Religion and Social Stratification

from *The Scientific Study of Religion* by Milton Yinger, and other sources
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Religion can support or challenge the stratification system of a society. Sectarian movements vary in the themes they adopt, due in part to the type of stratification system. The following discussion will clarify this issue in considerable detail. As we shall see, the relations between religion and stratification are very complex. Before discussing religious movements, we must review some basic information concerning social stratification.

Stratification systems are maintain through closure devices that prevent social mobility. Closure devices can be divided into cultural and structural types. *Cultural closure* consists of assigning membership in a class by virtue of descent. Birth into a lower-class family results in relatively permanent assignment to the lower-class. Another cultural closure device consists of stratum endogamy. Members of a class must marry within their class, resulting in a caste, or caste-like rigidity of class membership within families. *Structural closure* consists of limitations on economic, political, and educational opportunities that prevent social mobility. If lower-class individuals accept these limitations, the stratification system can be relatively stable.

The following table lists basic characteristics of three different stratification systems classified according to their cultural and structural characteristics. *Class descent affiliation* refers to whether one is born into or achieves status. *Class endogamy* refers to whether members of a status group must marry within their status level. *Institutional support for differential treatment* refers to whether the institutions of society support the stratification system. *Acceptance of status by lower groups* refers to whether members of the lower classes accept their status. The table shows how different stratification systems are structured in terms of these variables.

Types of Stratification Systems[1]

Type of System	Affiliation by Descent	Endogamy	Institutional Support for Differential Treatment	Acceptance of Status by Lower Groups
Caste	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Minority-Majority	Yes	Yes	No	No
Class	No	No	No	No

Social status revolves around a ranking system. Individuals are ranked high or low in terms of their possession of valued social resources. The three most basic resources related to status are wealth, power, and prestige. Usually, if individuals are ranked high on one of these three dimensions of status, they are ranked high in the others. However, sometimes individuals ranks do not match. This condition is called *status inconsistency.* For example, Catholic Priests enjoy very high prestige in our society, but they have little wealth or power.

Individuals' life styles and attitudes are determined to a considerable extent by their social status. Status inconsistency, itself, also has an impact on people's lives. Even the particular form of status inconsistency is important. Compare, for example, the status inconsistency of Priests, vs. that of *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs who have much wealth, perhaps some power, and little prestige, especially among the upper-classes they are striving to join. These two different forms of status inconsistency are related to different constellations of life style and attitude. Priests may feel sorry for the poor, feeling they are blameless for their condition. Wealth is not an issue in the lives of Priests. But *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs' lives revolve around the accumulation of wealth and frustration at being rejected by upper-class blue-bloods because they are insufficiently refined and their wealth is too new. *Nouveau riche* entrepreneurs are likely to feel the poor deserve their status. Anybody who has risen rapidly in status, in one or another dimension, may be tempted into taking credit for the achievement, thereby feeling that people who have not achieved are as undeserving as achievers are deserving.

Status is relative. People are wealthy, powerful, or honored only by comparison with some other person or group. Judgments of status level are always relative. When judgments of status are made relative to some other group, that group is called one's *reference group.* If my reference group is above me, I feel my own status is relatively low. If my references group is below me, my status is relatively high. How high or low in status I *feel* depends, in part, on to whom I compare myself. The comparative nature of one's sense of status is another determinant of life style and attitudes. For example, if I am statistically average in wealth, yet compare myself to my parents who were very poor, I will feel as though I have come a long way upward. However, if my parents were much better off, I may feel that I have fallen, and suffer a sense of loss or inferiority because of this.

Individuals' religious feelings and activities reflect among other things, their social status. However, the manner in which religion reflects status varies enormously, according to historical, cultural, social, and personality characteristics. The following discussion will show some of these complex relationships through examples drawn from historical studies and contemporary surveys. Before turning to the discussion, examine the figure 1 and table 1.

Figure 1 on the following page shows the distribution of religion by social class in the mid-twentieth century, lumping together religions that have similar patterns of class distribution. Episcopalians, Jews, Presbyterians, and members of United Churches were distributed fairly equally among the three major social classes. The area contained within their boundary is about the same for each class. Fundamental and Holiness sects had a very different pattern of distribution. Their membership was primarily lower-class, and secondarily lower middle-class.

Table 1 is from the same time period, but from another source. The categories are not organized the same as those of figure 1, so the data are not exactly comparable. Also, the data are from a slightly different time period. Note, however, the class distribution within each specific religion. The percentages don't add up precisely to 100 because of rounding.

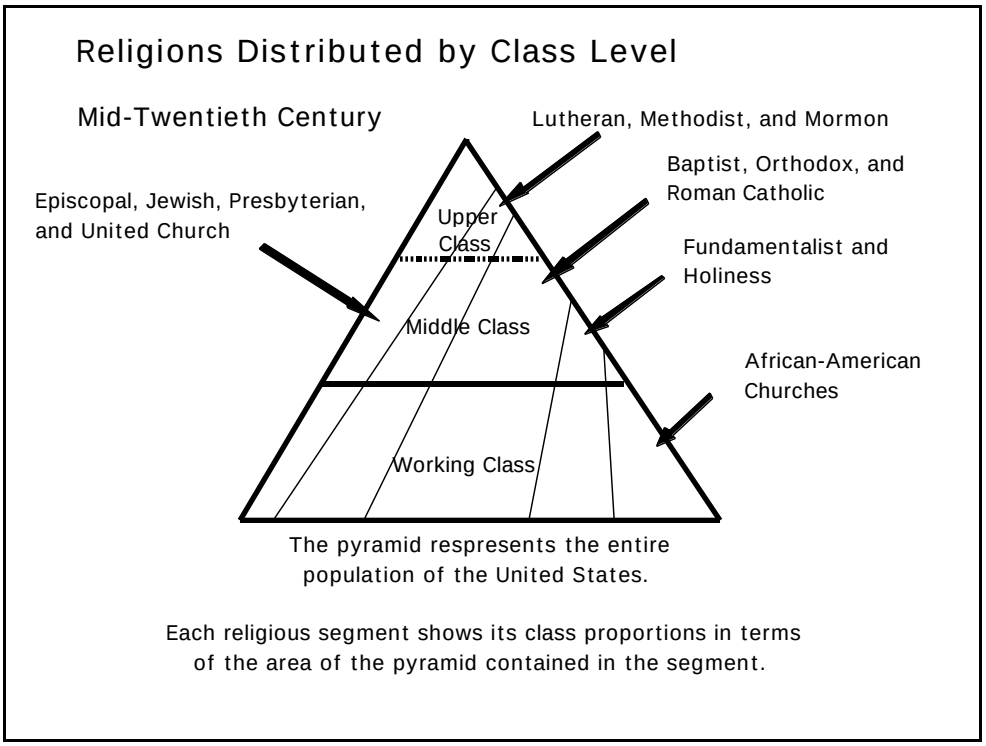

Figure 0: Source—*The Scientific Study of Religion* by Milton Yinger, 1970

Table 1: Social Class Profiles of American Religious Groups
Source: *Religion in 20th-Century America* by H. Schneider, 1952

	Class Level Breakdown		
Denomination	% Upper	% Middle	% Lower
Christian Science	25	37	39
Episcopal	24	34	42
Congregational	24	43	34
Presbyterian	22	40	34
Jewish	22	32	46
Reformed	19	31	50
Methodist	13	36	52
Lutheran	11	36	53
Christian	10	35	55
Protestant (small bodies)	10	27	63
Roman Catholic	9	25	67
Baptist	8	24	68
Mormon	5	29	66
No Preference	13	26	61
Protestant (undesignated)	12	24	64
Atheist & Agnostic	33	47	20
No Answer or Don't Know	11	30	60

A point to remember is that these data constitute a moment in history. Over time, the relations between religion and class change, sometimes dramatically. The figures are presented in order to illustrate the fact of such relations. It would be a monumental undertaking to compile such data for the history of the United States, and there would probably be large gaps in the data, since no systematic effort to collect this kind of data has ever been made. The project would require making considerable assumptions where information was missing.

Another approach to the question of religion-class relations is to review the history of various religious and political move-

ments. The history of sectarian movements demonstrates how religion and secular goals intertwine, depending on a variety of factors.

Compensation for low status or status inconsistency

Religion compensates individuals for relative deprivation and for status inconsistency. Sectarian movements are usually participated in by the lower classes. The experience of low prestige, for example, can be compensated for by joining a group that defines its members as honored in the eyes of God and their community. Status achieved through participation in a religious community can substitute for status not achieved in society. The leaders and officials of a lower-class church stand in high esteem in their lower-class communities.

The *nouveau riche* experience status inconsistency. They may be seen by others and may see themselves as over-rewarded. They may adopt the religion of the established elite in an attempt to be more accepted by them, and to avoid religious characterizations of wealth as threatening salvation.

High employment and educational status among members of a minority group may make them more militant than their lower-status counterparts. The feeling that their low level of honor in society is undeserved may make them less willing to accept the way dominant groups treat them.

Theodicy is a religious answer to the question *Why is their evil?* or *Why do we (or they) suffer?* The upper-classes of society often adopt a theodicy of good fortune that portrays their success and the failures of others as deserved. Such theodicies are a sign of secret guilt. The theodicy justifies what otherwise might be unjustifiable, especially in a religion that historically emphasized how wealth threatens salvation.

The poor can adopt the theodicy of glorification of suffering, rescuing themselves from a sense of earthly defeat by participating in a supernatural sense of victory. A theodicy of rebirth can place resolution to the question in a next life, or a series of next lives. Suffering in this life can be interpreted as payment for misbehavior in a previous life, or as down payment on a better next life.

Once the tone of a religion's view of human nature and the problem of evil is fixed in a religion by a specific class, that tone will affect other strata who are within the religious tradition. However, as religion spreads between classes, each class absorbs aspects of the religion in a unique fashion, modifying it according to its members class-related needs. This changes their perception and experience of the religion's truth.

The major world religions have become complex and varied systems for dealing with the fundamental problems of life, systems from which different strata may select and emphasize distinct views congenial to themselves, while sharing more basic views with other strata at the same time. As societies become more complex and highly stratified, their dominant religions become loosely jointed aggregations of belief and practice. Although they use many common symbols and share some doctrines and rites, the classes will vary greatly in their definitions of evil and their ideas of how one should deal with evil.

Christianity began among itinerant artisan journeymen. In a few centuries, it became the religion of peasants and noblemen, warriors and monks, and artisans and merchants. In its beginnings, it was a complicated hybrid, built on Judaism and on classic Greek humanism, and on some mystery cults. It drew together many different groups who were united only by their opposition to the ancient world order and their discontent with the prevailing religious attempts to deal with life's problems. It developed a conception of equality which bound them together, and yet left the differences that separated them close beneath the surface. Under Paul's guidance, the equality that was essential to Christianity was religiously interpreted. Christianity did not, indeed could not, eliminate the status differences and their influences on religious need and behavior.

The medieval theological synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas was achieved under favorable circumstances of a relatively stable society that had little trade and lacked a money economy. Yet even that relatively unified view was opposed by the radical individualism of mysticism, by sectarian movements, and by such theological protests as nominalism that denied the existence of absolute universals.

At various times in the history of Christianity, different status groups have been drawn together in joint efforts, only to break apart when their different needs and values proved incompatible. For example, Luther, for a few years, united several movements that were held together largely by their common opposition to the Church and the society it reinforced. Luther was primarily concerned with reshaping the religious views of the world. His movement attracted humanists, German nationalists, and peasants, all for different reasons than Luther's specific concern. Some of these groups hoped to use Luther's movement for secular purposes. However, the kinds of religious formulations that seemed meaningful and satisfying varied among these groups. Soon there were defections once the secular issues were decided.

The Humanists discovered that Luther did not share their grievance against the superstition and intellectual tyranny of the Church. Many of the German nationalists were uninterested in the specifically religious problems that were central to Luther. When political circumstances were favorable, they were easily reconverted by the Counter Reformation. And some of the peasants, when they found that Luther's doctrines had nothing to do with the land-tenure system under which they suffered, and when Luther harshly opposed the means they used to redress their grievances, turned to other religious movements. It was they who were the source of that other important part of the Reformation, the radical sects, which played their role in the religious life of several societies other than Germany. Many who left the Lutheran movement were not simply expressing secular conflicts. For many, there were religious issues involved. However, differences in secular position affected the way they viewed those religious questions.

The complicated interplay between class and religion has been most closely studied in connection with the Reformation and the several generations of drastic change that followed it. Drawing on the Old Testament, lower-class Christians frequently used religion to protest the secular order. Their status has always lacked consistency with their religion, because they have always hoped that *the last shall be first*. Their low social status is inconsistent with their sense of the religious value of poverty.

By the fourth century, the apocalyptic hopes of the early Church were officially pushed into the background as the

Church increased in worldly influence. The *kingdom of God* was interpreted as the soul. However, the apocalyptic tradition persisted among the lower classes as popular religion. When certain social conditions existed, apocalyptic religion broke out in powerful sectarian protest movements.

Messianic cultural beliefs erupted among people uprooted from traditional jobs, kin, and community ties. The lack of community and means of expressing grievances, coupled with weakened authority, both sacred and secular, caused the uprooted to doubt that the Church could help them with salvation. At the same time, some of them found new ways of making a living, giving their less fortunate counterparts hope for a new future. As their hopes rose, their sense of relative deprivation increased. In peasant society, hardships are taken for granted. When trade and commercial production begin to flourish, individuals are stimulated to grandiose fantasies of wealth and power.

In the eleventh century, opportunities and hopes began to transform the attitudes of those living close to commercial centers. Their acceptance of poverty and low status was weakened. The commercial changes also weakened the traditional aristocratic institutions, thereby weakening the institutional support for stratification.

In the messianic movements of medieval Christianity, particularly from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, cultural, structural, and character changes combined explosively. The Book of *Revelation* is a Rorschach-like invitation to anybody's chosen-people dream. Joachim de Fiore popularized a heretical version of *Revelation*, placing the apocalypse in his time, in this world. His dream of grandeur was a paranoid delusion that attracted other believers because it was drawn from their religious heritage, and because it embodied their dreams and anxieties.

The English Civil War

During the century following 1540, an industrial and commercial revolution created new influential classes whose activities were hemmed in by the Stuart government. The merchant and business classes had enlarged considerably. This had intensified the land shortage among peasants. An urban proletariat was beginning to develop. All these groups were dissatisfied with the political structure, and discontented with the religious establishment that supported the government.

By the time of Queen Elizabeth's death, the nation was sharply divided. The King and Church were on one side, with Parliament and the Puritans on the other side. The Established Church, bound to the sovereign by statutes and oaths, supported the Crown and the landed gentry. It taught, in the Homilies:

> *...that the King's power was from God alone; that, as it was a perilous thing to commit to subjects the judgment [of] which prince was godly and his government good and which otherwise, as though the foot should judge the head, it was in no case lawful to resist, wicked though he might be.*[2]

The new classes did not accept this doctrine. They turned away from the Church that denied their right to acquire power. They became the dominant element within Puritanism. Puritanism contained diverse classes united in opposition to the King. Religiously, this included Presbyterians, Independents, and radical sectarians. They united and successfully prosecuted the revolution that is usually referred to as the *Civil War*. However, their different status positions broke them apart and accentuated their religious differences after the Civil War. The Presbyterians were supported by the aristocrats and merchants who had joined the Parliamentary cause. They wanted to limit the political objectives of the War, to assert the sovereignty of Parliament, but not of the people. They also wanted to preserve the sanctity of property, whether real, personal, or political (except for the historic rights of the Crown and the material possessions of the Church).

At the beginning of the Civil War, the groups under the Parliamentary banner were united in opposition to the king and in their fear of Catholicism. When the cause was successful, they were driven apart by differences they could not compromise. The merchants had no intention of relaxing ecclesiastical discipline that helped them control the classes they wanted to exploit, and enabled them to prevent the propagation of ideas they considered dangerous or subversive. The lesser gentry, small merchants, and tradesmen were afraid of being oppressed by a system of central control. They were aware of the drastic limitations the large merchants and aristocrats wanted to impose on political criticism. The small merchants and tradesmen insisted on more freedom than those who dominated Parliament were prepared to permit.

The sectarians and Independents wanted to see separation of Church and State, and complete liberty of conscience in religious matters. The left wing of the Puritan coalition discovered that the right wing was no more interested in their economic problems than the Royalists. They broke away from the Puritan coalition in both political and religious matters.

Puritanism could not hold together in a single coalition the diverse classes of the new, emerging capitalistic order. They all pointed to the teachings of John Calvin, but reached different conclusions from them concerning doctrine, church organization, worship style, ethics, and relationship to the state. The Presbyterians emphasized the doctrine of predestination, an elitist doctrine that harmonized with their demonstrated success in business affairs. It armed them with proof that they need not be concerned with the poor, who were obviously numbered among the damned. Predestination was their *theodicy of good fortune*, to use Weber's phrase. Material suffering was interpreted as a sign of guilt and nonelection to paradise. The lingering doubts Presbyterians had accounts for their rigidity in doctrine and asceticism, for they sought to prove to themselves, as well as to others, that they truly were among the elect. The lower-classes objected to the doctrine of predestination. They declared the equality of all individuals before God. Equality had political and economic connotations for them, as well as religious meaning.

Puritans claimed that knowledge of God came only through personal study of the Bible. This removed clerics from the role of gatekeepers to religious knowledge, putting religious knowledge into the hands of educated, literate people, not the lower-classes who couldn't read or write. The lower-class sects claimed that knowledge of God came from inner spiritual inspiration, a source open to them, as well. Inspiration can be experienced by anybody, rich or poor, educated or not.

The desire for a sense of election among the Presbyterians combined with a fear of political and social anarchy, causing them

to support an authoritarian view of government. The lower-classes sense of duty and saintly discipline combined with their fear of tyranny, causing them to support rebellion. Cromwell blocked the political efforts of the lower-classes, abut could not eliminate their knowledge and understanding of the conflicts that emerged during the Civil War period. With their hopes raised, the lower-classes were no longer stable. Despite their continuing poverty and powerlessness, they were no longer satisfied with their condition.

> *After 1649 and 1650 that social consciousness could no longer be given direct political expression. Instead, it found its voice in the tremendous revival of mystical enthusiasm and millenary fervor that dates from those years. If the price of political agitation was persecution and imprisonment, it was much more convenient to shift the initiative for social change to the Lord who could risk with impunity the wrath of the dictators. And if the practical efforts of mortals had failed to achieve the desired results, surely God, in His time, would bring the eagerly awaited millennium.*[3]

A later sectarian said that government would wither away. The "despised ones of the earth" would triumph, while the rich men would "weep and howl." Christ, said Winstanley, "is the true and faithful leveller."

> *True religion and undefiled is this, to make restitution of the Earth which hath been taken and held from the common people...And the tithing-priest stops their mouth, and tells them that "inward satisfaction of the mind" was meant by the declaration "The poor shall inherit the earth." I tell you, the scripture is to be really and materially fulfilled...You jeer at the name Leveller. I tell you Jesus Christ is the head Leveller.*[4]

The Puritan revolution was partial, at best. Cromwell supported religious liberty, but not the economic and political egalitarianism of the sectarians. The Restoration (of monarchy), even more than the rule of Cromwell, made it clear that the lower-classes were not going to have their problems solved by a new society. The Civil War made certain that neither absolute King nor absolute Church would again impede economic change, but the old aristocracy and the more powerful members of the new commercial classes found they had more in common than they initially supposed. They united in opposition to the lower-classes and their radicalism. The Restoration was a compromise between the aristocracy and the upper middle-classes to exploit the economic opportunities of their expanding commercial society.

Anglican and right-wing Puritan alike accepted the basic structure of the new social order. They sought to assure individual goodness and salvation *within* that order. The richest merchants and industrialists felt closer to the landed gentry than the lesser men of business. By the eighteenth century, wealthy nonconformists were joining the Anglican Church. The converging political and economic interests of the aristocracy and richer bourgeoisie were matched by converging religious interests.

Opposed by this united front, the sects turned further away from the hopes for equality. They turned to quiet waiting for the millennium, or to patient nonresistance, and to more religious interpretations of life. The ideal of a new social order was abandoned in favor of a sectarian organization of mutual aid and brotherhood, communities instead of a society built on sectarian religion. Religious efforts changed when attempts to solve problems were inadequate.

The same transformation can be seen in the development of Jewish hopes for an earthly kingdom into the idea of a kingdom of God. Many Greeks after the third century B.C. retreated into mystery cults. Christianity, after its early phase, paid less and less attention to reformist dreams as the middle-ages progressed.

Class and Religion in America

Religion and class have not been as closely associated in America as they were in seventeenth century England. Nevertheless, they have been connected. In America's early years, status correlated to an extent with geography, so that the religious tendencies of the Eastern seaboard were different from frontier religion. The East retained middle-class Protestant national religious values. The polity corresponded to a class organized society. Religion emphasized ethics, stable commerce and citizenship, sobriety, and ritual religious expression.

The West manifested religions of the disinherited. The subculture of the West was similar to the subculture of the revolutionary poor, especially concerning the emotional quality of their religious experience. The isolation of the West produced a craving for companionship, making the lonely settlers susceptible to crowd psychology to an unusual degree.

As the nation developed, religion and class less and less corresponded with region. The newer influences revolved around population migration from Africa and Europe to America. Lines of differentiation among white Protestants were overshadowed by the growth of separate African-American churches, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism. By the mid-twentieth century, these groups together constituted over 50% of church members in America. None of these religious groups were homogeneous in class level. Nevertheless, some patterns have persisted.

Lower-Class Sects in the United States

By the nineteenth century, the Judaic-Christian millenarian culture was unacceptable to many of the urban proletariat in Europe. In the United States, however, the rural and urbanizing lower-classes were, and still are, heirs to a religious culture that is both otherworldly and revolutionary. In this, they are closer to the Europe and English lower-classes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than of later periods. The U.S. workers have experienced many of the same kind of uprooting and breaking of ties with small communities and kin groups. In recent years, the framework of authority has weakened. Unemployment rates have varied widely, but have persisted among the lowest classes of manual laborers. Labor unions have benefitted the upper levels of the working class, but have not been much help to the lowest levels. The uneducated and unskilled are still fertile grounds for the growth of sectarian movements.

When lower-class individuals move from a rural area into a city, to work in a mill or factory, they experience difficult adjustment problems. Their lifestyles change enormously. The rhythm of work, personal associations, and placement in a neighborhood all change. They enter a new social environment wholly lacking in social contacts, at its most poorly organized level. Their sense of isolation is increased by the way they are looked down upon by the established urban groups. Religion

may help deal with this by saying to them *You are not alone. You belong. Your problems are not everlasting, and they have meaning.*

In terms of service style, sermons, programs, and leadership, the established churches are poorly equipped to welcome lower-class migrants. Lower-class sects provide them with the kind of experiences they need to heal the distress caused by culture shock, isolation, and insecurity. The migrant may not have a sense of economic protest. The urban lower-class sect offers a welcome mat, and the kind of emotional style of service that expresses and satisfies their needs more directly. Their members are the emotionally starved. Factory work is monotonous. Workers have little choice or control over the conditions of their work. In the small religious group, members determine for themselves the modes of expression of their needs and religious feelings.

Lower-class sects are orthodox, as they see it, to a fanatical extent. By adopting orthodoxy, they say to themselves and others that they *belong to a very highly selected and exclusive association*. New members are admitted only after having given evidence of a religious experience that shows they will abide by the group's norms. Standards of behavior are rigidly enforced. A kind of modern asceticism assures members that they deserve to belong to the group.

The sects are quick to expel those who deviate. For example, one Free-Will Baptist Holiness Church in Gastonia, North Carolina received 33 new members and expelled 24 members, out of a total of 88. A Church of God with 143 members expelled 30 in two years. Another with 95 members expelled 40 in two years, and a third with 101 members expelled 20 in four years. Expulsion is more than a means of maintaining moral purity. It also is a sacrifice. Religious purity is granted by God in return for what they have given up, many friends as members.

Within sects, desires for leadership, status, expressiveness, and assurance are dealt with. Members can give free rein to their emotions and attribute their thrills to divine agency. They make no great challenges to political and economic injustices. Most sects accept America's institutions. Their members look to heaven for their reward, or to some apocalyptic transformation of the world. They see man as depraved. Only the second coming will permit escape from this condition. Other sects, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, emphasize withdrawal even more. Because they believe that this is a world of sin, they must not only be indifferent, but must also withdraw from it and refuse its commands.

American lower-class sects are usually avoidance sects. Avoidance sects can be differentiated from each other on the basis of secondary themes that point some of them more to acceptance, and others more to aggression. Whatever the mixture, sects deal with members' economic problems by redefining them, not by offering ways to solve them as social problems in this world. They redefine them by collectively looking toward the future, beyond history even. This requires coming to terms with God, as sects interpret God. Therefore, they emphasize confessions and the strict enforcement of rules.

Among some American sects, there is a tone of individualistic optimism underlying their surface of pessimism. The Pentecostal groups, for example, look at society less darkly than the Jehovah's Witnesses. Individual conversion rather than condemning an evil world characterizes the message of the Salvation Army. They are but a step away from Billy Graham's more denominational formula for salvation that attracts more middle-class followers.

The common element among lower-class sects is their members' level of education and experiences in life. The sects substitute religious status for social status. They emphasize Grace. What matters it, then, if a Methodist has more money if he has never been baptized with the Holy Ghost? Sects affirm separation from this world. In the face of forced exclusion from society, they exclude themselves from society, making virtue out of necessity. They transmute poverty into a symptom of Grace. They have little money, yet they tithe to their sects, far surpassing members of more conventional churches in their *per capita* contributions.

American sects rarely express their dissatisfactions directly as economic protests, in spite of the fact that poverty is a basic cause of their growth. Sects increased rapidly during the depression of the 1930's. Most of the established churches had little to say about the depression. They neither pressed for secular solutions nor paid attention to religious interpretations of poverty. The small sects that sprang up among the poor diligently tried to give religious meaning to poverty. They gave little or no attention to the economic and political situation of the times. They were ascetic and introverted. Although some were sharply critical of society, they withdrew from society into apocalyptical hopes. Serious protests came from secular groups such as labor unions and political parties.

Why have most American sects been withdrawal types? Some of the reasons are:

1. radicalism had been secularized in Europe, and to a lesser degree in America

2. the American stratification system is relatively open

3. democratic institutions and the legal right to organize labor unions provide alternative paths for protest

4. the division of the working class into three separate ethnic groups — white Catholic, white Protestant, and African-American, reduces the chances of radical religious movements uniting workers

5. American values of individualism, progressivism, and optimism mitigate against radical sect formation

There are two varieties of hope that may come to religious persons among those who feel deprived: hope that society can be altered in accord with religious values, and hope that society is sufficiently open that individuals can improve themselves if they are saved. Hope is mixed with different degrees of alienation. Aggressive sects are more likely to emerge among segments of the population who feel doomed to low status, such as African-Americans.

Consequences of Sectarian Movements

Some middle-class scholars who are unsatisfied by sectarian views assume that these views must be equally unrewarding to others, not realizing that different needs, accustomed modes of expression, and available alternatives make sectarian views meaningful to other individuals. Other scholars take a more tolerant view, but use circular reasoning to argue their case.

They say that sectarian views must be effective and satisfying, otherwise sect members would not accept them. Between these two extremes lies a more careful assessment of sectarian consequences.

Many of the beliefs and practices of sects are drawn from peasant cultural traditions that may be less adequate views in the context of an urban environment. Neighborliness, for example, has an important meaning in rural communities, but it may have very different consequences when applied to the complicated relationships of industrial workers to an absentee management. Sects may be advantageous to business owners and managers because sects direct attention away from this world to the hereafter. Better to hate the devil than the boss, certainly from the point of view of the boss, who often supports sects financially. It is convenient to bosses that sects often define labor unions that focus attention and opposition on the boss as inspired by the devil. On the other hand, sects can encourage a kind of self-control and hope that will help its members raise themselves above their class by infusing in them a seriousness of purpose and dedication to task. Some scholars say that sects function as a form of anticipatory socialization through which deprived individuals acquire the perspectives and motives of the middle-class. Their members are frustrated and deprived, but through faith and ascetic self-denial they can get a grip on themselves and succeed as valued workers. They acquire what Weber called *inner-worldly asceticism*, the essence of the Protestant Work Ethic that emphasizes self-control, achievement, moral respectability, and sobriety.

It is not enough to replace *religion is the opiate of the masses* with *religion is the stimulant of the masses*. Many who might join sects do not. Could it be that those who join already accept their society's dominant values? Are they perhaps more orderly and ambitious than their counterparts who do not join sects? Perhaps in sects they find support for views they already have. Or perhaps they are alienated on a conscious level, while being subconsciously drawn to those values. Freud granted that religion might be a substitute for neurosis, a substitute less destructive than individual neurosis. Boisen takes this approach in his analysis of Holiness sects that emphasize healing:

> *They are the spontaneous attempt of the common people to deal constructively with the stresses and trials which fall with peculiar severity upon them. Their unconcern with economic and social conditions which they are powerless to change and their turning to problems for which they are directly responsible is not entirely an unwholesome reaction....In any case these "holy rollers" are bringing to many distressed individuals release from the burden of guilt. They are giving them hope and courage and strength to keep going in the face of difficulties. Insofar as they succeed in doing this, their economic and social status is likely to be raised.*[5]

On the other hand, Clark implies that some attention to society, not just to improving individuals, is necessary in order to deal effectively with the needs that the sects express. A movement may be functional without being optimal.

> *In the long run...the effect of the Salvation Army was to arrest the development of a stable urban order. People's attentions were diverted from the real problems of an industrial society; the Army following tended to be held in a state of political and economic illiteracy. The effect was particularly evident in retarding the development of working-class organizations. It may be questioned, however, whether stable secular institutions would have developed much greater strength if the Salvation Army had not emerged. Another form of fanaticism almost certainly would have grown up in place of the religious.*[6]

Weston LaBarre arrived at a similar conclusion in his study of a snake-handling cult in the South. He interpreted snake handling as an effort of a deeply deprived and sexually repressed group to deal with the *guilty terror* embedded in their repressions. By handling snakes, they act out their unconscious, guilt laden sexual desires. He saw no therapy in the cult, only bitter necessity

> *...because of the pressures of their sadly neurotic and archaic and unhappy culture, these people have to have what satisfactions they can without any psychological self-possession, without any knowledge of who they are, and what they are like, and what they are really doing.*[7]

The cult may help stabilize the social system in which it exists, but it might be better if the system were altered. The following propositions summarize the functions of sectarian religion among the lower-classes:

> *1. Sectarian beliefs and practices among the deprived members of a society relieve the "pain" that many people feel as result of their highly disprivileged position.*
>
> *2. For those on the bottom of a status system, the sects are not usually dysfunctional in terms of economic and political institutions, because their adherents are not in any event equipped by training and inclination to challenge those institutions by other means. For those who are in a slightly more favorable position, however, a sectarian religion that discourages efforts to respond to deprivation by secular or religious challenges to the existing social situation may help preserve that situation.*
>
> *3. Many individual adherents are helped, by the self-disciplines that the sect encourages, to improve their own status; while at the same time the sect is irrelevant to the social and cultural causes that continue to create such disprivileged individuals.*
>
> *4. The sect is inadequate, and perhaps completely irrelevant, to the basic societal problem of freedom-**and**-order, with which mankind has continually to struggle. The acceptance and avoidance sects are unable to deal with society as the "patient," and the aggressive sects, with their inclinations toward a perfectionist view of man, are too unmindful of the difficult problem of freedom-**and**-order to make a large contribution to the reconstruction of society...a church-like response, by itself, is equally inadequate to this task.*
>
> *5. A sectarian challenge, by calling vivid attention to problems of adaptation and integration in the churches, and in secular institutions as well, may stimulate processes outside their own framework that are of great importance for their members. In some circumstances, the established organizations attempt*

to "steal the thunder" of the sects, just as major political parties adopt the programs of influential "sectarian" third parties in the United States. At other times, the sectarian challenge leads to retrenchment and coercion, as the dominant groups seek to maintain their power.[8]

Last, and most importantly, the ambivalence scholars show toward the emotional self-abandonment and fundamental theology of lower-class sects reflects the impossibility of their participating in sectarian religious experience. Their middle-class manners, the emphasis on rationality in academic scholarship, and their education make sectarian religion too implausible for passionate belief. Members of sects have passionate belief, and it transforms their personal experience. In order to understand how this works, scholars and students who study religious enthusiasm need to focus attention on the passionate beliefs in their own lives. Only by examining the subjective impact of their own passionate beliefs can scholars alienated from lower-class religion gain some inkling of what these sects do for believers. The study of religious behavior requires an appreciation of the nature of human consciousness, a tangled combination of sensory and imaginary structures.

References

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