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1

Sociology and Virtual Religion: Issues of Memory and Identity

The safe disposal of eight small aniseed balls, without breaking one’s teeth, might not seem a matter of moment. To an eleven-year-old Irish boy it was, for their consumption was calibrated by ritual movements over the back streets of Limerick, not in the times of Angela’s Ashes, but in those of the late Victorian Indian summer of the mid-1950s. The aniseed balls were purchased from Mrs Darcy’s little shop half way up Chapel Street. It was not a busy shop. To each customer, Mrs Darcy gave a dedicated and full service, one where time scarcely intruded. The demands of service necessitated a nice little sit-down to observe the world passing by before the next customer might come. Her shop was near Cornmarket Row, where one’s grandparents occupied a tall Georgian house.

The house had seen more graceful days. On the ground floor, grandfather would sit at the door of a shop smoking a pipe whose tobacco lasted an eternity. No customers seemed to come. This puzzled a young mind as to what he was expecting, for he seemed happily just to gaze out on the street and watch life pass by. As in Mrs Darcy’s little emporium, the advent of a customer seemed an unwarranted intrusion from the outside world. ‘Why was he there?’ was a question posed to one’s very sharp English grandmother whose response was that he had to be put somewhere, so that sitting at the door combined a façade of usefulness with an expulsion from her terrain upstairs. Understanding dawned slow on the young mind.

The time taken to suck one aniseed ball took one to William Street, two melted descending the seemingly steep Chapel Street to the church below and three vanished in ambling around to Cornmarket Row. The house of the grandparents overlooked a nineteenth-century French-style covered market. In retrospect, it seemed filled with redundant extras from The Quiet Man. Vendors cried aloud in the market, donkeys neighed and lots of old little ladies in black shawls bustled busily about the place. It was like a warren of ants, the sort found when lifting up a large stone. If Thackery were to return for more Irish travels, he might have seen a familiar sight. For the rest of the
time it was deserted. Quite correctly, it returned to its proper use as a venue for sending a balsa wood glider off to sail in and out of the pillars of the covered way that ran around the walls of the market. Such aeronautical labours involved running over the market, over the straw-strewn muddy cobblestones and in such endeavours the few remaining aniseed balls were barely sufficient to stoke one’s energy. This was a world of the definite, vivid in its presence, unripe for memory and unforeseeable in any future.

Inhabiting a discipline profoundly unfixed in present cultural circumstances, even sociologists have an urge to go back to inspect sites of memory and to re-fix the compass points of identity. In returning, one hoped that this site of childhood so intensely felt would be virtually the same and that some resemblance to what was remembered would be found. Unfortunately, in going back to Limerick in 2001, the scenery shifters of time had done a cleansing job. Bizarrely, what one saw seemed littered with sociological tags. Chapel Street was now a pedestrianised space littered with pseudo-Victorian bollards. Squatting incongruously, the bollards seemed to signify some obscure postmodern point yet at the same time they stood in testimony to the needs of the heritage industry. Mrs Darcy’s shop was now a Subway Salad Bar and a branch of Pizza Hut had replaced grandfather’s shop. The take-away culture of globalisation had hit Cornmarket Row. The house of one’s childhood had been demolished to make way for a red bricked multi-storied car park, with its own fretted twirls of green iron work replacing the shabby Georgian windows that used to look out on the market. The tumbling down house that faced on to the farrier’s yard had been demolished to make way for a concrete piece of modernism. On the left side of the former yard was a concrete hut that proclaimed itself as the best Adult Store in Limerick. Turning up into the High Street, one found at the top a bright red shop front that was an Internet café.

The sudden change from this late Victorian twilight zone lodged in the 1950s into the ordered disorder of a culture of postmodernity seemed unfortunate. It was not to be expected that the burghers of Limerick would slap a preservation order on the sites of one’s childhood. The surprise of the shift in perception of the landscape was less its re-ordering than the way it had been re-cast to reflect all too accurately sociological expectations of seeing. This bears on a point of Giddens that sociology moves easily in and out of the modernity it constitutes. Oddly, sociology has become a victim of some ill-earned success where a gap between its forging of concepts and their cultural use has narrowed incredibly. Public discourse is increasingly framed in the argot of sociology. As the rhetoric of sociology is so appropriated, so also are its dilemmas, the ones it has barely formulated and certainly not resolved. One problem increasingly looming is the need to distinguish between the virtual and the real. This points to rather a forbidding territory.

Times move on, and the sights of the 1950s and of 2001 of the same place could not but be different. What was seen related to more than shifts in
ageing. The landscape of childhood had been re-cast to make it seem more authentic than what had gone before. Neater, more ordered and more sensitive to heritage, what was now seen had been re-arranged to be read in a particular way. Pastiche, imitation and resemblance underwrote what was available to the eye. The gaze now saw what was re-arranged not for biography, but to service the needs of cultural memory. Individual biography might need servicing, but so does society. It has its own deposit of memory. As time goes by, society needs to re-inspect its relationships to the field of culture whose gleanings require re-inspection to see what is still rooted and what has been uprooted in the ploughing.

That accident of personal biography that clashed with the outcome of the needs of cultural memory drew into focus a tension between the virtual and the real. What was seen in the present was virtually like that remembered, but not enough to convince, for the sense of childhood memory formed a more formidable witness to the real, what the area was authentically like. What was seen in 2001 was a plausible resemblance, an imitation, almost counterfeit of what one had gazed at in the early 1950s. Experience of the prototype gives one a jaundiced eye towards what is presented as the virtual, whether to serve the needs of the heritage industry or cultural memory. One can spot the difference in ways that undermine confining what is seen to sight. The eye needs memory to re-call what it did see but sees no more.

As the needs of cultural memory increase, so do expectations for the virtual. Strangely, the capacity to expand the virtual, through technology and historical research, can make the past seem inauthentic to those who actually inhabited it. But as these powers of the virtual increase to meet the expectations of contemporary cultural representation and recognition, the question of the prototype, the original template, returns to cast a long shadow. The virtual always begs question about the prototype, its ethos, its mentalities now lost to time. One is curious about life in the prototype, for the virtual presents matters in a light that is too transparent. Somehow, the powers of the virtual insufficiently satisfy. They refract inadequately in ways that return the gaze to the issue of their prototypes. These issues become poignantly cast in relation to religion.

In English society, the cultural landscape is increasingly littered with redundant churches no longer able to fulfil their stipulated designations of giving witness to the unseen. Standing devoid of purpose, they give reproachful witness to a culture devoid of powers of recognition of their original purpose. As Evangelical traditions gain ascent in English Anglicanism, a sense of detachment from memory increases. These traditions do not need such buildings, cast as they are for the needs of the medieval world of Catholicism that the Reformation was set to displace. For Evangelicals, rituals bear superstitious baggage; they service the needs of the eye not the Word.

As these buildings are increasingly transferred to civic and secular custody, these redundant churches occupy a place in the heritage industry. They also
have a place in the wider issues generated by culture and memory. Even if religious memory fades, society needs some form of memorialisation, even through the virtual, to remember in culture what is best not forgotten.

The need to attend to memorialisation has been advanced very much in French sociology. The politics of commemoration have a more evident significance in France than in England. This arises from the radical displacement of religion from French cultural memory. The capacities to sacralise have been transferred from religion to civil and secular orders. In the march of reason, the virtual triumphed over the real in matters of religion and the light of reason given to citizens precluded them from caring to notice the difference. This legacy of the French Revolution marks a divide in memory between religion and culture whose equivalent in England is the Reformation. In both settings, Catholicism has a displaced existence, being somewhat outside memory and yet being oddly within it. Catholicism hovers uncertainly before the virtual, undecided over whether to claim back what has been misappropriated for profane imitations.

The culture and politics of memory have their own edifice complex where the unconscious of society needs to be given visible representation in some image or mobilising symbol. Now, it might be said that sociology is able to sustain a grand indifference to these matters of memorialisation, especially as they bear on matters of religion. After all, as a child of modernity, it is the beneficiary of a spirit of secularisation and as such, sociology has a vested interest in preserving religion in the unconsciousness of society. But this generates an unsettling question. If institutional religion is disappearing and the sociological tradition is to confirm its departures in analytical pieces, what has replaced it? This relates to a profoundly uncomfortable question for sociology. As a surrogate for religion, sociology faces a risk that some myopic parties might seek to cast it in virtual terms. In so casting sociology as a virtual religion, might confusion emerge that would cause some to see it as a real one? In more innocent times, religion could be treated as a form of false consciousness or a deception. Now matters have changed. There are so many virtual forms of religion about that sociology risks being taken in by the forgeries that loom in ways unseen before.

This chapter is concerned with how sociology is situated as a discipline in relation to the virtual. In the first section, it is argued that some form of choice between the virtual and the real emerges in the politics of memory. For its realisation, memory requires forms of recollection and re-presentation in the present. Its duty is to invoke a sense of the unseen, what is lost to time, which needs to be re-seen in the present. This begs questions when memory deals less with what is unseen, than how those in the past dealt with the seen and the unseen. Some entry point is required, and the door is the metaphor for this. It fulfils theological and sociological needs for an idea of opening. In the second section, sociology’s need to choose between the virtual and the real in relation to religion is explored. This relates to the
risks of blindness peculiar to sociology when it does not attend to differences between the virtual and the real and becomes misidentified. Sociology might have an interest in not attending to deciphering these differences if one finds a claim to being a virtual religion in its traditions. Virtual religion comes into focus in present society in two specific areas: the concert hall and the Internet, whose powers of calling up a virtual reality seem god-like.

The third section returns to the degree to which sociology persists as a virtual religion in its misappropriations of the language of religion that belong to the real – Catholicism. When sociology needs to summon up its visionary powers, it lapses into the rhetoric of a virtual religion. In France, to render this virtual religion vivid, Catholicism is plundered for metaphors, images and rhetorical flourishes that supply a higher order of appeal than mere analysis can deliver. The fourth section argues that when sociology faces a need to inspect its disciplinary identity for the purposes of formulating protocols for its novices, it falls further into issues of virtual religion. Finally, the fifth section suggests that notions of civil religion are similar to those of virtual religion, but with a crucial distinction. Notions of virtual religion do not require reference to theological distinctions, but this is not the case with civil religion. It is decidedly Protestant in its borrowings. This leaves the study with an unsatisfactory division in its theological leanings. Catholicism lurks incredibility in French efforts to formulate a virtual religion as the apex of aspiration for the discipline. Protestantism hovers around civil religion, one that points to the way American society is shaped to the command of a virtual religion. From these points, one can discern the genesis of what is to come in the study. Theological assumptions are buried in sociology’s dealings with culture to a greater degree than it has confronted. These assumptions generate matters of theological choice sociology has been reluctant to consider.

I

Mr Mandelson’s ‘Siamese twin’ elegantly resolved a delicate problem of representation in a neutered manner. Distinctions between virtual and real forms of religion might seem a form of sociological navel watching yet the advent of the millennium forced English society to pass a practical test in arbitrating between these distinctions. The need to make a monumental mark in time, for the recent millennium, concentrated political minds wonderfully. It also occasioned a delicate issue of what was to be the domain symbol of this monumental endeavour. Given that English society was post-Christian, multi-faith and inclusive, some all-embracing mobilising symbol had to be found. Despite state rights of patronage over Anglican episcopal appointments, the idea of erecting a cross inside the Dome would have been political suicide. It would have denied all the aspirations of New Labour for an inclusive society. On similar grounds, other religious emblems had to be rejected.
Initially, it would seem that a £90,000 long legged redheaded woman with a small head would be the most suitable candidate for memorialisation on top of the Dome.\(^2\) The government minister then responsible for the Dome, Mr Mandleson, thought that this model was too gender-specific. Instead, he settled for a giant half-man, half-woman, a ‘Siamese twin’ that transcended differences of gender. Who the twin was or where he or she came from was beside the point. This androgynous figure aroused much controversy. It was described by the less charitable as a ‘genetic monstrosity’.\(^3\) For others, it symbolised the curse of the Dome and the dangers of playing with cultural memory. In short, the issue of the figure exposed a crisis in how English society represented itself to itself in a post-Christian fashion.

Christianity was ghettoised in the Spirit Level section of the Dome, an appropriately entitled area for the calibration of all religions, virtual or real. This circular Dome lost lots of money, never fulfilled its projections for visitors, and its opening night was a disaster. As an exercise in virtual religion, it never caught the public imagination. The Dome came to reflect the spiritual and cultural vacuity of Blairism. For sociologists, it brought into focus the cultural importance of memory and commemoration, a concern that mattered greatly to the discipline’s founder and the virtual religion he instituted.

Wernick suggests that Comte’s church of humanity was ‘one vast exercise in memorialisation’. Festivals, calendars, shrines and parks, all culminated in a festival for all the dead.\(^4\) Sociology was involved in the memorialisation business more than many of its practitioners realised.

Although English concerns with memorialisation became evident at the time of the millennium celebrations, in France they had arisen decades earlier in response to the need to mark in cultural memory the Revolution of 1789. This led to a culture of commemoration in the 1960s and 1970s that was concerned with marking dates, symbols, civic gatherings and rituals that would link past and present.\(^5\) Nora’s notion of \textit{lieu de mémoire} refers to the vestiges, symbols, artefacts, and the embodiments of commemorative consciousness that survive history, which need resuscitation. It represents the loss of something sacred that requires rituals of re-presentation in a ritual-less society. Central to the notion of \textit{lieu de mémoire} is that memory is not something spontaneous; it requires ‘commemorative vigilance’, the staging of interventions such as the marking of anniversaries, the organisation of ritual celebrations and spectacles.\(^6\) This relates to an important facet of memory: the way the visual governs its re-construction. Nora introduces a term ‘mirror-memory’ to show the way that what is drawn from the past serves to reflect present identities. It is through differences that the elusive basis of identity emerges. The issue is not about origins, but ‘a way of figuring out what we are from what we are no longer’.\(^7\) This involves a radical re-casting of history.

Watts Miller draws attention to another notion of Nora, \textit{milieux de mémoire}. This concerns sites of memory and in this regard, there has been
an explosion of these. But the problem is that these are no longer about sharing in mutuality. As sites of memory, they are concerned with ‘how there can be solidarity among a mass of mutually anonymous individuals. They are a route, in our large-scale world to what has been called a “community of strangers”’.8 From these notions of the past emerge a loss of solidarity but also a sense of estrangement, where memory stands accusingly against the present. It is the unravelling of these threads of memory that underpins a sense of disconnection in the present. Memory begs a question of restoration, and it is this imperative to re-thread and to re-memorialise that forms the ambitions of this study. If memory is to be of use, it requires some coherent focus, some capacity of re-call to enable what is of the dead, what lies unseen, to be seen again by the living. Rituals and symbols fulfil this need. They facilitate not only the knowing of memory but also its restoration as living and vivid.

The central thrust of Halbwachs’ approach to collective memory is that it requires a social construction if the tales and stories so embodied are to live on in a present far removed from a past wherein they were conceived and formulated. The social is the means of sustaining recollection by marking symbols and rituals to be re-presented as representations.9 Thus, for Halbwachs,

every religion is a survival. It is only the commemoration of events that terminated or sacred personalities who disappeared long ago. There is no religious practice that must not be accompanied, at least for the officiating priest, and if possible, for the believer, by a belief in divine or sacred persons who have manifested their presence in the past and exercised their influence in defined places and periods, and whose gestures, words, and thoughts are reproduced through practices in a more or less symbolic form.

In this context, ‘religious thoughts are concrete images that have imperative force and generality of ideas … that represent unique persons and events’.10 Political and cultural events conspire to cause these images to lose their force. Removed from their contexts of recollection, they no longer vitalise and so the link between the past and the present is broken. The French Revolution and the English Reformation ruptured the continuities of memory of Catholicism and broke its powers of continuity. In France, the cultural and symbolic capital of Catholicism was dispersed after the French Revolution. The god of reason and humanity replaced the God of Catholicism. The state took to itself rights of sacralisation of memory, and sought to re-cast the civil in ways that betokened a virtual religion of commemoration of the heroic and exemplary virtues of the French Revolution.

In the English Reformation, Nora’s ‘mirror-memory’ in relation to Catholicism was broken by state decree. The orderings of relationships between
the earthly city and the heavenly city that so marked the genius of late medieval Catholicism were shattered in an iconoclastic revolt that left a mark of profound guilt on the English mind. Memories of these events have faded and constitutional niceties of Establishment have cemented over recollections of what those former times were like, before the fall into the Reformation. Only in Northern Ireland do sensibilities of difference over doctrine and liturgical practice still persist. These tribal divisions that keep alive such forms of religious memory seem incomprehensible to those for whom such differences are matters of indifference on mainland Britain.  

Secularism and ecumenism have conspired to suggest that these religious differences are of no consequence. What has faded from memory is the realisation of what has been lost to view of liturgical life as lived before the Reformation. A sense of this loss can be felt when visiting a late medieval church now in Anglican possession where discomforting archaeological evidences lie around the building as bare reminders of the imaginative powers of the liturgies used before the Reformation. Such little churches provide a microcosm of great events. Hervieu-Léger has suggested that ‘for centuries the parish represented the society of memory’ in a chain that linked its inhabitants back through time and the expression of this was found in the church. The Reformation broke these chains and often Protestant forms of recollection of such parishes tell an incomplete story. It is only when an historian provides an imaginative account of what life might have been like in a small parish before the Reformation that one realises what has been unlinked from memory and what the other tales might be.

Duffy has provided a unique insight into the effects of the Reformation on a small Devon parish and its church. The account reveals the cult of images that linked the world of the seen with the unseen in a community where everybody had a stewarding part and where piety was given its fullest of visual expression. Public and private forms of religious life were intermingled. In the church, the pious knew where to look to discern representations of a world yet unseen. Chantries serviced the notion of intercession where priests, or sometimes choirboys, were given endowments to pray and sing for the departed.

The Reformation ruptured the notion that the visible actions of those in the earthly city could have an impact on the heavenly city. With the abolition of purgatory in the Reformation, the intercessory powers of the clergy were lost. Links with the heavenly collapsed, and in the present it is the funeral directors who come to manage death with earthly effect. A whole religious imagination was closed and as Duffy graphically indicates, the visual piety of Morebath was dismantled. This process of iconoclasm that coincided with the genesis of modernity marked the beginning of the secularisation of visual culture. One edifice the Reformers hesitated to raze was the cathedral. It stands enigmatically in relation to cultural memory illustrating to a society what it had forgotten. As Vauchez has suggested, ‘the cathedral was in every
way an illustration of the Christian conception of time: time not as mere flux but as preparation, within each individual as well as in the world, for the coming reign of God. The cathedral now stands as an architectural emblem of the link between the seen and the unseen, a ‘symbol of the holy city and anticipation of the heavenly Jerusalem’.\textsuperscript{17} As von Balthasar suggested, the ‘cathedrals were the visible expression of contemplation and could only be understood by those prepared to devote themselves to the contemplation of the things of heaven’.\textsuperscript{18} The trouble is that few in present culture devote themselves sufficiently to seeing the unseen to be able to discern the cultural and symbolic capital of these richly laden edifices. Re-reading their basis depends on an eye of appraisal, a re-seeing that grasps their enduring significance.\textsuperscript{19} Too much of cultural memory and capital is embodied in these buildings to let them drift into decay. Too many chains of memory might be uncoupled if this were to happen. Although the cultural relevance of the cathedral, even in a post-Christian society such as England, might be conceded, its place in sociology might be less clear-cut.

The cathedral has been an important but underrated resource for sociological thought. It was the source of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. What was seen in the cathedral could be merged into the unseen, a scaffolding signified in Thomist philosophy. Habitus represented the disposition to merge both.\textsuperscript{20} But for Simmel, it supplied the metaphor of the door. For Simmel, the door marks a notion of entering and exiting. It suggests a property of looking in, one expressed in the ornamentation of the door of the Gothic cathedral. The structure of the door ‘leads the person entering with certainty and with a gentle, natural compulsion on the right way’. The journey is from the outward to the inward in a fixed direction. The basis of the value of door and the bridge (the other metaphor, one that links the seen and the unseen in a liminal manner) ‘for the visual arts lies in the general aesthetic significance which they gain through this visualization of something metaphysical, this stabilization of something merely functional’. Thus, Simmel argues that the actor must always separate but cannot connect without separating, but the door offers the prospect ‘of stepping out of this limitation into freedom’.\textsuperscript{21} The door is the enabling device for the liminally bound, to see between the seen and the unseen, to visualise in some imperfect manner what is beyond mere perception. Pointing beyond, the door also orders what is in the realm of the social. It not only marks entitlements to entry, thresholds, surveillance of those who pass through, trust and distrust, and etiquettes of greeting and departing; it also carries a notion of petition. The notion of knocking at the door is implicit in the property of prayer, where seeking and openings are to be found in Matt. 7:7. The door stands not only for those who seek, but it also expresses the self-imposed plight of God, for it is written: ‘behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me’ (Rev. 3:20). The door occasions a curiosity about what cannot be seen.
Journeying back to Catholicism, Huysmans displayed an almost forensic ethnographic brilliance in recording liturgies he gazed at from the back of Parisian churches. One particular ceremony fascinated him. This was the clothing ceremony of a Benedictine novice. These ceremonies aroused a fullness of horror in the Gothic imagination in the nineteenth century. Gazing at the whole event, Huysmans felt transported back to the Middle Ages. Part of the ceremony involved the novice knocking on the door leading to the enclosure and petitioning in Latin to be admitted. The door opened and she vanished from the world presumably never to return. Durtal (a fictitious front for Huysmans) gazed stupefied. The whole event seemed as a tableau. The door points to a seeking to see, but also to a property of awareness of its necessity. This impulse can be found in notions of reflexivity.

When expectations of reflexivity are applied to particular areas, such as those of religion, matters become more complex but in ways that give comfort to Christian practitioners seeking to reconcile their sociology with their theology. Increasingly, the demands of reflexivity call those dealing with religion to treat it on the inside of belief, and not in some disembodied manner of the outsider. As Stark and Finke argue, the human side of religion as a form of belief is increasingly being opened out in sociology in ways that avoid old-time reductionisms. Approaching the study of the religion from the inside, they argue that social scientists are unlikely even to grasp the human side of phenomena for which they have no empathy. While it is not necessary that social scientists who want to understand religion be religious, it is necessary that they be able sufficiently to suspend their unbelief so as to gain some sense of the phenomenology of faith and worship.

They go on to cite a comment of Durkheim that those who do not bring a religious sentiment to the study of religion cannot speak of it. They are like the blind trying to speak of colour. In one of the earliest linkings of ritual and reflexivity, Rappaport pointed to something vital, but obvious, that ‘in performing a ritual one participates in it. To participate is, by definition, to become part of something larger than the self’. In performing, the actor comes to accept what he realises. To understand this process, the sociologist has to understand it from the inside, at the level of understanding of the actor and the meanings sought – an orthodox Weberian stipulation. There is a definite theological property to Rappaport’s characterisation of ritual. For him, ‘ritual, then, is possibly the furnace within which the image of God is forged by a mystified reflexivity out of the powers of language and of emotion’. In so entering, disciplinary self-awareness becomes implicated in religious awareness as the sociologist engages with what the actor seeks. It is one thing to proffer reflexivity as a form of empathy to the other or even the Other, but this notion of being part of something greater than the
sociologist might signify the risk of being acted on from outside the field of inquiry. One might accept that religion needs to be studied from the inside, but it becomes perilous to suggest that this might involve a vulnerability to what comes from outside. Muscular sociology does not entertain visions that come in the night. Sociology is a discipline of the day; its duty is to bring matters to its light. Dealings with the night are unfamiliar terrain. Whatever its other ambitions, sociology has no desire to emulate Daniel’s dream: ‘I saw in my vision by night, and behold the four winds of the heaven strove upon the great sea’ (Daniel 7:1–2). Dealing with visions might not seem part of the disciplinary duties of sociology.

II

At the end of his lecture, ‘Science as a Vocation’, Weber observed that those who wait for new prophets and saviours are in the same position as indicated in the Edomite watchman’s song included among Isaiah’s oracles:

He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.28

Weber’s biblical excerpt is from ‘a grievous vision’ where Isaiah is enjoined to set a watchman who foretells what he sees. Set to see in day and night, he sees a chariot of men who come to say that Babylon has fallen and that all ‘the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground’. Somebody other than the prophet asks the watchman ‘what of the night?’ (Isaiah 21:5–12) This seems a curious query in a complex set of verses that speaks volumes about Weber’s perspicacity regarding Biblical knowledge.29 What Weber laid down was the necessity of choice, one that lay between religion and science. Being religiously unmusical, he could not quite make a leap of faith himself.30 Yet, oddly, given Weber’s disdain for the visual in his sociology, this affirmation of the duty of choice occurs in settings of Isaiah that ask the oracle what is seen. The account goes on to speak of the ‘valley of vision’ that leads back to Jerusalem (Isaiah 22:1). Again, matters return to the seen and the unseen.

Between light and dark is a twilight zone where the virtual is easily confused with the actual. Where is the sociologist to look, given these equivocations about what the night might hold? Weber’s injunction at the end of ‘Science as a Vocation’ is perverse. The issue of the visual is abandoned for concern with the interior, for the sociological calling is to look away from the social and to look within, to ‘find and obey the demon who holds the fibres of his very life’. Thus, the fulfilment of a duty to integrity lies within the chamber of private judgement, a very Protestant injunction that speaks suspicion of what lies outside in orderings of the social and the visual
implications it bears. But what if the conscience of the self is stifled, and the eye is presumptuously blind to what it should fear in the social? After all, all sorts of mirages, fantasies, masquerades and illusory visions can loom as spectres in a culture marked by suspicion. Even if Weber's injunction not to play the prophet is accepted, sociologists still encounter legions of false prophets with no such inhibiting calls to integrity. In not attending to the visual, to what lies in the social, sociology for all its inward attention might be blind to the consequences of its analytical stance, however worthy. These issues emerge in a splendid satire on sociological sensibilities.

Festinger’s *When Prophecy Fails* pursues an impeccably orthodox sociological question: how does a group respond when their belief systems become untenable? Paradoxically, failures effect their re-affirmation. This issue forms the basis of Lurie’s comedy of analytical errors, *Imaginary Friends*. This is an account of a study of a small rural sect, known as the Truth seekers, by Tom McMann, the author of a classic of descriptive sociology, and by his assistant, who chronicled everything. Admirably reflecting the methodological fissures of sociology, the study leans heavily on McMann’s faith in the strengths of observation studies rather than those of quantitative methods. Whereas quantitative methods facilitate a disembodiment of the self on the field of enquiry, observer participation leaves the sociologist vulnerable to an embodiment, an empathy with the tribe under study that risks disaffiliation from the protocols of disciplinary identity and its ethics of detached enquiry. The study foreshadows the emergence of reflexivity and some of the dilemmas that emerge when its concerns are attached to the field of religion where prophets rule.

Reflecting on the disaster this study effected, where McMann went mad, Zimmer, his assistant felt the whole experience seemed an ironic version of the means-justifying-ends type of argument. Their means of entry had been based on the excuse that ‘we were seeking Truth, we were proposing to lie ourselves blind to the Truth Seekers’. The book oscillates around the issue of who was observing who and, in the course of the account, McMann, so believing in the sect as a basis of a large study, comes to fulfil its needs by becoming the visitor they had prophesied would come from outer space. The whole study made Zimmer nervous. Listening to the scribble of the pencil taking down notes from Outer space, Zimmer ‘sent up a half serious request for the spirits of Max Weber, C. Wright Mills and Nicolo Machiavelli to get me through what lay ahead’. At the end of the book, Zimmer reflected that he and the professor were never ‘just observers’. Social scientists, he noted, often spoke about the effects of participant observation on the group studied, but rarely about the effects on the participant himself. From the events surrounding the study of the sect, Zimmer had ‘begun to wonder occasionally if sociology itself is absolutely sane’, a question many sociologists have asked themselves. Somehow, in dealing with issues of religion, sociology comes unstuck. In this tale, of not being able to tell of the difference between the
real and the virtual, the sociologist was propelled into being the answer to the prayers of the group. A prophetic mantle was bestowed and even if the sociologist did not see its necessity, others did. D’Agostino’s observation seems prophetically exemplified in this tale, when he noted that ‘while the sociology of religion is an important enterprise, it is also certainly a perilous one, not for the faint of heart’.35

Coming closest to the religious flank of sociology, those in the sociology of religion (who often fled theological ambits) are forced into proximity with virtual forms that unsettle. These forms still contain embers that signify what the fire of faith might look like if lit up. The powers of prophecy still attract even if the obligations of religious belief do not. As one commentator observed, when sociology takes on the mantle of prophetic utterance about the directions of social change, at least in America, there are ‘roaring sounds of silence’ surrounding religion.36 The notion of the virtual in religion suggests something more than the dismissal notices of false consciousness. Lurie’s parable of misrepresentation seems to suggest that there is something of religion in sociology that makes it prone to misrecognitions of the seen and the unseen, even if these mix in dangerous ways. In seeking motes of religion in society, sociology has its own myopia of not seeing the beam of religion in its own disciplinary eye. This selectivity of sight bears on the virtual in religion but more particularly on the way sociology has ill-disguised ambitions to be a virtual religion.

The virtual in relation to religion takes on three contrasting sociological meanings. The first highlights the propensity of sociology to become a virtual religion. The second relates to issues of misappropriation and performance so that what is of the sacred becomes attached to what is purely secular. The third form of the virtual bears on the image-making powers found in cyberspace that greatly complicate sociological efforts to understand the links between visual culture and religion. In relation to religion, the advent of cyberspace as a way of dealing with the seen and the unseen is both an asset and a liability.

The dalliances of sociology with virtual religion start with Comte. He had made strenuous efforts to form what Petit terms a ‘super-Catholicism’, a religion of positivism. This religion is ‘dogmatic, cultist and highly ritualistic’. As a religion of humanity, she suggests, it seeks ‘to bind together the human community here on earth, instead of promising to each of us an individual salvation in the another world’. To illustrate her concluding points, she cites the comment of Etienne Gilson that ‘Comte had in mind an atheist Augustine whose City of God descends to Heaven on earth’.37 The unseen was part of this virtual religion, but imperialised and reduced to the seen, to the canons of Positivism that were to govern the advance of sociology. It was the theology of this virtual religion, the instrument for a faith seeking understanding of the cult of humanity, in which man is the god. This property of deification not only percolates down to recent sociology, notably that of Goffman, but
it also emerges in the religions of the self so characteristic of the stresses and strains of life in a culture of postmodernity.

Stedman Jones argues well that religion was the quintessential social institution for Durkheim, the testing ground for his theories. For him, religion ‘involves forces, symbols, representations and the conscience collective, but above all beliefs’. By attaching collective representations to beliefs, Durkheim paved the way for the formulation of a question sociology has treated ever since with equivocation. Was his cult of man, his religion of humanity a virtual religion in its own rites of analysis? Did it escape the clutches of the Catholicism it sought to replace or was it a doomed exercise? This is a question difficult to answer, but what is clear is that the claims of sociology stand at odds with those of the real theologies of Catholicism, which the discipline was founded to supersede. Some sociological bodies that dealt with religion, especially in the late 1960s, sought to secularise the basis of their affiliations and to move away from the ambit of Catholicism. The use of the term ‘vocation’, inserted by Weber in its ambitions, suggests an appeal to something more than what comes from mere perception. There is a property of prophecy, of the oracle, in the calling of sociology, to see what the laity cannot discern. In this regard, settling for imitations and plausible resemblances will hardly suffice. To fulfil its vocation with integrity, sociology has to find some sensibility of self-regard, some image that gives focus to its claims to see what others cannot.

Back in 1977, before the rise of reflexivity, Carroll argued that it ‘should be demanded of every sociologist that he comes to know the idealized self-image in terms of which he judges the world’. This points to what the sociologist identifies with and seeks to embody. One idealised image is the privatised angst Weber bequeaths to sociology, but a more general set arises from a god-like property of enduring scientific scrutiny and scepticism under the inconvenient burden the discipline brings to social affairs. Postmodernity has destroyed this Olympian sense of engagement with the gods of science. Ironically, the forces of secularisation that destroyed real religion have acted in a similarly destructive manner on the virtual religion of Positivism. Capacities for self-description by reference to some god-like powers of narrative are no longer credible. As Luhmann aptly suggested, ‘the proclamation of the “postmodern” has at least one virtue. It has clarified that contemporary society has lost faith in the correctness of its self-description’. As sociology seeks to mirror society, its domestic doubts are also refracted in its subject matter. God might have died, but so also have the gods of sociology. This leaves sociology with a need to find an idealised self-image that is credible, and the increased recognition of reflexivity accentuates that imperative to so search. Sociology needs something credible to invoke to visualise. Somehow the virtual gods of the cult of humanity seem inadequate for the task.

The second strand of the virtual refers to forms of religion, the sacred or liturgical, which are imitations of real religions. Bergeron coined the term
‘virtual religion’ to refer to an explosion of interest in Gregorian chant in the mid-1990s. Her notion of virtual religion emerged from the contrast between the authenticity of an ensemble production of chant in a cathedral, and the rugged, less exact performance of the monks for whom this was the daily work of giving worth to God. Somehow the virtual form, the concert, seemed more authentic than the real thing, the actual forms of monastic chant. As she suggested,

the concert presented a virtual liturgy, one in which we were invited to participate, but also one that required nothing of us whatsoever. It is the condition of being between two realities, both of which are denied, that creates the desired effect of this music.

This liminal property invites a choice of staying in the virtual space the concert music invokes, and adhering to its criteria for the sacred, or of moving to another definition, one that belongs to the real, its lineage and forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Choral music takes on an image that moves from the archive to the public arena, from settings of ruin to restoration in an evolution of appreciation that has been rarely studied. In the concert hall, performance is given the liturgical support of a virtual religion, which claims access to notions of the sacred that serve aesthetics. The performance bears an interest that simply requires acceptance rather than negotiation. Similar music performed in a cathedral as part of a liturgical event reflects a property of disinterest of giving worship to God and what is done is sacred only to that end. Postmodernity has accelerated permutations of virtual religion.

The concept has been expanded creatively by Beaudoin to characterise the ambiguous attitudes of GenX (those born between 1961 and 1981) to religion. Beaudoin argues that simulations, the making of the virtual, can lead to a more thorough religious practice. In a perverse way, the virtual can become the gauge of real forms of liturgy. The basis of the gaze shifts from the expectations of the real to the virtual. He suggests that ‘GenX’s culture of virtuality, of both reality and its imitation, uses irony to communicate religious ideas’. Pastiche, playfulness and imitations suggest that virtual religion is the religion of a culture of postmodernity. It is self-made religion, where cultural props are assembled in a highly individualised manner to make one’s own church. This property of play and disconnection can become tiresome. It can create an urge to connect that is an outcome of an overuse of the virtual. Flory and Miller make a good point that Generation X do not perceive their religion in terms of disputations over written texts ‘but on narrative, image and experience in religious belief’. It is this property of directness that underpins a seeking of connection and validation in relation to religiosity. In this second form, the virtual is a double-edged weapon. At one level, it signifies the capacity to simulate to render imitations of religion.
more credible in their virtuality than what they imitate, but in another way it signifies a need to restore relationships with the real, the prototype. Efforts to wrest the real from the virtual suffer charges of being conservative, when in actual effect they are radical forms of restoration.

The third facet of the virtual bears on Lurie’s parable of sociology having to exercise a prophecy in terms of discerning what comes out of the air. It relates to consideration of what emerges from cyberspace and its fragmented and de-contextualised experiments with cultural forms. In this miraculous expansion of image, icon and representation, the virtual and the real have become mixed up in ways that exceed even sociology’s powers of arbitration. Sin, grace, pilgrimage, altars, icons and images can be represented in virtual terms in the religions of cyberspace. This form of the virtual working through the Internet gives diverse and disconnected believers a chance to fulfil a complete identity as a religion through the Internet. The Internet and digital technology provide simulations and forms of experience seemingly more authentic, in a virtual space more intensely felt and more individually crafted than anything to be found in social reality. The field of culture is no longer required to fertilise the visual; it can now appear in a tidier disembodied form in ways that make social reality seem untidy, cluttered and disabling, and to that degree it shares something in common with the second version. In the third version, the powers of Faust have been democratised; they are the rights of all who inhabit a visual culture.

The manifold, confusing and contradictory relationships between the virtual and the real in these three settings might generate a paralysis, a sense that there is no way of distinguishing between these. Yet, each form of the virtual suggests an accentuation of choice. The gods of Comte’s virtual religion might elicit questions about God; the virtual form in the concert hall might simply echo Benjamin and demand that choral music be returned to its nexus of tradition, its forms of memory; and the virtual that emerges in the third form points to the need to cultivate more trustworthy visual forms of arbitration between the seen and the unseen. In approaching the virtual, the issue of the self-image of the sociologist returns, for after all it is his vision that governs the account. If this is the case, then it would seem that sociology also has its own ways of seeing. Sociology has a field for looking and its disciplinary eye suffers the embodiment that afflicts others. As a discipline, it can think that its plight of regard is peculiar to the times and forget that in other times, similar difficulties of characterisation arose over the fraught relationships between the seen and the unseen where there were also many gods to be distinguished by the learned.

Appraising the researches of the Roman antiquarian Marcus Varro, St Augustine characterises these as ‘the kind of learning which we Christians call secular’. Varro’s *Antiquités* expressed ‘the fear that the gods may perish, not through an attack of the enemy, but through the indifference of Roman citizens’. They too feared the forces of what has become embodied in the
notion of secularisation. Cicero looked to Varro to change things, in an expectation that might seem to be that of the contemporary sociologist of religion. Thus, Cicero wrote of him:

we were like strangers in our own city, visitors who had lost their way. It was your books that, as it were, brought us back home, so that at last we could recognize who we were, and where we were. It was you who revealed to us the age of our country, the sequence of events, the laws of religious ceremonies and of the priesthoods, the traditional customs of private and public life, the position of geographical areas and of particular places, and the terminology of all matters, human and divine, with their various kinds, and functions, and causes.\textsuperscript{52}

Like Varro, the sociologist faces the contradictory task of chronicling forms of religion but in ways that overcome the indifference so accentuated in a culture of postmodernity, where finding the difference that matters turns out to be highly elusive. This is possibly because virtual religion still operates in the aspirations and the identity of sociology more than one might realise.

III

The degree to which the ambience of French Catholicism seeps into the formulations of its sociology has gone unchronicled in its reception in English and American academic life. Comte’s mission statement to sociology embraced rituals, catechisms, a sacred calendar, its own priesthood and altars, an apparatus of a virtual religion, one made in imitation and likeness of Catholicism. This virtual religion had its articles of faith bound into a collective consensus that set the contexts of sociological values in ways that anticipated later notions of paradigms. As Oliver suggested in relation to Durkheim, ‘faith in science does not differ in its essentials from faith in religion’.\textsuperscript{53} In his treatment of society as god, Durkheim might be said to have sacralised sociology.\textsuperscript{54} This tradition was nobly carried forward by Bourdieu. An expression of the aspiration that sustains the sacralisation of sociology in a Durkheimian manner appears at the end of his pretentiously titled collection of essays, \textit{Pascalian Meditations}, where Bourdieu finishes with a creedal flourish. He states unequivocally:

sociology thus leads to a kind of theology of the last instance: invested, like Kafka’s court, with an absolute power of truth-telling and creative perception, the State, like the divine \textit{intuitus originarius} according to Kant, brings into existence by naming and distinguishing. Durkheim was, it can be seen, not so na\textsuperscript{i}ve as is claimed when he said, as Kafka might have, that ‘society is God’.\textsuperscript{55}
The issue of Comtean borrowings from Catholicism comes into clear focus when efforts were made to import his teachings into nineteenth-century Ireland. This posed an acute problem for liberal Irish Protestants who sought to use a religion of Positivism to transcend religious differences. Irish Catholics were unlikely to exchange their faith in God for one in humanity when the ‘new’ religion virtually borrowed all the trappings of Catholicism. If lapsing, they were hardly likely to settle for such a virtual religion. Some Protestants, however, were attracted to the properties of memorialisation in Comte’s positivist religion, a point mentioned above. The religion of Comte fitted admirably to the religion of nationalism. As Pelling suggests, ‘in Comte’s religion of humanity, remembrance of the dead, symbolising worship of humanity was central. The heroes of the national past were a particular object of reverence . . .’ In Ireland, nationalism and Catholicism were interwoven in forms of memorialisation that Comte’s virtual religion could only aspire to imitate.

The religion of positivism still flourishes, notably in France and in Brazil, where it had sufficient impact for one of its sayings to be placed on the national flag. Although no liturgical order was found for the Paris chapel, one was uncovered for the Positivist Church, a Humanity Temple, in Rio de Janeiro. The order of service started with the officiant in front of the humanity altar making the positivist sign. Then came a hymn in humanity’s name, after which came ‘a classical music execution’. The sermon extolled vegetality and animality laws and noted that biology prepares sociology and moral(s) to form a link between sciences and the cosmology group. Another ‘classical music execution’ followed. At the end, the officiant (stands up looking to the public) and gives the final invocation that starts with a call – ‘let’s put our hearts up to HUMANITY and confirm to it the recognizing that we feel full by the education we have received’. The text of the website encourages all to read Comte’s Positivist Catechism. From the website, the building seemed to have all the accoutrements of a church, a nave, altar, candles and pulpit. Presiding over all this is a bust of Auguste Comte, presumably there as a mere human and not as a god (www.arras.com/br/igrposit/foto2html).

Why should sociology blur the line between a virtual religion and the real thing – Catholicism?

Borrowings from theology endow sociology with a legitimacy, a right to use the language of Divinity to enhance, to embellish and to secure the credibility of its insights. This recourse to theology enables sociology to speak of what it cannot utter from within its own rhetorical resources. The extensive writings of Bourdieu are littered with theological concepts appropriated to characterise the basis of power on the field of culture. The constitution of the field and its control relates to powers of consecration, but also to habitus, the capacity to play the game with a flair that comes from the realisation of a disposition. The roots of habitus lie in theology, notably in Aquinas (with debts to Aristotle). These appropriated theological
notions are central to Bourdieu’s sociology of culture. For him, sociology has terrifying powers in its exposure of contingency but also in the exercise of its prophetic tasks. Thus, Bourdieu wrote of the

wretchedness of man without God, or any hope of grace – a wretchedness that the sociologist merely reveals and brings to light, and for which he is made responsible, like all prophets of evil tidings.59

Bourdieu’s famous inaugural lecture, ‘a lecture on a lecture’, awarded a god-like power to the sociologist to bring to light deeds that thrived in darkness. Above all, through reflexivity the sociologist had powers of redemption derived from a self-awareness of position on the field but also a capacity to stand outside it. Resolution of this antinomy gave the sociologist powers of a divinity. In this lecture, Bourdieu returns to this Pascalian theme of the wretchedness of man without God. But in the lecture, he argues that ‘what is expected of God is only ever obtained from society’. The basis of the resolution of wretchedness lies in the social, not in God. The social is the domain that ultimately matters. Again, the language of theology is appropriated to sociological ends, when he asserts that ‘the judgement of others is the last judgement; and social exclusion is the concrete form of hell and damnation. It is also because man is a God unto man that man is a wolf unto man’.60 The reflexive sociologist seems to hold the keys of the kingdom of the social. As Duncan suggests, ‘in this lecture, which uses religious language so liberally, sociology takes on an almost mystical character’. He is also correct to point to the religious character of Bourdieu’s vision.61 But it is one that veers off so close to the virtual in the service of sociological prophecy, its power of antinomy of standing inside but also outside society, that few inspect the borrowings from the real thing. This points to an issue seldom explored: sociology’s implicit theology.62 It points to a dilemma of sociology. How does it recognise where the shadings of virtual religion merge into those of real religion? The discipline might shake off its borrowings, its metaphors and rhetoric that give it a property of a virtual religion, but there are points where it reverts to an inspection of the real thing to resolve what it cannot from its own analytical resources.

Few doubt the influence of Michel Foucault, yet fewer would wish to pay attention to the Early Church borrowings that underwrote his complex attitudes to sexuality and the identity politics that marked the later parts of his life. His attitudes to theology and Catholicism in particular are complex and seldom confronted.63 Like Weber, and also an intellectual polymath, Foucault had a deep interest in the technologies of the self and its regulation. His concerns with confession are familiar; less so is his interest in the regulation of the self in relation to sexuality, and this brought him to the study of the genesis of monasticism in early Christianity and to the writings of the theologian John Cassian (c. 360–430). Cassian formulated the basis of
monasticism, upon which St Benedict later built. He also developed a rigorous approach to sexual purity and the virtues of virginity that are treated as fundamental to the realisation of monastic aspirations. A similar escape back to Early Christianity occurs in Maffesoli’s notion of the tribe.

This concept arises in response to the fractures of affiliation of modern life. Tribes represent properties of vitality, an ambience of connection sought in the public square by disparate emotional communities. His treatment of the individual and the collective owes much to Durkheim and his efforts to sacralise humanity. For him, ‘religion . . . is the matrix of all social life’. It is the crucible for the creation of ‘being together’, a mysterious puissance or vitality that requires sociological inspection. To find a template for this ‘social divine’, Maffesoli turns to studies of Early Christianity and its capacities for an ‘elective sociality’ that involve the networking of tribes of believers.

Like habit, which is fraught with boring overtones, but which has releasing properties, custom is denoted as the unspoken residue of being together. The double process of ‘social reliance and of negotiation with the holy characteristic of the early Christian communities’ form the working hypotheses of what he wishes to understand about tribes in the present. These communities operating against the Pagan societies of Late Antiquity supply models of vitalisation for his contemporary tribes. These communities also provide examples of networking in small groups. In looking at the paradoxical power of modernity to effect unity through blurring of differences, he observes that ‘the master craftsmen of the Middle Ages knew a thing or two about this, and built our cathedrals on this principle’. This need to attend to what divides, what might effect social solidarity but also transcend it, points to the functions of the unseen, their transcending power over seen differences. Thus, efforts to see the unseen have healing functions in the forms of hope they service and supply.

Use of metaphors that are distinctly Christian not only arises in recollections of past forms of communal bonding, but also is a means of characterising a future as yet undisclosed. These dalliances with theology persist and are given unexpected expression in English society in the writings of Bauman. These are considered in the next chapter. In this context, however, it is interesting to note the way that theological borrowings creep into Bauman’s vision of things unseen. This particularly emerges in relation to the virtue of hope.

Reflecting on Bauman’s deepening critique of socialism, Smith notes that ‘the object of hope should be a high ideal, whose achievement is way beyond the distant horizon’. He descends on Bauman’s last sentence in Socialism: the active utopia, where St Paul wrote ‘hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?’ But the verse which follows is equally important: ‘if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it’ (Romans 8:24–5). The answer to the waiting lies in the context of the verse so cited. It refers to the groaning of creation and its waiting for redemption. It is about hope in an unseen force, the Spirit sent to console, a Trinitarian solution
Bauman would hardly avow as a Jew. What lies in scripture and is cast under the light of the heavenly city is often re-cast for use in the virtual religion of sociology. Thus, the metaphors of the organic that underpin a Durkheimian approach to social structure can be traced to Paul’s metaphor of the body, its weakest parts and their mutual concern and interdependence. The metaphor is used to characterise the hierarchy and community of the Church presented as a model of the social and the need for the utilisation of gifts and talents of all (1 Cor. 12:12–31).

Notions of virtual religion as part of the ideal self-image of sociology persist. They particularly arise in terms of the protocols laid down for novices aspiring to be sociologists. Issues of dealing with the seen and the unseen emerge in fieldwork, but also in confronting the pantheon of ideal type figures that have dominated and shaped the genesis of the discipline. These figures are its heroes and its disciplinary exemplars.

IV

Whaling has argued that all major religions have the following eight characteristics: religious community, ritual, ethics, social involvement, scripture, myth, concepts, aesthetics and spirituality. Some of these elements can be found in the ethos of sociology itself. Sociology has an exalted notion of community, and as a discipline it aspires to a prophetic mode in its highest estimations of itself. Endowed with its own code of ethics of enquiry, sociology aspires to maximise autonomy and human dignity free from social constraint. Appealing to more than can be seen, sociology’s visions are emancipatory as it seeks to lead the blind, the entrapped, to kingdoms ordered and lit by lamps of reason sociologists are given to bear for entry into darkened territories governed by unreason. Sociology has its own canonical texts that are virtually scriptural in the reverence awarded to them. To use Bourdieu’s phraseology, sociology forms its own oblates and novices to be fit to bear analytical burdens.

In a highly imaginative speculative essay, Richard J. Martin explored the degree to which sociology has the characteristics of a virtual religion. His concern was with the nature of sociology and the degree to which it took on cultic elements when considered as an occupation. Published in 1974, the essay drew on the self-scrutiny of sociology and the way its disciplinary orientation was realised in forms of piety, prayer and mystique. These theological notions were metaphors to understand how sociology understood itself. Piety related to disciplinary proprieties and prayer was given a location in the ritual round of sociological life, conferences and graduate training. Prayer had a mimetic property, for it shaped the sociological character of graduate students. It enabled them to fulfil the disciplinary powers they sought. Conversion of view was also part of the training of the student, a change of orientation that moved the novice from a non-sociological
perspective to a sociological one. Martin gets nearest to the notion of sociology as a virtual religion in his discussion of mystique. This anticipates Bourdieu’s notions of habitus. Mystique refers to the unrecognised knowledge underpinning sociology, its language and style of enactment that takes on a sacerdotal property to the laity, to outsiders on the discipline. Concern with the instillation of values in the training of postgraduates bears on the need to instil an ethical dimension, an awareness of calling. The mantle of a virtual religion that sociology takes on in its treatment of its novices serves to socialise them into treating with reverence the higher ideals of the discipline, its vision, its ideals, its protocols and its obligations. Images require a social construction, a point sociologists make to others but seldom to themselves. The image making of anthropology particularly occurs in fieldwork where there is a need to reconcile what is seen in fieldwork with what is inscribed.

Margaret Mead’s famous work *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published in 1928, was subject to two decades of criticism by Derek Freeman that she had been hoaxed and that the image she had drawn was a distortion. The controversy surrounding Mead’s fieldwork points to a wider issue of its construction. Traditionally, fieldwork in anthropology has been treated as a rite of passage, an encounter with tribal customs, whose properties are translated into text in some ‘magical’ process of conversion. The power of anthropology derives from this capacity to transfer from one context to another in a manner that secures a brand image for the tribe, one that becomes associated with the anthropologist who performed this process of re-imaging. In her study of fieldworkers in anthropology, Jackson has explored the liminal quality of fieldnotes as they lie between memory and encounter and between private sentiment and their re-casting in public disclosure in a professional account. The fieldnotes mark an effort to reconcile the self of the anthropologist with the tribe to be represented. The self of the fieldworker comes into play as discrepancies between memory and what is recorded in the notes emerge. Thus, she notes that many of those interviewed spoke of the kind of person revealed in the notes. Their moral character emerged as they worked with a process of creating something from the fieldnotes, the major physical remain of the study. As she suggests, fieldnotes had a heavy emotional valence and sacredness because they are objects crucial to the performance of the rite. This rite refers to the process in which the tribe comes into being illustrating the way anthropologists come to their own consecrations, their antinomies of the seen and the unseen. It is what is brought to the event to be characterised that enables it to come into life. Conceptual pre-suppositions are brought to social reality to shape it.

In Weber’s context, they are ideal types, exaggerations of social reality used to shape and to characterise it. The necessity of dealing in abstract pictures or images entails strict adherence to reading empirical matters in hand. The seen and the unseen emerge in the unbridgeable gulf between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. These methodological necessities can mask biographical imaginings and
dispositions, the habitus of the sociologist himself in playing the game of analysis, what he is disposed to wish to see. These fieldwork matters point to worlds of imagining of what was seen, what might never have been and what becomes decidedly unseen.

To an unexpected degree, sociology is governed by deference to exemplary actors or types. These occupy the pantheons of sociological imagination. Devoid of an actual context of gestation, these imaginings hold a powerful sway on the proprieties of the discipline. Weber’s Calvinist has no corporeal existence yet his personality exercises a bleak hold over the discipline. It would be a foolish sociologist who sought his plaque in Amsterdam, Philadelphia or Geneva. Likewise, Durkheim’s notion of ritual was based on imaginative readings of the fieldwork of Spencer and Gillen in Australia. Then there are Goffman’s actors. Although they enter sociological existence through being based on interviews and observations, his inmates, waiters, the stigmatised and the grotesque form tribes whose territory resides in the sociological imagination. Their lack of place in reality disturbs few sociologists who seek entry to Goffman’s country. This relates to an important point of Waksler that Goffman’s analysis ‘recognizes the ultimate impossibility of making absolute distinctions between the “real” and the “as if” – both for members of society and for sociologists – and moves analysis to spheres where such impossibility does not fetter sociological inquiry’. Goffman’s concern is with one way ‘that the social world can be seen to work…’

This property of the ‘as if’ provides a vital means of entry for this study into the relationships between the seen and the unseen.

There is a fine line between hypotheses and imaginings that Goffman crosses with impunity. In reading Goffman, nobody could seriously think that these sociological actors exist in a real world with personalities and character (the absence of these is one of his weaknesses). They are largely the figments of a brilliant sociological imagination that has re-cast the way the discipline sees the world. The unseen status of those so invoked is beside the point. The fact that they are imagined adds to their allure. Building on the notion that nations are invented, Anderson coined the idea of imagined communities to characterise the growth of nationalism. In this regard, the political community is

*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.76

The building of disciplinary affiliation bears a similarity to the properties of edification in religion. Some texts are regarded as canonical; some founding fathers are treated as exemplary prophets; and some concepts are enduring in their authoritative range. In their use, reverence builds up a sense of image of communion in a common vocation, whose exemplary sermon is Weber’s
'Science as a Vocation’. After a long period of asceticism in lonely preparation, the sociological novice comes to his Ph.D. viva to seek consecration to distribute the communion of knowledge to undergraduate followers likely to believe in his powers. The way sociology comes to be established as a virtual religion can be found in Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus*. Disciplinary boundaries are kept in creedal formations, hierarchies elicit deference, heretics are dispatched and oblates assert their loyalty to their patron, the professor, but also to their discipline of affiliation.77

Although Christianity might have slipped away from English cultural consciousness, notions of virtual religion abound in Durkheimian versions too conspicuous to ignore. Commentators reached for the notion of a virtual religion to describe the World Cup and Jubilee celebrations in 2002. The term had floated around as a puzzled response to the mass mourning for Princess Diana. There was something in the order of a culture of postmodernity that meant that the public, if not sociologists, reached for the rhetoric of virtual religion to describe what they saw. Thus, shopping malls are described as cathedrals of consumerism, icons are the terms of reverence for the images of mega-stars, and charisma denotes the surreal gifts of highly skilled football players.

V

In France and the USA virtual religion has had wide currency in notions of civil and secular forms of religion. These refer to the political need to hallow what is deemed as sacred in forms of memorialisation, the reverential marking of symbols of national endeavour, and the provision of rituals of commemoration that express the values of republicanism, and the freedom and democratic rights of its citizenry. Civil and secular religions have their own feast days, Bastille Day and Thanksgiving Day being examples. Some symbols become highly sacred. Thus, prohibitions exist on the use and the disposal of the US flag, when it has become worn out. This flag is endowed with a religious status, one confirmed by the pledges recited to it in classrooms. The Bill of Rights, the moral template of the nation, is lodged in a mausoleum in Washington. Its architecture is Classical Grecian, and it has the aura of a cathedral, a site of pilgrimage for the citizenry to inspect their documents of liberation. Protestant in origin and in its stress on liberty, toleration and separation of powers, civil religion marks well the divide between the virtual and the real. Lacking any dogma, and being non-sectarian, it binds everybody to a generality of memory. As Bellah wrote,

the words and acts of the founding fathers, especially the first new presidents, shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has been maintained since. Though much is selectively derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity.78
Wuthnow denoted civil religion, narrowly conceived, as ‘the use of God language with reference to the nation’.  

Public religion is a means of speaking of the sacred in the realm of society. In its public or civil forms, this virtual religion services a sphere for the regulation and production of the sacred outside the nexus of institutional religions. In American society, the constitution strictly prohibits the use of religion in public spheres. In the UK, the established church supplies the needs fulfilled by civil religion. It does so in ways that reflect a Protestant Settlement for the monarchy and a nation whose identity is built on fidelity to the values it incorporates. In matters of cultural memory, Protestantism controls the account, for Catholicism, in this regard, is not deemed creditworthy.

Whatever its demerits, the notion of a civil religion has important implications for issues of religion and visual culture. The power of display in architectural forms, whether in Babylon, Xanadu, Athens or Rome, serves to mark positions of legitimacy and status. These forms are to be seen in ways that render the inferior docile. Commandeering public space, they speak much of the contours of sacred geography and what its arrangements present as a basis of emulation.

Anticipating many later sociological formulations, Varro treated religion in terms of the needs of the citizens of the commonwealth it serviced. He divided his theology into the ‘mythical’, the ‘natural’ and the ‘civil’. ‘Mythical’ or ‘fabulous’ (in terms of fable) theology is peculiarly suited to the theatre, to performance and spectacle; the ‘natural’ relates to the world; and the ‘civil’ to the needs of the city. St Augustine spends much time demolishing these distinctions in *The City of God*. The notion of virtual religion arises in the context of Seneca’s criticisms of the rites of civil theology where the role chosen for wise men ‘is to simulate conformity in the act while having no religious attachment’. Varro’s central interest was in ‘natural’ theology. This produced a mob of deities whose naming Augustine satirises. They served to alleviate the worries of the citizens of the Roman commonwealth. Finding a fit object for worship posed numerous pitfalls. Gods were invented to provide an honourable explanation for obscene ceremonies. Thus, St Augustine argues that

the men of antiquity invented images of gods and their attributes and ornaments, so that those who had been initiated into the mysteries of the teaching could fix their eyes on them, and then apprehend with their mind the true gods, namely the Soul of the World and its manifestations.

In his writings, Varro treated human affairs before those of the divine, on the basis that the latter dealt not with something in nature but with purely human institutions.

Something similar can be found in Durkheim’s notion of religion as the image of real society. As Durkheim argued, ‘if religion has given birth to all
that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion. Religious forces are therefore human forces, moral forces'. Stedman Jones cites a central facet of Durkheim that ‘divinity is the symbolic expression of the collectivity’ and adds that for him ‘the gods...are conceived not perceived’. The mistake of the Romans was to name these gods in an anthropomorphic manner, which St Augustine tears to pieces. Varro and Durkheim would concur on the conception of the gods and the social needs they fulfil. But for both, the truth or falsity of religion was beside the point. Varro, it is claimed, asserted that ‘it is an advantage to communities that brave men should believe themselves to be sons of gods, even if it is not true’. This also accounts for the invention of ostensibly religious rites ‘where lies about the gods were thought to bring advantage to the citizens’. Gods that are projections of the citizens can effect infamy and degradation as shown in the activities of those who followed the Great Mother as mentioned in The City of God. Thus, St Augustine argues that “civil” theology has invited wicked demons and unclean spirits to take up residence in those senseless images and by this means to gain possession of the hearts of the stupid. Failure to distinguish between the virtual and the real in religion can generate mass mayhem and times have not changed much since St Augustine wrote so acidly of Varro.

Something more than the dignity of man is reflected in these criticisms of Varro that also point to a flaw in Durkheim that Stedman Jones has noticed. Rituals serve to confirm beliefs. They enable society to be conscious of itself yet, as Stedman Jones suggests, there is a circularity here whereby what is social and what is of religion affirm each other. She goes on to add that

the republican problematic was to turn the object of faith from God to society; it was to harness the power of belief to make and underwrite society. So society can be compared to the gods; it too will die if no longer believed in.

Even if religion does flourish in virtual form as something sacred, it risks doing so in a diminished and restricted form, even if it is the worshipper that is sacralised, a point which Watts Miller raises. When man becomes god, there is a scaling-down of the sacred environment. Referring to Nora’s work on memory, Watts Miller writes that ‘where they see the rituals of a more or less flourishing secular religion, he sees what are nowadays empty shells of the sacred, “the rituals of a ritual-less society”’. In his conclusion, he states that secular religion ‘still needs to live off some such spirituality in the environment around it, in order to give meaning to its own ideas of our limited unsuperhuman world’. In short, the virtual needs the real. This form of living off the real relates to Davie’s notion of the vicarious, where a minority exercise traditional beliefs on behalf of a majority who settle for virtual forms of religion, those dispersed and treated as the fruits of secularisation.
Virtual religion comes to signify what the actor needs to gain from the
deification of the social, even if it no longer seems either necessary or useful.
As Goffman observed ‘in the contacts between such deities there is no need
for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest’.94 This
self-consecration has expanded in the context of postmodernity, where
spiritual powers are treated as capacities to be unlocked, often in a mixing of
therapy and New Age values. Thus, a book entitled Rituals for Sacred Living sets
down advice on the management of the sacred areas of the home, mealtime
rituals, spiritual cleansing and the sacralisation of sexuality. Rituals are devised
as techniques for coping with stress and ‘negative energy’. Advice on posture,
spiritual and aura cleansing, rituals for cutting ties and the decoration of
altars for domestic use are also given.95 Comte’s little altars that serviced a cult
of humanity have now been domesticated to serve the expressive needs of
individualism in postmodernity, where the self ministers to itself as its own
god. This new priesthood that mirrors its own divinity suffers the conceit of
seeking to look more widely, and in so doing, its gaze returns to the social.
In so looking, it finds inadequacies reflected that cause it to examine again
templates and imitations, things missing in the mirror. Unfortunately, the self
finds itself returning to an interest in the prototype and to its interconnection
with virtual versions.

The notion of virtual forms of religion living off the real versions finds
expression in Séguys’s idea of metaphorical religion. This metaphorisation,
a property of modernity, effects a form of symbolic violence on traditional
religion (to use Bourdieu’s term). In seeking to modernise, traditional religions
collude in their own peripheralisation. As Séguy observes, traditional religions
become seduced into deference to the reconstitutive powers of modernity.
Secular or virtual religions become indices of the world, the false consciousness
of religiosity and also the illusory reference points for theological connection.
This is why liberal theologies are always doomed to fail, for they base their
insights on the virtual religions the populace use as surrogates for what insti-
tutional religions do not supply. Virtual religions are religions of compensation
that can never excel their prototype. In so legitimising these secular religions,
theologians become false to their own forms of memorialisations.96

Arguments for a secular religion are rare. Fenn has recently argued for the
demystification of the sacred, which is mysterious and set apart. His critiques
are based on the authoritarian and corrupting power of religion and its idol-
atrous properties. For him, idolatry is a sign of the sacred. It takes to itself
powers of exclusion that render the marginalised and the inarticulate dumb.
The sacred facilitates a repression of what belongs to the memory of those
on the margin. In its sacralisation of texts, civil religion carries a Protestant
property of nostalgia, its form of sacramentalism.97 The edicts of the Founding
Fathers, and thanksgiving for their memory, effect a flow of grace into the
civil order of American society, but in ways where some are deemed to be
more eligible to receive than others.
Few sociologists think of their calling in terms of servicing a public theology that understands the truth of tradition that Bellah seeks to restore. Public theology is certainly not part of Giddens’ notion of the Third Way. Fenn makes a good point that as various political groups lay claim to the sacred, a war over idolatrous claims occurs in the public market. For whatever reason, Prime Minister Blair has found it convenient to emulate the terms of civil religion in English society, and to sacralise the rhetoric of his party, its manifesto and its claim to speak for the nation, albeit in a multi-faith inclusive manner, where the rights of all are enshrined, but in a peculiarly authoritarian way. The civil rights of those marginalised are affirmed but in ways that render dumb those foolish enough to still wish to make religious and moral distinctions about matters of sexuality. It is this misappropriation of the language of the sacred in the public arena for idolatrous purposes of dominance that Fenn deplores. But there is another deception abroad.

Virtual religion seems the beneficiary of a false memory syndrome. It manages to abolish a sense of recollection of how real religion might be seen. Those who deal in the spectacles of real religion might feel a form of symbolic violence that Bourdieu has coined, that the culture they inhabit suggests they ought to collude in not seeing what they believe they see. Few might bother to attend to distinctions between the virtual and the real in matters of religion, writing these off as speculative manners and as conundrums of little analytical consequence. Yet, as culture has taken a visual turn, and matters of transparency have become of decided importance, the need to secure distinctions between the virtual and the real have increased not decreased. As this visual turn accelerates, it does so as concerns increase with testimonies, stories and tales. The visual has merged with tale telling in ways that would not been envisaged in the late 1980s. In the next chapter, the way this tale telling has emerged is linked with the growth of visual expectations of testimonies. These yield concerns with trust, but also with the issues of who sees and to what end?
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