Foreword

We can sometimes find we are learning most from people we profoundly disagree with. I shook with rage as I read some of the things Dr Kieran Flanagan says in *The Enchantment of Sociology: A Study of Theology and Culture*, which was published in 1996 in the U.K. by Macmillan (ISBN 0–333–65167–7) at £40.00 hardback, and in the U.S. by St Martin's Press of New York (ISBN 0–312–12975–0). Yet I think it would be a great pity if Flanagan's sometimes hardline theological opinions and his low estimate of much modern theology made theologians decide that this was not a book which deserved to be taken seriously.

The author, who is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bristol and also a deeply committed Catholic, is on his own admission a very rare bird in present-day academia: a radical sociologist of discernment and sensitivity who, judging from his opinion of Vatican II, is theologically somewhere fairly well to the right of Pope John Paul II. It is precisely because he has a personal perspective on the role of religion in society which is well out of the ordinary that he has been able in this book to make a fresh contribution to the debate on what place sociology should have in the thinking of the modern theologian.

When, in the 1970s, that great age of dialogue, a group of sociologists and theologians met at Blackfriars, Oxford, in order to dialogue, what did they agree on? According to the Introduction to *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict* (1980: Harvester), the book which came out of those discussions, they agreed that "it is a foolish theologian who sees sociology merely as a useful tool", and at least some of them agreed that

> because of their failure to see the reality of sociological bounds marking the limits of change, Roman Catholic theologians had not anticipated the basic crises of faith precipitated by alterations in church organization and practice which they had advocated.

They agreed that sociologist and theologian "belong to distinct universes of discourse" but that

> both of us, sociologist and theologian, are trying to identify and explain what moves men most deeply. And we are trying to do this with the confident assumptions of the nineteenth century, as well as of the thirteenth century, radically shaken... The responses of sociologist and theologian can and do affect each other and sometimes (not always but sometimes) they will talk better sense if they overhear one another or, equally important, are aware when they are overhearing one another.

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It was all very polite and cautious stuff... but remember that what they were doing in those distant days was something quite novel.

The tone and emphasis of Flanagan's book—which is written primarily for theologians to read—is very different. He is making much more ambitious claims than did that group in the 1970s, and his major theses are far more provocative and controversial. I shall try here to summarise what this book is basically about, but I should remind you that Flanagan's text is complex and nuanced, and I must leave unmentioned here even facets of the study which the author himself considers important. I am focussing on the ideas in the book likely to stir up most discussion.

The *first* and possibly the most prominent of the book's major theses is that there has been a disastrous misreading of culture by Roman Catholic theologians since the Second Vatican Council, and that possibly sociology may be able to help rectify this, particularly by helping theology to understand what enables and disables religious belief in a culture of postmodernity. Says the author:

> if theology is faith seeking understanding, then in its reading of culture sociology might be a novel strand to be added to theological thought.

He states close to the beginning of his preface that behind the book is "an ambition to write the imperative for enchantment in sociology into the interface between culture and theology."

The *second* of the book's major theses is that in postmodernist culture there has been a shift (overlooked by theologians) towards "sacralisation"—both good and bad. Says the author:

> Part of the revolt which late modernity or postmodernity signifies is its rebellion against the myth of secularity and its seeking of sources of enchantment.

He sets out to show "that sociology finds metaphors of the sacred transferred to signify symbols, idols and icons within a commodified culture of postmodernity" and one of his objects is to work towards the restoration to theology of "that which has been misappropriated in a culture of modernity".

The *third* of Flanagan's major theses is that there has been a shift in at least some recent sociology towards "enchantment". Says the author:

> sociology nurtures a nascent theological voice, an imperative for religious belief that becomes apparent in its understanding of culture.

We have asked five authorities with very diverse interests to react to *The Enchantment of Sociology*.

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David Martin, now Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Lancaster, is the first contributor. He has written widely on secularisation, liturgy, politics and Latin America, and more recently has returned to the issue of theology and sociology. Writing from a sociological standpoint, he discusses above all Flanagan's claim that modern liberal theology has misappropriated sociology—which Martin thinks is "the main point of his exercise".

Michael Paul Gallagher, an Irish Jesuit who formerly worked in the Pontifical Council for Culture in the Vatican and now teaches theology at the Gregorian University in Rome comes next. He has been concerned for some time with the area of faith, unbelief and culture, and he is the one contributor who has read widely and deeply in modern Catholic theological writing on culture. Here he in particular takes to task (ever so gently) Flanagan's attack on this writing.

James A. Beckford, who is Professor of Sociology in the University of Warwick, is our third contributor. He has written extensively in sociology of religion, especially in relation to new religious movements, and is researching on chaplaincies in multifaith society. In his article for this issue he looks critically at the concept of postmodernity and particularly at Flanagan's understanding of what postmodernity is.

Keith Tester, who is Reader in Social and Cultural Theory in the University of Portsmouth, follows Beckford. He has written extensively and incisively on postmodernity, sociology and ethics. Here Tester considers the limits of sociology; against Flanagan, he argues that sociology does not possess competence to address questions of ethics nor has an ethical dimension.

Graham Howes, Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and Director of Studies in Social and Political Sciences, is our last contributor. He writes mainly on aesthetics and religion, and also on Church-State relations. In his article for us he raises questions about Flanagan's views of sociology's theological potential and theology's sociological potential, and also about what chance is there of sociologists and theologians taking his ideas on board in the foreseeable future.

The author has got the final word in this issue of *New Blackfriars*, but who can tell which of the theses proposed in "this powerful, provocative and impassioned book" (as Howes has called it) will turn out eventually to be horribly wrong and which magnificently right?

John Orme Mills OP
Guest Editor of this special issue

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