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978-1-107-02755-8 - Religion and Inequality in America: Research and Theory on Religion's Role in Stratification

Edited by Lisa A. Keister and Darren E. Sherkat

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Religion and Inequality in America

Research and Theory on Religion's Role in Stratification

Religion is one of the strongest and most persistent correlates of social and economic inequalities. Theoretical progress in the study of stratification and inequality has provided the foundation for asking relevant questions, and modern data and analytic methods enable researchers to test their ideas in ways that eluded their predecessors. A rapidly growing body of research provides strong evidence that religious affiliation and beliefs affect many components of well-being, such as education, income, and wealth. Despite the growing quantity and quality of research connecting religion to inequality, no single volume to date has brought together key figures to discuss various components of this process. This volume aims to fill this gap with contributions from top scholars in the fields of sociology, economics, and religious studies. The chapters in this volume provide important new details about how and why religion and inequality are related by focusing on new indicators of inequality and well-being, combining and studying mediating factors in new and informative ways, focusing on critical and often understudied groups, and exploring the changing relationship between religion and inequality over time.

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*Research and Theory on Religion's Role
in Stratification*

Edited by

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Foreword

N. J. Demerath III

When I first heard about the conference that spawned this volume, I leapt – or rather at my age limped – at the chance to participate. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, I invited myself. Some 50 years ago, I was embarked on a dissertation and then a book entitled *Social Class in American Protestantism* (1965). This seemed a rare opportunity to revisit the topic and see how the field has developed since. Authors are rarely afforded the chance to rethink their work, except for those who make a risky practice of repeating it.

My research involved a secondary analysis of data collected by my University of California–Berkeley mentor and continuing friend, Charles Glock. He had administered a questionnaire survey in congregations representing five Protestant denominations: Baptist (the northern or “American” wing as opposed to the larger and more conservative “Southern” variety), Congregationalist (now mostly identified as the United Church of Christ after its merger with the smaller Evangelical and Reformed Church), Evangelical Lutheran Church (as distinct from the more conservative “Missouri” and “Wisconsin” Lutheran synods), and the Presbyterian Church of the USA (not to be confused with the smaller and mostly southern Presbyterian offshoots dating principally from the Civil War). I was interested in the effects of socioeconomic inequalities within these congregations.

EARLY INFLUENCES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

It is hardly surprising that a mid-20th-century graduate student was led to conduct research involving religion and inequality. All of us cut our intellectual teeth on the great trio of Karl Marx, Max Weber, not to mention Emile Durkheim, who had plenty to say about religion but little involving inequality. Of course, few sayings about religion and inequality have had greater influence than Marx's reference to religion as “the opiate of the masses.” The phrase is often interpreted as a scathing indictment of religion and its lower-class

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ignorant followers, whom Marx was no fan of generally. But seen in context, its meaning shifts:

Religion is a false or . . . perverted world consciousness (and) the general theory of that world. . . . the fantastic realization of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 1844, pp. 87–88)

Marx's real indictment was of a world that seemed to need the kind of "false consciousness" that religion provides. He was far more sympathetic than scathing in his account of religious people; nor are these "people" exclusively of the "proletariat," though one assumes it was the lower reaches of the class system that he had primarily in mind.

Still, Max Weber had very different concerns. Writing some two generations after Marx, and only a little more than three generations before my graduate cohort, Weber saw inequality as a function of power and of status honor as well as economic class. Indeed, knowing Marx's influence, Weber expressed cautious disagreement with Marxian economic determinism. Although economic factors certainly had their place in analyzing social change, Weber generally took a more cultural turn as reflected in both his conceptions of inequality above and in the title of his most cited work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1906] 1958). Somewhat like Marx's argument stated earlier, the thesis here is often capsulized but not always fully captured. Weber argued that the capitalistic spirit was a product of Calvinist predestinationism abetted by Puritan asceticism. Middle-class Calvinists believed that their fate in the next world was entirely predetermined by a God who was beyond their influence. However, clues to their destination in heaven or hell were available, and economic success in this life was a sign of heavenly success waiting in the hereafter. Enter the "spirit of capitalism" with all of its ethical injunctions, including the importance of plowing business profits back into the firm rather than lavishing them on oneself or one's family.

But it was another of Weber's conceptions of religion and inequality that attracted me. Working with his student and Heidelberg boarder, Ernst Troeltsch (1932), Weber developed a distinction between middle-class "churches" and lower-class "sects." Basically *churches* had professional clergy, programmed ritual, theological flexibility, formal organizational structures, and rational-legal authority, and they served as avenues of accommodation and integration into the surrounding community for their higher-status congregants. By contrast, *sects* had lay leaders who stressed charismatic authority, spontaneous and highly emotional ritual, theological inerrancy, and escape from the community into a life beyond for their more marginal and generally low-status members. As the distinction was developed further throughout the first half of the 20th century and beyond the originating insights of Weber and

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Troeltsch, it took on a dialectical dynamic. Most Christian religious organizations and Christianity itself had begun as sects but then matured into churches, only to provoke a new generation of sects as breakaway movements seeking purity as a response to the compromises entailed in church growth. And these sects were themselves destined to become churches in their own right, thus spawning a new generation of sects as the cycle continued.

Echoes of this iterative dialectic can also be found among nonreligious organizations, whether economic, educational, or political. The basic distinction still resonates almost a century after it was first published – but not without opposition. In fact, I was drawn into a somewhat protracted published debate with another young sociologist, Erich Goode, who argued that it was time to bury the construct. I disagreed, in part because I was using the distinction as a centerpiece in my ongoing research and also because I was beginning to see it as a useful rubric for analyzing the dynamics of very diverse organizations. Not surprisingly, we never resolved our dispute. This may have been partly because both of us were second-generation sociologists. Indeed, I ended my last volley by suggesting that, if all else failed, my father could beat up his. Since all of the parties were academics, the challenge was never tested. However, when I later became a good friend of Erich's father – the great sociologist of the family, William J. Goode – I came to suspect that I had been wrong in my joust, if not in my position.

Meanwhile, I had begun to use the church-sect distinction somewhat differently than Weber and Troeltsch intended. They saw “church” and “sect” as two ideal-typical organizations, although Troeltsch added “mysticism” as a third type of religion that involved a more secularized and more personal religiosity that he predicted would ultimately become the most common of the three. Weber also predicted secularization in his fashion, and although I put my own small oar in those waters later, that was not my concern then. Instead, I argued that rather than regarding churches and sects as wholly distinct types of organizations, they might be viewed as forms of individual religiosity that could coexist not only within the same denominations but also within the same congregations. Further, I hypothesized that they would reflect major class and status differences among parishioners, and they might well serve as an important clue to some of religion's principal organizational dynamics.

Once my large and clunky IBM counter-sorter and I came to terms, we were able to see the data support the thesis. It is true that one reviewer was skeptical of using secondary surveys for such a purpose, likening the venture to a cartoon figure who had lost a coin in the middle of a block but was searching under a corner street lamp where the light was better. True, I had no empirical access to “sects” in order to test them for different sorts of participants related to social class. But the sampled “churches” did confirm their half of the thesis. Thus, their higher-status – mostly middle-class – parishioners evidenced a “churchlike” religiosity that scored high on organizational involvements, such as church attendance, the number of friends in the congregation,

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and by implication participation in other kinds of activities in the community. By contrast, their lower-status congregants scored higher on traditional beliefs, prayer, and religious emotionality. And yet the churches studied tended to have both church-like and sect-like parishioners. Because these different types of participants had different needs and different styles of religiosity, it is not surprising that friction sometimes developed between them. But if their interaction could be a short-term liability for the church as an organization, it could also be a source of long-term adaptability to different folks needing different strokes – a sort of religious division of labor.

But Marx and Weber were not the only exemplars for mid-20th-century graduate students examining religion. Only a short while later, I was wooed in a different direction by the siren call of Emile Durkheim. But students of religion and inequality were influenced by the work of such major figures as Alexis de Tocqueville, H. Paul Douglas, H. Richard Niebuhr, Liston Pope, Talcott Parsons, Will Herberg, and Gerhard Lenski. de Tocqueville ([1835] 2003) had all the fascination one might expect of a French Catholic aristocrat confronting the diverse and vibrant class differences within American Protestantism in the 1830s. Douglas (1935) was one of the first empirical church researchers whose various surveys and conclusions in the early 20th century rocked the religious world, if not the academy. H. Richard Niebuhr was more sociologically inclined than his mid-20th-century theologian brother, Reinhold. Richard saw class, ethnic, racial, and regional differences as *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) – a phenomenon he deplored unlike his later Harvard colleague, Talcott Parsons (*Structure and Process in Modern Societies*, 1960), who saw the differences as functionally adaptive within the religious system. Liston Pope was a stalwart professor at Yale Divinity School whose classic *Millhands and Preachers* (1942) was a study of labor organization and class-based churches during the Depression in North Carolina. And to jump ahead to two works that were more contemporaneous for graduate students in the 1960s, social class was certainly a factor in both Will Herberg's reflective *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960) and Gerhard Lenski's compendious empirical work, *The Religious Factor* (1963), concerning white Protestants, black Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

RECENT TRENDS IN AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE SOCIOLOGY THEREOF

So far I have focused on work inspired a century ago and enacted a half-century later. But the times have changed and with them our research agendas. Religious participation was at a high point in the mid-20th century, and both churches and sects were distinctive parts of the American scene. Their tension is illustrated bitinglly by the characters of *Elmer Gantry*, Sinclair Lewis's 1927 novel later made into the 1960 Academy Award-winning movie – a film I have recently shown scenes from to wide-eyed Chinese students in lectures

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on American religion. The fictional Midwestern city, Zenith, was torn by the dispute between the high-status upstanding churches in its downtown and the lower-class sectarian tent revivals on its outskirts. Throughout there was a sense that believing was more show than conviction, and the film ends with a line from the overacting evangelical Gantry (played by Burt Lancaster) that suggests religious change in the offing: “When I was a child, I understood as a child and spake as a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Cynics might say that this is what happened on a much larger scale. Fifty years ago, American sociologists of religion assumed high levels of religious involvement and sought to delineate its various dimensions and correlates. More recently that assumption has been questioned, whether because of changes in American religion or changes in American sociologists. In “olden days” long-term secularization over the preceding several centuries was taken for granted, although there was little talk of it as a current phenomenon.

Then the discussion shifted. Even the very long-term, Enlightenment-provoked secularization was subjected to doubt, and disputes raged over the extent to which America was the exception or the rule (cf. Demerath 2007). Recently there has been evidence in both directions. On the one hand, sectarian religion has not only grown but also shifted from the sideline to the mainline and claimed cultural and political influence in addition to greater numbers. On the other hand, although new “churches” such as the Assemblies of God, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and even the Mormons have attracted new members while the mainline Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists have lost many of theirs, the old mainline denominations retain major advantages of wealth and numbers. They began the recent trend lines with so much larger memberships and endowments that the recently growing neo-sectarians have yet to catch up though some have recently plateaued (see Campbell and Putnam 2010).

But sideline advances notwithstanding, there are other evidences of secularization that require acknowledgment. It used to be an article of empirical faith that the United States was by far the most “religious” complex society in the world, and there were data to support it. Now not so much. Does anyone still believe that more than 90% of Americans “believe in God”? Surveys now commend caution. For example, it makes a difference when respondents are asked to select or specify just what they believe, and traditional conceptions of an anthropomorphic Christian deity have fallen into the 60% range. Indeed, although British scholars once set Americans to one side in debating whether the British were “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994), “believing in belonging” (Day 2011), or indeed neither believing nor belonging, it is no longer clear that Americans are a breed apart. As another example, consider the old empirical chestnut that 40% of us attend church on any given Sunday. Pew-checking researchers find the replicated percentage of actual attendance at about half that level (e.g., Haddaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993). Finally, it is certainly worth noting that the percentage of American “none”s – those

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claiming (or confessing) no religious preference or affiliation – has grown since 1990 at a rate even faster than the neo-sectarians, almost tripling its level of 8% in 1990 (cf. Campbell and Putnam 2010, 2012; Hout and Fischer 2002).

Consider also the changing pattern of denominational identity even among those with affiliations. It used to be that one's denominational seat reflected where one stood theologically and liturgically, not to omit one's family birthright. This is much less so today. Denominational identity in the pews, if not the pulpit, reflects increasingly the three principal criteria for franchise food: location, location, and location. Religious shopping and actual denominational switching are far more common today than in yesteryears. But in addition to location and moves from one to another, the most common influence is the increasingly common mixed religious marriages. Rarely is the shopping guided by religious criteria such as the quality of the preaching, the details of belief, or the appeal of the ritual. Insofar as cultural matters are pertinent at all, they are now more likely to involve secular politics than sacred traditions. Although it is common for each generation to complain about the religious illiteracy of the younger folks following them, the complaints are now louder and perhaps more deserved. Even if shoppers and switchers want to take into account traditional denominational markers, few have the knowledge to do so. It is worth noting that many of the so-called mega churches – those with more than two thousand members – play down traditional religious distinctions and identities in order to emphasize the congregation as a social-service-rendering community to all comers.

One implication of all these developments is that social class should have a reduced effect on religion. Insofar as there has been a blurring of religious identities and trajectories, there should be a blurring of status and class correlates. Some of this blurring was already present in my earlier research. One surprise of that research was the extent to which each mainline denomination and most of their constituent congregations had parishioners of every class level. In fact, that was what made the research possible. According to the study's theoretical logic, for there to be both church-like and sect-like members of every religious unit, there had to be both high- and low-status members in each unit. But the changes noted over the last half-century should have a different sort of influence. High- and low-status parishioners should continue to coexist in both churches and sects, in large part because the differences between them and the sensitivities to those differences should have declined. Although there remain churches versus sects, parishioners should reflect the differences less and less.

FROM RELIGION TO THE SACRED

Partly because of the changes I have described, in recent years I have labeled myself not as a “sociologist of religion” but rather as a “sociologist of the sacred.” I had thought of this term as something new. But it turns out to be not even new for me. Partly as background for this assignment, I reread snatches of

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my 1965 book for almost the first time since it was published. In the concluding chapter, I was surprised to come across the following:

One of the premises at the outset was that churches are not the only institutions that fulfill a religious function. If a religious function is defined as one that reinforces and promotes distinctive values [I have recently referred to “sacred values” reinforced by shared “rituals” enacted by a common “community” – cf. Demerath, 2010] then any number of institutions may qualify. Military groups, political parties, trade unions, universities, even an institution as simple as a family may serve religious functions in that all of them urge values on their members and seek to sustain them. . . . Furthermore . . . each has the potential to serve churchlike or sectlike purposes. If they emphasize what they hold in common with the mainstream of social values, they are more churchlike. If they emphasize what they alone represent, they are more sectlike. Here again, status should determine the choice. Institutions are flexible, including both possibilities within themselves. (Demerath 1965: 198)

So much for repeating oneself. In any case, I then went on to suggest three propositions with special implications for social class and status:

First, the lower one's secular status, the more he is apt to seek out institutions with unique values as a framework for interaction and self-judgement. Second, within any institution, those lower in status are more likely to seek out the least secular facets as the loci of their commitment. Third, it is possible to gain a suitably distinctive orientation in organizations other than the church. The church is not the only recourse for the disenfranchised; the lower classes may find succor in other groups and institutions as well. (Demerath 1965: 198)

I am confident that the book had fewer readers than author's hours invested in it. I am no less confident that very few of these very few readers ever made it to this concluding chapter. However, here is where I had hoped my true colors might show. In the few lines just quoted – some apparently paraphrased from the unattributed last chapter of Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1957) – I was taking my first steps as a sociologist of the sacred, and I was also offering a preliminary sketch of a theory of social class and voluntary associations beyond religion itself.

But this was not just a theoretical exercise. Ten years ago I was asked to serve as an “expert witness” in a federal court case involving a young checkout girl who was fired by a nationwide store chain because she would not remove a small gold earring in her left ear after the company had disseminated a policy barring facial adornments. She claimed that this was a violation of her religious free exercise because she was a member of the Church of Body Modification. My task was to persuade the court that this national group qualified as a religion, and doing so was not difficult. I offered a sociological definition of religion as a sacred set of beliefs, ritually reinforced, and with a community of like-minded participants. As it turns out the third and most sociological criterion goes one step beyond current federal and Massachusetts state law by insisting on some sort of sacred community so that individuals

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cannot simply pass legal muster by defining their own private religion. Because of the First Amendment's strictures against any "established" religion, the law of the land now allows any individual to define the religion of his or her choice so long as it is not "frivolous." Indeed, the broadening scope of acceptable definitions of religion may portend a sort of constitutional crisis ahead. As the courts seek to heed the First Amendment and avoid an established conception of religion, they have moved increasingly away from the small tent of religion to the big tent of the sacred. In the process they may soon have to confront more directly just what are the limits posed by such definitions for both the religious "establishment clause" that begins the First Amendment and the clause providing for the "free exercise" of religion that concludes it.

PARSING RELIGION AND INEQUALITY

Finally, it may be worth asking just what kinds of relationships between religion and inequality are to be explored in this important volume. Even a quick perusal of the Contents suggests that they are many and varied. For example, in some chapters inequality is the cause and religion the effect. Others examine just the opposite causal direction. In some chapters the causes explored have direct effects; in other cases, they are indirect. And then there are chapters that explore both causal directions and with both direct and indirect effects. Let me illustrate these possibilities by returning to the world of early Protestant capitalists who in some sense exemplify them all.

Max Weber saw the early capitalists illustrating religion as a cause of inequality because they were caught up in early Puritan churches whose strict doctrinal interpretations of predestination and of appropriate everyday conduct caused them to behave in a way that brought about the inequalities of capitalism as a direct effect. But it can be argued that the doctrine itself was less the cause than an indirect effect of those factors that brought the parishioners into contact with it as members of a rising urban middle class that found the churches to be a source of shared community – even if it meant listening to the sermons of the day as a burden to be countenanced. Indeed, one of Weber's critics – the historian R. H. Tawney (1938) – even argued that the Protestant ethic was less a cause than an effect of early capitalism. The new and increasingly unequal middle class came to the churches not so much as putty in the pews but as conditional parishioners who demanded a doctrine that would reconcile and legitimate their profitable capitalist rounds with a link to the afterlife. From this perspective, the critical figures in the development of a Protestant ethic were not the virtuoso theologians such as Luther and Calvin, but the Sunday preachers who complied from the pulpit in satisfying the capitalists' demands. Tawney was not the only historian who faulted Weber. A number pointed out that Western capitalism preceded rather than followed the Protestant Reformation, and others found evidence of early capitalism in places far beyond the reach of Protestantism such as Japan. Of course, Weber argued in his own behalf that

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he was talking about a distinctive form of “rational capitalism.” And to those who argued that the Protestantism of their own day was not as congenial to capitalism as Weber’s thesis would require, he responded that the link between Protestant religion and capitalist inequality had been broken before the end of the 19th century, so one would hardly expect to see persistent ties into the 20th.

If all of this seems confusing, that is precisely the point. The myriad relations between religion and inequality require a volume such as this one to clarify them. Religion and inequality are both host to myriad variables and varieties. If a “religion” is a cause, is this a function of its beliefs and doctrine, its social ethic, its traditional class standing, or the status of its parishioners? And although mid-20th-century social scientists tended to equate inequality with social class, the chapters to follow illustrate a much richer conception, one that ranges beyond class to ethnicity, gender, age, and the like and one that moves from the macro to micro and back again.

But enough of a “Foreword” that should have been titled a “Backward.” On to a panoply of conceptual and methodological riches that make the research of my day seem pedestrian by comparison. Clearly religion and inequality are both multifaceted. Just as clearly, both are at the core of any effort to understand society.

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