

Sociology in Theology

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Sociology in Theology

Reflexivity and Belief

Kieran Flanagan

*Reader in Sociology
University of Bristol*

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To Willie and Elizabeth Watts Miller

For long-standing sociological support and much friendship

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Preface

While a deeply pleasurable activity, writing a book can be an oddly isolating and isolated venture, but no author works alone and the preface is where the debts to others can be placed. Many have been very supportive in the gestation of this book. A prime debt is to Professor Keith Tester, a referee on the original proposal. He prevented me from being lazy. He forced me away from thinking about a collection of essays and into venturing into something more imaginative. I owe much to my undergraduate students at the University of Bristol who patiently heard many of the thoughts that hover around the book, not least in relation to Erving Goffman. Their enthusiasm gave further impulse to chase the ideas through the text. At Palgrave Macmillan, I am indebted to my editor Jill Lake who went through the manuscript rapidly and with an eagle eye. She was warmly supportive of the venture. Melanie Blair, the editorial assistant at the publishers was hyper-efficient and helpful.

The cover has its own tale. A long-standing colleague, and a Durkheimian scholar, Willie Watts Miller brought me back a candle from Germany with an inscription from Samuel. This gave much food for further thought and was a spur to writing this study. My thanks to Catherine Roperto who exercised the arts of digital culture to provide the cover photograph. A particular debt of gratitude is due to Dr Peter C. Jupp who read through the manuscript for me. He made the inelegant elegant, and caught a number of downright silly errors. Again, I am very grateful for his support.

Although a study of reflexivity and imagination, the project rotated more around my head than I would have liked. Honesty forces one to admit that the study entailed one afternoon of fieldwork and that occurred on a visit to Tintern Abbey. I am very grateful to Fr Robert King, the Catholic chaplain at the University of Bristol, for insisting in mid-August 2006, that I really needed to see something different. Another debt is to Fr Michael Robertson whose sagacity and capacity to recognise what I was stumbling to say has been awesome. In the department, I must thank Jackie Bee, the departmental secretary, who always managed to make encouraging noises when the study was getting lost, again. Professor Gregor McLennan, who looks after research in the department, was most supportive and enthusiastic about the study's progress. Again, I have a debt to the computer support unit in the Faculty of Law and

Social Science for their help and assistance. Mark Cox was especially helpful. Clifton Cathedral and its Dean, Canon Robert Corrigan, kept my feet firmly on the ground during the course of the study, and again I would like to acknowledge the wonderful witness of the young men and boys who serve on the 11.00 Sunday mass at the cathedral who supplied much affirmation that the study did matter.

As the study came to its final phases in 2006, my mother died in July and my sister-in-law, Joan Flanagan, in October. I am enormously grateful to my brother, Brian Flanagan, for coping so bravely in ways that enabled the study to be finished. In writing a book, one just soldiers through to the end.

Curious it is the way the end of exile in hibernation in the text just occurs. The writing just stops and the life of the text expires. It is as if leaving the dark and blinking in the light of the day. But what day is it on the liturgical calendar? A day in ferial time might do, giving testimony to the routine basis of writing, but with *memoria* there is a property of potluck. Imagine explaining away the *memoria* of St Snuffilus, patron saint of the orphans of Ossory (Ireland), as the finishing date? The muse flew out of the window on the date below. One felt slightly disconsolate: why not finish the next day, the Feast of the Epiphany, one so much in keeping with the vision and hopes of the study? On closer inspection, the day to finish seemed perverse, occurring after the Octave of Christmas without even a vigil (the manifestation of the Christ child commences on 25 December). The 5 January seemed oddly liminal for the termination of a study so devoted to concerns with reflexivity and liminality.

One trudged to Clifton Cathedral to get ready the anticipated Sunday mass at 6.00 (on Saturday). Dusk had fallen in the building, but in the gloom three shadowy figures could be discerned on the sanctuary over by the organ. Huddled together, they seemed a strange trio set for action, but frozen in a dilemma. They transmitted puzzlement as to why they were there the day before the Epiphany. Light dawned: in their wisdom the English Bishops had moved the feast to the Sunday, which by chance fell on 6 January. On that Saturday, the evening mass of 5 January was after all a celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany.

One looked again at the trio. Their plight too seemed liminal. Nobody had told them their arrival time had been moved back a day, hence their silent begging for a lift across the sanctuary from a passing sociologist, lest they arrived late. Little epiphanies give consolation to the sociological imagination. Nobody was about, so one could carry the Wise Men across the sanctuary and place them in their sequence of arrival as in Luke. Rather than placing them in the crib, they were set in a line coming

down from the sanctuary. Their arrival seemed to transmit amazement at what they saw in the manger.

The looks of many between the morning masses the next day expressed satisfactory levels of wonder and awe. Being a Catholic cathedral, somebody had to spot a mistake. A small and decidedly unangelic voice piped up loudly: 'why are the shepherds still there?'

KIERAN FLANAGAN

5 January 2007