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Religion in the Urban Community: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Many theologians have called for a re-examination of traditional religious practices and beliefs as they exist today in urban societies. Some argue that churches have not changed as quickly or as deeply as is necessary to confront key modern issues. Religious institutions often appear to be by passed by other social institutions and important individual and societal concerns do not appear in church agenda. The process by which religious institutions are separated from other social arrangements and lose influence throughout many areas of life is known as secularization. Historically, secularization and urbanization have been linked together and the goal of this study is to show how each process has influenced the other.

Key words: Secularization, urbanization, religion, institutions, ecosystem, theories

CLASSICAL THEORIES

Two main theories in sociological theory link the process of secularization with the massive transformations that occur when societies change from rural to urban. The first is that of Durkheim (1915), who believed that social change often causes social disorganization and loss of influence, weakening traditional institutions and making them less effective in resolving new problems. Another view is that of Weber (1958) who coined the term demystification to characterize the effect of scientific explanation on traditional religious ideas. Magic and religious dogma are no longer the foundation for understanding but are replaced by intellectual modes of inquiry employing rational objective analysis. Areas of social activity that had been previously dominated by religious authority are controlled by other institutions that appeal to scientific and rational expertise as the basis of knowledge.

The term secularization is confusing because it has been used in several different ways; first secularization refers to the separation of religious institutions from other social arrangements as in the breakdown between church and state, the distinction made between religious and economic activities and the loss of religious influence in educational institutions. A second meaning of the term suggests fewer public religious practices, such as attending church services or formal prayers. Third, secularization as developed by Weber refers to the decline in beliefs about the supernatural and a downgrading of mystical and spiritual explanations essential to most religious belief systems.

To measure secularization in any one of these meanings is difficult. Historical comparisons of religious activities are inaccurate because the records of the past are incomplete. Also, church membership had a different connotation when the church was a political and economic institution in the lives of ordinary people. Recent surveys estimate a decline in adult attendance at weekly services in the United States from 49% in 1968 to 40% in 1988 (Poll, 1988).

Present estimates indicate that approximately 40% of all Americans attend religious services regularly. This figure varies greatly, however among different denominations and urban situations: Information about religious affiliations is not collected in the US Census, so that attendance figures are gathered by individual churches making it difficult to check for accuracy and reliability. Other urbanized countries have national figures that document the decline in attendance. Weekly attendance has changed in England from 25% in 1900 to 10% in 2005 (Argyle, 2005). Other evidence supporting the decline of religious influence in modern societies is the loss of status of the clergy, the rise in the number of people who claim no religious affiliation, the overwhelming use of scientific knowledge as the basis of decision making and explanation and the continued development of specialized organizations that restrict the scope of religious institutions.

Secularization is further complicated because any definition of the process depends upon the definition of religion adopted. If religious participation is defined as attendance at a formal worship service, secularization refers only to attendance. But, other measurable dimensions of religion identified by social scientists are: A system of belief or dogma; ritual and ceremonial activities and membership in some kind of association or fellowship. Efforts to evaluate these dimensions have proven very difficult.

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Whatever definitions one adopts for religion and there are many-religious questions clearly deal with problems of ultimate values and meaning. Religion is expected to provide both assistance and explanations of profound human concerns, as well as to establish a fundamental understanding of life and death. Throughout history, the answers given to such important questions have been as varied as the organizational arrangements developed by religious groups. Although, most churches adopt some reference in a supernatural being or spiritual power, modern ideologies, such as humanism or communism may serve as spiritual substitutes, providing meaning and direction in the lives of individuals and groups without appealing to God or the supernatural. One definition of religion that includes all of these ideas is that of Geertz (1988):

> A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic

Religious organizations are the usual social means for expressing and interpreting religion. Like other institutions are independent of contemporary members and survive individual personnel changes. They deal with the collective features of religious organizations and belief systems that are complex in the extreme, varying from formal structures of ecclesiastical authority to informal groups. Urban religious institutions are more differentiated than their rural counterparts because urban environments are generally more complex. The belief that the country is more religious than city cannot always be supported, however sociologist Berger (1999) argues that the departure of the super natural is more likely to occur in modern, urban societies but a continued interest in religious institutions can be observed in all urban societies.

Researchers must conclude that the strength of religious institutions is a complicated matter, reflecting more that geography or even the economic development of societies. To understand the survival of churches in urban areas is to recognize that religious institutions have responded to a variety of demands both personal and social in different ways. This process has entailed transformation, adaptation and innovation in both religious organizations and beliefs.

URBAN ADAPTATIONS TO RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

A major factor that has stimulated religious adaptations in urban contexts has been the diversity of populations living together. Different religious opinions encouraged the growth of more tolerant attitudes toward those who believed differently from one another. In addition, more sophisticated ideas about science and trade that were accepted in cities influenced religious thinking among many church members and stimulated new theological scholarship. As already noted, the rationalism characteristics of social relationship in urban areas was a key factor in the development of bureaucratic and rational authority structures. Churches developed organizational arrangements similar to those found in other areas of social life operated by specialists with management expertise.

Another feature of the urban milieu was the completion among different religious messages. Church members could choose among creeds, worship styles and fellowship groups. In some instances, churches completed for new members by using the same kinds of market place techniques that producers employ to sell ordinary products. Members were able to compare and contrast their religious institutions with others, making religious membership a choice rather than a birth right or a permanent identifications.

URBAN FEARS

Religious leaders often found the urban scene threatening and hostile to traditional church views. One response to this perceived threat was to emphasize old-fashioned values and strict adherence to dogmatic interpretations of human beings and God. This emphasis was reflected in the growth of fundamental churches and evangelical religious movements urging people to return to the teachings of the Bible. It was as if fundamental and dogmatic religious ideas could shield urban dwellers from dangerous features of metropolitan life. An example of, the kinds of tension reflected on many of these struggles was the famous scopes trial in 1921. The scientific theory of evolution taught in a local high school was debated in light of the biblical explanation of creation. The evolution controversy provided a rallying point around which many diverse fears could be articulated. Interestingly, in the 1970s, evolution erupted again in debates over school textbooks, once more providing a focus for those who believed that science, social change and urbanization would threaten established and traditional views.

The fundamentalist theme is particularly strong in American protestantism and a strong anti-urban bias has been powerful in many protestant groups. Often it was related to the desire to preserve small religious community life and the purity of rural values.

The fear of the city as a dangerous and destructive place can also be seen in the concerns of religious leaders. Even, when many of these church members moved into urban areas themselves, they brought their fears and dislike of the city along and sought to replace small towns with neighborhood groups or church communities. Another effect of the religious bias against the city was to exaggerate the fears of immigrant groups who were predominantly urban, largely Catholics and Jews.

Signs of an anti-urban attitude is still evident. For example, church services are scheduled at 10 or 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings to fit the rural pattern; farmers can compete their chores and get dressed for the ride to church. This may not be the most practical time for a service in modern societies but the tradition continues. The death of God movement publicly denounced the symbolism of rural existence as one inappropriate for the contemporary urban dweller.

Another response to the urban influence has been the persistence of an organizational form known, as the sect that retains the small-town quality of rural churches. Sects have been particularly attractive to rural migrants who find themselves locked into large urban societies for which they are not prepared psychologically or financially. Located at the bottom of the social scale, often poor, uneducated and with very little hope, some turn to small religious groups organized in a personal style. The religious message of these groups promises eternal rewards to compensate for earthly suffering. Members of sects often meet in shopping malls or private homes; they can be seen preaching on street corners and passing out religious literature from house to house.

Another important effect of rural attitudes among church leaders was to encourage clergy and lay members to help those suffering in the godless cities through charity research. The social gospel preached in the late 19th century urged concern with the plight of those unfortunates who were led to sin in the evil metropolitan areas. An example of, this concern was the Young Men's Christian Association. Like the Young Women's Christian Association that followed later from England these groups tried to assist urban youth in many ways. The Salvation Army brought its missionary zeal to the suffering down and outs in the poorest parts of the city. Christian centers for early reformers, particularly in Chicago. In the turbulent 60's, religious institutions continued to help relieve suffering among the elderly, the blacks and the poor caught in migrations to American cities. Paradoxically, the anti-urban bias has both stimulated and slowed social action efforts, particularly among wealthy suburbanites or religious leaders who believe in the inherent depravity of cities and wish to remain uncontaminated (Cully and Harper, 2009).

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSES OF URBAN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Another way to understand how religious institutions have responded to changes brought about through urbanization is to examine the changing social functions of these institutions. In hunting and agricultural systems, religion is usually the center of group life. To Durkheim, religious rituals were the affirmation of the group's existence and religious beliefs the foundation of all social order. Religion provided a cultural cement composed of common values, understandings and ideologies which brought people together. Durkheim adopted the term collective conscience to refer to group morality. He called attention to an important sociological insight that religion has social purposes, as well as spiritual messages or in his terms, religion is a social fact with social consequences.

When viewed in the context of villages and tribes, Durkheim's ideas were supported by many ways in which religion did provide a unifying center for all social activity. Even today in small towns and villages, the church remains physically in the center of community life and dominates group socialization activities. In urban areas, however Durkheim's theory becomes severely strained. Two or three churches of different denominations may exist side by side and compete for members. Often one group is actively opposed to the beliefs of another group. Clearly, religion can divide and separate groups as well as unite them. Durkheim's theory requires modification, as an explanation for religious functioning in urbanized societies, a task that has occupied urban scholars for over 100 years.

One modification has been to examine urban religious institutions as the source of unity for a particular group rather than between different groups. For example, churches have served as cultural centers for different ethnic groups in American history. Churches were homes for people of one nationality in a mixed society, providing a place where religious beliefs and cultural traditions could be shared. A Polish-Catholic parish, a Russian-Jewish synagogue or a German Lutheran church are examples of the ties between religious participation and ethnic cultures. According to sociologist Herberg (1995), an ethnic group is a form of self-identification and self-location that is linked to religious affiliation. Andrew Greeley goes even further by noting that instead of Americans belonging to churches because they believe in religion there may be a strong tendency for them to believe in religion because they belong to churches. When the group is without a geographic center, such as a village and when an established national church cannot provide cultural unity, religious institutions preserve ethnic association.

The sense of belonging is an important part of religious affiliation within a heterogeneous population. Religious groups can provide primary relationships in a complex impersonal world, meeting a human need for fellowship and coming together with others who share similar views on significant issues. Belonging is recognized as one of the most important factors in church membership. Churches are thereby part of the web of affiliations that help to solidify the individual's social bearings. Because church membership is voluntary, individuals can withdraw or change religious affiliations as well as identities in ways that were not possible when a single religious perspective dominated the environment. Catholics who no longer attend Mass regularly may no longer think of themselves as Catholic or Italian. If the individual decides his or her personal and group needs are satisfied within the church, support is given freely but support can be withdrawn just as freely if such needs are not met. Freedom of choice has important consequences on the clergy on church financing and on the ability of the organization to change or modify activities.

Today, some urbanites find the most attractive features of belonging to a church are psychological. The church provides comfort in times of trouble, security in times of fear and companionship in times of loneliness. This comfort theory of religion suggests that the primary function of religion in urban society may be the enrichment of individual lives rather than social groups. The term privitism describes an orientation toward religious participation based upon the belief that religion is a private concern. One of the ways in which urban religious institutions differ from their rural counterparts is an emphasis on religion as a personal, voluntary and private matter rather than as an issue of public policy. The personal dimension appears to be reinforced where laws on the separation of church and state discourage public identification with one denomination and where alternative religious messages are easily available.

Although, most urban citizens recognize the private benefits obtained from religious institutions, sociologists also believe that these institutions are important in maintaining social control. Religious justifications for regulating many areas of social behavior, particularly in matters of morality in key life areas, such as sex, marriage, birth and death, are the subject matter of rituals, symbolizing the religious values and the ability to know well most of the people with whom one interacts make it possible for informal social pressures to control social behavior. To use such methods in urban areas is difficult, although some evidence suggests that active participation in any religious organization helps the individual to be more disciplined. Because any one denomination in the city cannot exert the power that led to social conformity in non-urban situations (Argyle, 2005), religious influence on social order diminishes.

Nottingham (2001) has tried to view the changing functions of religious institutions in conjunction with the stage of development of societies. Thus in a society characterized as small isolated and preliterate, religion functions as Durkheim suggested: To bring members together and to reaffirm the value of the group. In changing societies with some technology, a growing division of labor, rising social class differences and increased literacy, religious institutions have contradictory functions: To provide integration for particular groups and individuals but also to support ideas that may divide segments of the population diversity, religious institutions have lost many social functions. Many people have no religious affiliation but those who continue to participate in religious institutions seek personal meaning and integration. In post-industrial societies, then religion becomes a private conviction rather than a social policy.

As urban populations increase in heterogeneity, churches frequently are pushed together. Many pressures arise to bring religious institutions into a kind of functioning association. Interdenominational service groups, the ecumenical movement and interfaith services are evidence of these pressures. Together, religious institutions increase their individual resources and offer a religious perspective in public decisions.

The term religiosity refers to the measurement of particular forms of religious participation, such as attendance at services, participation in rituals, frequency of prayer, recognition of the teachings of faith willingness to identify with a denomination and the frequency of interaction with other members of the church. Researchers are interested in religiosity because it can be empirically documented and verified, although some aspects of religious experience, clearly cannot be quantified. As a result of the quantitative emphasis in religious studies, a substantial body of evidence has been developed demonstrating relationships between social characteristics and religiosity.

For example, members of the same social class and status groups tend to participate in similar religious associations. The middle class participates more actively in churches than the working class as is true in all forms of voluntary association. At the same time, certain forms of religious participation are distinctively linked to the poor or those who are dissatisfied with the established forms of worship. Sects are particularly attractive to

groups rejecting the social environment in which they exist. Females attend church services more often than males; the young and old more often than the middle-aged. There is also a correlation between region and geography and specific denominational memberships. Education, occupation and income, the components of social status are correlated to membership in specific religious affiliations. Episcopalians, Jews and Presbyterians, for example fall into one category; Methodists, Lutherans and Roman Catholics into a middle range and Baptists, both black and white, fall into a lower status grouping according to these criteria. This is not surprising if researchers consider the urban church as operating similarly to other voluntary associations: People who share the same economic background usually associate with others like themselves.

One of the most difficult questions to answer is how religion affects behavior. Once again, Weber (1930) raises this question in his classic, the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Weber argued that protestant beliefs reinforced the values of emerging capitalism so that individuals who supported the puritan research ethic accumulated the capital necessary for success in the economic sphere. The difficulties of interpreting the tie between behavior and belief were illustrated by this thesis. Another example is an examination of anti-Semitism by Glock and Stark (2006). They found a relationship between orthodoxy and prejudice: The more people believe that their religion provides the only true path to salvation, the more likely they are to be hostile toward Jews. Those religious attitudes that reinforce prejudice are usually rigid and dogmatic. However, urban environments can also promote tolerant religious attitudes. A study of Canadian religious practices concluded that high urbanism is consistently related with high liberalism in beliefs with tolerance of minority groups and with approval of centralized public controls over economic activity (Crysdale, 2006). One difficulty with most studies of religion and social behavior is that a cluster of characteristics, rather than a single variable is present.

This means direct causation or even precise associations cannot be claimed what is evident are complex relationships between religion and social factors.

ETHICAL PROBLEMS

One of the most difficult tasks of all religious institutions is responding to the problems caused by advanced technological expertise. Biomedical research, for example has raised perplexing and troubling issues about the control of genes and the manipulation of the unborn child. Medical technology has made death complex because life can be sustained under conditions previously not possible. The rise in population threatens to upset the ecological balance of the world and resource depletion fuels the tensions between the have and have-not nations. Traditional sexual morality is attacked as emerging life styles reflect modern realities, such as contraception, long life and widespread in families. In many areas, technology now or in the near future portends grave moral concerns. Just as war can never again be discussed without considering the reality of the deadly means of destruction available, so human relationships can no longer be interpreted without reference to the technological factors that influence fundamental decisions about living and dying. Religious organizations are challenged in important and dramatic ways to present guidelines on these complicated topics.

Bitter debates about abortion, birth control, over-population and genetic engineering; the moral concerns over war, weapons and biological and psychological techniques of combat and interest in revolutionary and nationalistic political movements, particularly in the third world are indications of the range and difficulty of the ethical issues religious leaders confront.

Sociologists point out that to a large degree religious institutions have lost the power to define situations. Because the ethical issues are so complex and because science rather than religious dogma is the prevailing basis of intellectual authority, churches may not be able to have religious interpretations of these issues accepted or even heard. According to Budd (2003), perhaps the most important is the loss of control over activities which are now ruled by secular knowledge and values. A consequence of such changes is that public discussion of social and moral dilemmas now often refers to the religious arguments as a category to be taken into consideration but not one that is preeminent.

CONCLUSION

Urbanization in the future as in the past will accentuate the transformation of religious institutions. However, these institutions will continue to compete against other institutionalized forms providing meaningful systems from a secular perspective. In the competition, religious groups may become special centers in life rather than the center of social life. No one denominational view will become powerful enough to represent diverse urban populations and continuous religious experimentation with both belief systems and organizational arrangements will continue.

In the past, church and family as well as government and educational institutions, researched together to present a common framework of meaning in life. Today these institutions are more often than not at odds with each other. This does not mean as has often been predicted that religious institutions will disappear; it does mean they will change and redevelop to meet different human concerns.

Such changes will not occur easily; powerful status arrangements, rules that clearly define human relationships and satisfying answers are not instantly discarded. In a sense then, the future will be more of the past: The urban church will be called upon to reinterpret daily life for those believers who have faith a supernatural being or in a code of ethics or political philosophy. At the same time, many will look for meaning in nonreligious activities and will bypass traditional religious institutions.

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