just, well balanced and shrewd appraisal of the study and its place in debates on sociology and theology. When he praised a piece submitted, one accepted the authenticity of his judgement with pleasure. This was an editor with standards, and by some freak of grace one had met them.

In the present box ticking managerial culture that so governs British University research, its funding and appraisal, editors such as John Orme Mills would now be a rare breed. His integrity and competence enabled him to bypass an increasingly discredited refereeing system and rely on his own professional judgement as to what to accept, or not, for publication. Yet, these apparent disqualifications rendered him oddly well qualified for umpiring what he termed the 'epistemological imperialism' that characterised the relationships between sociology and theology. With William Pickering and David Martin, he convened a symposium which was held at Blackfriars, Oxford in 1978 and 1979. The need for the symposium arose as a response

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to Robin Gill's pioneering work The *Social Context of Theology.*[1] This ecumenical symposium brought together theologians, sociologists and philosophers for an innovative dialogue, the like of which has not occurred since. An outcome of these sessions was the publication of a collection of essays which Orme Mills mainly edited.[2] It was published by a small press (now out of business) and re-issued in 2003.[3] Both issues sold only moderately well and the collection was not well received.

Edited volumes have a dubious status. Their supposed failings range from being treated as merely collections of already published pieces or as welfare outlets for defunct academics whose publications no serious refereed journal would consider for publication. But when they succeed, edited collections can mark a paradigm shift in disciplines and their relationships.[4] This edited collection so associated with Orme Mills is very much a case in point. It still stands as the best work on the difficulties of reconciling the two disciplines. As Orme Mills observed in his introduction, 'this book is a product of the 1970s'.[5] That was to be its problem. The collection appeared a decade before a shift in sociology and philosophy recognised that postmodernity had a theological ambit.

Having laboured for seven years on this horrendously difficult project of finding reconciliation between both disciplines, Orme Mills, Martin and Pickering decided to pass on their files on their symposia to other hands. Unfortunately, their work was not to be continued. Each went their separate ways, Pickering becoming the exemplary scholar and commentator on the life and works of Émile Durkheim, David Martin, re-casting secularisation, went on to explore the intersections of sociology and theology as expressed in relation to Pentecostalism and Orme Mills took on the editorship of *New Blackfriars.* Why did this venture fail, given, as Orme Mills himself prophetically observed that 'it is increasingly difficult not to theologize in what are sociology's categories'? [6]

Inspecting the collection, it is clear that the sociologists wanted the dialogue more than the theologians even though both were supposed to be equally represented in the symposium. The main contributors to the edited collection were Eileen Barker, Christopher Harris, William Pickering and David Martin and these came from the

[1] Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975).

[2] David Martin, John Orme Mills & W.S.F. Pickering, eds., *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980).

[3] David Martin, John Orme Mills and W.S.F. Pickering, eds., *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

[4] See for example Bryan R. Wilson, ed. *Rationality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

[5] Martin, Mills & Pickering, *Sociology and Theology,* p. 1.

[6] Ibid., p. 145.

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sociology side. The theological response was largely reflected in two exemplary essays from Robin Gill and Timothy Radcliffe. Lurking in the background of the collection, but with no direct contribution to it, even though he was invited to attend, was the American Lutheran sociologist of religion, Peter L. Berger who took no hostages to fortune in his dealings with the liberal theologians who so dominated this period. Unfortunately, the collection fell down between the fissures of theological fashions and the secularisation of the sociology of religion itself in the U.K., in France and the U.S.A., a process that started in the late 1960s. The Catholic contribution to the formation of the sociology of religion, notably in the *Sociologie Religieuse* was discarded in the hope of rendering the study of religion 'respectable' in the wider discipline. Religion was detached from a theological ambit and creedal affiliations, on the grounds of disciplinary etiquette were treated as forms of bad faith. Such efforts to enhance disciplinary respectability foundered.

The sociology of religion became decidedly parochial in the 1970s and the 1980s, where its agenda, at least in the United Kingdom became dominated by concerns with cults, sects and secularisation. The venture of Orme Mills, Martin and Pickering was denied an outlet of reception in the sociology of religion and in the wider discipline as a whole at a time when few if any wished to amplify its resonances. On the other side, the presentation of a sociological demand to attend to the implications of the practice of religion in society, its context and modes of reception met with ill-favour from theologians for whom modernisation was a self-evident solution to the dilemmas of planting faith in culture.

In his introduction to the collection, Orme Mills aptly summarised the situation well when he noted that 'if the relationship between these two particular disciplines, sociology and theology, has been an astonishingly confused mixture of hostility, aloofness and frequently misplaced expectation, surely one reason for this is that, however obliquely, both us, sociologist and theologian, are trying to identify and explain what moves men most deeply'.[7] It cannot be said that matters have greatly improved since as each discipline still stands at the barricades, even in these postsecular times, hardly hearing the voice of the other in the din of cultural wars over identity and affiliation. It still seems that theologians treat as impertinent demands from sociologists to attend to the outcomes of their dalliances with modernity. Likewise, sociologists award theologians the maximum of civil inattention, deeming them to represent everything the discipline was founded to deny. In the face of such hostile circumstances, Orme Mills, Martin and Pickering were brave in their venture. The remains

[7] Ibid., p. 13.

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of a prospect for dialogue can still be seen in the collection, even if later efforts to discuss theology and social theory truly muddied the waters.

Given the enormous advances in current debate on religion and civil society, on the rise of spirituality, on religious fundamentalism, postsecularity and visual culture, which so implicate sociology in theology and vice versa, those initial explorations to which Orme Mills contributed so much, deserve remembrance as the stellar contributions of a brilliant, highly original Dominican who discerned what was worth building on in these houses in culture so divided against themselves. In an astonishing way, his insight that theology is increasingly formulated in sociological categories has come to pass. In an ironic way, which he would have celebrated, sociology has become oddly theological and theology has become mysteriously sociological. Glimmers of the genesis of this uncelebrated symbiosis can be discerned in the collection.

Despite his stormy periods, which emerged because he cared deeply, Orme Mills had a certain serenity, a drollness and a kindness which made it crystal clear that behind all the trivia of life he had a deep faith. Because issues mattered, he felt called to interrogate them with an intellectual vigour which those who had dealings with him will fondly remember. He was all too human. The tributaries of sociology and theology still flow into unexpectedly stormy waters. The legacy of Orme Mills was to leave a sense that their navigation was not without profit or prophecy. May he rest in peace.

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