



BRYAN WILSON

Bryan Ronald Wilson

1926–2004

BRYAN WILSON, who died on 9 October 2004, was a Fellow of All Souls College for thirty years and a world-renowned sociologist of religion. His career spanned a wide range of interests, but perhaps he is best remembered for the unique contribution he made to the study of sectarian movements and his staunch defence of the secularisation thesis. Wilson was awarded a D.Litt. by the University of Oxford in 1994, the same year that he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

The early years

Few who knew Wilson, either as teacher or colleague or through his extensive writings, were aware of his humble origins. He was born on 25 June 1926 in a two-bedroomed house, in Proctors Terrace, Leeds. The identity of his biological father remained unknown to him, but he was given and kept the family name of his mother's first husband, Jesse Wilson, who was the father of his three siblings and who had died eight years earlier. His mother, Alice Elizabeth Wilson, née Clarke (1885–1961), was a clothing club collector, going from house to house to collect a shilling each week from the members of various clubs; each week the first in a draw received twenty or thirty shillings with which they would buy their holiday clothes. There was only cold running water in the house—they would bath in a tin tub—and the lavatory, which was emptied once a week, was up the street and 30 yards round the corner but, he recalled, always kept scrupulously clean by his mother and the neighbour with whom it was shared.

It was during these early years that the young Wilson became acutely conscious of fine distinctions of social class between the various occupants of the neighbourhood. 'We were a better class working-class family than the pump boys—they were rough; we weren't rough' he once remarked. He was aware that if he wanted to get on in the world he needed to learn to talk like the radio announcer, Stuart Hibberd. One of his most cherished memories was overhearing Mrs Thompson, who ran the sweetshop, commenting that he had a nice voice.

The family was not particularly religious, but the children were sent to the Methodist Sunday School on Sunday afternoons (he would have had to cross the road to attend the Anglican church). This habit was not, he concluded, for religious reasons but to give his mother and stepfather some relief from the children after Sunday lunch. Although he did not particularly enjoy the Sunday School, it provided him with a firm grounding in Scripture and throughout his life he was able to quote Bible verses fluently. Most of the more successful families in the area were Jewish, and he remembered being invited to a school friend's Bar mitzvah where he found himself being referred to in a friendly fashion as 'the little goy' by his friend's uncles and cousins. His mother would make somewhat tart comments about the religious communities—when a Jewish man wanted a boy to light the fires on the Sabbath, she asked who had lit his cigarette; the Salvation Army was rebuked for asking for money; and when a Jehovah's Witness announced that God was in His Watchtower, she retorted that He ought to come out and do something about the state of the world.

At the age of 5 Wilson started attending Meanwood Road Elementary School, then a year later, when his mother married her second husband, Harry Little, they moved to a slightly more salubrious area and Wilson transferred to Leeds' Cowper Street Elementary School. However, his formal education came to an end when he was aged 13 or 14, and he started working for an accountant, adding up columns of figures and answering the telephone. This left plenty of time for him to read—Plato's *Republic* was one of the books he remembers enjoying. Then, after spending a year working for the accountant, he got a job as a junior at the *Yorkshire Post* before being called up for military service in 1944. Demobbed in 1948, he decided to use the gratuity that retiring troops were given to finance himself through college to gain his School Certificate. He enlisted for six months at the local College of Art in Leicester, where he lived with his sister, Jess, studying all the basic subjects such as English, Mathematics, Geography and History. While most of his fellow students were sitting

their examinations so that they could progress to further qualifications, Wilson had no such aspirations—nor, indeed, had he any money to take him beyond the six months' course. However, he happened to encounter a student who was on his way to register at University College Leicester who asked him to accompany him for the walk, during which he told Wilson about the things he hoped to do if he got a degree and induced Wilson to register with him, paying ten shillings and sixpence: 'Money wasted, I thought when I paid it,' Wilson later commented.

When he matriculated with sufficient success in his School Certificate to be eligible for entry to the College, Wilson was faced with a quandary. He had no money, and the job he had as a door-to-door salesman, selling clothes pegs and electric heaters, took up too much time for him to be able both to study and to earn sufficient income to survive. He then learned, however, that he was eligible for a grant, and, to his amazement, within a short period of applying, he received a cheque for £263 to cover his first term's expenses. Before long, he had become both educationally and socially involved in the life of the College and was well on his way to a career in academia—and when, in 1952, he took the external University of London B.Sc. Economics examination, he was awarded a first-class honours degree.

This success led to his being awarded an Arnold Gerstenberg studentship, which allowed him to take up a place at the London School of Economics. Here Maurice Ginsberg introduced him to the literature of the sociology of religion and Wilson developed a life-long interest in sectarian movements. He began an empirical study of three Christian sects under the supervision of Donald MacRae (whose Scottish ruminating he would mimic with an uncanny accuracy in later years over a glass of good claret). An open scholarship from the University of London and an award from the Ministry of Education allowed him to complete his studies, and in 1955 he was awarded the Hutchinson Medal for the best research of the year for his doctoral thesis.

He returned to Yorkshire to take up an Assistant Lectureship in Sociology in the Department of Social Studies at the University of Leeds in October 1955, being promoted to Lecturer in 1957. There he taught courses on urban sociology, sociological theory, and the social institutions of modern Britain as well as the sociology of religion.

Meanwhile he had begun pursuing his publishing career in the field of the sociology of religion, starting with a paper in the *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*,¹ but one of his earliest articles to receive international

¹ Bryan R. Wilson, 'Apparition et Persistence des Sectes', *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, 5 (1958), 140–50.

recognition was ‘An analysis of sect development’ in the *American Sociological Review*.² Then, in 1961, his revised thesis was published as *Sects and Society*.³ This he dedicated to his former tutor at Leicester, Ilya Neustadt.

In 1962 he resigned from Leeds to take up an appointment as Reader in Sociology at the University of Oxford, which had awarded him an MA that year. He was considered but rejected for a Fellowship at Nuffield, which was considered the ‘natural’ home for sociologists. This rejection was, he suspected, partly on account of an article that he had written with Malcolm Bradbury in the *Sunday Times*, which was considered to be ‘too conservative’. He was, however, elected to a Fellowship at All Souls.

Fellow of All Souls

Somewhat to his surprise, he confessed, he found All Souls unexpectedly open to the new disciplines, such as sociology—and he reassured himself that any disparaging comments by A. L. Rowse, who referred to Wilson as ‘the sociologue’, were merely part of the College’s ‘playful acerbic quality of conversation’. For thirty years (1963–93), All Souls not only became his intellectual home, but also offered him a way of life that he embraced wholeheartedly. He was Sub-Warden from 1988–90, and Domestic Bursar from 1989–93, taking considerable pride in his responsibility for the stocking of the College cellars. He revelled in what he described as the sharp, witty and slightly malicious style of discourse that one heard in the common rooms and at High Table, and he thoroughly approved of the tradition (later revoked) of not allowing wives and other females to dine in the college, because, he said, ‘one might find oneself having to discuss washing machines over dessert’.

² Bryan R. Wilson, ‘An analysis of sect development’, *American Sociological Review*, 24/1 (Feb. 1959), pp. 3–15[0]. This paper is available online at <<http://www.jstor.org/pss/2089577>> and it has been frequently reprinted, in, among other places, Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil J. Smelser (eds.), *Sociology: Progress of a Decade* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1961); Friedrich Fürstenberg (ed.), *Religionssoziologie* (Neuwied, 1964); William M. Newman (ed.), *The Social Meaning of Religion* (Chicago, 1974); and in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London, 1967), pp. 22–45.

³ Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society: A Sociological Study of Three Religious Groups in Britain* (London, 1961). The American reprint has a different subtitle but an identical content: *Sects and Society: A Sociological Study of the Elim Tabernacle, Christian Science, and Christadelphians* (Berkeley, 1961).

International travel

Although Wilson was to remain an Oxford Fellow for the rest of his academic life, he certainly did not confine his intellectual experience to the setting which, following Arnold, he occasionally referred to as 'the city of dreaming spires'. At regular intervals, he would slip away to become a visiting Professor or Fellow in places as varied as Bangkok, Belgium, Berkeley, Brisbane, Ghana, Japan, Leuven, Melbourne, Padua, Santa Barbara and Toronto. Everywhere he went he would studiously enquire about, and, where possible, visit, the local religions, accumulating a wealth of meticulously observed detail. As early as the academic year 1957–8 he had held a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship⁴ at the University of California, Berkeley, a campus to which he was to return as a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies in the year 1966–7. During these visits he travelled around the United States, learning not only about the Christian sects to which the settlers and their descendants had given birth, but also about the religious movements of the North American Indians. Further sojourns in North America were as the Snider Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto in 1978 and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1987. In 1964, he had an opportunity to become further acquainted with the religions of Africa when he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Ghana, an experience that was to contribute to the scholarship that would inform his tome, *Magic and the Millennium*,⁵ although much of the data that he accumulated through his research there was lost in a flood in the cellar where it had been stored.

In 1975, Wilson was a Visiting Fellow of The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. His admiration and affection for the Japanese as well as his interest in their religious beliefs and practices was soon apparent. He developed in particular a long-standing association with the Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and during the winter of 1978–9 while he was teaching at Soka University (from which he received an Honorary Doctorate in 1985), he and Soka Gakkai's President, Daisaku Ikeda, started a conversation over dinner that led to a series of further meetings in Japan and, among other places, the Austrian Alps. The recordings of their discussions were eventually edited and published as *Human Values in a Changing*

⁴ The Commonwealth Fund Fellowships were renamed Harkness Fellowships in 1961.

⁵ Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: a Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (London and New York, 1973).

World.⁶ The topics covered an incredibly wide range, encompassing: The Source of Religious Emotion; The Idea of an Afterlife; Fate and Karma; Antidotes for Suicide; Gandhi's Principle; Community Values in the Modern World; Authority and Democracy; Charisma; The Decline of Western Christianity; Religion as a Basis for Social Revolution; Organ Transplants; Euthanasia; Contraception and the Population Issue; The Occult; Sexual Ethics; Sin; and Parent-child Relations.⁷ Wilson returned to Japan on a number of occasions. He delighted in visiting the many Shinto and Buddhist shrines and temples, with his Japanese colleagues and students vying to introduce him to both new and ancient forms of religious life—and to Japanese culture, the niceties of which he appreciated as not entirely dissimilar to the formalities and rituals of All Souls.

Wilson's visits to the East were by no means confined to Japan. He spent some time teaching in Macau and in 1980 was Visiting Professor in the Sociology of Religion, as well as Consultant for the Institution of Higher Degree Courses in Religious Studies at the Mahidol University, Bangkok—and Tutor to Her Highness, the Princess Sirindhorn. In 1981 he was the Scott Visiting Fellow at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, and in 1986 he returned to Australia as a Visiting Professor at the University of Queensland, taking advantage on both occasions to gather as much information as he could about the local religions.

Wilson was also a frequent visitor to almost all the countries of Western Europe, where the universities in which he lectured included those of Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Having cycled through parts of Europe after the war, he developed a particular fondness for Belgium. He had made a number of friends, but had been particularly impressed by an incident when, having lost his anorak in Charleroi during the rainy season, it was returned to him the next day as the landlord at his previous night's lodgings, knowing where he was bound, had arranged for it to be delivered. His first academic association with Belgium was as a Visiting Professor in 1976—a relationship that was renewed on a number of occasions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in 1992 with the Catholic University of Leuven (as the high point in its celebration of 100 years of social sciences) conferring upon him the degree of *Doctor Honoris Causa* in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the sociology of

⁶ Bryan R. Wilson and Daisaku Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World: a Dialogue on the Social Role of Religion* (London & Sydney, 1984).

⁷ *Ibid.*

religion. His close ties with the Belgian academic scene owed much to his friendship with the Belgian sociologist of religion, Karel Dobbelaere, with whom he collaborated in a number of ventures, including empirical research into Soka Gakkai,⁸ the Jehovah's Witnesses,⁹ and the Unification Church.¹⁰ He was also one of the editors for Dobbelaere's *Festschrift*.¹¹

The university

During his seven years at Leeds, Wilson served first as Sub-Warden, then as Warden of one of the university's residences, Sadler Hall. There he spent most evenings during term-time and many during vacations talking to—and listening to—the students. It was this experience of close interaction with students (some half dozen or so of whom he still had contact with fifty years later) that helped to shape his beliefs about the university and its role—beliefs that were to guide his relationships not only with his students but also with his colleagues and others, such as the members of the minority religions, with whom he was in contact throughout most of the rest of his life.

He became strongly of the opinion that the expansion of the university following the Robbins Report of 1963 was a move in a disastrous direction, and that it was to be responsible for not only the dilution but also the potential collapse of what he considered to be the distinctive mission of English universities as the 'dissemination of human, liberal, civilizing values'.¹² Far from welcoming the democratisation of higher education, Wilson was of the opinion that students needed to be taken out of their environment into the protective setting of the ivory tower in order to introduce them 'to the richness of our cultural inheritance, to

⁸ Bryan R. Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (Oxford, 1994). See also, David Machacek and Bryan R. Wilson (eds.), *Global Citizens: the Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World* (Oxford, 2000) to which Dobbelaere contributed.

⁹ Karel Dobbelaere and Bryan R. Wilson, 'Jehovah's Witnesses in a Catholic country: a survey of nine Belgian Congregations', in Bryan R. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 149–75.

¹⁰ Bryan R. Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, 'Unificationism—a study of the Moonies in Belgium', *British Journal of Sociology*, 38 (1987), 184–98; reproduced as chap. 12 of Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* (1990), pp. 251–66.

¹¹ Rudi Laermans, Bryan R. Wilson and Jaak Billiet (eds.), *Secularization and Social Integration: Papers in Honor of Karel Dobbelaere* (Leuven, 1998).

¹² Bryan R. Wilson, 'The needs of students', pp. 44–87, in Marjorie Reeves (ed.), *Eighteen Plus: Unity and Diversity in Higher Education* (London, 1965), p. 45.

provide access to the cumulative aesthetic, literary, philosophic and scientific resources of mankind, and to stimulate intellectual discussion and critical assessment'.¹³ The large university was, Wilson believed, merely a way of imparting technologies or specialist skills that might be instrumental for obtaining jobs with high salaries. For the transmission of the university 'values of academic integrity, sound scholarship and cultural achievement', personal contacts with academics through the tutorial system and small halls of residence were essential.¹⁴

Such beliefs stayed with Wilson throughout his teaching career. His students were always received with courtesy and undivided attention. Enthusiastic ideas were directed towards manageable theses; tentative proposals were encouraged, the generous insertion of commas and semicolons was recommended. There were, however, boundaries that had to be recognised.

There must be a high degree of formal and informal communication which occurs within a clear structure of relationships, in which wardens never cease to be wardens, never try to become 'one of the boys' or to gain confidence by undue familiarity. They must go beyond inviting people in for sherry once a term on a rota system, but they must also know how to draw the line at accepting invitations to go to the pub with particular groups.¹⁵

It was not only Wilson's students who were the recipients of his generosity. Junior colleagues and indeed his peers, especially those whose first language was not English, could rely on him to read their drafts with meticulous care and attention. His scrupulous attention to detail was also evident when he acted as an examiner. Not only was he always able to find something of value to encourage, he would return the manuscript with several sheets of 'suggestions', and an A4 template that he would have made, numbering the lines on each page to fit the particular font and spacing in which the thesis had been presented so that the candidate could tell at a glance exactly which line was being referred to on any particular page.

A memorable weekly event for students and established scholars was the Thursday afternoon sociology of religion seminar in All Souls. Several of the talks given at these seminars were edited in a special volume;¹⁶

¹³ Wilson, 'The needs of students', p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Religion: Contemporary Issues, The All Souls Seminars in the Sociology of Religion* (London, 1992). There was also a collection of papers, written mainly by his doctoral

others were tentative steps on the way to becoming theses and/or books, and the speaker could be assured of receiving both encouragement and, perhaps, some gentle suggestions that might forestall over-enthusiastic indiscretions. And the speaker could always anticipate an excellent dinner afterwards, though female speakers would be entertained at one of his favourite Oxford restaurants, rather than in the College—unless, of course, it was the annual Ladies' Night.

Sectarianism

The themes of secularisation, rationalism and sectarianism were of particular interest to Wilson throughout his academic life, and it was they that were to form the title of the Festschrift presented to him in 1993 at an international conference at which he was a key speaker.¹⁷ Although the three topics can be clearly distinguished, they were woven into a seamless web in his writings, each informing the others in an intricate fugue, sometimes united and sometimes in opposition, but never totally irrelevant to the complementary themes.

It had been the nature of sectarian organisations and their protest against the wider society that first caught Wilson's attention and which constituted the subject of his doctoral thesis. He saw the sect as having some special attractions for the sociologist as an object of study. It tended to be a clearly defined community which was small enough to permit only a minimal range of diversity of conduct, but while in some ways it offered the sociologist a subject of study not unlike the anthropologist's isolated tribal society, it differed in that 'the sect, as a protest group, has always developed its own distinctive ethic, belief and practices, against the background of the wider society'.¹⁸ He described the sect as a clearly defined

students, providing them with an early opportunity to publish their work: Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism*.

¹⁷ The conference, *New Religions and the New Europe*, was held at the London School of Economics, March 1993. The contributors to the Festschrift, all of whom wrote original essays in Wilson's honour, were students and colleagues from around the world, including Sabino Acquaviva; Asa Briggs, FBA; Richard Fenn; Richard Gombrich; Phillip E. Hammond; Michael Hill; David Martin, FBA; J. D. Y. Peel, FBA; Philip Rieff; Roland Robertson; Jean Séguy; Mark Shibley; Susumu Shimazono; Roy Wallis; and the three editors: Eileen Barker, James A. Beckford and Karel Dobbelaere (eds.), *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism: Essays in Honour of Bryan R. Wilson* (Oxford, 1993). This volume also contains a bibliography of just over 100 of Wilson's more important publications.

¹⁸ Wilson, *Sects and Society* (1961), p. 1.

voluntary community, which is not only an ideological unit, but also a social unit 'seeking to enforce behaviour . . . and to draw the faithful apart from the rest of society and into the company of each other'.¹⁹ The sect demands an exclusive allegiance from its members, and it has clear boundaries that distinguish 'us' from 'them'. The characteristic of voluntariness refers both to individuals who have to make a personal decision whether or not to be a member, and to the group as a whole, which can reject or expel the individual. Furthermore, the sect rejects the authority of the orthodox faith and considers its membership to be elites.²⁰ The denomination, like the sect, is a voluntary association, but, unlike the sect, membership is relatively uncontrolled and it can see itself as one movement among others, all of which are thought to be acceptable in the sight of God.²¹

In his thesis, Wilson described the beliefs, history, organisation, social teachings and practices, and social composition of the Elim Foursquare Gospel Church, the Church of Christ Scientist and the Christadelphians. One of the arguments he sought to demonstrate through his account of these religions was that Richard Niebuhr's contention that the categorisation of 'sect' is valid for one generation only (as the children born into sects will necessarily turn them into denominations) was 'quite untenable'.²² It is, Wilson argued, the relationship of a religious group to the society that justifies the use of the term 'sect', rather than its method of internal recruitment, and sects have demonstrably shown that they can preserve their distinctive features of protest, transmitting them from one generation to the next. It was, he maintained, quite unjustified to deny the term sect to organisations such as the Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses simply because they had both outlived the generation from which they originally recruited.²³ The vast majority of the members of the sects he studied had joined *established* (as opposed to spontaneous) sects—as was the case with many of the other sectarian movements in Britain in the mid-twentieth century.²⁴

¹⁹ Wilson, *Sects and Society* (1961), p. 1.

²⁰ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religious Sects: a Sociological Study* (London, 1970), pp. 26–35 (also published in translation in French, German, Spanish, Swedish and Japanese).

²¹ Wilson, 'An analysis of sect development' (1959), p. 4.

²² Wilson, *Sects and Society* (1961), p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. The term 'established sect' Wilson borrowed from the writings of J. Milton Yinger as expounded in *Religion in the Struggle for Power* (Durham, NC, 1946); and, more fully, in *Religion, Society and the Individual* (New York, 1957).

But while sects will, to a greater or lesser degree, share the defining characteristics, there is considerable diversity to be found between them. In *Religious Sects*, Wilson enlarged the scope of his earlier work by distinguishing a number of 'ideal types' that continue to be widely used by sociologists of religion. The defining question that he selected to determine his classification was 'What shall we do to be saved?' One answer, which is provided by a *conversionist* sect, such as the early Disciples of Christ or the Assemblies of God, is that one has unreservedly to accept the Truth—to have a 'heart experience'—as a necessary perquisite for salvation. A second answer, adopted by movements ranging from the Fifth Monarchs to the Jehovah's Witnesses, is that of the *revolutionist* (*adventist* or *transformative*) sect which teaches that salvation is possible only by the overturning of the evil world through some kind of supernatural action, as a result of which, although they themselves do not necessarily have to do anything to bring about the transformation, the believers can hope to be saved.

The response by members of *introversionist* (or pietist) sects, which include the Hutterites and the Exclusive Brethren, is not so much to change either themselves or the evil world as to withdraw from the world. The *manipulationist* (or *gnostic*) option (adopted by Christian Science and the Church of Scientology) is to employ special means to achieve special ends, which may be this-worldly (rather than other-worldly or transcendent) goals. The methods of manipulating the world may be acquired through some esoteric or occult knowledge and/or supernatural agencies. Fifthly, a more narrow, particularistic, rather than universalistic, response is found in the *thaumaturgical* sect, which offers methods that might have a magical nature to relieve the individual from present ills—rather than saving the whole world through some universal principle. Spiritualists and various snake-handling sects fall into this category.

Wilson suggested that two further responses should be included, although neither of them was necessarily religious in the sense of invoking supernatural agencies or explanations. These were the *reformist* and the *utopian* types. For members of the former sect, such as the Quakers, it is up to them, as a result of their (divinely inspired) conscience, to use rational means to reform the evils of the world. Members of the latter type, the Bruderhof community being an example, believe that the world is evil because men have created an evil system and salvation is to be achieved by recreating the world according to the principles originally intended by the creator.

Wilson stressed that the types were analytical tools to be used for comparative purposes and they were not likely to be found in their ideal form

in the real world. He was also concerned to show not only that there were variations within each type but also that the movements themselves differed according to both time and place. He was, furthermore, at pains to point out that some sects—an example he gave was that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons)—were ‘many-sided’ and might institutionalise their offer of salvation in divergent forms.²⁵

A few years later, in *Magic and the Millennium*, the typology was succinctly presented in the following form with a further three sub-divisions:

- (1) The *objectivists*, who focus on the world, saying:
 - God will overturn it (revolutionists);
 - God calls us to abandon it (introversionists);
 - God calls us to amend it (reformists);
 - God calls us to reconstruct it (utopians).
- (2) The *subjectivists*, who say:
 - God will change us (conversionists).
- (3) The *relationists*, who say:
 - God calls us to change perception (manipulationists);
 - God will grant particular dispensations and work specific miracles (thaumaturgists).²⁶

In *Magic and the Millennium*, Wilson’s interests in sectarian religions extended beyond those groups on which he had previously concentrated and which had come almost entirely from the Christian traditions of the West. Now his concern was with an even broader comparative approach, drawing largely from Africa, the North American Indians, Melanesia and the South Pacific, with, as his title suggested, an emphasis on thaumaturgical (or magical) and millenarian groups, which, he argued, were not only the most common form of primitive religion, but also frequently to be found amongst tribal peoples who have felt themselves under pressure as a result of contact with industrial societies, although such religions could develop into more revolutionist movements. When revolutionism had failed, however, the tribal peoples might resort to an introversionist response. Finally, however, the sectarians could resort to rational responses to the difficulties that they were facing, and the sect could undergo a process of denominationalisation.

²⁵ Wilson, *Religious Sects* (1970), pp. 197–203.

²⁶ Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (1973), p. 27.

Secularisation

The process of rationalisation lay at the basis of another sociological concern for which Wilson was internationally renowned—that of secularisation.²⁷ Early in his career he became, and is still regarded as, the foremost proponent of the thesis that with modernisation, societies have tended to undergo ‘a process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance’.²⁸ He was, of course, aware and at pains to point out that the process was not one that occurred evenly in all societies. Religious *practices* were minimal in the Scandinavian countries, but remained unexpectedly persistent in the United States; religious *institutions* might also show remarkable resilience in America, though this, he suggested, they did by embodying the rational, bureaucratic assumptions of non-religious organisations in advanced society. He argued, however, that religious *thinking* was the area that evidenced the most conspicuous change in western society in the twentieth century. So far as the British and American societies were concerned, he was persuaded—and sought to persuade others throughout his academic life—that it was an empirically demonstrable fact that religion had lost, and was increasingly losing, its influence.

Men act less and less in response to religious motivation: they assess the world in empirical and rational terms, and find themselves involved in rational organisations and rationally determined roles which allow small scope for such religious predilections as they might privately entertain.²⁹

It was, nonetheless, important for Wilson that the process of secularisation should be understood as a *social* process, rather than a statement about private beliefs—a point that he was at pains to stress in several of his writings, especially when these were concerned with the existence of sects or new religious movements, which he saw as offering a response to the very process of secularisation. In the private sphere, he wrote:

religion often continues, and even acquires new forms of expression, many of them much less related to other aspects of culture than were the religions of the past . . . Religion remains an alternative culture, observed as unthreatening to the modern system, in much the same way that entertainment is seen as unthreatening. It offers another world to explore as an escape from the rigors

²⁷ See, for example, Karel Dobbelaere, ‘Bryan Wilson’s contributions to the study of secularization’, *Social Compass*, 53/2 (2006) 141–6.

²⁸ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: a Sociological Comment* (London, 1966), p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of technological order and the ennui that is the incidental by-product of an increasingly programmed world.³⁰

Despite, or perhaps because of, his ground-breaking work on the classification of Christian-based sects, one of the conclusions that Wilson drew from his study of the new religions that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century was that there was little point in trying to pigeonhole them into ideal types as the only characteristic they had in common was their newness at a given point of time.³¹ Another conclusion was that they offered a new supply of religious beliefs, practices and organisations in response to new challenges brought about by changes that they (and perhaps Wilson himself) considered to be the malaise and religious decay to be found in contemporary society.³² Nearly all the new religions offered their followers a surer, safer, swifter, more immediate promise of salvation than the often stagnant, institutionalised religions could in the rapidly changing social environment. What the new religions offered, he wrote, was a 'revitalisation of religious culture, sometimes by purging the established and ossified religious system of accretions, and sometimes by restoring things lost by accretion'.³³

In the final chapter of their study of Soka Gakkai Buddhism in Britain, Wilson and Dobbelaere argued that there had been a change from an economic structure in which the goals of a production-oriented economy 'demanded a moral order in which the work ethic had a central role' to one in which 'a consumer society demanded the abandonment of the regulation of personal comportment'.³⁴ Furthermore, they argued, 'Ideals of duty to the state, or action for the corporate good, were subordinated to the search for personal fulfilment and the desire to enjoy life to the full.'³⁵ The image of a personal God was increasingly displaced by the idea of an impersonal force or spirit. Rewards had increasingly come to be sought in this life, in this world, and/or through reincarnation in the next life in this world, rather than through the achievement of salvation

³⁰ Bryan R. Wilson, 'Secularization: the inherited model', 9–20, in Phillip E. Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Towards Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 20.

³¹ Bryan R. Wilson 'The New Religions: Some preliminary considerations', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6/1–2 (1979), 206.

³² This particular theme was explored in his Riddell Lectures given at the University of Newcastle in 1974 and published in Bryan R. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford, 1976).

³³ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford, 1982), p. 124.

³⁴ Wilson and Dobbelaere, *A Time to Chant* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 217–18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

in some other world. Not all new religions were as 'in tune' with the modern (or post-modern) world as Soka Gakkai; movements such as the Unification Church and ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) had continued, in the old tradition, to call for self sacrifice for some transcendental cause, albeit with a new spiritual rationale, but many others were following a variety of paths in the pursuit of hedonism, pleasure, happiness and some kind of fulfilment in this world.³⁶

Elsewhere, Wilson argued that Scientology was precisely the kind of religion that one might expect to find reflecting the preoccupations of a modern secularised society in which individuals exhibit a greater concern for self-development and psychic well-being than for other-worldly salvation. This was spelled out as a response to the claims of some government and other bodies that Scientology could not properly be designated a religion, with Wilson arguing that it could be seen as a secularised religion. He proceeded by listing twenty characteristics that might serve as a 'probabilistic inventory' for phenomena we might wish to call 'religion' and then discussed their application to the beliefs and practices of Scientology. He concluded that eleven of the items were applicable, four might be applied with certain qualifications, and the remaining five were not applicable.³⁷

The conclusion was not merely of academic interest. There were considerable consequences of a secular nature in the outcome of such deliberations—whether or not Scientology would be eligible for tax exemption in this instance. Wilson gave testimony and/or appeared as an expert witness in scores of legal cases, appearing nearly always on behalf of the members of a minority religion. He acted as an expert consultant to the lawyers briefed by the Church of Scientology in a projected (but aborted) legal action against the British Charity Commissioners, in a Trade Mark Application case, and in its submission to the Charity Commissioners for charitable status, 1995. And he acted as an expert witness in the trial of Scientologists in the court of Lyon, France, another trial in Athens, and, by affidavit, in the preliminary preparation for a trial in Madrid, although the case was eventually concluded with an acquittal for all the defendants.

In 1988 he was an expert witness for an Industrial Tribunal in London in an action for unfair dismissal brought by a Seventh-day Adventist; and he was retained as an expert witness between 1986 and 1988 in the (eventually abandoned) cases mounted by the Attorney General in a dispute over the charitable status of the Unification Church, as well as acting for

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁷ Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* (1990), pp. 267–88.

the Church in its submission for a short-term visa for its founder, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, after this had been refused by the Home Office. He was also called upon to give expert written advice on religious movements for the Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee of the House of Commons.

Frequently he provided information about a movement for custody cases, including those where there was 'a divided family' involving one partner who was a member while the other was not of, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Exclusive Brethren. His involvement in such cases extended again beyond British law to include Cape Town (in 1981 and 1982), France (in 1998), and Australia (in 2003). He served as an expert witness for the Exclusive Brethren in disputes with the Charity Commissioners in the London High Court, and with the South African Government in an Industrial Tribunal in Johannesburg; and in libel actions brought against a Dutch author in Utrecht, and against the *Christchurch Press* in New Zealand. He also wrote affidavits on behalf of Brethren seeking permission to emigrate from South Africa to Britain and/or Australia in 1999; and affidavits on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Latvia, and for their Moscow Congregation in their attempted rebuttal of charges brought against them relating to their doctrines.

It was not that Wilson did not get frustrated with some of those whom he helped in this way—occasionally he would express his irritation at their unreliable behaviour or his concern over their unconventional practices—but he was still prepared to fight for the principle that they should be allowed to follow their beliefs and live according to these beliefs—so long, of course, as they did not contravene the laws of the land in a democratic society. He told a story (one of many) about John Sparrow, who was Warden of All Souls between 1952 and 1977 and whom Wilson greatly admired. A new chaplain had been appointed to the College and, in welcoming him, Warden Sparrow explained that although he himself was not a believer, he would none the less support him in his work—as an outsider supporter, like a flying buttress. Wilson, like Sparrow, could be regarded as a flying buttress by the minority religions that he studied throughout his academic career. He himself was an atheistically inclined agnostic, but he saw much to admire in the sects and new religions he studied, and he believed firmly in their rights and was prepared to defend these not only by supplying objective corrections to the ignorance and misinformation that surrounded them, but also by appearing on their behalf in court as an expert witness and writing testimonies on their behalf.

Like several other sociologists of religion whose work brought them into close contact with the new religions, Wilson found himself being branded a 'cult apologist'. Generally he ignored such accusations, although he did on occasion pick up the gauntlet, as, for example, when Irving Horowitz accused him and others who attended conferences sponsored by new religions of jeopardising the scientific status of their scholarship.³⁸ Wilson's response included pointing out that 'empathy need not lead to advocacy', and that the conferences were not so much sponsored research as consultations.³⁹ His conditions for attending such a conference included the strictures that he should be free to say whatever he chose; that his participation should not be used for propaganda purposes; and that he should have personal control over the publication of his own contribution.⁴⁰

Methodology

Throughout his career, Wilson's methodology was predominantly qualitative. He treated most quantitative analysis with considerable suspicion, declaring that:

Questionnaires canvass opinions out of contexts, and simplify the complexities of the issues at stake. They often illustrate the prejudices of the investigators, but do so in a concealed way, and they respond to the limitations of their computers, missing the richness and the diversity of the texture of real-life relationships.⁴¹

Starting with his doctoral thesis in the way that he was later to continue, he gathered information through published materials and by soliciting life histories, interviews, the use of informants and observation, the latter involving prolonged participation in one of the congregations of each of the groups he was studying, which resulted in a number of delicate cameo portraits, one of which, on an Elim Revival meeting, was published as an Appendix to the thesis.⁴²

³⁸ Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.), *Science, Sin and Scholarship: the Politics of Reverend Moon and the Unification Church* (Cambridge, MA, 1978).

³⁹ Bryan R. Wilson, 'Sympathetic detachment and disinterested involvement: a note on academic integrity', *Sociological Analysis*, 44/3 (1983), 184.

⁴⁰ Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements* (New York, 1981), pp. v–xvi. See also his introduction to Bryan R. Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London, 1999), pp. 1–11.

⁴¹ Wilson, 'The needs of students', in Reeves (ed.), *Eighteen Plus* (1965), p. 52.

⁴² Wilson, *Sects and Society* (1961), p. 7 and pp. 357–9.

There were, however, tensions inherent in an aspect of the approach that he adopted which he called ‘sympathetic detachment’.⁴³ There was, he argued in the introduction to his edited volume on Rationality, a sense in which no one but a medieval man could understand medieval society, but there was also a sense in which medieval man had little or no chance of ever understanding medieval society—‘and certainly far less prospect of doing so than has modern man’.⁴⁴ He believed that if the sociologist were to become a disciple he would cease to be a sociologist. The sociologist should, however, seek to understand as far as possible what the disciples understand, and he should do it in their terms.

Only if he can gain some apprehension of what it means to be a believer can the sociologist say anything useful about the religious movements he studies; and yet, in gaining that understanding, he must not actually become a believer . . . his brief is to interpret religion sociologically; his values lie in a scientific discipline, and in consequence he must always maintain appropriate distance.⁴⁵

And an appropriate distance was something that Wilson was always careful to maintain. He unreservedly appreciated the fact that when he visited the Exclusive Brethren he would be courteously invited to eat in a separate room. His way of understanding depended upon his being separate. There was an occasion in Budapest when I dragged him along to a large revivalist gathering. A couple of thousand enthusiastic members of the Faith Church were holding up their arms as they sang and swayed to the music. I joined in, my arms held high, while Bryan stood rigidly beside me, in his dark suit and tie, getting not a few curious glances. I could feel him becoming increasingly agitated. It wasn’t that he objected to our Hungarian companions, he was very familiar with how evangelical Christians behaved; it was my behaving like them that upset him. I got a discrete nudge in the ribs. ‘Eileen, stop it’, he whispered ‘they’re all looking at you!’ It was, of course, Bryan who stood out in the crowd. He stood out throughout his life by presenting a public persona that was always meticulous in its All Souls’ correctness.⁴⁶

⁴³ Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (1982), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Bryan R. Wilson, ‘A sociologist’s introduction’, in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford, 1970), p. ix.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (1982), p. 13.

⁴⁶ Apart from occasions when the addition of an academic gown was appropriate, Wilson was invariably attired in a suit and tie, whatever the circumstances—or the weather. I once tentatively suggested that he might like to take his jacket off while we ate an *alfresco* lunch on a boiling hot day when all around were in shorts or minimalist sun clothes. He responded that if he were to take off his jacket, he might feel like loosening his tie. Clearly, that was reason enough for his not

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Wilson was merely a dry academic. In his youth he had been a keen sportsman, and cricket fan. His cycling experience was not only in the flat countryside of Belgium, but also through Austria. While living at All Souls, he owned a house in North Oxford, where he would often spend his weekends gardening. Indeed, he had an impressive knowledge not only of garden flowers but also of those found in the wild. But beneath Wilson's sober appearance there lay a wicked sense of humour. Few who witnessed it will ever forget his impersonation of the adenoidal spiritualist. And although a stickler for accuracy in his academic research and writing, Wilson had an incredibly fertile imagination, and would occasionally indulge in the most extraordinary flights of fantasy. I have a large collection of picture postcards that he sent me from around the world with an original commentary on the back of each—usually with a genially denigrating reference to the London School of Economics. There was, for example, the Stuttgart Tower: 'a new seminar room for LSE', he had written, 'not quite ivory, but best quality pre-stressed concrete'. A Somenko carding machine he depicted as the original apparatus for churning out theses in the LSE basement: 'candidates need only throw in 100,000 assorted words . . .'. Palanquins turned into LSE students' coffee machines dispensing forty-seven varieties of coffee from thirty-six third-world countries. Then there were the illustrated stories about academic ogres performing human sacrifices, and devious plots by wicked lady governors to withdraw student funding, before they were overthrown through further nefarious intrigues . . .

However, Wilson always took seriously a responsibility for fostering the international community of scholars. This he did in part through serving his term as an officer in a number of professional organisations—he was, for example, a Council Member of the American-based Society for the Scientific Study of Religion from 1977–9 and for several years the European Associate Editor of the SSSR's *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. He also served for six years as Joint Editor of the *Annual Review of the Social Science of Religion*. The organisation that was, however, closest to his heart was the European-based *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse*, of which he was President for the

doing so. Karel Dobbelaere tells the not entirely dissimilar story of how he was staying with Wilson in a Cornish hotel. They had planned to spend the day visiting some gardens and other scenic places and Dobbelaere, having told Wilson the previous evening not to dress up, was surprised to see him in a suit and tie. He asked, with some surprise, 'Surely you are not going to the gardens dressed like that?' To this he got the reply 'Of course not, I shall change after breakfast.'

years 1971–5. He was largely instrumental in the change of name to Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions/International Society for the Sociology of Religion, being determined that the difference between ‘religious sociology’ and ‘the sociology of religion’ should be recognised. Participants from around the world would turn up at the registration desk and Bryan Wilson would always be somewhere nearby, ready to welcome them with his old-fashioned courtesy, remembering most of their names—but giving no hint when he had no idea who they were. He was always particularly diligent in ensuring that the Japanese were made welcome and would make sure that at least one meal was spent in their company. In 1991 he was elected the first (and, so far, only) Honorary Life President of the SISR/ISSR, and, despite his failing health, its biennial meetings were one of the highlights of his calendar. In 2003 he flew out to the Conference in Turin, but, due to a pharmacist’s error in making up his prescription for the medicine to counteract the effects of the Parkinson’s disease from which he was by then suffering, he became ill with some disturbing side-effects from the drugs and had to fly home before the Conference had got under way.

On his retirement in 1993 Wilson moved to an apartment in Headington on the outskirts of Oxford. He amazed his friends by buying an enormous television set and watching videos of Japanese westerns, but he continued to write, to attend conferences and to give lectures in different parts of the world almost up to the time of his death; he particularly enjoyed staying with Karel Dobbelaere and his wife Liliane Voyé in their cottage in a delightful part of rural Belgium. He was, indeed, able to lead a relatively active life right up to the day of his death, which took place after having spent a day in the Oxfordshire countryside and enjoying a good meal with his customary glass of claret at a local restaurant.

Rereading Wilson’s work in preparation for this memoir was in some ways like going to a Shakespearean play—one knew the lines were penned by the Bard, yet one can still be surprised to come across them in their original context and realise that the author was not quoting but creating the thought. So much of Wilson’s work is now taken-for-granted as part of the conventional wisdom of the sociology of religion that it is easy to forget how great his contribution was. His writing style flowed with an elegance that made complicated arguments seem simple statements of reality.

Of course, one might not always agree with Wilson, but somehow that did not matter; one could learn from him *by* disagreeing with him. He was not someone with whom one had heated arguments, but civil debates in

which one had to conjure up one's own arguments pretty carefully. His last, posthumous, publication was a contribution to a book for the British Academy. It was a chapter I co-authored with him entitled 'What are the new religious movements doing in a secular society?'⁴⁷ It soon became apparent that we each had a slightly different answer to the question. After a preliminary discussion over a good claret, I would draft a section which he would then elaborate, adding a few courteous question marks, indicating where he suspected I might have made a slight error in my presentation, rather than suggesting that I could be mistaken in my opinions or interpretation of the situation. Sometimes I would rewrite what I had written, trying to accommodate both our views, and usually he would let it go at that, but occasionally he would gently add a 'slight modification—just to tidy up the prose'.

Those of his students, friends and colleagues who knew Bryan Wilson were enriched by the experience. We all learned from him and generations to come will continue to profit from his work. He combined a systematic rigour with an uncanny sensitivity to the sentiments of those who differed in fundamental ways from himself. He held strong opinions, but was always ready to fight for the rights of those with whom he might profoundly disagree. He will be remembered with admiration and affection as an honourable gentleman and a truly exceptional scholar.

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Note. I am grateful to Bryan Wilson's sister, Mrs Jess Mason, and his nephew, Mr Andrew Mason, for their generous help in filling in gaps in his early years. I am also grateful to Mr Mark Philips who recorded some of Wilson's reminiscences in 2003, shortly before his death. I would, furthermore, like to thank Professors Karel Dobbelaere and Liliane Voyé for their kind assistance.

⁴⁷ Bryan R. Wilson and Eileen Barker, 'What are the new religious movements doing in a secular society?', in Anthony F. Heath, John Ermisch and Duncan Gallie (eds.), *Understanding Social Change* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 291–317.