SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND CHURCH HISTORY: A CASE STUDY

To introduce the spectre of sociology at this meeting of Canadian church historians may be deemed heretical, or at least retrogressive, by some. But, if legitimation is required, it should be remembered that when the late H. H. Walsh decried the undue devotion among religious analysts to certain sociological constructs, the issue was one of reductionism. It was his belief, for example, that the church-sect typology so dominant in Canadian church historiography limited the understanding of religious "enthusiasm".1

The concern of this paper is not to simplify by the introduction of sociological explanation but rather to underline just one factor in historical- graphical analysis. The larger framework for this discussion is historical relativism which assumes with Carl Berger that history invariably "reflects and incorporates the ideological climate of the period in which it was conceived and composed".2 The narrower focus is ethnic historiography recently raised to consciousness in Canada by French-Canadian nationalism and in the United States by both Black Power advocates and a generally malfunctioning melting pot.3 The sociology of knowledge especially as articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann4 provides the analytical perspective with the case in point coming from the Mennonite study of Anabaptism as critiqued most notably by James M. Stayer of Queen's University.5 Given the imprecision inherent in this form of theoretical procedure, this paper may best be seen as an exercise in methodological probing.

I

The "social construction of reality" is, according to our sociologists, a dialectical process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. For present purposes it is sufficient to interpret this "sociologese" to mean that man, because of his peculiar biological nature, creates an environment of society and culture in which his humanity is completed and defined, this social environment most notably in its language gains the status of objective reality, and this reality in turn is owned by the individual as internal facticity through socialization to the extent that "the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself".6 Despite the "real" status of this objective world, its fragile nature in the face of chaos requires legitimization through a "Weltanschauung". Because religion plays a decisive role in the construction and maintenance of these "realities", the sociology of religion becomes an integral partner of the sociology of knowledge.7

Even if this system deserves criticism especially where the empirical sociology as Van Harvey argues tends to drift off into philosophical speculation,8 it proves most suggestive to church historians. For one, under the broadened definition of religion offered, the vast variety of new and pseudo-religions within our pluralistic society which alongside traditional religions serve the legitimating function, deserve inclusion under the aegis of religious history, if not of church history more narrowly defined.9 Then too, this perspective places a large question mark after the concept of secularization insofar as that term refers to dereligionization.10

The interest here in this "relationship between social structure and consciousness", however, focusses rather on the necessity for historical
study to perceive the interaction between society and thought in both the era under research and the historians own ideation. Parenthetically, before pursuing these dual aspects, two caveats are required lest we once again drift into a simplistic reductionism. To begin, the assumption here is of a mutual interaction between the thought world and social situation rather than a one way determinism. And further, to speak of historical relativism in this sense does not exclude the possibility of at least comparative historical objectivity (and truth?) but rather should serve as a step towards that "noble dream". Speaking from within the historicist tradition which strongly influenced the sociology of knowledge, F. H. Bradley suggested that "it is when history becomes aware of its presuppositions that it first becomes truly critical and protects itself (as far as is possible) from the caprice of fiction".

There is of course a limit to the historical applicability of the sociology of knowledge. As Peter Berger noted in appropriate humility "There can be no satisfying sociological explanation of why Hegel thought what he did" although, he added, "sociology is relevant in seeking to explain the impact of a thinker of Hegel's stature". James Preus, an historian of Christian thought, argues that the area preserved as sacrosanct from the wiles of sociology is, however, much too large. An epistemological dualism fostered by Hegelian idealism, according to Preus, is exhibited by most historians of Christian thought, who accordingly operate as though ideas float entirely free of a societal base. Historians more interested in the institutions and common piety of the church possibly avoid the epistemological trap Preus identifies by operating more closely to those less lettered in feigning ahistorical "truth".

But even if church historians do perceive the relation between society and ideas in their historical subjects, the social rootedness of their own work deserves much more serious consideration than has been evidenced, at least overtly, heretofore. A notable exception is a most provocative essay on The Myth of Christian Origins in which the author, Robert L. Wilken, adopted the Berger-Luckmann perspective to speak of the "historical constructions of the past". It is his thesis that "what memory is in the lives of individuals, history is for groups - organizations, institutions, religions or nations", and that "historical memory contributes to the social construction of reality". Accordingly, "to speak of historical constructions of the past is to speak of the way the memory of the past is formed by the experiences of a community, and kept alive as the community reproduces these memories in its ongoing life". "Someone living outside of the community", he adds, "may have quite a different perception of the same historical event."

This community rootedness and functionality of history is echoed in the report of the History Panel delegated by the Survey of the Behavioral and Social Sciences conducted under the auspices of the National Academy of Science. According to this significant study of the current status of historical studies in America, history is defined as:

First of all, the custodian of the collective memory and as such performs the important function of nourishing the collective ego.

Second, it is in all societies a primary vehicle of the socialization of the young, teaching them the past so that they may know who they are and behave appropriately in the present. Third, it is the branch of inquiry that seeks to arrive at an accurate account and valid understanding of the past. Interestingly, that part of this definition which seeks to emphasize historical "objectivity" uses normative terminology such as "valid understanding" which is in itself community determined.
A ready example of interest to church historians in which the history created by a community is supremely socially functional is suggested by Kenneth Murdock's study of Puritanism. Witnessing their seemingly insatiable appetite for historical writing, Murdock concluded that:

"the Puritan wrote and read biography and history partly because they helped him in his effort to establish his relation to the traditions, symbols, myths, common experience, common sensibility and common culture of the world outside his little province. If he could establish this relation, he could ease his feeling of isolation and his worries about his 'status' and 'belongingness' in the whole human community. If he read lives and histories diligently enough he might better understand himself and his intimates in the village, and be more confident of his dignity and 'identity' and theirs." 19

These lengthy quotations conclude the attempt to suggest that among the various insights the sociology of knowledge offers to history, it is of special importance at least for this essay, that history writing is rooted in community and is functional towards the identity definition of that community. "Identity" as here understood obviously moves beyond biography to embrace, in continuity with the work of Erik Erikson, the concept of a "group ego", or if you will a "community ego", i.e. the very stuff of History. 20

II

North American society can be defined in terms of the criss-crossing of two sets of social stratification - the one based on class and the other on ethnicity. 21 Sociologists of knowledge in the tradition of both Marx and Mannheim have been impressed by the functionality of horizontal social differentiations in the formation of varying "realities". 22 Without denying the role of class in the social construction of reality, it is here suggested that in North America especially, "ethnicity" is an important variable in historical consciousness. 23

Studies of New York City focussed upon the Age of Jackson 24 and the present alike 25 underline the ethnicity variable in American self-identity and self-interest. Thus ethnic block voting continues to provide major leakage to, if not actually shattering, the proverbial melting pot. Similarly John Porter's monumental study of Canadian society insists that class interest cannot vitiate, even if frequently assimilating, the facts of ethnicity. 26

In keeping with the definitional direction established by E. K. Francis, 27 Milton M. Gordon attributed the concept "ethnic group" to "any group which is defined or set off by race, religion, or national origin, or some combination of these categories". 28 Ethnicity thus moves beyond kinship relationships to embrace the associational dimensions of peoplehood and Gemeinschaft. 29 Recently Andrew Greeley, in a most provocative interpretation of American religion, argued that in the face of the "impersonality of the industrial metropolis", American denominations emerged as "quasi-ethnic" entities to fulfill the need for belonging. 30 The vertical groupings in American society based on ethnic differentiations are accordingly not only the vestiges of divergent heritages imported into America but also the ongoing associations in which the individual is embraced in a group ego. 31

Accepting these definitions, historians will find interesting Gordon's conclusion that the ethnic group is "likely to be the group of historical identification", 32 That is, the group established by race, religion or national origin in which or to which the individual has been socialized supplies his historical memory and historical identity. Thus Michael Novak
offers this fascinating suggestion. "What is an ethnic group?", he asks. "It is a group with historical memory, real or imaginary. One belongs to an ethnic group in part involuntarily, in part by choice. Given a grandparent or two, one chooses to shape one's consciousness by one history rather than another. Ethnic memory is not a set of events remembered, but rather a set of instincts, feelings, intricacies, expectations, patterns of emotion and behavior; a sense of reality; a set of stories for the individuals - and for people as a whole to live out." 33

Novak is reaching for an understanding of ethnicity very similar to Clifford Geertz's definition of religion. According to Geertz a religion is:

1. a system of symbols which acts to
2. establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
3. formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
4. clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
5. the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." 33b

For Novak, ethnic identity serves a religious function; it establishes "a sense of reality; a set of stories for the individuals - and for the people as a whole to live out;" it establishes "moods and motivations". Thus, Novak not only agrees that the ethnic group is of utmost importance in the social construction of reality, but also emphasizes that the unique historical "reality" of an ethnic entity is less a matter of historical chronology than of "mood".

It is within this context that ethnic and denominational historiography must be seen. Such history is written from the vantage of the "reality" to which the historian has been socialized. Thus, "ingroup" and "outgroup" interpretations will likely vary if not in fact at least in mood. The "ingroup" historian writes for his own and his community's identity, whereas the "outgroup" historian writes, in part, to incorporate the ethnic entity under study into his own and his community's self-understanding. Accordingly, Vincent Harding insists that white American history must be entirely reconceived to include the Black experience in every facet. Only then can it begin to be the Black man's history - and for that matter, an honest white man's history. 34 But even then, as is symbolized in the debate over William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner, Black and white historiography will vary according to their particular worlds of "reality". 35 A similar example could be cited regarding the divergence between French and English interpretations of Canadian history. 36 These cases of differing historical readings are thus not simply a matter of bigotry, apologetics or propaganda nor necessarily of disagreements on historical "facts" - although these frequently emerge - but rather of honest differences based upon divergent "realities". Refereeing between varying historical interpretations, or in other words, relative historical objectivity is possible only when the social construction of diverse realities is realized, and to the extent possible, superceded. According to Mannheim, this ought to be the task of the intellectual. 37

Contrary to Mannheim's fondest hopes, the intellectual remains a human animal and thus cannot, at least in any absolute sense, escape the social conditioning of his ideation. 38 However, the intellectual frequently occupies a social situation which allows him to offer a unique perspective and which, in turn qualifies any monolithic emphasis upon ethnicity in the social construction of reality. As Milton Gordon theorizes, intellectuals found largely in the university and arts professions tend to be "marginal men" in
the sense that they have weakened traditional ethnic identities and, therefore, tend to look to each other for their primary group relations, forming thereby a subsociety of their own. Accordingly as subsociety membership shifts so does the "reality" modify in the new situation.

The implications of the intellectual community as a unique subsociety - or "ethnos" if you will - are most relevant to the subject at hand but for now can only be hinted at from a distance. It might be suggested, for example, that the professor of religion or history writing primarily for fellow referents of the intellectual subsociety is working from a different "reality" than the church historian writing from within the "reality" of his ethnic group. In the U.S. this distinction is institutionalized, although only in shades of gray, in the history division of the American Academy of Religion and the American Society of Church History. The church historian straddling several such subsocieties, as many do, must in some way sort out his "realities" for the health of his historical product.

A further modification, lest we reduce North American society to a static series of parallel ethnic groups, hinges on the dynamic nature of ethnic "reality" resultant upon a vast complex of subsocietal interaction. Common religious, educational, economic, political, entertainment and mass media influences minimize divergent realities and push towards varying degrees and modes of acculturation. In similar fashion the history of the dominant groups - the "charter" or "core" ethnics - is passed on to the minority groups as normative in identity definition. The extent to which this "standard" history is adopted by the minorities as their history and results in amnesia with regard to their own unique stories, assimilation has taken place.

Yet the maintenance of ethnic identities for a variety of reasons and by diverse mechanisms denies total assimilation. Geographical, cultural, social and ideological differentiations acting separately or in varying combinations to continue to define distinct ethnic identities, although these identities are frequently redefined to accommodate the acculturation forces undermining traditional self-understanding. Not least, ethnic ideologues most frequently through ethnic history, offer the group ideological alternatives to absolute assimilation. Thus, the variations in historical perspective resulting from the ethnic construction of reality, remain an important variable in historical analysis.

Mennonite historiography, especially in its recent quest of the Anabaptist vision, exemplifies rather forcefully the ideological function of both ethnic and denominational history. This historiography may not be typical for as James Nichols noted: "The Mennonites have exhibited in this generation a vigor in historical studies unequaled, in proportion to their size, by any other Christian tradition in America... (This movement) seems to have arisen in part from the international crisis of identity of the Mennonites and their need to identify a viable tradition." But even if the Mennonite case is unique, it may at least prove suggestive in the study of other American religious bodies. Any adequate understanding of Mennonite historiography and the social context to which it responded requires detailing which is in process elsewhere. Suggestions as to the direction of such an analysis offered here obviously carry the risks of inaccuracy inherent in all such abbreviations.
The crisis of identity, correctly isolated by Nichols, climaxed after the first World War and resulted from a confluence of a series of factors. Anxiety arose with: the end of significant geographical and cultural differentiation, the inability to join the American nation in the Great War, the lack of an adequate written ideology, the growing body of University-trained scholars, the unsatisfactory flirtations with both the Fundamentalist and Modernist parties, and the disgrace of their forefathers at the hands of church historians from other traditions. The solution pressed by the Mennonite ideologues was to share in the renewed emphasis on theology among church historians by translating the Anabaptist research begun in late nineteenth century Europe into a viable theological identity for twentieth century American Mennonites. The concrete manifestations, all of which related to Harold S. Bender - the major architect - in some way, culminated in the Mennonite Quarterly Review, the Mennonite Encyclopedia, numerous source publications, dissertations, monographs and a Bender Festschrift, The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, which included his American Society of Church History presidential address "The Anabaptist Vision" - a virtual paradigm of the movement.

These Anabaptist studies which emerged to serve as a new formulation of Mennonite ideology have recently come under repeated criticism. James Stayer, for example, although admitting his own indebtedness to Mennonite scholarship and noting recent exceptions to the rule, found unwarranted "the premise fostered above all by American Mennonites, that something called 'Evangelical Anabaptism' had a historical existence that began in Zurich in 1525 and that gave rise to the Swiss Brethren, Mennonites and Hutterites". Stayer objected primarily to the isolation of a systematic theology from an essentially diverse and dynamic movement. The offense of this operation to sound history, according to Stayer, was the imposition of a normative definition from another era upon a historical movement in which theological flux rather than stasis prevailed.

In his focus "upon interacting groups and sects rather than on a unified movement", Stayer's treatise represents a most impressive and legitimate revisionism in Radical Reformation research. Given the confessional needs of Mennonites in the era not coincidentally paralleling that of neo-orthodoxy in American theology, Mennonite ideologues did define sixteenth century Anabaptism to fit their particular situation. Clearing away what appear to be errors in historical judgement from a post mid-century perspective obviously is necessary for "ingroup" and "outgroup" historians alike to facilitate the formulation of a new history for a new day. However, in his commitment to intellectual history to the almost complete exclusion of a sociology of historiography, Stayer begs to be questioned on both his critique of Mennonite historians and his own conclusions.

Stayer, for one, assumes that their ideological usage of Anabaptism blinded Mennonite historians to sixteenth century reality. The truth in this needs to be balanced with the real possibility of a unique mitgefuehl of those who stand in the very ethnic tradition established by certain Anabaptists, who find their own identity in an interpreted version of that sixteenth century aberration, and who episodically at least experience shades of the same ostracism resultant upon rejection of society's majority position. If Mennonites like Blacks and other ethnics bring a unique mood to their history because of their peculiar socialized "realities", then historians need to pause before judging that reading wrong although different from the perspective of their ethnosta.
Still within his analysis of Mennonite historiography, Stayer complements those of us Mennonites who accept his revisionist stance in Anabaptist studies by exulting that this development "is heartening evidence that the perspectivist nature of the historian's enterprise does not preclude rationality and progress of knowledge". Such an explanation despite its flattery is only partly adequate. Rationality hopefully plays its role but it is also significant that contemporary Mennonites no longer find necessary the defense of Anabaptism as a viable Christian tradition. Furthermore, by the 1960's the ideological needs of Mennonites were no longer served by a statically formulated systematic theology of "evangelical Anabaptism". Consequently, not only was it possible and necessary to reintroduce the revolutionary Anabaptists into the fold but also the reality of a diversified and acculturated Mennonite denominationalism rendered ready translation of a monolithic Anabaptism into the twentieth century increasingly frustrating and suspect. A new interpretation of Anabaptism followed. Interestingly, in America "ingroup" and "outgroup" redefinitions are proceeding apace suggesting that the dynamics requiring new insights are broadly shared.

Even though an "outgroup" historian of the Anabaptists, Stayer cannot escape his own ideology which is undoubtedly related to his peculiar ethnos. He is, his readers are appropriately informed, "a profane historian with a liberal perspective" who "can better identify with the realpolitical ethic of Zwingli and Hubmaier than with that of any of (his) other protagonists". This biographical revelation offers some indication as to the source and definitions of the categories "crusading", "realpolitical", "apolitical moderates", and "radical apoliticism" which do not appear in the sixteenth century literature, and according to some interpreters, are foreign intrusions into the world of that century. To make Zwingli into the image of John C. Bennett seems as inappropriate from one perspective, as creating Pilgram Marpeck in the image of modern day Mennonites from another. But then each of us works from the "mood" of our unique ethnic identity.

This exploitation of James Stayer's excellent study for present purposes obviously does not exhaust the issue of a sociology of Mennonite historiography. A possible direction in the application of the insights of the sociology of knowledge to church history, however, is hopefully established.
NOTES

1 H. H. Walsh, "Canada and the Church: A Job for the Historians", Queen's Quarterly, LXI (Spring, 1954), 78; and "The Challenge of Canadian Church History to its Historians", Canadian Journal of Theology, V (1959), 163.

2 Carl Berger, "Introduction", in Approaches to Canadian History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), vii.

3 A good introductory summary of this new awareness, which in itself provides evidence of the sociology of knowledge in operation, is provided by Martin E. Marty, "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America", Church History, XLII (March, 1972), 5-21.


5 James M. Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1972).


9 This suggestion was earlier made with reference to Canadian religious studies by N. K. Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: An Historical Analysis", Church History, XXXVIII (Dec., 1969), 506-523.

10 See esp. Luckmann, op. cit.

11 Following a rereading of F. Engels, some recent Marxist historiography has also modified a rigorous überbau-unterbau determinism. e.g. "Die Vorstellungen der Menschen der Menschen sind nicht mechanistisch aus der jeweiligen Klassekampfsituation abzuleiten", Gerhard Zschaebitz, Zur Mitteldeutschen Wiedertaufcrbewegung nach dem Grossen Bauernkrieg (Berlin: Ruetten und Loening, 1955), 17.


13 Peter Berger, "'Sincerity' and 'Authenticity' in Modern Society", The Public Interest, XXXI (Spring, 1973), 84.


Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 14.


"One can only conclude that the functioning ego, while guarding individuality, is far from isolated, for a kind of communality links egos in a mutual activation. Something in the ego process, then, and something in the social process is - well, identical." Erik H. Erikson, Identity: Youth and Crisis (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1968), 224. This is but one reference to a concept Erikson develops here and elsewhere. Church historians well be especially acquainted with his: Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1955).


This position is implicit in Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 ed.).


28 Assimilation in American Life, 27.

29 Ibid., 38.


31 Ibid.

32 Assimilation in American Life, 53.


36 See: Marcel Trudel and Genevieve Join, Canadian History Textbooks: A Comparative Study (Ottawa, Ontario: Queen's Printers, 1970); and Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Book II Education (Ottawa, Ontario: Queen's Printers, 1968), chapter XVII.


38 See for example: S. N. Eisenstadt, "Intellectuals and Tradition", Daedalus (Spring, 1972), 1-20.


40 Joshua A. Fishman, "Childhood Indoctrination for Minority-Group Membership", Daedalus (Spring, 1961), 329-349.

41 Assimilation in American Life, 62.

4.3 Without necessarily accepting all the implications of Parsons' analysis, an appropriate definition of "ideology" as here used is "a system of beliefs, held in common by the members of a collectivity, i.e., a society, or a sub-collectivity of one - including a movement deviant from the main culture of the society - a system of ideas which is oriented to the evaluative integration of the collectivity, by the interpretation of the empirical nature of the collectivity and of the situation in which it is placed, the processes by which its members are collectively oriented, and their relation to the future course of events" in Talcott Parsons, The Social System (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1951), 349. The Theoretical framework for my understanding of ideology is informed by: Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System", in David E. Apter, ed., Ideology and Discontent (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 47-75.


4.4 The Mennonites share both ethnic and denominational characteristics. See: Francis, "The Russian Mennonites: From Religious to Ethnic Group", op. cit.


Anabaptists and the Sword, 8-9

Ibid., 13-14.

Ibid., 21.

Ibid., 20.

Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 20.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid., 22.

Ibid., 3.

e.g.: Walter Klaassen, op. cit.


The work of Bainton, Williams and Littell generally shared the earlier Mennonite interpretation, whereas Stayer's reading is very similar to that of Walter Klaassen, op. cit.

Anabaptists and the Sword, 6.

Ibid., 22.

Ibid., 3.

e.g.: Walter Klaassen, op. cit.