

REVIEW ESSAY

Theology in a Social Context: Sociological Theology, Vol. 1. By Robin Gill, New York: Ashgate, 2012, 240 pp.

Theology Shaped by Society: Sociological Theology, Vol. 2. By Robin Gill, New York: Ashgate 2012, 219 pp.

Society Shaped by Theology: Sociological Theology, Vol. 3. By Robin Gill, New York: Ashgate 2013, 252 pp.

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For more than half a century, Robin Gill has negotiated the scholarly interface between sociology and theology. This trilogy by the Emeritus Professor of Applied Theology at the University of Kent, Canterbury, brings together his work as an Anglican academic. The two initial volumes, he says, can be read in "stand alone" terms. This review restricts itself to a brief, albeit critical overview of the three volumes. Together they constitute Gill's systematic account of his "theological social system," and his "sociological theology." They collate a lifetime's work of substantial breadth and depth, a testimony to the care and persistence of this academic and clerical author. Gill's three volumes gain their coherence from his unwillingness to forget earlier stages in his own theoretical development. He keeps on working; earlier formulations are not discarded.

In negotiating the borderland between theology and sociology, Gill incorporates insights from the sociology of knowledge into his theological reflections. His succinct summary of his purpose is to "explore the possibility that theology, even theology in a modern pluralist society, may at times be socially significant. That is to say, that its influence may sometimes extend beyond the restricted confines of academic theologians and even beyond the confines of the academic community as a whole" (SST:33).

This is tongue in cheek humor to explain his work. "Even" and "may" in the phrases "*even* theology," "its influence *may* sometimes extend beyond," and "*even* beyond" exhibit a winsome hope as a Christian academic and scholar. He draws attention to the "restricted confines" of theology, which is itself nested within the confines of the academic community. We also perceive him to be confronting an academic culture lacking true openness. His work expresses the hope that his analyses will be appreciated beyond the academic context in the wider society, even out there in the parishes of the Church of England! He goes so far as to hope that his sociological theology will cross the divide from theology into sociology itself! This humor coincides with a conviction that sociological theology should be an integral part of every ordinand's intellectual formation. Here is a work fired with a many-

sided hope, and a self-conscious Anglican contribution to university, church and society. This attitude binds the three volumes together as one work.

When Gill, in the afterward of the third volume, sums up his efforts, he concedes "that my project is far from complete" (SST:229). This comes hard on the heels of his culminating chapter about theology's task in fomenting the public virtues of "solidaristic compassion," where he commends the difficult task of extending care to those living with HIV. "Theological Virtues in the Public Forum", compares HIV prevention programs with the challenges Jesus issued by healing lepers. The basic concepts of sociological theology are expounded in the belief that this new (sub)discipline must strive to make such a compassionate contribution. Many situations in this suffering world cry out for "solidaristic compassion;" academic disciplines like sociology and theology, in their examination of the various dimensions of all kinds of human endeavor, need to see themselves so constrained and "under continual construction." Any "incompleteness" of Gill's project is part of his recognition of the dynamic human reality that confronts these disciplines. Those who theorize "theological virtues" may better rise to challenges of human suffering with assistance from a sociological theology.

Gill's perspective on caring articulates his response to the Gospel's challenge to confront, overcome, and turn away from cruel and deeply harmful "stigmatizing and shaming [of] people who cannot undo their condition" (SST:226). His incisive exposition of New Testament healing stories seek to bring into sharp relief the persistently negative communal processes that "compassion, care, faith and humility" must confront and overcome.

The discussion is necessarily academic; its arguments are presented as well-crafted essays in a style not unlike what is required in university coursework. That is no criticism. Gill has been reading and re-reading the formative textbooks of his undergraduate and graduate study back in the 1960s and 1970s. He remembers their stimulus and writes with sensitivity to his readers, assuming that we may gain greater clarity of his views if he explains how he then saw and responded to the challenges of prominent scholars. And so the three works are tied together autobiographically, which enhances their contribution. More recently he has confronted the views of John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas, with whom he clearly disagrees. Gill repeatedly reiterates strong dissent from "radical orthodoxy," particularly of Milbank's strident negativity toward social science.

Nested within Gill's narrative is his account of the genesis of his own theoretical arguments and concepts. That cannot be covered adequately here, but to put it in shorthand, his inter-disciplinary effort is framed by the impact of both J.A.T. Robinson (1919-1983), author of *Honest to God* (1963), and C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), author of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) upon his reflections. His recurring emphasis is upon sociology's interface with theology, and the less-than-clear-cut theological response to the intellectual challenge of those viewing religion and theology with a "sociological imagination." Gill writes as a pioneer in border territory, knowing full well that some residents on both sides of the dividing line between sociology and theology view it as a "no

go" area, perhaps even a bewildering wasteland, or they may even deny its existence altogether. Milbank apparently views it as a fantasy-land or a deadly bog. But this phase of the *Sociological Theology* project chronicles his persistent sojourn in that scholarly realm, and contrasts sharply with Milbank's evident aversion to such exploration.

Gill's negotiation of that "borderland," as well as the concepts and insights he derives from the sociology of knowledge, requires a more complex analysis than can be given here. Suffice to say he raises important and critical questions, including those about sociology's long-standing commitment to "secular" assumptions. The data collected about religion raise facts that are undeniable, and sociological analysis needs to avoid being skewed by ideological or even theological weaseling. This is a point about empirical research that will need further clarification from a critical examination of Gill's arguments and analyses.

Overall, the three volumes are well written, and an enjoyable chronicle of an Anglican academic's odyssey in the secular academy. He happily identifies with David Martin's assessment that together with himself and Peter Berger, they constituted a group of Christian sociologists of religion, who

stumbled on the necessity of sociology as a natural extension of our immersion in theology and as a way of sorting out what were to us urgent issues about religion, social understanding, and human betterment We were, and remain, mistrustful across the board rather than liberals across the board. For us the proper work of a sociologist is to sniff cautiously at everything, sociology included. (*SST*:3, quoted from an unpublished document and correspondence with David Martin with his permission)

Gill's account of how sociological theology has emerged provides his exemplar of how theological knowledge is formed in and by its relation to society. Sociological theology must challenge taken for granted realities, his own included. Gill assumes that by objectively identifying the processes by which social reality has been and continues to be constructed, issues that arise within the borderland between sociology and theology can be given their due. I will return to this below. The question I have concerns the manner in which Christian faith should be made evident within sociological analysis.

Theology in a Social Context (Vol. 1) takes up themes Gill developed in his very first book, *The Social Context of Theology* (1975). In fresh and easy-to-follow language, his retrospective and self-critical documentation presents corrections to previous over-reactions, misunderstandings, and mis-readings of data. He also identifies his own faulty arguments put forward to those with whom he disagreed as he tried to promote deeper reflection about the value of sociology for theological reflection. He does not forget that it was his Birmingham MSocSc supervisor Bob Hinings who made the salient suggestion about "applying sociology to theology rather than just to parochial work (*TSC*:3).

He remains alert to important transitions in his thinking. The applied contribution of sociology is not just about discerning how social action can be formed in line with some theological ideas, for example, in the programs of an Anglican parish trying to implement its "mission statement." Hinings' suggestion meant applying sociological concepts to theological concepts and insights in order to discern how it *qua discipline* is part of a "socially constructed reality." This "academic" (rather than merely "applied") refocusing of the relationship between these two disciplines led Gill to the sociology of knowledge and the work of Karl Mannheim (1893-1947). His roughly-hewn philosophy of science is discussed in the opening chapters of *Theology Shaped by Society* (Vol. 2), where he examines the social structure of theology, and this leads to a view that is central to the entire project, found in "Theology: A Social System" (Ch. 5). In such terms, Gill's sociological theology promotes empirical sociological fieldwork as an important source for theological reflection. In his earliest work, a 12-page essay titled "British Theology as a Sociological Variable" (1974), the use of the term "variable" is critical for his understanding of explanation in sociology (*TSC* Chapter 3 "Explanation in Sociology and Theology" 41-59). Gill's sociological authorities – Berger and Mannheim – provide him with a theoretical view of how science confronts reality's diverse and immanent variability.

In any scientific explanation, the dependent variables are related to the independent. But what in one study can be considered an independent variable may in other studies be viewed as dependent and vice versa. Berger affirms this view of scientific explanation with his sociological account of religious phenomena. And this is also why, within social scientific inquiry, appeals to the transcendent are necessarily excluded (*Theology in a Social Context* 2012:47). However, the critical problem with this stated exclusion of the transcendent is that it involves an immanent belief in the self-sufficiency of scientific explanation that actually transcends scientific explanation. This is a problematic dogma that must be examined further in any critical examination of Gill's sociological theology. Together with Berger and Martin, Gill's Christian professional aspiration is to "debunk" the secularist assumptions that are taken for granted within sociology.

It is all very well to "sniff cautiously at *everything*, sociology included" (*SST*:3), but what are we to make of the reality of human responsibility? Is this simply an idea that has been "socially constructed" by we humans in order to avoid the view that our human life might otherwise be meaningless? Secularist assumptions have led to the view that human responsibility is simply a social construction, a convenient part of the story to shield ourselves from our presumed inevitable demise. Is Gill's sociological theology going to challenge that secularist assumption? And if so, what Christian view of our diverse social responsibility will lead the analysis of the processes by which social reality has been and continues to be objectively constructed? One might have expected that an English Anglican sociological theologian would, at this time, focus upon the divinely ordained nature of marital and family responsibility, let alone of the social responsibilities that pertain to membership in church and state. Gill's trilogy is surprisingly silent on these matters.

There are other questions to be “sniffed” out when we consider Gill’s three very readable volumes. Does the “caring” motif represent a simplification, if not a narrowing, of the relationship between these two academic disciplines? It almost seems as if the sociological and theological dimensions represent two ends of one moral or ethical reality. And that would suggest that sociology and theology are to be viewed as two intellectual routes to and from a reality in which a superordinate ethical theory leads the way. But if sociology and theology are to be articulated in this way, we still have the question of the relationship of this disciplinary dyad to other human sciences – economics, political science, history, and the science of law – let alone the natural and mathematical disciplines.

We are left with the following critical questions: Is Gill suggesting that the method of sociological skepticism is a religiously neutral strategy? Should his sociological theology be considered a specifically Christian contribution to sociology? And if so, how then is such a Christian sociological theology to relate to sociological theologies that arise from other religious commitments or worldviews? These are some of the critical theoretical and philosophical questions raised by the author’s very readable trilogy.

In his expansive set of three percolated volumes, Robin Gill vigorously promotes what he believes is a clear-cut self-critical approach, not just to sociology, not just to theology, not just to the relationship between them, but to living the Christian life. We have listed above Gill’s record of his own sniffing at various sets of data, which indicates an aversion to claiming a final word in such matters. But at the same time, there remains a strong persistence of an uncritical dogmatism concerning the religious neutrality of sociological reflection that stands in the way of a more coherently *Christian* contribution to sociology, and to Gill’s own *sociological theology* project. And that *Christian* contribution will not only require the further elaboration of the comprehensive critique of this contribution to *Christian sociology* that this review has begun, it will also require the elaboration of a systematic alternative, a sociological perspective inspired by a Biblically-directed view of society and social responsibility.

References

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