

**Sociology and Faith:
The Witness of Paul Hanly Furfey**

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In the 1940 volume of The American Catholic Sociological Review, Msgr. Paul Hanly Furfey wrote an essay entitled "Why a Supernatural Sociology?" Msgr. Furfey was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1896. He entered Saint Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, and transferred to the Sulpician Seminary in Washington at the Catholic University. After his ordination to the priesthood in 1922, he pursued graduate studies in sociology at The Catholic University for three years. In 1925 he was appointed Instructor in the Department of Sociology at that university, spending his entire academic career there. He became a full Professor of Sociology, and was the chairman of the department for many years (1934-1966). He died in 1992, just before his ninety-sixth birthday.¹

In the article, "Why a Supernatural Sociology?" Msgr. Furfey describes sociology as "the study of human society, of human group life. To learn about this subject, the sociologist naturally wants to use all available means".² Msgr. Furfey points out that certain social phenomena are best studied by objective and quantitative methods. Exact scientific methods have been very helpful in understanding aspects of society such as population growth, the distribution of wealth and income, crime rates, vital statistics, human ecology, social psychology and the like.³ At the same time there are other social facts which are not accessible to quantitative methods. "Science can tell us

nothing about the essential nature of man and the purpose of his existence in the universe; yet we cannot understand society without knowing these things."⁴ In addition to this help from philosophy, divine revelation can tell us certain things about society which are significant, such as the existence of the Catholic Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. Theology, the science of divine revelation, can teach us about justice and charity, sin and hell, grace and love.⁵

One might object that the word sociology is a consecrated term which is used in many universities for the purely naturalistic study of society. Msgr. Furfey is not moved by this objection. He asks, Is it wise to take our standards from non-Catholic institutions?⁶

II.

Msgr. Furfey had a remarkable career both in academic sociology and in his influence on the American Church, especially through his affiliation with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker groups. He divided his career into three stages: scientific charity, the new Catholic social activism, and finally, revolutionism.⁷ An important point in his thinking was his attempt to find ways of responding to the sufferings brought on by the Depression after 1929. In 1933 he gave six radio sermons in which his movement away from the purely scientific or quantitative approach to social problems was evident. He began to see that the witness of holiness was more important in dealing with social problems than the efforts of psychology and social work.⁸

In 1934 Furfey's meeting with Dorothy Day was a turning point in his spiritual journey. He encountered a form of social action based on the New Testament.⁹ Through the influence of Dorothy Day, Furfey moved away from the social worker's view that the poor were pathological to the realization that society was unfairly organized. The pathology was in society, not in the poor.¹⁰ From the early 1950's, Msgr. Furfey developed insights derived from his conversion to radicalism. In his 1953 book, The Scope and Method of Sociology, he presented an explanation of supernatural sociology.

Lescher, whose 1990 doctoral dissertation deals with the relationship of the spiritual life and social action in the work of two Catholic University sociologists William J. Kerby and Paul Hanly Furfey, notes Furfey's presentation of the inter-relationship between social theory and Catholic belief, but also demonstrates the validity of his insistence on the importance of philosophic thought to the sociological enterprise.¹¹

III.

Paul Hanly Furfey carried out his work as a professor of sociology from the viewpoint of one who was committed to a scientific study of society which was not cut off from Christian revelation. He described his work as a "supernatural sociology," or as the study of a "pistic" or faith-based society. That was a commonly accepted position in the late 1940's and early 1950's when, as a seminarian, I first read The American Catholic Sociological Review. The review was the organ of the American Catholic Sociological

Society, which had been organized in 1938. Father Ralph A. Gallagher S.J. of Loyola University of Chicago was the first President (1938) and Executive Secretary (1938-1962) of the American Catholic Sociological Society and the Editor (1940-1954) of The American Catholic Sociological Review.¹² Father Gallagher was convinced that there was such a thing as a Catholic Sociology, and Paul Hanly Furfey was one of his most important allies.¹³ Nevertheless, within the Society itself there was a growing opposition to the concept of a Catholic Sociology. The negative side emerged victorious, and The American Catholic Sociological Review was renamed Sociological Analysis in 1964, and Sociology of Religion in 1993. The Society itself was renamed in 1970 as The Association for the Sociology of Religion.¹⁴

Before this secularization of the Society, the interests of Father Gallagher and Msgr. Furfey focused on the reform of industrial relations and on the prevention of crime and delinquency.¹⁵ The second President of the Society was Father Raymond W. Murray C.S.C., who declared that the basis of the Society was "the existence, on the one hand, of a body of Catholic social teaching and, on the other, the determination of the Catholic body to make the teaching influential and effective."¹⁶

Not all Catholic sociologists were in agreement with the idea of a "Catholic Sociology." One priest member of the society said that he did not think "that there is a Catholic Sociology any more than that there is a Catholic algebra."¹⁷

In his article, C.J. Nuesse describes how he

eventually adopted the negative position on a Catholic definition of sociology. He holds that there is "an elementary distinction, that between thought and action, between the theoretical aim of a social science and the practical endeavor of social reform."¹⁸ Nuesse held that a developing science of sociology would become indispensable for the implementation in society of Catholic philosophical and theological principles.¹⁹ He does not explain how the separation of the philosophical and theological principles from the quantitative analysis of society would make the implementation in society of those principles more effective.

Nuesse reports Furfey's distinction between a "broad" definition of Sociology and a "narrow" definition, and he indicates that he favors the "narrow" definition as connected with a greater concern for methodological rigor. He does not explain why this should be so.²⁰ It is interesting to note today that much of the work of sociology at the present time seems dominated by the work of those holding broader definitions of the field, not the hospitality to Catholic philosophical and theological principles but the domination of the field by feminist and homosexual and black liberationist sociologists. It is precisely because of a concern for the development of sociology and the other social sciences with the enrichment of the philosophical and theological heritage of our Catholic faith that The Society of Catholic Social Scientists was established in 1992. It seems clear that Catholic sociologists made a mistake in turning away from the sociological thought of scholars such as Ralph Gallagher and Paul Hanly Furfey. Their work is now being

continued in the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

IV.

How did Msgr. Paul Hanley Furfey approach sociology?

In his book Three Theories of Society,²¹ Furfey pointed out that there are various ways of studying society, One may use objective scientific methods, information from theology, and help from philosophy. He takes the tentative position that one must use many different techniques to reach a satisfactory view of society. "These techniques will be very diverse and they must be combined, with a proper subordination one to another, to the final purpose of attaining the deepest and fullest possible understanding of society."²²

In the first part of his book Three Theories of Society, Furfey deals with the approach to sociology associated with Auguste Comte. Comte, and others inspired by him, observed how modern physical science had made great advances "through the pains-taking observation of phenomena and the classification of these phenomena under general laws. It began to occur to social thinkers that this same technique might be applied to sociology."²³ Others began to apply mathematical methods to the analysis of social data. Furfey holds that the movement inaugurated by Comte reached its culmination in our own day, with widespread acceptance of determinism, the neglect of questions of common purpose, and widespread borrowing from mathematical sciences. Behaviorism was brought into sociology from psychology.²⁴

Msgr. Furfey consciously reacted against this

phenomenological method. He used a method which he called teleological. This method tries to explain the phenomena in terms of human motivation rather than in terms of impersonal laws.²⁵ Furfey looks upon any society as a group cooperating for some common purpose. "Without a common purpose a group becomes a mere aggregation of individuals. It ceases to be a society."²⁶ Furfey proposes therefore to study not the external aspects of the world, territory, population and products, but rather the way their people react to these things.²⁷

For the external events are the mere shell within which the living reality exists. The living reality itself - the life of society itself - is something deeper. It is a scale of values, a way of looking at things. It is a congeries of traditional prejudices, and vague fears. It is a massive common activity which takes its direction from these apprehended values.²⁸

Furfey believed that the teleological analysis of modern society leads to the insight that its purpose is success, particularly financial success. And yet, he points out, "The success - ideal is a philosophy of life for middle - aged shopkeepers, but it is not an ideal to fire the heart of youth with dreams of a suffering which transcends joy."²⁹

The theory of society which has encouraged the growth of the success-culture is the positivism developed by Auguste Comte (1798-1857). This philosophy rejects "all inquiring

into causes, first and final; and its confining research to the invariable relations which constitute natural laws."³⁰

In the second part of Three Theories of Society, Msgr. Furfey deals with what he calls noetic society. Here Furfey deals with society from the viewpoint of the classical philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. In such a theory, the role of the intellect is central. The intellect can attain truths by discursive reasoning, reasoning which presupposes truths already known. The intellect also functions in the immediate apprehension of truths. This latter use of the intellect, by which certain truths are immediately apprehended is called noesis.³¹ This ability to discover truths by noesis is called by Furfey "the great signal triumph of the human mind."³² Even though the noetic society and the use of noetic methods is a large advance over positivism, it is still lacking as a method for sociology and as an ideal for society.

In Part Three of his book, Msgr. Furfey holds that "a society founded upon positivism is mean and commonplace. A society founded upon noesis is beautiful but unworkable."³³ A good society, for Furfey, is one founded upon faith, a pistic society.³⁴ But Furfey brings in faith not only as an ideal of his pistic society; he also incorporates the supernatural knowledge of faith into the method of sociology, without giving up on the statistical techniques of positive method or the philosophical insights of classical philosophy.

From the viewpoint of sociological theory however, this third part of the book is weakest. Furfey presents an

ideal of society based on Catholic social theory, as taught by the modern social encyclicals. This ideal society would be motivated by Christian charity. Unfortunately, Furfey does not clarify how the truths of faith should present not only guidance in reform efforts to make a good society, which he does well: but he does not probe deeply enough into ways that sociologists can be helped in creating a science which will be not only respectable professionally but intimately shaped by philosophical and theological truth. He presents a beautiful ideal, but he does not provide specific guidance in forming a theory of Catholic sociology.

V.

During the second World War in his book The Mystery of Iniquity, Msgr. Furfey said "Today, in the midst of the most terrible of wars, no thinking person can fail to reflect on the problem of evil in society."³⁵ Furfey pointed out that Catholics are in a uniquely advantageous position for discussing the issue because we can use not only the data of social science but the truth of Revelation as well.³⁶

In fact, however, the social scientists who prefer to reject ethics do not actually do so. Furfey holds that, if a sociologist should really reject all ethics, he would be unable to recognize a social problem when he saw one. "If he really remained ethically neutral, he would have no reason to prefer a society in which murder and robbery and rape had been eliminated to a society in which these types of conduct were rife,"³⁷ If such a person were confused about the nature of social problems, the remedies he would

propose would not be effective.

Furfey recognizes that we are dealing with a mystery. He quotes Saint Paul, who said that the mystery of iniquity is already at work.³⁸ Furfey explains that:

These highly disturbing words teach us that a malign force is operating in this familiar world of ours, and that this force is hidden and mysterious in nature.³⁹

Furfey holds that there is a "radical antithesis between the Catholic viewpoint on the root cause of social problems and the current materialistic viewpoint."⁴⁰ Furfey holds therefore that the Catholic sociologist must break sharply with materialistic social philosophy and faithfully follow out to all its logical consequences his own distinctive system of social doctrine.⁴¹ He criticizes the "Catholic Conformists", who do not deny any social doctrine of the Church outright, but write as if it did not exist.

They discuss sociology of the family by the hour, without ever once mentioning marriage as a sacrament. They can discourse learnedly about the evils of modern war, but not from the standpoint of the doctrine of the Mystical Body... Thus they convey the impression that they do not differ basically from materialists in their social thought.⁴²

Furfey holds that one's attitude toward social problems and social issues will be colored by one's conception of society, whether Marxist, Fascist, Liberal or Catholic.⁴³ One of the greatest problems of the modern world

is the problem of poverty. At the time Furfey was writing, he looked back to the situation in the United States prior to the Second World War. He criticized the "bourgeois spirit" which dominated many Catholics of the middle class.⁴⁴ In the twenty-first century, while poverty remains a major social problem in the United States, even our poor people often live on a higher level than the poor of the Third World. This is one of the areas in which sociology, to be adequate, must deal with such problems in the light of the compassion of Christ.

In succeeding chapters of The Mystery of Iniquity, Msgr. Furfey brings this Catholic conception of sociology to bear on social work as a profession, and on the principal social problems of the 1940's: labor, the family, race, and exaggerated nationalism.⁴⁵

Msgr. Furfey concludes his study of the mystery of iniquity and its place in sociology by holding that we cannot hope to make any progress at all against evil in society unless we pin our hope to the supernatural.⁴⁶

If, like the conformists, we reject the divine suggestion in its unmodified purity, then we shall be left to the unfruitfulness of our human devices. But if, like Peter, we set aside our professional prejudices and follow the Lord's command with strong faith, then, like Peter, we shall obtain results which wholly surpass all human expectation....⁴⁷

VI.

At the time that Msgr. Furfey was developing his work in

sociology, another great Catholic intellectual was moving in a similar direction. Luigi Sturzo published his book The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural⁴⁸ in 1943. It is interesting to note that Paul Hanly Furfey was the Censor Deputatus of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and Washington for the book. Sturzo pointed out that the true life is the supernatural life to which we have been called by God. It is not something accidental added to or super-imposed on man's life of nature; it is a real transformation of human existence and activity.⁴⁹ Sturzo says clearly that it is not a metaphor or hyperbole to call the supernatural life "the true life." The supernatural life implies no denial, but is indeed the perfecting of the natural life.⁵⁰ While admitting that the subtitle Sociology of the Supernatural must sound strange to many readers, Sturzo's science of sociology is not a study of society in the abstract nor a moralizing study of what society should be. For Sturzo, sociology is a study of society as it is in the concrete, with the aim of discovering the inner laws of society. Sociology cannot be a science if the particular analyses of certain questions are not brought together and united in a synthesis. To be truly scientific, sociology should carry the study of society into the fourth dimension, that of time. Only in this way can one discover the purposive tendencies it reveals, and understand its orientation towards the future, in fact, the eschatological future.⁵¹

A true science of sociology has to be the science of society in its concrete existence and in its historical development. "If the supernatural is an historical and social fact, it must fall within the field of sociological investigation."⁵² Religion, as a social fact, cannot be

reduced to pure naturalism, or to a political moralism fostered by the dominant classes for their own interest. "Such errors spring from considering sociology an experimental science of external facts, and eliminating both philosophy, as a metaphysical construction, and history, as the inner process of society."⁵³ Sturzo did not hold that there are no sociologists who are believers in divine revelation. He saw, however, that there was a dichotomy between their faith and their sociology. For them, it is as if there were a natural society, really existing and free from any influence of the supernatural. But the only society which does exist is the society which is in a real synthesis with the supernatural,

For Sturzo, then, his sociology of the supernatural studies human society in its concrete reality, with the supernatural life as the force integrating and synthesizing and transcending nature. The supernatural life, then, involves both the divine initiative towards man, and man's response to the divine summons.⁵⁴

In 1943, two series of lectures were delivered, one at the Catholic University of America by Msgr. Paul Hanly Furfey, and the other at Fordham University by Dr. Robert C. Pollock. The papers were supposed to appear in English in a volume by Luigi Sturzo. An English edition was never published, but the volume appeared in Italy in Italian in 1950.⁵⁵

Furfey's paper was an attempt to present Sturzo's sociology to the American reader. He points out that, if the sociologist is a believer, he cannot but acknowledge

that the supernatural plays a part in human society. Sturzo does not attack empirical sociology, but he does attack positivist sociology. He attacks positivism as a philosophical system which denies the validity of metaphysics and theology. The error of the positivists is the denying of any evidence not derived from empirical sources. Positivism is not a method of empirical research and study. It is a philosophical system.⁵⁶

It seems clear that Luigi Sturzo presents a joint witness with Paul Hanly Furfey to the importance of relating sociology to faith. This witness may be given additional significance now that the cause for Luigi Sturzo's beatification has been introduced in Rome.

VII.

C. Joseph Nuesse describes how a controversy over the concept of a Catholic sociology divided the participants in departmental seminars at the Catholic University between those holding a broad definition of the field (e,g, Furfey) and those who held a narrow definition.⁵⁷ Those who were proposing a broad definition were oriented toward the solution of social problems and the reconstruction of society according to Catholic social principles. Those who held narrow definitions seemed to be more concerned about methodological rigor. As we move into the twenty-first century, the old problems confronting societies have put on new garments. The poverty of 2002, which is very real in the United States, is very different from the poverty of 1950. The poverty of the Third World seems also to have changed, as television news broadcasts show people in far off places wearing baseball caps and American style

sneakers. The empirical studies have to be made anew continually. The data has to be continually brought up to date. And any sociology, broad or narrow, which claims academic respectability has to go after that data. At the same time, the findings of empirical studies have to be organized and evaluated in order to be usable for political and social reform efforts. Paul Hanly Furfey's vision of a sociology open to all the riches of Catholic faith, a sociology akin to Luigi Sturzo's sociology of the supernatural, seems to be the only approach to the social sciences which can deal with the problems of today.

In Nuesse's memoir on the controversy over a Catholic sociology he drew two broad conclusions. The first was that the controversy can be seen now as one through which Catholic sociologists were clarifying the boundaries of the field. The second and more important conclusion was to point out the challenge to them of articulating the verifiable findings of sociology with the developing body of Catholic social theory, drawn historically from supra-empirical principles and practical experience.⁵⁸ In other words, Catholic sociologists must master the tools of their trade and must carry out their work in the light of their Catholic faith.

It is hard to see how both aspects of their work should not be seen as parts of Catholic sociology, a sociology of the supernatural. Catholic sociologists have the witness of Paul Hanly Furfey to inspire them in their academic work.

¹ For information about the life of Msgr. Furfey see “Paul Hanly Furfey: Insights from a Spiritual Pilgrimage” by Bruce H. Lescher, American Catholic Historical Society Records, Fall-Winter 1996, 107:39-63;

“Tribute to a Mentor” : Paul Hanly Furfey (1896-1992), by Gordon C. Zahn, New Oxford Review, September 1992, 59:8-10; “Catholic Sociology : Memoir of a Mid-Century Controversy”, by C. Joseph Nuesse, U.S. Catholic Historian, Summer 1098, 16:94-110

² American Catholic Sociological Review 1940, as quoted in The Catholic Social Science Review, vol. I, (1996), p.247. (Henceforth referred to as CSSR)

³ CSSR, p.247.

⁴ CSSR, p.247.

⁵ CSSR, p.248

⁶ CSSR, p.248.

⁷ Lescher, p.42.

⁸ Lescher, p.54

⁹ Lescher, p.56.

¹⁰ Lescher, p.57.

¹¹ Lescher, p.63, quoting Joseph A. Serano, The Social Mission of the Church in the Writing of Paul Hanly Furfey and John Courtney Murray: Analysis and Assessment (S.T.D., Dissertation, The Catholic University of America 1981).

¹² Nuesse, p. 9.

¹³ Nuesse, p. 101.

¹⁴ Nuesse, p. 9.

¹⁵ Nuesse, p. 99

¹⁶ Nuesse, p. 100, quoting Father Murray’s 1939 Presidential address, ACSR I (1940) p. 39

¹⁷ Nuesse, p.105, quoting J.R.W. Maguire.

¹⁸ Nuesse, p. 105.

¹⁹ Nuesse, p. 106.

²⁰ Nuesse, p. 106.

²¹ Paul Hanly Furfey, Three Theories of Society, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1937. (Henceforth referred to as Three Theories)

²² Three theories, p.viii.

²³ Three Theories, pp. 4f.

²⁴ Three theories, p. 5.

²⁵ Three Theories, p.4

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- ²⁶ Three Theories, p. 8.
- ²⁷ Three Theories, p. 8.
- ²⁸ Three Theories, p. 9.
- ²⁹ Three Theories, p. 4
- ³⁰ Auguste Comte, The Positive Philosophy (1886), p. 799 as quoted by Furfey in Three Theories, p. 57.
- ³¹ Three Theories, p. 107.
- ³² Three Theories, p. 122.
- ³³ Three Theories, p. 159
- ³⁴ Three Theories, p. 159.
- ³⁵ Paul Hanly Furfey, The Mystery of Iniquity, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co.), (henceforth referred to as Mystery) p.7
- ³⁶ Mystery, p. 7.
- ³⁷ Mystery, p. 15.
- ³⁸ Mystery, p. 19 quoting Saint Paul, (2 Thess,2:7)
- ³⁹ Mystery, p. 19,
- ⁴⁰ Mystery, p. 30.
- ⁴¹ Mystery, p. 30.
- ⁴² Mystery, p, 31.
- ⁴³ Mystery, p. 68.
- ⁴⁴ Mystery, pp. 84-101.
- ⁴⁵ Mystery, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ Mystery, p. 168.
- ⁴⁷ Mystery, p. 179, quoting Luke (5:2-7)
- ⁴⁸ Luigi Sturzo, The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press; Patterson, N.J.: St Anthony Guild Press, 1943)
- ⁴⁹ The True Life, p.1.
- ⁵⁰ The True Life, p.2.
- ⁵¹ The True Life, p. 2f.
- ⁵² The True life, p. 4.
- ⁵³ The True Life, P. 5.
- ⁵⁴ The True Life, p. 11. See also Luigi Sturzo, Inner Laws of Society: A New Sociology, (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons 1944.
- ⁵⁵ Nicholas S. Timasheff, The Sociology of Luigi Sturzo (Montreal: Palm Publishers; Baltimore-Dublin:

Helicon Press, 1962), p. 193.

⁵⁶ Timasheff, p. 194. See also Furfey in Sturzo's Metodo, p. 154.

⁵⁷ Nuesse, p.106.

⁵⁸ Nuesse, p.106.