

SECULAR SOCIETY AND THE LANGUAGE OF WORSHIP

Language reflects culture. The extent to which language is part of culture is debatable. However, it is through our language that we communicate ideas and it adapts itself to the predominant ideas of the time. It adapts itself by changes of emphasis in vocabulary and even by neologisms.

The problem which is posed in this article is whether we should expect liturgical language to undergo major transformations in response to a secular, seldom abstract, culture.

The language of liturgy has, of course, been changing. Series III in the Anglican liturgy is vastly more up to date, and a choice is given between different styles of language in the *Divine Service*. However, these moves towards modernity on the face of it do not seem to have responded to the cultural climate but are simply the up-dating of language for a small minority.

What does the culture of today demand? It seems that it demands three things. Firstly, simplicity. A paper such as the *Daily Express* offers its journalists a basic vocabulary of one hundred words. This means that in the medium of high circulation newspapers and other popular media, vocabulary tends to become repetitive. Secondly, language tends to reflect society's need for the immediate. Most consumer products are portrayed as having immediate and great success. This is reflected in the use of superlatives and exaggerations. Thirdly, I suspect that one of the reasons for the amount of bad language about which so many people seem to complain is that as a labour force expands the more articulate it must become, and yet it has to contend with rather scant language training.

How does the language of the Church match up to this? Firstly, be it in prayer or sermon, ecclesiastical language is far from simple. Certainly in liberal theology God is never very immediate but abstract. Our worship, which often relies upon superlatives, exhortation and sometimes exaggeration, fails to deal with anything immediate such as is the case in advertising, which also uses superlatives and exaggerations. Indeed, when we think of advertising we think of such words as 'wonderful', 'marvellous', 'powerful' and of exaggerated claims. No conscientious clergymen exaggerates about God, but there seems to be an unwritten rule that one must start from a position of lofty exhortation rather than from the depths of the despair of looking at our present situation. I often wish that preachers would sometimes employ the Song of Ascents, Psalm 130,

'Out of the depths I cry to thee . . .'. Lastly, the Church does not seem to appreciate, perhaps because it does not want to, just how much our society has become permeated with symbols of sex and materialism and a very large proportion of everyday language is given over to that. In the face of this fact the Church is understandably impotent.

As someone interested in the forms of language in society, it seems to me that this picture should pose a problem for the Church, and more particularly a problem for the analysts of secularization. Let us first of all look at two past currents in such an analysis. I have chosen them because it seems to me that they can both be re-appraised and lead to fruitful rethinking. One of the most influential books in the sociology of religion which permeated to the layman was Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels* published in Britain in 1969 following earlier publication in America. In that book Berger argued that organizations which were experiencing a decline, such as the Church appeared to be experiencing in what was the heyday of secular and 'Death of God' theology, had to find a new type of 'plausibility structure'. Berger advocated, amongst other things, some political involvement. The entire message of his book was that sociological reality demanded change.

In 1973 a new area of research came to my attention. In the Brotherton Library in Leeds there is stored all the correspondence arising from the 'Honest to God debate' amounting to several thousands of letters. A team of sociologists at Leeds, led by Turner, decided to examine this material by a process called 'content analysis'. They also gained access to the letters which were written to the very popular TV programme *Stars on Sunday*. Their tentative conclusions at that time were that people held beliefs which were more basic and fundamental than had been credited to them by secularists. The inadequacies of a less sophisticated form of research which had been conducted by 'optimistic' Catholic sociologists tended now to be vindicated, whereas it had previously been scorned both for its conclusions about the health of religion and also for their simplistic methods of research.

Thereafter the whole of my thinking became concentrated upon the seemingly obvious necessity for a radical change in the language of worship, and the seeming contradictions which were emerging in sociological research regarding the necessity for such radical steps. What seemed, and still seems, theologically desirable, does not appear to be sociologically necessary, and I wish to explain an alternative sociological theory in terms of language which allows for the persistence of the almost pitifully archaic forms of devotion portrayed in *Stars on Sunday* and the oft-expressed wish of the members of a congregation to have 'more of the old fashioned

religion'. Discontented with the third edition of the Church Hymnary many of them seem to wish to go back to the Redemption Hymn Book which, as a pastor, one knows is a contradiction in most of their lives.

I was introduced to a book which preceded *A Rumour of Angels* but which in fact, although it was not classed as sociology of religion, offered a more constructive attitude to change when combined with a theory of language. Holzner's book *The Social Construction of Reality* talked of reality constructs and epistemic communities. A 'reality construct' is any configuration of knowledge or values which are presented to a group such as the programme Stars on Sunday, and 'epistemic community' is the group of people by whom the construct is understood and valued. The advantage of these two concepts as opposed to the 'plausibility structure' of Berger is that the *status quo* of a group's values need not be called into question but examined impartially. My contention is that Holzner's concepts are valuable if we understand one of the mechanisms which links the reality construct to an epistemic community as being to a large degree determined by language. This therefore involves a discussion of a theory of language.

The great American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, has come to regard language as an exchange medium. Like a currency it takes on a value. An incomprehensible foreign language is nothing but a noise to the uncomprehending listener, but the language we hear and understand assumes a value we wish to place upon it. When we place value on language we develop language codes.

Bernstein developed the idea of linguistic codes in an attempt to explain the difference between the language development of children from different social strata. However, as his work progressed his application of his theory of codes became less centred upon his theory of social class. In one paper he posits three possible types of codes, one elaborated and two restricted. Our concern is with restricted codes. The first one contains a *high lexicon prediction* and is useful for those who do not have a great command of vocabulary. The second form of restricted code is characterized by a *high structural prediction*, but it must not be thought that the latter is confined simply to professionals with their own particular jargon. In the sociology of religion the language of sects in their worship is the most vivid example of restricted codes. The language of sects is characterized by their dependence upon the recital of biblical texts, often in a ritualistic order which makes it impossible for the outsider to penetrate until he has been initiated. In my own experience the more theologically trained one is the more difficult such a penetration becomes.

Now, the point arising from this theory is that the necessity for

change may not be as sociologically simple as we sometimes think. We all work within restricted codes and these may be misinterpreted. Mary Douglas illustrated how Papal Encyclicals, in this instance about Friday abstinence, were understood and received well by liberal sections of the Roman hierarchy, yet when they tried to convey these to parishioners, the Irish immigrant, for instance, was still dealing with codes and constructs which place a high value on Friday abstinence and the exercise of many clergy turned out to be fruitless.

I started this article by suggesting that cultural influences had made a vast difference to our language and yet, along with this, there is religious language which I suspect to many who read this Journal is appallingly simplistic. What I wish to suggest is that one of the signs of our secular society is that people have not abandoned religion – in fact, if we believe Turner, their beliefs are stronger than ever – but rather that the reality constructs of their devotional life and worship is linguistically quite separate from their approach to the rest of their cultural media. I feel that it is our duty to force people to realize that the language of worship is the language of the market place and not allow them, as I contend, to separate the two by using the mechanism of the linguistic code to gloss over the contradictions in their life style.

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