

ENTREVISTA AMB BRYAN WILSON¹

Juan M. García Jorba

Bryan R. Wilson és una de les figures cabdals de la Sociologia de la Religió i tota una institució a Anglaterra. Imparteix classes de Sociologia a All Souls, Oxford, i cal destacar les seves aportacions a l'estudi del sectarisme i de la secularització. *Religion in Secular Society* (1966), *Religious Sects* (1970), *Magic and the Millennium* (1975), *Contemporary Transformation of Religion* (1976), *Sects and Society* (1978) i *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (1982), juntament amb la compilació *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements* (1981), són un bon exemple de la seva excepcional producció. A continuació es detalla el contingut de l'entrevista d'hora i mitja de duració que es va mantenir a les seves habitacions privades a All Souls el dia 10 de Juny de 1993.

J.M. Mr. Wilson, you are one of the most outstanding professors in Sociology of Religion worldwide. You are considered one of the most authorized voices in this field. How did your interest for religions begin?

B.W. Well, initially my interests were with sectarian movements and that began, I think, because I knew a number of people who belonged to different sects, and the sort of question which I asked myself was whether they belonged to those particular sects because they were the sort of people they were, or whether being the sort of people they were they came to belong to the sects. It's not a question which has an easy answer. In fact, there is no answer to a question put like that, but that is what stimulated my initial interest in religion.

J.M. You have worked intensively on the secularization process in western societies. Considering the institutional, the beliefs and the behaviour aspects, which of them would be, in your opinion, more useful to set up the secularization degree of a given society? Could we find significant correlations between them to define religion?

B.W. I tend to think that secularization must be looked at as a structural phenomenon. What I think of as secularization is the process in which beliefs and practice and institutions declines in significance. It's not to say that they disappear, it's only to say they decline in significance. So that what one's thinking of here is a process which has consequences for the running of the social system, for the operation of the social system. When the major institutions of society cease to operate on supernaturalist assumptions, then we may say they are being secularized and, in the long term, this has happened to all the major agencies which function in society. So, it's very much from my point of view a structural question, not a question of whether people are believing less than they did, or not believing so intensely as they did, although that may be also happening, and there may be some correlation between the two; there may be some concomitant relationship. But essentially I think one wants to look at the nature of the social system and not at the character of individual religious commitment. You asked then if we could find significant correlations between them to define religion? I think a definition of religion has to be a substantive definition. As I see it, it has to deal with the phenomenon of belief, practice in relation to the supernatural. So that I would use the concept of the supernatural as a necessary element in the definition of religion. This, I think, has the advantage of conforming to what the laymen in the street believe. To use the word religion he doesn't automatically think of marxism or football, or pop concerts, all of which are sometimes said to have the same functions as religion. But there can be different substantive phenomena which fulfill at least some of the same functions as religion it doesn't make them religious. So in this sense I would want to use the substantive definition and that definition would necessary include some conception of the supernatural and the relationship to, or attitudes towards, that supernatural sphere or entity, or principle or whatever it might be, but it would be something which is beyond the merely empirical knowledge of human beings.

¹ Aquesta entrevista va poder ser realitzada gràcies a la concessió a l'autor d'una borsa de viatge per part de la CIRIT. Aquesta possibilitat estava contemplada quan la Direcció General de Recerca del Comissionat per a Universitats i Recerca de la Generalitat de Catalunya li va concedir una beca F.I.

J.M. So, we could see your definition as closer to Tylor's definition of religion than Geertz's...
B.W. Perhaps, yes... The real contrast would be with someone like Thomas Luckmann. In practice we agree about a good deal, but in terms of the definition of religion we have quite a different standpoint.

J.M. What could be the most important causes of the slope of religion in western societies in the last two centuries?

B.W. That's a very large question...

J.M. It's true. But you have to understand that having this opportunity of being able to speak with you, it's nearly an obligation to ask you about your basic considerations of secularization. Also, you have been one of the pioneers in the theory of secularization in Sociology and one of its most important diffusers.

B.W. Yes, the decline of religion has obviously got many causes, but I think if one had to decide on the principal factors one would refer to the development of rationalization. The rationalization not only of social organization, but also of the way in which people think. So that the attempt to cope with the world to deal with phenomena in a pragmatic and empirical way is something rather different from the way in which people in the past, in the distant past, sought to understand their circumstances and to relate to them. So that I think if we take rationalization in a broad sense we can include the development of science and technology and include new patterns of thought, often arising in consequence of the development of science. So that, in everyday life we are all obliged, because of the increasingly rational structure of society, to behave ourselves more rationally and to respond to those rational structures. Man has created a context which is in itself increasingly rational. We organize our lives in rational lines, we alter the climate, we make the day into night with electricity or other means of illumination, we alter the context of living by air conditioning, by central heating, we create contexts which are congenial to us, and we do it all by the application of technical means. And technical means are rational means. So that in this sense we all have to know how to deal with an increasingly rationalized structure, not saying that there aren't problems, of course there are problems, and I'm not saying it's necessarily any better I'm simply saying that this is the sort of world we have constructed, and the way we have to deal with it has to conform with that world. So that if one looks at the mental processes, one can say we are more rational, because the world is more rational, the environment is more rational. It's a matter of reconstructing our ways of thought to cope with the world; which eliminates the supernatural, or at least relegates it to remote corners of our experience. It doesn't disappear altogether; and there are some areas of experience which don't respond to the rational. We have certain arbitrary experiences which can't be rationalized; the sex drive, death for example, those two things alone, and there may be others which are arbitrary items which cannot be easily rationalized, and yet, we do cope with some of the consequences of these phenomena in a more and more rational way. We use institutes say retirement which is anticipatory death, we take people out of the social system and set them in important areas by retirement, so that we can calculate when they, in some sense, cease to be living functionaries at full level; or with the approach of birth control we use technical means to eliminate the consequences of what otherwise would have been arbitrary action. So that in some sense, even these areas are subject to rational planning and considerations. So this would be the focal point, that I would seize upon as the principal factor in explaining and defining religion.

J.M. Lately, some sociologists have realized that there could be several evidences of a hypothetical slope of the secularization process in western societies and also of religious and spiritual reactivation in general. Do you agree with that? Are we facing a new fight for the hegemony of minds or is it a peaceful coexistence situation?

B.W. Well, religion persists, of course... even although it's less important in the social system, and even though we attach less importance to it. It doesn't mean to say that religion disappears. There are, as we've already said, areas in which reference to religious principles, or accord with religious dictates, is still important in people's life, and, of course, there are areas of belief which religion explains -if I can put that word in inverted commas- the "inexplicable". After all, death is understandable in medical terms, and in biological terms, but it's not quite understandable always in moral terms, and people ask moral and emotional questions, which don't have answers that science can provide. They may not have answers at all from the point of view of some people. But religion, at least, if it doesn't answer those questions wholly,

provides some structure, some rhetorics and framework of discourse within which the answer can be perhaps unfolded. So that people will persist in seeking answers to questions about meaning and purpose. Even though we may say the meaning and purpose are beyond comprehension, nonetheless people may still want to raise those questions, and to seek some sort of satisfactory answer. And they may be satisfied with answers which in the end are totally improbable and not empirically justified. But they seek and celebrate certain answers, or use certain rhetorical formulae, in order to cope with the otherwise inexplicable and unpredictable. So, in that sense, I would see religion not as disappearing, but as persisting in certain interstices of the social system, certain areas of emotional significance. After all, if someone dies, who is close to you, there is nothing rational to do about it, and no rational system will help or sway the emotional responses that people wish to make. The best that can be done is to join in some shared rhetoric of a kind which sways the emotions, which provides people with some sort of answer although, of course, it's not empirically an answer, but it's something moving towards an answer in the sense of stilling or quietening the emotional response. Anyone who goes to a modern funeral recognizes that somehow, because we have fewer forms, because the forms have fallen into decay, everyone shares a sense of inadequacy in the face of this experience. It's hard to know what to say to the close relatives, it's hard to know how to interpret the event. If it's the death of someone in the prime of life or if it's a young person, it becomes even more traumatic, and it's at this point that some religious formulae, and exercise of certain sentiments, the use of certain phrases, the joint and shared activity of a certain corporate or collective feeling, may be quite stimulating and useful to people. It may help them cope with the situation. So in this sense I wouldn't rule out the role of a religion. But I think we have to recognize the limits of that role, and the points at which that role can be performed. You asked also about the rise of religious and spiritual movements in general?

J.M. Yes... Do you think we are facing a revival of religions? If so, would it be a contribution to another phase of social tension among believers and non believers?

B.W. Well... I think the emergence of new religions is itself an eloquent commentary on the decline of traditional religions. It is in itself a suggestion that those old religious forms no longer satisfy, or are no longer understood, or involve symbolism to which people can no longer respond, either because they are uneducated in terms of that symbolism, or because that symbolism no longer meets the emotional needs of the present time. I think we must expect new religious movements to arise. I think they are entirely consistent with the process of secularization because these movements are quite widely and readily recognized as not like, not the same as the old traditional religion. They don't replace it, they don't fulfill the same functions. Many of them, of course, fulfill private functions; they have very little comment on the social system as a whole. They exist in the peripheral areas. Our society is so complex, of course, that there are always people who can live within this society without living within the general social system, without contributing to it, or being involved in the major areas of activity, in the economy, in the political process, in the judicial process, in the educational process. They can contract out. And our systems are so complex that there are old people who can contract out. The system won't support them in the way that it has supported monks in the old monastic tradition of the Catholic Church, who also in a sense contracted out, at least in part, but they were legitimately contracted out, because they belonged to and were approved by the dominant religious tradition. In the new religious movements people are not sponsored by, or supported by the major religious tradition. They have contracted out of the way of this society, without that legitimization, because in this society we have a plural system. People are allowed to entertain beliefs of a quite diverse kind from those of the majority. So that, I think one can understand how these movements arise. I think one has to recognize however, that in spite of all the publicity, in spite of the public concern, there are quite peripheral movements. They may absorb the total energies of certain individuals who belong to them, and that may be regarded as tragic or traumatic by their relatives who don't belong to them. And we've seen that many times over. But in terms of the wider society, they're not really important so that they get a great deal more publicity than perhaps they merit in terms of their real impact on the society. Of course, people are still somewhat conformist. The majority of people expect everyone to behave like them, and to respond in similar ways to their own, to the imperatives of life, and for many people it's perhaps difficult to accept that some people that won't respond in that way will in fact contract out, will lead a different kind of life. And so, the emotions which are aroused are sometimes of envy, sometimes of resentment, sometimes of hostility to people who are not pulling their weight, contributing to the wider society, who are taking opportunities which most people can't afford to take, and so on. So, there are many

complex reactions to new religious movements. But I think we have to expect that they will be there, because our society is so complex that some people will always be able to opt out of the major areas of activity in concern.

J.M. Most of the new religious movements have come from the eastern perspectives and plannings. Then, could we affirm that there has been a stop in the ability of religious innovation in the West?

B.W. I think I would take issue with the question because I think there are quite a number of Western but not necessarily Christian new religious movements. You must consider the human potential movements which are quite powerful, which are quasi-religious movements, and which are quite significant in terms of their numbers in their memberships. For example, many people have undergone courses in Scientology or the Est Network, or other types of human potential movements. So I think one has both superrational movements. These movements say: "we will help you to be more rational, to cope with the work, because we have access to the supernatural, which is itself supremely rational". Or one has completely the opposite type of response, movements of an Eastern provenance, the ones you've mentioned and others, which tend to say: "We have something which is more powerful than rationality. We have access to the occult. We have access to spiritual forces, which are outside the realm of the rational and which are more powerful and of more abiding significance than, say, your traditional religion in the West", name it Christianity, or any kind of established or orthodox religion as Islam, or Judaism or any other.

I think the part of the appeal of the Eastern movements is, of course, that they are exotic. They come from cultures which are strange and different. And their appeal is partly that those cultures appear to be in some way more authentic than Western culture with its high degree of technology and rationality, but also, as people tend to see it, with a high degree of corruption and pollution, and the irrationality of its rationality; the irrational consequences of rational development so far. So, in some ways, this appeal is something simpler, more immediate, not overlain by the sort of power structure which exists in Christianity, for example, traditional Christianity. So I think Eastern religion has this kind of attraction for some Western people. I think there's also the element in the appeal of new religions, that they very often suggest that deep down inside, the individual has resources, or has the capacity to respond to forces that are outside himself. So that he may reawaken these forces, by master, by guru, by some ancient or more ancient than Christian God, or principle at work in the universe or in terms of some human power which has been either lost, or overlain for centuries, but which can now be reactivated. So, I think there are many possible points of attraction here, and some of these movements are capable of making their appeal in both sorts of terms. Scientology which claims to be supremely rational, and which regard Christianity as all right but unsystematic, or Buddhism as quite insightful but ultimately not coherent, not really useful in the form in which it's being offered, that the Buddha and Christ were both people with insight, but those insights were not organized properly; whereas Elron Hubbard has put the thing together in a systematic way, which can be taught or experienced through a series of programmed courses in a hierarchic order so that you can have a totally rational perception, and eliminate all the irrational from your experience. But you do this in some reference to an ultimate dimension which can be identified with God. So that for those that are inside, you can either take it as a rational technique or you can take it as an ultimate metaphysic. So that, in this case you have both sorts of appeal, but I think that either of those possible appeals may be capitalized on by any new religious movement.

J.M. Several authors define the 60's as the starting point of this trend towards new ways of spirituality. In which way could we consider the forms and contents as really new of the so-called new religious movements?

B.W. Well, I think that there have been new religions for a very long time. Christianity was once a new religion, every sect in Christendom. Of course, we have more in protestant, in Northern Europe than you know in Southern Europe, but each one of these, even although they are several centuries old, were once a new religion, and these new religions tend to have some characteristics in common. In particular, they tend to be lay. That is to say, they disbelieve in or will do away with a clergy because in some sense a new religion tends to regard the leaders of old religion as corrupt, and this is partly why they emerge with a message, and they say the new religion is for you, we are simple people or something of the kind, there are simple principles, you have direct access to spiritual power, you don't need to go through a priest or a mediator, all this is available. In fact, those priests and mediators who were supposed to put you in touch

with salvation, or in touch with the divine, were in fact hindrances. They prevented you from coming close to the divine. When you get rid of the clergy you will have more direct access. So this, in a schismatic way, is in part a typical message from a new religious movement, that you too can have direct access, you can be a priest, maybe you can be a God. This is the strong element in new religious movements: that your possibilities of salvation are much greater than you realized before, "we can show you how you will achieve that salvation...", in fact you may become like God.

J.M. It's just like primitive Christianity...

B.W. Yes, yes...

J.M. Some authors seem to identify new religious movements with sects. Do you agree with that? Would a conceptual discrimination be necessary between both sects and new religious movements for a better approach of the analysis of these phenomena?

B.W. Well... I think, as I've said, old sects were only new religions, so in some sense there is a continuity of type. But what one has to recognize in the modern context, shall we say in the context since the last war, at any rate since last four or five decades, is that the spectrum from which ideas could be drawn has widened. The old sects were mainly, almost all of them, but mainly, certainly, drawn from Christian themes and Christian principles. Typically they went back to the Bible. They found some text or texts which they took as being more important, or neglected, and they emphasized them, and they set these texts and the principles involved in them over against the teaching of the church. They may have been texts about the second coming of Jesus, a very characteristic point of departure for sects, but not only that; it may have been the fact that in the Scriptures there is no warrant for clergy. The Scriptures do not institute a clergy and therefore they say the clergy are illegitimate, or... it may have been something of this kind. So the old sects tended to emerge within the parameters of Christian conceptions reinterpreting Scriptures, reinterpreting the nature of man's life on Earth in some sort of Christian terms. But since the end of the last war the arena in which they can exercise, or the corpus of understanding a knowledge from which they can draw, has widened because of the introduction into the West, or the knowledge in the West increasingly at a popular level, of Oriental religion for one thing, or the development of scientific techniques and their application to religion as another. So that from a situation in which almost all sects were within the Christian context or were within the context of another religious body, Islam or Judaism, but were still part of, or a variant of, a central tradition, now we have sects which draw on religious traditions which are alien to the culture in which they arise, and which provide another source of legitimation, particularly in Judaism, and Buddhism. But not only established old religions, but movements like Theosophy -which of course is a little earlier than that period- which are eclectic and which seek to draw together strands from various religious traditions, and some from spiritualism, from paganism, from supposedly pre-Christian, or ancient roots of wisdom, and they can put those together in almost any of a number of forms. These can be drawn upon in a way which is quite eclectic. And this is true not only in the West, it's also true in the Orient. It's true in Japan, for example, where you can find a sect where the clerical members dress like nuns, in the Christian traditional nuns, with the black and white outfit, where they have scriptures which are written in Esperanto although all the members are Japanese, and which are called the voice of the sphinx, which of course is a reference to ancient Egyptian wisdom, and it's all in the context of a somewhat shintoist religious practice. So there's no end to the possible amalgamation of ideas, combination of ideas, which conform the teachings or the practices of a new religious movement. It's a much wider canvas than it used to be, so that in some sense these new movements, or some of these new movements, fall outside the parameters of what you can conceive of old style sectarianism.

J.M. In Spain, as in other western countries, there has appeared a strong increase against sectarianism. In your opinion, which would be the main factors that have led to that response? What role do you attribute to the organizations for the defence of the family and to the media in this social reaction?

B.W. Yes... when you say sectarianism here you are referring to the new religious movements, not to the traditional sects...

J.M. Exactly. I'm using here the sect concept as an *emic* category.

B.W. I think that people are very often afraid of, as we've already mentioned, of something different and something new, which falls outside their general experience and which persuades members to distinguish themselves or separate themselves from the wider society. I think that undoubtedly the fact that sectarian movements teach something different from the majority, is of course the first point of objection which the majority have. People who are quite religious will put up with the secular more easily than with the different religions; and the very fact that people espouse a religious position or a religious conception which differs from their own is a type of affront. Secular people can be regarded as lapsed but not as hostile, or as divergent but sectarians have made a positive commitment to something else. So in this sense they attract a rather different reaction which is one of a negative kind. The new religious movements of course attract this hostility now much more fully than the traditional sects, because the traditional sects partly have become familiar, people have become used to them. Partly also the extreme responses over time to any movement tend to become tempered, either the movement begins to accommodate a little, and one can see that in many sects. Alternatively people become used to it and in some way the traditional religion becomes looser, and certainly in the case of Anglicanism, and I think it would be true with Catholicism, there's a growing tolerance of divergences of opinion within the churches, certainly among the lay members. So that given this divergence, sectarianism no longer seems to be so black as against white as it used to be. It becomes greyer because the opinions, doctrines and attitudes of the major churches become greyer. You follow what I mean by greyer? Well. The new religious movements of course offer a more profound challenge because they are so diametrically different. Their assumptions are fundamentally divergent and in consequence, there's no need to mute or to temper the hostility of their reaction. The fact is that many of them have appealed especially to young people, and that's quite expectable because old people are not so likely to change their religious position - as one says, old dogs don't learn new tricks, but young dogs do learn new tricks - and of course new religious movements are on offer. They are available. They are in the market, and it's mainly young people they are likely to attract and, of course, it's mainly young people whom they try to attract. So that one has this particular concern for the welfare of the young; now that's a very complex concern in our society. The emphasis is shifted very powerfully from the old to the young. The younger you are, the more important you are in some respects in our society, partly because of the idea of progress, partly because of the idea of continuity, partly because of changing secular techniques in the sense that whereas at one time the man who had worked many years in a job was highly valued, because he was experienced, now to have worked for a long time in a job is to become redundant and outmoded because techniques change, and there are very few jobs in which long experience is a positive asset. In most jobs you need to retrain, to re-tool, to learn new techniques, so that experience becomes a positive hindrance. It gets in the way of learning and of course as one gets older, one learns this quickly. Learning has become a primary focus in the society in which rapid social change is occurring. People need to learn. The people who learn best, the most adequately, are the young. So that in this sense the young are the focus of a great deal of attention, and it's those young people who are so highly valued, and are on whom society places so much reliance. If they are then summoned, if they are attracted or seduced by a new religious movement, there is a sense of threat to the continuity of society itself. What will happen if a lot of young people become Hare Krishna? What will happen if they all become Scientologists? So there is in the background a fear of the subversion of our society by virtue of adherence to new religious movements. So because the young are attracted, this is given a very special impetus to the antagonism felt against the new religious movements. I think it's also the case, of course, that the media have played a part. We know a great deal more today about what is happening in the world than we knew forty, fifty years ago, because we have instantaneous transmission of information. That information is set in a competitive context: one body of information is set over against another in terms of its competition for a place in the news media. Only the most sensational information will make it to the point of public presentation. Dull statistics are much less likely to get through than startling statistics. New religious movements are very much more exciting than regular church services which have been repeated now for centuries. There's not going to be any news about how many people were in church last Sunday. Except for sociological and statistical purposes this is of no concern to the wider society. But if there was a festival of light, if there were new people, new religious movements emerging which were spectacular and different, sensational, and in which underlying element of threat to our society, to our culture, to our young people, could be presented, then this would make the headlines. And this, I think, has been a very significant factor in promoting fears in new movements, and in giving them a very

important public image. It must be said, of course, that the new movements have themselves courted publicity, sometimes even in slightly negative ways; they are quite capable of taking their cases to court, and of being exposed to the media more and more, and this of course in some sense has advantages for them, even if they lose the legal cases.

J.M. That would be a way to become more popular.

B.W. Yes, their image is more evident.

J.M. They could even appear in front of young people as victims... Victims of the religious intolerance.

B.W. Yes, exactly... yes... indeed. Oh, yes, they're certainly that too.

J.M. What do you think about the concept of destructive sects, or destructive cults?

B.W. Well, of course one has to see, to ask what is being destroyed, and of course all religions destroy something. They destroy illusions, they destroy sentiments, they destroy relationships which existed before... If someone joined any religion, this would disrupt relationships. I think that having that, however, one has to recognize that some of the new religious movements are very radical in terms of what they teach and in terms of how they expect their members to live. So that in this sense they appear to be destroying or threatening more of the social fabric than would be the case with traditional religion, which is already accommodated. But I think one has to ask what is destructive about them, what is it that people fear will be destroyed. To some extent relationships may be destroyed, of course. If people are alienated from family or kinsfolk there may be a certain destructiveness of the fabric of society. If many people were to join new religious movements then the whole fabric of society may be certainly altered, and some people would see that as destruction of tradition, destruction of customs and practices which are familiar and which are to some extent treasured and which of course give people a sense of what is familiar in life. So one can see that one can represent new religious movements as destructive. It's not difficult to do so. We could go further, however, because there are cases, and they're familiar cases like Jonestown, and Wako, and perhaps some others, in which new religious movements have effectively destroyed their own members, or have allowed their own members to be destroyed. One must expect an element of pathology in religion that can be pathological phenomena as well as phenomena which are simply different. So, I would be careful about using the word destructive myself. But one recognizes that people may have cause for concern; and particularly families whose young members join new religious movements maybe have good reason to be upset. So I wouldn't deny that some of these movements have their influence, which is alien to the interests of the community, but I think it's very easy to exaggerate that too.

J.M. And so, what do you think about the relation between conversion and the concept of destructivity applied to the personality?

B.W. Well... I think all religious movements are in the business of converting. And converting usually has the implication of changing individual's character, not only his beliefs, but also the moral premises on which he behaves, and the characteristics of his behavior. So that in this sense there's likely to be a transformation of the individual by virtue of joining a movement. Whether one evaluates this, of course as good or bad depends on certain other considerations which are outside my own sphere of reference.

J.M. Are we maybe witnessing a progressive medicalization of diverse aspects of the religious life? Would it be a mechanism to reinforce the transition of religious beliefs and practices to the private life?

B.W. As I see it, contemporary religion is very considerably inclined towards privatization. Personal beliefs, personal commitment cease to be a public matter in some regards. There was a time, not so long ago, when to go to church was an obligation, a duty, and in going people thought they were doing a duty to God and indirectly, to society. That concept of religious obligation has very much dissipated. It's not disappeared, but it's certainly dissipated. And today people don't see their religious activity as a duty. They see it as a personal preference, and of course to some extent that applies to the moral teachings of religion too. Morality becomes a matter partly of preference and not a matter of public concern and public obligation. So that we see an assault not only from changing religious practices, but also the idea of common morality. Morality can be challenged because it's no longer recognized as being legitimated by religions as a supernaturalist commandment, and because people want to do what they want to do and believe they have

a right to do what they want to do; that in itself legitimates what they do. Obviously, there is a point in which the criminal law might want to operate if people want to do things which are declared to be not in the interest of the others. But it's also clear that criminal law in most Western countries has gradually withdrawn from certain areas of moral concern. It's withdrawn from aspects of sexuality: adultery, of course, at one time was sinful and criminal, homosexuality was criminal, prostitution was criminal or near criminal, suicide was criminal... All of these areas of personal choice have gradually been recognized as no longer a concern of the wider public body. But, of course, once you lose that common commitment, then the public body, as such, is less constrained by common and shared concern. So that, in some way, the fabric of society begins to fray at the edges, because we are no longer keepers of each other's conscience, we are much less concerned with each other's moral comportment than we were. There may be a limit beyond which that can not go without social effects... (Phone interruption) Where was I? Yes, I think that what you're referring to is the shift from what we might call common moral custom and control to a much more technical and in this sense medical conception of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior... My impression is that this trend may be stronger in Latin countries than in Anglosaxon countries. I think in general the idea of brainwashing is something which is not very widely regarded as an appropriate concept for religious movements; that there is an element of voluntarism. Of course, there is an element of persuasion, there always was. Perspective converts are themselves susceptible to persuasion and when they are converted they are persuaded, and the persuasion may come from other people who for one reason or another have powerful influence over the perspective converts. But at the same time people still have an element of free will, and in most circumstances it is short of what is specifically criminal. I think it's the case that most converts are themselves voluntary converts, and not coerced converts, because coercion is something which is extremely difficult to apply in a religious context in a free society, in Western societies... And as far as I can see the possibilities of regarding patterns of belief and religious practice as pathological, in any strictly medical sense of it, are very limited. It may be one of the ways in which perhaps legal representations are made as a powerful, and in some sense authenticating categorization of religion as dangerous. But I think that there are strict limits to what can be done in that direction. So I'm not unduly pessimistic as it were about that prospect.

J.M. Mr. Wilson, one can identify a trend to criminalize the activities as well as the intentions of sects and new religious movements. What is your opinion about the potential social hazard of sects and new religious movements?

B.W. I think for the society as a whole these phenomena are relatively small and insignificant. But I think for people who become involved, they can of course be totally disrupted of their previous way of life; and this is something which they themselves, the converts that is, may well recognize. They may recognize that their way of life is going to change presumably if they join the new religious movement. They accept the idea that that change is going to occur. They're prepared to abandon certain elements of their previous existence, perhaps most of them, in order to espouse some new and compelling idea. Of course, if you are not yourself persuaded of the desirability of this change, you will regard those who make the change in some sense as destroying their lives. This is, of course, what many parents have thought about the young people who have joined radical movements of one sort or another. And in terms of the conventional wisdom they are destroying their conventional lives, but they are opting to take up another kind of life. I wouldn't like to make judgements, in most instances certainly, of how well warranted that change is. I've not made it myself which is its own commentary on the situation from my point of view. But I'm prepared to allow that there may be people and there may be circumstances in which fully conscious, shall we say rational -in the sense of people in command of their own mental processes- make a decision to give up a great deal of what conventionally has been regarded as an appropriate way of life in our society. It was the same for people who entered monasteries and nunneries. Not all of them did so entirely voluntarily, of course, in the past, but one can suppose that some people may make the choice to contract out of the normal social relationships and circumstances which most of us find acceptable. And I think one must be careful about making judgements about that.

J.M. Certain social sectors accuse these movements as criminal. There are two plausible explanations for this fact: "society is looking for justice, and does not tolerate these behaviours", or "it is a self-protecting argument versus alternative ways of living". Which of them would you back?

W.B. Well, I'd maintain a certain distance from... both these positions as they are exposed here, as far as I follow exactly the thrust of the argument. Of course, within society people have a stake within the existing relationships that prevail, within the predictive assumptions they can make, about how to lead their lives and how others should lead their lives, and what relationships they should have, and what facilities, institutions should provide, and so forth. People are committed to that, and are threatened by anything which tends to disrupt those relationships and institutions. I think that the tendency to criminalize movements is one which is potentially very dangerous, unless what they do is in clear contravention of the criminal law as it would normally apply apart from religious movements. I think when you try to control what people believe or the practices as long as they're innocent practices which manifest those beliefs, then you move into an very dangerous dynamic, and I would have thought into a ultimately unsuccessful type of legislation or type of litigation. I don't think you can actually criminalize beliefs. Behavior perhaps, but not beliefs.

J.M. Why do you think most of the moral arguments used to accuse sects are not used against other practices or institutions?

B.W. Well, I think that religion or religious commitment is perhaps of a somewhat different nature from most other commitments, in the sense that it deals with ultimate values, it deals with ultimate legitimations, and in consequence it appears to be more radical or potentially more radical than is the case of, shall we say, a political system or something of that kind. The political system is the most obvious analogy of educational ideology, but an educational ideology is very often itself underpinned by religious oquaso, religious assumptions and premises. But I think that because religion deals with final beliefs, and can demand total commitment and total obligation, it appears a very much more fundamental and threatening possibility than would be comparable philosophies in comparable patterns of behaviour in non religious institutions. Eh... I've another thought about that... Dissappeared!

J.M. Sects and new religious movements are under suspicion. The complete agreement, the total compromise with the ideas and practices of these movements is considered something dangerous and also reactionary. Must we consider these organizations and movements as a reaccionist social element or, on the contrary, innovative?

B.W. Well, I think the judgement of reaction or innovation is something which would require one to expose certain basic premises of one's philosophy. It's possible that a religious movement may be regarded as initially innovative and subsequently reactive, for example the peyote cult among North American Indians. If you know this movement...? Yes? The peyote cult was clearly, from the point of view of many tribesmen, highly innovative because it was a cult which introduced practices which were non tribal, which came from other tribes, which came from somewhere else, into tribal practice. So that here you had innovative movement. The older tribesmen, the traditionalists, regarded it as an innovation because peyote was not part of what their traditional practice had been. But within the course of two generations, peyotism had sufficiently integrated itself, with certain Pan-Indian ideas. For new generation indians, the grandchildren of those who thought peyote was innovative, saw this as highly reactionary because it maintained certain Pro-Indian, Pan-indian positions which were quite different from their own conception of the world. So the same movement can be regarded in different ways at different times. I think that looking at new religious movements and sects, sects are in some ways both reactionary and innovative because, of course, they're reinterpreting Scriptures which means they are putting forward ideas, which may not be entirely new, but they are new to the public to whom they put them. So that in a sense they tell people things which are new to them, although they may be ancient and recurrent themes in Christian history. And this appears to them as an innovation. But the effect of that may be to stipulate a way of life which looks like a way of life which comes from a more rigorous age than the present one, so that both perspectives can be in focus. According to how you stand in terms of this movement, and how you view it in terms of its wider history, some of the new religious movements which draw on the exotic sources, Buddhist and Hinduist, also look like reactionary. But their reaction is out of a different culture. So you have the sense of the introduction of ideas, which are new to the culture, to the society in which this new religious movement migrates, the West in particular, but which are a call back to some ancient wisdom or ancient pattern of belief or practice. So

you have a reactive element at that level. Human potential movements, on the other hand, and perhaps some other movements, are essentially concerned with progress, in what they believe the world of mankind should develop. So in a way it depends on who is making this judgement, what judgement will be made.

J.M. Individuality vs. collectivity. Do you think this would be the key issue in the controversy about sectarianism? Perhaps we must see it as a tension between the social majority against the social minorities?

B.W. Well... yes... sects tend to be collective organizations, if they are themselves communitarian or radical. What I mean is that the radical sectarian experience tends to be the introduction of the individual into a society which has a collective life and collective attitudes to the world. Typical Christian sects are highly integrated internally. I think of Jehova's Witnesses or other groups which probably don't operate in Spain, but which nonetheless, have a way of life which is intensely social within, but is maintained as distinct from the wider society without. So in this sense sects do have a collective disorientation. This is not to say that the individualism is destroyed, but it's expressed within rather different parameters, perhaps more restrictive parameters than would be the case if these people were not part of the sectarian movement. On the other hand, one has movements of a rather different kind. The human potential movements which demand only a segmentary commitment, that is the individual who is a Scientologist or who takes Scientology courses, or Transcendental Meditation courses, does so as only one facet of his life operation. And what those movements offer is to empower the individual for his everyday life experiences. They don't say, "we will withdraw you from society"; they say, "we will enable you to get on in society very much better than hitherto". So in this sense these movements are highly individualist in certain respects. Of course, people go through the same sort of courses, they are trained in the same programme, but it's all expected to empower them in their own life circumstances and in their own life activities. So that, in a sense, these movements can be seen as emphasizing the privatized character of religion, individualist orientation of religious people. What they offer is to give them a technique with which to manipulate the world. Whereas the old style sectarianism was in a very much more collectivist context, in which you were supposed not to be concerned about getting on in the world but to make your life within the sect. So they're a completely different pattern of orientation.

J.M. Do you think this social reaction against sects and new religious movements could reinforce the trend to a secularization process? If so, we could be facing a paradoxical phenomenon: the rise of new religious movements would lead to another slope of the religion in western societies...

B.W. I'm inclined to think it doesn't reinforce secularization, which I see as stemming from a rather deeper laid structure or circumstances, and from public responses. It seems to me that secularization is a much bigger process going on in society, not really fundamentally interested in reactions to new religious movements. Quite a lot of the reactions to new religious movements stems from the churches themselves, which are seeking to defend and protect their own religious position against these new interlopers who come into the religious scene, or what they see as dangerous corruptions or paradoxical consequences of movements which call themselves religious, which, of course, for the traditional religions may not be a legitimate consideration. So, I don't really see this reaction as promoting secularization.

J.M. I ask you this question from a hypothetic point of view. Taking into account the characteristics of these groups which protagonize this increase of religiosity rates, and the fact that they are perceived as dangerous because of these same characteristics. Would it be possible that this could create a social response against religion in general?

B.W. I see secularization as a more fundamental phenomenon, which relates more to the structure of society, to beliefs of individuals, of course. If large numbers of people depart from the churches, this confirms the process of secularization, and makes it very clear that the society in fact relies less and less on religious and supernatural conceptions. But this is more a confirmation of the process than a stimulation of it, I would think.

J.M. Lately in Spain, many sects have contacted social scientists looking for some advice and ultimately for some justification. Is this a proper strategy? Which should be the social scientist's attitude in this case?

B.W. Well... I think the social scientist, as I see it, remains neutral. It's not his business to undermine religion. It's not his business to sustain either sectarian or public religion. I think it's beyond the domain of the social scientist, it's beyond his competences. I think, however, that there may arise circumstances in which a new religious movement or a sect may feel that it needs testimony to be given about its practices and beliefs, and the social scientist may be the best person equipped to do that if he has made a study or done a research into the movement. His interest in looking into the movement is not to justify it, nor to condemn it. His interest is really to understand it. And it may well be if he's successful in undertaking research, that he has some understanding of the movement and he may be able to explain what the movement is about in terms which are beyond the competence of the movement itself. I think that the situation that arises, is that the social scientist may understand the sect or the new religious movement in scientific terms, in empirical descriptive, neutral, terms, in a way that the opponents of that sect, nor the members of that sect, can understand the phenomenon itself. First, they're committed to something quite different in different directions. It may be that if the sect is having, shall we say, legal problems, that the court cannot understand the defence that the sect will make in its terms. It could be a Christian sect will go to court and they'll quote the Scriptures. The judges, the court, don't want to hear Scriptures. It's nothing to do with the case as far as they're concerned. So the social scientist may be able to mediate and translate the meanings of the sect into terms which are understandable by the court. The language with different institutions differs. The language of the church is not the language of the court. The language of the court is quite different from the language of a religious body. So the social scientist may have a role to play in interpretation. But interpretation doesn't necessarily mean advocacy, nor does it mean condemnation. So this, I think, is where the social scientist may play; like a translator.

J.M. Do you think your sects' typology scheme described in your book *Religious Sects*, in 1970, is still valid today? If not, what could be the changes?

B.W. I think the typology was constructed as a way of looking at sects within a conventional Christian context. The parameters were set by the possibilities of Christian interpretation. So, I think, if one wanted to classify or categorize, or if one wanted to interpret sectarianism or the new religious movements, one would perhaps need to construct new types. Types are dispensable. They are only yard sticks in terms of which to stabilize our meanings and our definitions. One mustn't get emotionally involved with a scientific apparatus. If the scientific apparatus is to do its job, then it must be stable, it must be consistent, it must have some relevance within the wider context to the empirical material that it's looking at. But if that material becomes somewhat divergent, if it becomes drawn from a wider context, which has been the case with new religious movements since that typology was developed, one has to begin a new typology. One must be prepared to discard old typologies if the phenomena are too remote from the types, for the types to be usefully applied to them. So, I'm quite open to the idea that one might have to try again.

J.M. Mr. Wilson, Eileen Barker, James Beckford and Karel Dobbelaere have edited a book in your honour. How do you feel?

B.W. Well, it's very surprising and it's very nice. I think that's all one can say. Yes... It's very nice and surprising. It was a pleasure, but what more should one say?

J.M. Finally, what do you think about the future role of the Sociology of Religion in the context of Social Sciences?

B.W. Well... I think it will continue to have a role to play, but it is a somewhat marginal subject within sociology at this time. And I don't think, and I don't see that as changing radically, because it means, of course, that the secularization process means that if religion diminishes, the sociology of religion cannot expect to have a major role. It still has some important insight to provide for more theoretical aspects of organization, but I don't envisage it as having a glorious future.