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Toward the Study of the Relation between Social Class and Religion

The early history of both sociology and anthropology is profuse with illustrations of the interest in religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theorists such as Comte, Durkheim, Frazer, Simmel, Tylor, and Weber spring quickly to mind. And while the proportion of literature devoted to religious topics in terms of the total output of sociology has perhaps declined, there is, nonetheless, a considerable body still being produced. But having abandoned the search for the origins or the nature of religion, sociologists have now turned their attention toward questions dealing with the interrelations between religion and other social phenomena. One of these interests has been the connection between religion and social class. It is this particular area of research that the present paper proposes to examine. The available literature in this field will be reviewed and, in addition, one or two modifications in the present approaches will be suggested, which, if employed, might serve to clarify some of the presently vague issues.

Before examining the available literature, however, a brief attempt will be made to define the notions of social class and religion as they will be used in this paper.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Since attention will be directed to western societies, and particularly American society, the problems of defining religion are not as perplexing as they would be if primitive societies were also included. In primitive societies the distinction between what is religious and what is secular is often difficult and, indeed, many would argue that any attempt to isolate the two would do an injustice to the 'nature' of primitive society.[1]

Most definitions of religion focus on the following aspects, singly or in combinations; beliefs, practices, feelings, experiences, or organization. From Durkheim on, sociologists who have attempted formal definitions of religion have generally focused on belief and practice and, to a lesser extent, on its organizational aspects. Thus sociologists have viewed religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things ... uniting into a single moral community all those who adhere to those beliefs and practises.'[2] Or, 'a system of beliefs about the nature of the force[s] ultimately shaping man's

1. Clifford Geertz in his book *The Religion of Java* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), has cogently argued this point. See especially p. 238.

2. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 62.

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destiny, and the practises associated therewith, shared by the members of a group.'[3] Or, 'a more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a supernatural order of beings, forces, places, or other entities ...'[4] Given these three definitions, one would be hard pressed to show that much of what is commonly thought of as 'religious' in the United States would fulfil the criteria proposed. These definitions are restrictive in the sense that what is commonly viewed as religious (say, attendance at worship services) would not be classified as indicating the presence of religion unless the practices have a corresponding belief, or a belief a corresponding practice. Lenski's definition is especially surprising since in his research he has dealt almost exclusively with religiosity rather than with belief dimensions.[5]

There is evidence to suggest that people who go to church are not necessarily 'believers'; therefore, a broader formulation of religion is necessary unless we choose to violate what we commonly think that it includes. Certainly the Lynds' work in Muncie, Indiana, suggests that people go to church for other than 'religious' reasons. The following quotations from their book suggest this conclusion: 'I go chiefly because I think it sets a good example for the boys' ... 'Why it just never occurred to me to question church going' ... 'Mr. — and I go as a matter of principle. People ought to support the churches. The children go to Sunday School because they enjoy it ...'[6] Research in Winnipeg, Manitoba, also revealed that, in many cases, people were motivated to church attendance by non-religious considerations. Witness the following responses to the question of satisfactions people reported they got from church attendance: 'I thoroughly enjoy the singing. I enjoy meeting certain friends and shaking hands with the minister' ... 'You feel you've done your duty, what you've been trained to do' ... 'It's a right thing to do' ... 'I feel the church is a good force in the community and I feel support is worthwhile.'[7] Clearly, belief and practice are two different, and not necessarily associated, phenomena. Although I have not encountered any research indicating religious beliefs occurring in the absence of corresponding practices, it is intuitively obvious that appropriate research would indicate the presence of such a phenomenon.

A further difficulty in the various definitions of religion – and this is particularly relevant for the conceptualization of non-western religion – is their

3. Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 298–9.

4. Harry M. Johnson, *Sociology: A Systematic Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), p. 392.

5. Of 184 questions asked of respondents in Lenski's Detroit Area study, only one set of questions (numbers 42 to 56) dealt with 'belief' items and all of these were concerned with belief in God. If the respondents did not claim to believe in God (question 42) they were not asked any more of the questions in the set. See Lenski, *ibid.*, pp. 341–58.

6. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1956), pp. 366–7.

7. J. E. Winston Jackson, 'The Active and the Inactive Church Member: A Sociological Analysis of Certain Aspects of St. George's Anglican Church, Winnipeg' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba), p. 135.

failure to take into account that what is perceived by people to represent the sacred is of greater importance than what the social scientist perceives to be important. Thus it could be argued that if church-sponsored basketball is commonly perceived to be a sacred activity in New York, then the social scientist should so consider it, even though in Dublin such a perception may not exist commonly. Clearly, similar structures do not have the same meaning in different contexts.

In order to surmount the difficulties encountered by the belief-and-practice fallacy, and also to take into account regional and cultural variations in the perception of what is religious, the following tentative definition will be advanced: Within any particular regional or cultural context, religion refers to any beliefs and/or practices commonly perceived to be related to the supernatural, or to supernatural forces which are viewed as significantly influencing man's destiny.

Some further points might be raised in connection with this proposed definition. First, objections might be offered to the effect that it would be virtually impossible to determine what is 'commonly' perceived to indicate the presence or absence of religious belief and practice. The only solution, empirically, would be to test a sample of people within the area being studied to see what beliefs and actions the majority think refer to the supernatural, or to supernatural forces. Or, if empirical questioning is not practicable, then one could proceed on a common-sense basis. Second, it might be objected that no religious organization is insisted upon in the definition. The omission here is to purposely allow for the possibility of a non-institutionalized religion. The provision of, 'significantly influencing man's destiny,' hopes to permit a distinction between religion and various forms of magic and superstition which may, in some contexts, be regarded as not being crucial in shaping man's destiny, though perhaps moderately influencing it. And finally, the proposed definition of religion preserves the possibility of a distinction – and I think it is worthwhile to do so – between ideology and religion. This possibility is maintained through the specification of a supernatural element.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CLASS

While the problems in adequately defining religion are great, so too are the problems in conceptualizing social class. This concept has been used in many different ways and it has no commonly accepted conceptual or operational definition. Even when similar criteria are used to arrive at social class, the cutting points between the classes vary considerably. Hence what is upper class in, say Kitchener may be identical with what is middle class in Toronto. It is these variations in both the operational and conceptual definitions, so evident in the literature treating the subject, that make any consideration of the relationships between class and religion difficult.

A further difficulty in talking about social class is that it seems necessary to distinguish between social class as a 'real' phenomenon as opposed to social class as a construct of the observer. Clearly, there is a danger of reifying the

concept. It would, indeed, be helpful to know the nature of the relation between the ways in which people evaluate one another and the positioning one gets when various socio-economic scales are used. Undoubtedly the criteria individual actors use in ranking one another are different from those the social scientist uses in his research.

One excellent illustration of the confusions that can arise from alternate operational definitions of social class has been provided by Demerath who pointed out that all the studies which indicate that the upper class is the most active in the churches are based on studies conducted in predominantly farming communities with populations of under 6,000; on the other hand, studies which indicate that the middle class people are the most active in the churches are based on studies in centres over 50,000 in size.[8]

Because of the diffuse techniques used to arrive at social class, the concept will simply be conceived of as a hierarchial continuum which may be segmented by any or all of the following differentials: perceived class position of one's self or others, income, education, occupation, power, prestige, or, general 'style of life.' This is clearly not a definition of social class but is, rather, a statement of the kinds of criteria which are commonly used to arrive at an individual's position in the social class hierarchy. In discussing the literature on the relation between social class and religion, an attempt will be made to indicate which criteria the various researchers used. It is hoped that this will provide some clarification of the current debate concerning the question of social class and religion.

Many questions can be asked about the relation between social class and religion.[9] The procedure to be followed here will be to examine the general, large-scale questions first, and gradually move toward the more specific questions. The relation between social class and different denominations and types of religious organizations will be examined first. Second, the relation between agents' social class and their religious beliefs and practices will be treated. Third, some attention will be given to the question of the social-class dynamics of particular parishes or congregations. And finally, other questions which pertain to the relation between social class and religion, but which do not fall within the scope of the previous sections, will be examined. In each of the sections an attempt will be made to suggest some generalizations which appear to be possible from the available research findings concerning the relation between class and religion. Moreover, questions will be posed which, to date, have not been adequately dealt with but which, nonetheless, would appear to be worthy of sociological inquiry.

8. N. J. Demerath III, *Social Class in American Protestantism* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1965), p. 18.

9. This section of the paper is an extensively modified version of an earlier paper, 'Religion and Social Class,' written for a Sociology of Religion seminar, Washington University, St. Louis, December, 1965.

SOCIAL CLASS VARIATION BY DENOMINATION TYPE

That different types of religious denominations have varying class compositions is an observation almost as old as sociology itself. Ernst Troeltsch's classic distinction between the church and the sect had, as one of its criteria, that sects tend to be composed of the propertyless.[10]

Although considerable effort has been spent in conceptually distinguishing the church from the sect, there apparently has been little effort to evaluate empirically these small, inclusive, voluntary religious organizations to see if, for example, they are *always* lower class in composition. If one accepts a common-sense definition or notion of sects, then numerous research efforts would point to the fact that such organizations are not, in fact, always composed of lower-class elements. For example, Wilson's analysis of three sects in England – the Elimites, the Christian Scientists, and the Christadelphians – suggested that only the members of the Elim church were predominantly working class while the Christian Scientists were drawn from the middle and upper classes; the Christadelphians, while historically lower class, today have incorporated middle-class elements into their memberships.[11] Similarly, Geertz's analysis of religion in Modjokuto, Java, indicated that the sect-like organizations were especially common among the upper class, in the *prijaji* religious variant.[12] Thus it is clear that membership in small, inclusive, world-rejecting, voluntary religious organizations is not limited to the lower class.

Perhaps a fruitful departure would be to abandon the bonds of the classical church-sect dichotomy and focus instead on the processes of emergence, development, and collapse of these small religious groupings. Clearly, there are many types of such groupings which vary in doctrine, in their orientation to the secular world, and in the kinds of people they attract as members. One might well wonder whether the sectarian groups are more homogeneous in their class structure than their big sisters, the churches. Furthermore, what conditions lead middle-class individuals to identify with these small religious groups? Are most such recruits downwardly mobile? What is being suggested here is that the classical church-sect dichotomy has limited the kinds of questions researchers have been posing: the taxonomic emphasis has led to questions about the differences between churches and sects but not about differences between the sects themselves. Using classifications indicating the variations in the organizational structures of 'sectarian' groups might shed light on numerous questions related to the social class composition of these groups. One might hypothesize, for example, that in those groups where charisma has become routinized, the social-class composition will be higher than in those groups where bureaucratization has not started. Similarly, one might hypothesize that, as routinization occurs, individual participation in the group will

10. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949), I, pp. 331–41.

11. Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society* (London: William Heineman Ltd., 1961), pp. 97–118, 198–215, 296–314.

12. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, pp. 234–41.

decrease.[13] Needless to say, many more propositions could be advanced: the point is, however, that focussing attention on the variations between sectarian groups would undoubtedly lead to a fuller understanding of them.

Leaving aside the church-sect classification, one might raise questions about the differences in social-class composition between, say, the episcopalian, the presbyterian, and the congregational forms of organization. Which of these three organizational forms has the most social-class homogeneity?

Furthermore, questions could be raised concerning the differences in function between types of religious organizations. Do the small religious groups provide pay-offs for the individual which are not possible in the larger religious organizations? Do lower-class people have, as Niebuhr has suggested,[14] greater 'affective' needs than the middle class? Or do the middle classes have these needs met through other structures?

To sum up what is known about the relation between social class and types of denominations, all that it is possible to say is that *generally* sects tend to be more lower class in composition than are the churches. Little is known, however, of the reasons for this phenomenon.

SOCIAL-CLASS VARIATIONS BETWEEN DENOMINATIONS

There is no shortage of reports noting that there are social-class variations between denominations. Herbert Schneider, for example, points out that, of the three major religious groupings in the United States, the Jews have the highest proportion of their membership from the upper class (21.8 per cent); 14 per cent of the Protestants and 9 per cent of the Roman Catholics are upper class. The various Protestant groups show a considerable range, however. The proportion of upper class people in these denominations varies from 24 per cent among the Episcopalians and Congregationalists to 8 per cent among the Baptists.[15] It should be noted that, although there are considerable variations in class composition among various denominations, there is none in which fewer than one-third of their membership is derived from lower-class individuals.[16] Indeed, the tentative claim could be made that the major religious denominations are the least class-bound of all the large voluntary organizations in America. This is not to claim, however, that individual congregations are not highly homogeneous in their class structure.

But how do we account for the variations that do exist? In part, the class composition of denominations undoubtedly reflects the regional and particularly the urban versus rural emphasis in them. Those denominations which historically have served the rural areas, or the poorer sections of cities, would understandably derive a greater proportion of their membership from the

13. See Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), p. 380.

14. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1929).

15. Herbert Schneider, *Religion in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 228.

16. *Ibid.*

lower and the middle strata as compared to those churches which have gravitated toward the urban, and particularly suburban, areas.

A further possibility which might be noted is that those denominations which stress purely ritualistic, unemotional ceremony may well attract, and hold, members from the growing middle classes and hence reinforce their middle-class image. (This explanation depends on the acceptance of the proposition noted earlier, that lower class individuals have a greater 'need' for affective involvement.) Also, it might be reasonable to assert that if certain denominations become identified with, say, the upper class, we might expect converts to such churches to be those who are – or are attempting to be – upwardly mobile.

There remain two additional explanations for the class homogeneity of denominations. The first of these is historical. Since many churches were, and still are to a considerable degree, associated with particular ethnic groups, as the ethnic groups moved in the class structure, the denominations moved with them. Thus, as the Anglo-Saxons achieved the upper echelons of American society so did their churches. But how is it that these class lines have remained? Here it could be argued that, the fact that to a considerable degree people remain within the denomination of their parents (and since there is a reasonably high correlation between parents' and their children's class position), accounts for the preservation of class-identified denominations. However, this explanation cannot be pushed too far since there is some evidence to indicate that there is considerable movement of people from denomination to denomination.[17] If this movement were random with respect to social class, then the class homogeneity would soon crumble.

And, finally, on this point it might be noted that if greater material goods become available to greater proportions of the American population, then possibly 'conspicuous consumption' as a means of status symbolization will become less effective and membership in prestigious organizations (including perhaps the Episcopalian and Congregational churches) will become more important as indicators of social class. Such activity would serve to reinforce the present class-identifications of various denominations.

All of the above explanations of the social-class identifications of various denominations are perhaps partially tenable. No one by itself could fully account for the phenomenon. Perhaps to fully understand the mechanisms by which denominations maintain their class identification, it will be necessary to examine carefully particular congregations. The potentialities of such an approach will be discussed later in this paper.

Before we consider the question of which social classes are the most

17. Of 1,200 Anglicans surveyed while in attendance at church services in Winnipeg, over one-quarter had been members of other denominations at some time. See W. S. F. Pickering, 'The Inner-City Church' (Toronto: The Council for Social Service, the Anglican Church of Canada, Bulletin 187, 1963), p. 12. In another study in Winnipeg, covering a United and an Anglican church, over 30 per cent in each had been members of other denominations previously. See W. S. F. Pickering and J. E. W. Jackson, 'A Brief Sociological Examination of Local United and Anglican Churches,' *C.J.T.*, XIV, 4 (1968), 249–61.

involved in religious organizations, it might be noted that a careful analysis of variations between denominations in their efforts to establish congregations in the suburban areas could well provide clues to which churches will become more middle and upper class in composition. Those which 'capture' these areas will undoubtedly gain people, providing, of course, that the 'right' kind of religion is offered. A further factor, which could fruitfully be explored to predict future trends, would be the relation between the advancement of racial and ethnic groups in the social structure and the present day ethnic churches. As the various ethnic groups advance in the class structure, one would expect a breakdown in the lower-class ethnic church.

WHAT CLASSES ARE MOST INVOLVED IN RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS?

Although a large body of research has dealt with the problem of differentials in religious affiliation and participation by social class level, the evidence uncovered is not unanimous. The bulk of the research, however, points to the generalization that 'the higher the social class, the greater the likelihood of religious affiliation and participation.' (It must be pointed out, however, that the criteria used to evaluate affiliation, participation, and social class vary widely among the researchers.) These findings cover both the American and the European scenes. Support for the above generalization comes from such scholars as Fogarty in Western Europe, Isambert in France, and Masterman in England.[18] In the United States, the generalization receives support from such writers as Lazerwitz, Cowgill, Mather, Komarovski, and Lenski.[19]

Earlier it was noted that the evidence indicating that the higher the social class the higher the levels of affiliation and participation in religious bodies was not unanimous. Hollingshead has pointed out, for example, that among the middle class (his class III) 'there is a significantly higher average attendance at church services ...'[20] Louis Bultena's Madison, Wisconsin, study indicated that there was no relation between social class (as measured by occupation and education) and church affiliation.[21] And, finally, in a study by Lenski on the social correlates of religious interest in Indianapolis, the tentative con-

18. Michael P. Fogarty, 'Religious Statistics,' in Louis Schneider, *Religion, Culture, and Society* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), pp. 394–6; François Andre Isambert, 'Is the Religious Abstension of the Working Classes a General Phenomenon?' in Schneider, *ibid.*, pp. 400–2; Charles G. Masterman, chapter VII, in R. Mundie Smith, *The Religious Life of London*, 1904.

19. Bernard Lazerwitz, 'Religion and Social Structure in the United States,' in Schneider, *ibid.*, pp. 430–2; Donald O. Cowgill, 'The Ecology of Religious Preference in Witchita,' in Schneider, *ibid.*, pp. 436–52; W. A. Mather, 'Income and Social Participation,' *American Sociological Review* (1941), 381; Mirra Komarovski, 'The Voluntary Associations of Urban Dwellers,' *American Sociological Review* (1946), 691; Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor*, p. 46.

20. August Hollingshead, 'Selected Characteristics of Classes in a Middle Western Community,' in Bendix and Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), p. 218.

21. Louis Bultena, 'Church Membership and Church Attendance in Madison, Wisconsin,' *American Sociological Review* (1949), 384.

clusion was that the middle classes (when defined purely in economic terms) expressed greater interest in religion than either the upper or the lower classes.[22] With the exception of Bultena's research, indications are that middle-class people in western society are more likely to be involved in church activities than are lower-class individuals. The evidence for the relative degrees of religiosity of the middle compared to the upper class is by no means clear. And, as Demerath has noted, what evidence there is on this subject may simply reflect the size of the communities in which the various research projects were carried out.[23] In the larger communities where the criteria for inclusion in the 'upper class' are more rigorous, we find that the upper segments in the area are less likely to attend church frequently. Perhaps Schneider's analysis is the most convincing, despite the fact that he has no empirical data to support his conclusions.

> At the other end of the social scale are the proverbial millionaires. They, too, are outside the pale of organized religion; they are not the objects of charity, but all other mortals are such subjects to them. They are the 'angels' or patrons of religious bodies, but usually feel superior to the bodies they patronize. For them the modern inventions which we are considering are merely incidental comforts; their standards are not seriously transformed by these additional conveniences, since their interest, though 'wordly,' transcends the commonplace. Such persons show a benevolent interest in the churches, as in schools and hospitals, believing them to represent worthy causes. When they occasionally 'visit' churches they do so as they would a hospital, either out of benevolence or as patients in extraordinary need.[24]

One question which requires empirical testing is whether social class and religious participation and belief are related in a linear fashion or a curvilinear one. To answer this question adequately it will be necessary to distinguish types of activity and types of beliefs and then relate these to a continuum of social class. In this case, a continuum approach would reveal whether the various relationships are linear or curvilinear, since no arbitrary cutting points would be established. It is indeed possible that some of the relations will turn out to be linear and others not. Hollingshead, for example, has found no relation between social class and belief in God.[25] More rigorous research might reveal whether the divergent findings on the relation between social class and religion reflect 'real' differences or are only the product of deficient (or perhaps variable) methodologies and measurement. Once the nature and the direction of the relationships between various dimensions of religion have been

22. Gerhard Lenski, 'Social Correlates of Religious Interest,' in Robert W. O'Brien *et al.*, *Readings in General Sociology*, third edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 434.

23. Demerath, *Social Class in American Protestantism*, p. 18. See also p. 85 of this paper.

24. Herbert Schneider, *Religion in Twentieth Century America*, p. 8.

25. Reported in Demerath, *Social Class in American Protestantism*, p. 14.

carefully worked out, it will then be possible to turn to the more important questions dealing with the 'whys' of the relationships.

VARIATIONS IN SOCIAL CLASS WITHIN PARTICULAR CONGREGATIONS

One area which certainly has not been adequately researched – and one which might prove especially profitable in revealing some of the relationships between social class and religion – is that of the social-class dynamics of particular congregations. For example, is there as great a range within particular denominations as a whole? Furthermore, are particular congregations less social-class homogeneous than other voluntary organizations? Are the congregations within some denominations consistently less homogeneous in their class makeup than those of other denominations? If so, why? Furthermore, one might well ask who, within the social class range presented by any congregation, are the most active participants in the church's affairs – the upper-, the middle-, or the lower-class segments? What little evidence there is on this subject would suggest that it is the middle stratum within a church which is the most active in the affairs of the church.[26] However, the governing boards may well be dominated by the wealthier elements within the church's membership.[27]

A comparison between particular congregations might also indicate certain relations not yet known. For example, do churches with large salaried staffs have a lower participation rate among their memberships? Do smaller congregations generally have higher or lower participation rates? Within congregations' various voluntary groups, is there a high degree of class homogeneity? Are these groups more homogeneous than the congregations themselves? If they are more homogeneous, what are the formal and informal means of maintaining this homogeneity?

Greater attention paid to the sociology of the parish might certainly contribute a great deal to our understanding of stratification within the church. We know little about the class dynamics of particular congregations, and therefore the sociology of the parish has not as yet contributed much to our understanding of the general relationship between social class and religion.

OTHER ISSUES

There are a few issues on the relation between social class and religion which do not fall within any one of the four general areas just discussed: let us examine some of these issues. One is the relation between social class and conversion. Which social class provides the highest proportion of converts to

26. See Arthur Elliott, 'A Sociological Study of one hundred active church members and one hundred irregularly attending church members in five Protestant churches in Louisville, Kentucky, 1953' (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Louisville, Kentucky, 1953), 29; and J. E. Winston Jackson, 'The Active and the Inactive Church Member,' 93–9.

27. Charles Lee Wilson, 'A Social Picture of a Congregation,' *American Sociological Review*, 10, 420.

other religious groups? Or is conversion random with respect to social class? Are the upwardly and downwardly mobile more likely to change their religion than those who are stationary in the social structure? Furthermore, one might well inquire into the effect mobility has upon belief. In historic periods of high mobility has there been a correspondingly high rate of conversions?

One dimension of the relation between social class and religion which appears to have been largely ignored is that of belief. Possibly because of an emphasis on dimensions of 'religiosity' rather than belief, a systematic bias has crept into our research. Is it possible for example, that while middle- and upper-class people are more likely to be affiliated with a church than are members of the working class, they are no more likely to adhere to, or accept, the beliefs of their church?

Related to the above question is the problem of the economics of church affiliation for the individual. To what extent do lower-class people avoid church membership because of the perceived economic burdens which would be involved? Lutterman has found that lower-status church members actually give a larger proportion of their income than do the higher-status members.[28]

Finally, there is the whole question of the generally noted[29] lower rates of participation in voluntary organizations (including churches) among the lower stratum. Because this group is less active in associations of any kind, it would appear that the churches, in the United States at least, have an excellent record of attracting members from this class. (It is to be recalled that in none of the religious groupings reported by Schneider did fewer than one-third of their memberships come from the lower class.)[30] As Lenski has pointed out, perhaps the appropriate question to be asking is not why do workers attend church so rarely? but rather why do they avoid formal organizational activities generally?[31] This same question, if posed in functionalist language, could ask about the functional alternatives to membership in voluntary associations, not the functional alternatives to religion itself. On this point it has been suggested that possibly the kin group serves the working class as an alternative to high levels of participation in voluntary associations.[32] Another possibility is that the lower class is not as geographically mobile and that therefore the local community provides more outlets for sociation within it.

28. Kenneth J. Lutterman, 'Giving to Churches. A Sociological Study of the contributions to eight Catholic and Lutheran churches' (unpublished PH.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962), 37–8, cited in Demerath, *Social Class in American Protestantism*, p. 17.

29. See Komarovski, 'The Voluntary Associations of Urban Dwellers,' p. 687; Mather, 'Income and Social Participation,' pp. 380–1; and Charles R. Wright and Herbert H. Hyman, 'Voluntary Association Membership of American Adults: Evidence from National Sample Surveys,' *American Sociological Review*, 23 (1958), 288–9.

30. Herbert Schneider, *Religion in Twentieth Century America*, p. 228.

31. Gerhard Lenski, 'The Sociology of Religion in the United States,' *Social Compass*, 9 (1962), 313.

32. See Floyd Dotson, 'Patterns of Voluntary Association Among Urban Working Class Families,' *American Sociological Review*, 16 (1951).

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Some of the gaps in our knowledge about religious stratification perhaps are inevitable, given the fact that research is carried out by many individuals using various techniques, employing varied concepts, looking at various dimensions of the relationship, and doing their research in different localities. But knowing that many gaps in our knowledge do exist, are there any strategies which might help to diminish some of them?

First, until we achieve greater precision in our conceptualization and operationalization of our variables, we will not make much progress toward understanding the relation between social class and religion. Rather we must go further and ask why such relationships do, indeed, exist, and under what conditions do they exist? One way to get at these 'why' questions would be to devote more of our research energies to the sociology of the parish. Once we understand that and why certain relations exist at the parish (or congregation) level, it should be possible to generalize some of these findings and thereby explain some of the reasons for religious stratification in general.

To date, most of the research dealing with the relation between social stratification and religion has been based on what Levi-Strauss would call a 'statistical model.'[33] Instead of focusing attention on the stratification of particular congregations, research has been directed to the social-class composition of different denominations and then to comparing these large 'statistical' units. Or, alternatively, efforts have been spent in finding out which social class is the most active in religious organizations.

Another approach would be to analyze many small units and then combine these to form larger units: this kind of model is referred to by Levi-Strauss as a 'mechanical' one. If we were to apply Levi-Strauss' mechanical model to the study of religion, it would involve the study of individual units first and then the combination of these to form denominations.

While not all the questions which have been raised in this paper could be answered through the use of a mechanical approach, many of them could. The contention here is that until we have careful analyses of individual congregations we will not know much about the larger units, the denominations. Essentially the problem is similar to the ones faced by the cultural anthropologists who attempt cross-cultural comparisons. They have found that, until they have good ethnologies, cross-cultural comparisons are dangerous because of the possibility of structural and functional non-equivalents between items in the cultures being compared. Only good ethnology can protect against such errors. Similarly, one could argue that before one can compare denominations one needs to know a great deal not only about the denominations being compared but also much about the units which comprise them. Some 'lower' level generalizations are needed. If one were to study, say, only ten congregations

33. Claude Levi-Strauss, 'Social Structure,' in S. Tax, ed., *Anthropology Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 325–8.

of a denomination, and to develop some generalizations, about for example, the mechanisms used to preserve the class homogeneity of these congregations, one would then have a good starting point for a clearer evaluation of the whole relationship between social class and religion. Such a study could also yield results which would bear upon many of the questions raised earlier in this paper.

Until we devote more attention to the individual congregation, we will probably not progress beyond the descriptive phase in the sociology of religion. Perhaps the sociology of the parish will be the point from which studies of high explanatory power will come.

Conclusion

This paper had three major objectives: to provide a more adequate conceptualization of religion; to review, and comment upon, the available literature on religious stratification; and to suggest strategies which might prove productive in increasing our understanding of the nature and mechanisms of religious stratification.

The proposed definition of religion differs from the usual sociological form in that it does not insist upon an organizational dimension or upon both beliefs *and* practices, but rather provides for the possibility of 'religion' despite the absence of one of these dimensions. Note, too, that the definition offered at the beginning of this paper provides for an easy distinction between ideology and religion and a possible – though not easy – one between religion and magic. One obvious weakness of the definition is that in specifying a 'supernatural' dimension (which is perceived 'as significantly influencing man's destiny'), it would seem to exclude Buddhism and possibly other 'religions.'

The review of the literature has turned up few generalizations, and of these, none had much, if any, explanatory power. Thus many questions were raised but few answers to these questions were possible. In most cases the evidence was either slim or non-existent. As a suggestion for further research it has been argued that greater attention ought to be paid to the sociology of the parish and to a more rigorous conceptualization of variables.