

## YINGER AND THE CLASSIC FIGURES ON RELIGION

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**INTRODUCTION** Since the late 1960's the issue generating the most intense action in the sociology of religion is the definition of religion, and what it concerns (Bellah 1967; Luckmann 1967; Berger 1969, 1974; Weigert 1974a, 1974b; Lemert 1975; Machalek 1977). Yinger argues that all religions rest on a common substructure of beliefs and experience (1969 1977). To accent the importance of these substructures, Yinger wants to redirect measurement in the sociology of religion away from church-related belief and action to the investigation of universal religious phenomena. His proposal has generated several studies, but the theoretical substance of his proposal has not been closely examined (Nelsen et al 1976; Roof et al 1977).

. I will show in detail that Yinger's explanation is not original, and that it is rooted in the classical studies in the sociology of religion. Yinger has furnished the sociology of religion with a definitive statement: "Religion rests upon the persistent experience of suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness. These experiences are widely recognized as the roots of religion." Satisfied that he has defined the core of religious experience, Yinger suggests that: "we should find these three beliefs among the adults in any society." (Yinger 1977) In asking questions about suffering, meaninglessness and injustice, Yinger finds that people are indeed concerned, and that "the data in hand tend to confirm their existence in a fairly heterogeneous group of respondents." (1977)

.Methodologically, assessment of Yinger's non-doctrinal hypothesis is fraught with troubles. The question which we shall address is this: Does Yinger's statement represent a new contribution to the scientific study of religion? This is important. Yinger could argue that it is the most crucial question to be asked of any

theory or body of research. He does not describe his substructures position as a new perspective, but traces it to his own earlier work, and regards it as his own contribution (1978). He acknowledges no relation between his thesis and the classical theories of religion, since he makes no reference to Weber, Durkheim, Freud, or Malinowski.

. I will demonstrate that the basic components of Yingers argument are already present in the works of the classic authors. The contention that religion arises to combat feelings of suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness is clearly a part of their theories, if we apply Geertz' treatment (1966).

**WEBER** Weber's parallel to Yinger is most apparent. Weber declined to define religion explicitly, but there is ample evidence that he assumed that problems of suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness and injustice were tied to elemental religious experience. According to Weber, "One can explain suffering and injustice by referring to individual sins committed in a former life, to the guilt of ancestors, which is avenged down the the third and fourth generation, or to the wickedness of all creatures per se. As compensatory promises, one can refer to hopes of the individual for a better life in the future in this world, or to hopes for the successors, or to a better life in the hereafter. The primeval attitude towards suffering has been thrown into relief most drastically during the religious festivities of the community." (1946 275, 271) Weber says that religion provides the individual with a meaningful life pattern. "Religion must provide a differentiated meaningfulness for the various social strata." For the advantaged in society, religion has a fundamental function of legitimizing their own life pattern and situation in the world. Conversely, for the

underprivileged, religion provides for a hope and expectation of just compensation (Weber 1964 107).

Weber, in investigating the relation between religious and economic action, hypothesizes that religion provides a meaningful interpretation of the world and man's place in it. These grounds of meaning have relevance for the world (Parsons 1968 667). Religion assuages the pain associated with injustice and suffering by promoting a social legitimacy and rationale.

**DURKHEIM** Durkheim described religion as a social phenomenon rather than as a psychological construct. But suffering, injustice, and meaninglessness are all social facts that must be dealt with on the collective level. He argued that religion, though a spontaneous development, serves to address these very real problems.

Durkheim argued that religion emerged from the collective frenzy associated with festive occasions (1965 464-476). To explain the genesis of religion, Durkheim states that in society, "evil goes beside the good, injustice often reigns supreme, and the truth is often obscured by error." Society attempts to correct the evil, injustice, and falsehood, and "it is toward this that all religions strive." He relates the problem of suffering to the palliative effects of the religious force which "awakens this sentiment of a refuge, a shield and a guardian support." For Durkheim, religion also counters the problem of meaninglessness as a "system of ideas whose object is to explain the world."

Durkheim believes that religion provides man with positive answers to the problems of meaninglessness and suffering. "The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though

he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man; he believes that he is saved from evil, in whatever form he may conceive this evil." Durkheim 1965 464)

**FREUD** According to Freud, religion is in essence a psychic projection. He gives three accounts explaining the genesis of religion. 1) The projection of religion is assumed to arise from a filial sense of guilt over actions taken to appease the urges of the Oedipus complex (Freud 1950 140). 2) Religion can be seen as emerging from a feeling of infantile helplessness (Freud 1961b 19). Here, Freud argues that for the adult, religion represents an exalted father image. 3) Religion is conceived as an elaborate psychological mechanism or mass delusion which allays frustration due to the superior force of nature and the shortcomings of civilization (Freud 1961a 21). He contends that feelings of guilt, helplessness, and suffering lie at the heart of religion. Consequently, only one of Yinger's three experiences, namely, suffering, is an explicit part of Freud's analysis of religion. This concept of religion as a palliative for suffering is conspicuous here. "The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcise the terrors of nature; they must reconcile men to the cruelty of fate, particularly as it is shown in death; and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them." (Freud 1961a 18)

**MALINOWSKI** Malinowski's analysis of religion was undertaken in conjunction with his analysis of magic and science. He argued that science in primitive societies is taken to be practical knowledge which governs day-to-day activities in settings deemed unproblematic by members. In settings not marked by certainty and regularity, that is, where science has nothing to offer, religion and

magic arise. Once established, religion "fixes and enhances all valuable mental activities, such as reverence for tradition, harmony with environment, courage and confidence in the struggle with difficulties and at the prospect of death. Both magic and religion arise and function in situations of emotional stress: crises of life, lacunae in important pursuits, death and initiation into tribal mysteries, unhappy love and unsatisfied hate." (Malinowski 1954 87-89) Malinowski argues that religion is functionally beneficial for the integration and solidarity of society. Although Malinowski and Yinger differ in terminology, both stress that religion is functional for society. For Malinowski, problems of suffering and meaninglessness, broadly defined, constitute key reasons for the emergence of religion.

**CONCLUSION** Yinger's assertion that religion is based on feelings of suffering, meaninglessness and injustice has a trail of origin in the classic figures. From Weber's perspective, religion addresses the individual's feelings of suffering, meaninglessness, and injustice. Durkheim discovered a collective origin for these feelings, and took religion to be society's response to the problems associated with them. The convergence of ideas between Yinger's position and the writings of the classic figures is least obvious with Freud, and concerns only suffering. A more demonstrable correspondence exists between Yinger and Malinowski, regarding the social functionality of religion. The core of Yinger's substructures argument is clearly present in earlier sociological thought.

Why should we trouble to trace the origins of an argument? Scientific knowledge ought to have progressed beyond the classic figures (Freeze 1972; Geertz 1966; Yinger 1978). We conceptualize science as a cumulative body of knowledge. We expect formulations to provide an original framework of understanding, or at least, to increase

the explanatory power of previous interpretations.

The second criticism, that the classic theorists have not been adequately appreciated is equally pertinent to Yinger's position. Science does not proceed by going around the classic figures, but through them. Classical theory is a necessary and useful resource for the development of current theory and research. However, to distinguish what is applicable from what is antiquated requires that the past masters be read meticulously and thoroughly. Both criticisms apply to Yinger's substructures thesis, but the problem is not peculiar to Yinger alone. The question of using classical theory is persistent and pervasive in all studies of the sociology of religion. To advance the field, we must go beyond the classics, but unless we pay close attention to the classic formulations, we are likely only to repeat them.

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