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Adam Possamai and Anthony Blasi, Editors

Class

A class denotes a category of people with a shared market position (the Weberian tradition) or a common relationship to the means of production (the Marxist tradition) that defines shared economic interests, even though those concerned are neither necessarily aware of this, nor necessarily identify with each other. While in political sociology it is not uncommon to understand class-based economic interests as determining people's political values and voting behavior, sociologists of religion typically forge the link between class and religion in a less deterministic and more open-ended fashion.

The class approach to religion finds its roots in Marxist historical materialism, which assumes an economic base to give shape to a cultural superstructure that among other things includes religion. Religion is conceived here as a basically irrational set of beliefs that ideologically mystifies the true nature of capitalism and the harsh economic realities of the industrial working class it entails. It does so by promising eternal salvation from economic suffering and injustice in a future afterlife – hence the Marxist characterization of religion as ‘opium of the people’. Even though theories about religion as a response to class deprivation have certainly not disappeared since Marx's days, they have had less of an influence on the further development of sociology of religion than Durkheim's and Weber's accounts.

The two most important studies of religion that foreground class are influenced by German theologian-cum-sociologist Ernst Troeltsch's classical work on the dismissive stances of sects vis-à-vis their social environments, including the established churches that identify with the latter. In *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, published in the 1920s, H. Richard Niebuhr addresses the issue of religious fragmentation and points out economic inequality as one of its principal causes. The established churches, his theory holds, tend to cater to the privileged and well-off classes, while sect formation entails protest by the economically deprived against these churches, which leads Niebuhr to characterize sects as 'the churches of the disinherited'. Niebuhr in effect understands class inequality as a major source of religious change through sect formation by the economically deprived.

A similar argument can be found in *Religion and Society in Tension*, published in the mid-1960s by Charles Glock and Rodney Stark. The book presents the so-called 'deprivation theory of religion', which understands religion as offering compensation for experiences of deprivation. Much like Niebuhr before them Glock and Stark identify economic class deprivation as a major type of deprivation besides others, maintaining that it sparks sect formation and religious change. Due to the central axiom that religion offers compensation for experiences of deprivation, the theory foreshadows Stark's later influential, though not uncontested, rational choice theory of religion (e.g., *The Future of Religion*, with William Sims Bainbridge).

Despite these books and the studies that have sought inspiration from them, it would be fair to say that most accounts of class and religion have refused to reduce religion and religious change to class inequality. A less materialistic and deterministic approach opts for a bi-directional logic and downplays the notion of causal determination of religion by class-based deprivation. Here, the notion of 'classes' is also used more liberally, referring in fact not so much to categories with common economic interests, but rather to status groups with

shared cultural outlooks and lifestyles. In this alternative understanding classes (or rather: status groups) are understood as feeling attracted to particular religions, often even being shaped by the latter, just like the other way around particular religious groups are understood as feeling attracted to the lifestyles of particular status groups.

This is the classical Weberian logic of *Wahlverwandschaft* ('elective affinity'), according to which religions and status groups attract (positive elective affinity) or repel (negative elective affinity) each other. The result is the emergence of links between religions and carrier groups, which gives religion societal impact and significance, be it by conserving and legitimizing the status quo or more or less radically transforming it. The classical example of this type of analysis is of course Weber's analysis of the mutual attraction between middle-class entrepreneurship and puritan-style Protestantism. In the hands of this particular carrier group, the latter's inner-worldly asceticism (i.e., the foregrounding of hard work in a professional calling and a sober lifestyle defined by delayed gratification) made a major contribution to the breakthrough of modern capitalism, and rationalized modernity generally. Weber's comparative sociology of religion indeed aimed to demonstrate how the other world religions boasted elective affinities with very different carrier groups that rather stood in the way of rationalization. Examples are China's Confucianist mandarins, who occupied administrative positions in the imperial bureaucracy; the Brahmins, the highest caste within the Hindu caste system; and Buddhist monks who lived in secluded monasteries. All lacking the fateful combination of inner-worldliness and asceticism, these non-Western examples according to Weber impeded rationalization rather than stimulating it.

While sociology of religion has surely not been witnessing a disappearance of the tendency to reduce religion to class-based economic interests, it has nonetheless increasingly given way to analyses in terms of elective affinities between status groups and religions. Echoing Ernst Troeltsch, for instance, Colin Campbell's characterization of the type of post-

Christian spirituality that has emerged in the West since the 1960s as ‘the secret religion of the educated classes’ invokes neither class-based economic interests nor the economic determinism that comes with it.

Dick Houtman, University of Leuven

Cross-references

Deprivation theory

Elective Affinity

Marx, Karl

Troeltsch, Ernst

Weber, Max

Further readings

Glock, Charles Y. and Rodney Stark. *Religion and Society in Tension*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965.

McCloud, Sean and William Andrew Mirola (eds). *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History, and Politics*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Holt, 1929.