

First Impressions: American Sociology's Early Encounters with Pentecostalism

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Abstract

Though sometimes presented as a recent development in sociology of religion, the convergence of Pentecostalism with Weberian principles is as old as both Pentecostalism and Max Weber himself. This paper analyzes early developments in Weberian sociology and the important role Pentecostalism played in directing the trajectory of Weberian principles, particularly with respect to church-sect theory and *The Protestant Ethic*. In doing so we can conclude that Pentecostalism was invoked arbitrarily to serve the needs of the sociologist in perpetuating (or in at least one case, critiquing) the applicability of Weberian concepts.

In 2008, the Centre for Development and Enterprise in South Africa released a report entitled *Under The Radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and its Potential Social and Economic*. The report, guided by sociologist Peter Berger, claims that Pentecostals have been “under the radar” of those seeking to boost capitalist development in South Africa (and throughout the developing world), and that they have inherited Max Weber’s inner-worldly ascetic ethic, and ideally situated to replicate the *Protestant Ethic* in the developing world today. Though presented as a recent development in sociology of religion, the convergence of Pentecostalism with Weberian principles is as old as both Pentecostalism and Max Weber himself. This paper analyzes early developments in Weberian sociology and the important role Pentecostalism played in directing the trajectory of Weberian principles, particularly with respect to church-sect theory and *The Protestant Ethic*. In doing so we can conclude that Pentecostalism was invoked

arbitrarily to serve the needs of the sociologist in perpetuating (or in at least one case, critiquing) the applicability of Weberian concepts.

Developments in sociology, specifically Talcott Parsons' positivist theory of social action and the rise of church-sect theory, were very influential in early studies of Pentecostalism. Conversely, Pentecostalism frequently played an important role in the fieldwork of sociologists such as Walter Goldschmidt, Liston Pope, and Milton Yinger, among others, who sought to utilize and expand these theories with hard data. These earlier works represent the shift described by Sean McCloud (2007) from biological and scientific explanations of what attracts people to which religion, to an examination of social and economic factors driving people to this or that faith. Pentecostalism was uniquely situated as a sect (or at least viewed as a sect) experiencing significant growth, growth that was correlated to economic decline. Parsons' theory of voluntaristic action, heavily based on the work of Max Weber, had immediate implications for social aspects of economic activity, and Pentecostalism's link with urban migration, economic hardships, and social dislocation appeared to offer a relevant avenue to explore these implications. In addition, Parsons solidified the position of functional analysis, which served as the sociologist's tool kit in the field.

However, sociologists did not study the Pentecostal movement, as such. Instead, they researched various "sects," some of which were associated with a Pentecostal network, and others that were set up independently, but exhibited characteristics commonly associated with Pentecostalism. There is some legitimacy in this, however, because Pentecostalism, in the early decades of the twentieth century, was in actuality an "amorphous movement" composed of "a confusing patchwork of small sects frequently divided by seemingly trivial points," says David Harrell (1975: 11). The lens of history has pushed the common traits and characteristics between the various Pentecostal networks to the forefront, giving a perspective to the phenomenon that would not really be achieved until Walter J. Hollenweger collected the histories together in his seminal work, *The Pentecostals*, in 1969.

Ironically though, as sociologists navigated their way through the confusing networks that would later be called "Pentecostalism," there were, at the same time, significant developments within the movement itself that would alter the trajectories of Pentecostal groups. While the term "sect" was being refined and applied to various Pentecostal groups, other Pentecostals were defying the sectarian construct altogether by achieving increased respectability, wealth, and social status. While this was not true for all Pentecostals, there were significant movements grounded with Pentecostal roots, yet reaching out to new classes of peoples with different backgrounds than those used to supply explanations about the growth and function of Pentecostalism.

Sociologists and Pentecostalism

In sociologists' approaches to the phenomena of Pentecostal groups, two themes can be quickly identified as universally relevant, at least until the early 1960s. Firstly, Talcott Parsons' functionalist approach is the primary methodological framework for all sociological studies of Pentecostalism during this period. Gradually we see the variables taken under consideration by sociologists increase in number and complexity. As the situation becomes increasingly convoluted, it becomes clear that the functionalist model itself may be untenable when there are so many variables at play.¹ Until then, however, sociologists are content with the Parsonian approach to the study of religion, making addendums and clarifications when necessary.

The second theme that guides the sociology of Pentecostalism during this period is the evolution of church-sect theory. It is difficult to say when church-sect theory actually came into being as a model for the relationship between religion and society. Max Weber first introduced the terms as tools to aid him in his analysis of historical data. The "church" and the "sect" were not classifications but rather idealized types of religious bodies from which he could launch a comparison (Swatos 1976: 133). As we will see, sociologists became increasingly distant from Max Weber's heuristic use of the terms in his "ideal type" construct and adopted a more taxonomic use for the terms. Whereas Weber employed the church and the sect as models for comparison, ideals that represent the polar extremes of a religious body's relationship to their society/environment, they increasingly became used as classifications (with additional and sub-classifications added over time). We therefore see the issue of complexity in functional analysis, drawing attention to the diversion away from Weber's original use for the terms.

H. Richard Niebuhr

In 1929, a book was published by a seminary professor who felt compelled to write about problems he came across while trying to teach a course in "Symbolics." In the course the professor was meant to teach students about the various Christian denominations, distinguishing them by their respective doctrines and then approaching the ethical issue of church unity from a theological point of view. The professor found the exercise "so artificial and fruitless that he found himself compelled to turn from theology to history, sociology, and ethics for a more satisfactory account of denomination differences and a more significant approach to the question of union" (Niebuhr 1929: vii). The professor was H. Richard Niebuhr, younger brother of theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, and it was his first systematic study of American Christianity. Though he would not call himself a sociologist or a church historian, he was well acquainted with the works of Troeltsch, Weber, Tawney, and Marx, having read the works of Troeltsch and

Weber in the original German. The book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) would later become an immensely significant text in the sociology of religion and propel the theories of Weber and Troeltsch to the forefront of sociological inquiry, through their typologies of religious organization, namely, church-sect theory.

H. Richard Niebuhr was first and foremost a theologian, discontent with the state of Christianity, seeking to use sociological, historical, and ethical tools to illustrate the divisive aspect of American pluralism of denominations. Niebuhr draws on the sociological tools formed by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch which came to be known as church-sect theory. Weber and Troeltsch did not share the same understanding about the church and the sect, which has been pointed out by Swatos (1976), and Niebuhr naturally draws his interpretation along closer lines with the fellow theologian, Troeltsch. The appearance of the book in 1929, one year before Parsons' translation of *The Protestant Ethic* appeared, meant that many scholars were introduced to Max Weber through Niebuhr's portrait of him: a concise summary of Weber's theory contextualized in a Troeltschian framework. In many ways Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* mirrors the groundbreaking text of Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (*Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, 1912). Like Troeltsch, Niebuhr was a theologian concerned with the state and trajectory of the Christian church and the conflictual relationship between church and the social order. Whereas Troeltsch describes three "types" of Christianity (church-type, sect-type, and mystical-type), Niebuhr analyzes the history of denominations to demonstrate the inequalities that had come to define the boundaries between various denominations. Nonetheless, Niebuhr's book inspired a robust debate that would carry on for decades about church-sect theory.

Niebuhr writes both as a sociologist and a concerned theologian, which can create an ambiguous atmosphere in which to distinguish between analysis and prescription. Diefenthaler says, "[Niebuhr's] historical and sociological appraisals do not mask his personal frustration over the divided character of Christendom" (Diefenthaler 1986: 172). Though Niebuhr had an agenda to create a more ecumenical Christian body in America, he makes stunning observations about the racial and economic lines that divide denominations, claiming: "for the divisions of the church have been occasioned more frequently by the direct and indirect operation of economic factors than the influence of any other major interest of man" (Niebuhr 1929: 26). He is careful to discourage a strictly economic interpretation of denominationalism. Niebuhr, being a theologian, declares it "unjustifiable, above all, to leave the religious factor itself out of account in dealing with religious movements" (Niebuhr 1929: 27). Because of this religious aspect in Niebuhr's work, it is difficult to call *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* a strictly sociological text. Nonetheless, Niebuhr's

principle concern is rooted in sociological phenomena and he makes use of the fathers of sociology of religion to make his case.

Niebuhr devotes two chapters to “The Churches of the Disinherited.” There is no mention of Pentecostalism as a distinct movement with its own character, though Niebuhr likely has in mind congregations that would retrospectively be numbered among the Pentecostal movement. It appears that, despite the establishment of unified Pentecostal denominations across the nation, Niebuhr was not aware of Pentecostalism as a cohesive movement worth mentioning by name. Still, Niebuhr’s “churches of the disinherited” include a pattern of classification that would not exclude the Pentecostals, as he lists “Anabaptists, Quakers, Methodists, Salvation Army, and more recent sects of like type,” referring to “revolutions of the poor” (Niebuhr 1929: 28). However, he considers, “the Methodist revival was the last great religious revolution of the disinherited in Christendom,” though it is difficult to discern what qualifies a religious movement to be deemed a “revolution” for Niebuhr (1929: 72). He likely refers to Pentecostalism when he speaks of “the naïve religious movements” and “contemporary movements of the religious poor toward the attainment of adequate religious experience and expression come to the light in many a gospel tabernacle and evangelistic society and millenarian association” (1929: 75-76). From Niebuhr’s point of view in 1929, “there is no effective religious movement among the disinherited today,” and which movements among the poor that did exist, such as those of a Pentecostal nature, were “simply outside the pale of organized Christianity” (1929: 76).

Niebuhr understands Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic* as arguing that the character of early Reformation churches was formed in large part through an “alliance with rising commercialism and set forth an interpretation of Christianity conformable with their major economic interests” (Niebuhr 1929: 28). Niebuhr’s knowledge of *The Protestant Ethic* came from reading Weber’s later work, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion, 1922), which contained an edited version of *Die Protestantische Ethik und der “Geist” des Kapitalismus*, along with Weber’s essays on Chinese, Indian, and Jewish religions. Apropos of Weber’s work, Niebuhr proclaims, “it is not possible to disagree with the fundamental contention that a close relation has existed in modern times between these two great social movements [capitalism and Calvinism]” (1929: 79-80). He also draws comparisons between the emotionality of religious groups and their economic (and educational) limitations. He writes:

The religion of the untutored and economically disfranchised classes has distinct ethical and psychological characteristics, corresponding to the needs of these groups. Emotional fervor

is one common mark. Where the power of abstract thought has not been highly developed and where inhibitions on emotional expression have not been set up by a system of polite conventions, religion must and will express itself in emotional terms. Under these circumstances spontaneity and energy of religious feeling rather than conformity to an abstract creed are regarded as the tests of religious genuineness...An intellectually trained and liturgically minded clergy is rejected in favor of lay leaders who serve the emotional needs of this religion more adequately and who, on the other hand, are not allied by culture and interest with those ruling classes whose superior manner of life is too obviously purchased at the expense of the poor ... Intellectual naïveté and practical need combine to create a marked propensity toward millenarianism, with its promise of tangible goods and of the reversal of all present social systems of rank. (Niebuhr 1929: 30)

The text above bears remarkable similarity to Robert Anderson's (1979) appraisal of Pentecostalism, though Anderson would not go so far as to draw the link between emotional religion and lack of education and/or "intellectual naïveté."² While Niebuhr does not name "Pentecostalism" as such, his description expels the possibility that Niebuhr was unacquainted with the characteristics of Pentecostalism and of its followers. Niebuhr sees these Pentecostal characteristics (emotional fervor, millenarianism, disregard for ritual) as the natural and expected religious expressions of the disinherited, because in this manner the psychological and emotional needs exclusive to the poor and uneducated are fulfilled. Nonetheless, for Niebuhr, these expressions are not necessarily desirable and are consequences of the failures of the established church to meet the needs of the poor and ethnic minorities. Niebuhr makes a historical case for connecting economic hardship to religious revolution and sectarianism, drawing on the examples of the Quakers, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Methodists. The Methodists emerged as an underprivileged class marked for their emotionalism. He argues that the upper classes have always and will always abhor gratuitous emotionalism in religion, yet it remains a marked trait of churches of the lower strata (Niebuhr 1929: 62). As the Methodists achieved middle-class respectability in the United States, the emotional fervor waned. Thus the need arose for another religious revolution inside Methodism, closely resembling that which spawned the movement in the days of John and Charles Wesley, to cater to the needs of the poor that were left behind as the Methodists became economically and socially upwardly mobile. Here we see the emergence of the Holiness and, later, the Pentecostal movements.

Niebuhr, despite his concerns with religion that was uneducated, admires the passion found in these “religion[s] of the heart,” and describes it as “pure religion” that inevitably erodes when believers grow in wealth. He also believes that it was the natural consequence of revivalist religion to encourage frugality and diligence, traits that he no doubt read in Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic*. He accepts and even embraces the “Protestant ethic,” saying, “we ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is in effect to grow rich” (Niebuhr 1929: 70). Though an important distinction here is that where Weber recognized this as the “Protestant ethic,” Niebuhr says, “religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches” (1929: 70). Niebuhr concludes, “therefore I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long” (1929: 70). Here we see Niebuhr taking the Weberian ideals of what it means to be a sect (in this case, “revival”) and applying this ideal type, along with Weber’s “Protestant ethic” hypothesis, to forecast the fate of revivalism (in which we could include Pentecostalism).

Niebuhr’s book introduced many readers to the works of Weber, even before Talcott Parsons did so through his “Voluntaristic Theory of Action” (1937), and Niebuhr’s use of Weber’s ideal types vis-à-vis church-sect theory initiated a framework, which would undergo many alterations, in which to conduct sociological inquiry in the religious sphere. Niebuhr’s use of Weber has been contested, but it should be noted that Niebuhr was not merely making use of Weber’s ideal types; he was also operating within a framework which understood *The Protestant Ethic* itself as an ideal type.³ About Niebuhr’s use of Weber’s ideal type, Swatos writes:

The result has been a flood of types based on a variety of criteria which leave the impression that the task of church-sect theory is no longer one of being a tool to facilitate comparative analysis as much as to formulate a classificatory system for the application of sociological jargon to religious organization—the very opposite of what we have seen Weber’s intention to have been. (Swatos 1976: 136)

Swatos demonstrates how Weber’s ideal types, which were originally intended to describe organizational structure, became convoluted with Ernst Troeltsch’s sociological categories of religious behavior (1976: 133). Swatos goes on to show that Niebuhr’s contribution was to use Troeltsch’s categories of church and sect as illustrative poles on a continuum and to present the “dynamic process[es] of religious history as groups moved along this continuum” (1976: 134). Importantly, it should be noted that as Niebuhr demonstrates these dynamic

processes of transition from church to sect, and vice-versa, he is using Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* as a paradigm unrestricted by Weber's original context. We see here the first instance in which Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* is taken for granted as a universally applicable rule. However, this misuse of *The Protestant Ethic* should not be blamed on Niebuhr alone, for he was inspired by Troeltsch, who had himself taken Weber's ideal-type tools that were intended to solve a sociological (organizational) problem and transformed them into a "sociological formulation" (Swatos 1976: 133, author's emphasis). By whatever means, Weber posthumously began the long, and ongoing, process of being misunderstood.

A.T. Boisen

Though not a sociologist, A.T. Boisen's research of Pentecostals in 1939 includes many social aspects to which future sociologists studying the Pentecostal phenomenon would refer. Being a psychiatrist by trade, Boisen naturally explores psychological aspects of the movement. This would also feature in many sociological studies of the movement, as sociologists generally believed that while there were social and economic catalysts for the phenomenon, the function of various types of Pentecostal expression was primarily psychological. A.T. Boisen bridged a gap in sociologists' work by providing psychological assessments of Pentecostal practices, set in a social framework. Boisen published two articles in 1939 about Pentecostals, or "Holy Rollers," as he calls them.⁴

Boisen's article, "Religion and Hard Times: A Study of the Holy Rollers," appeared in the March 1939 edition of *Social Action* and addresses the rapid growth of "eccentric forms of religion" since the commencement of the depression era (1939b: 8). Through research carried out in three localities, the most immediate correlation drawn is that of the rise in population related to urban migration to find employment and the sudden surge in number of Pentecostal congregations. The article is written in an informative tone, as if to introduce the reader to a phenomenon they will surely encounter (or perhaps already have). He describes their membership as youthful, underprivileged, and from rural areas (1939b: 16). Boisen understands Pentecostalism as a form of radical mysticism that appeals to those who have disproportionately experienced the hardships of the depression. Speaking in tongues, being filled with the Spirit, and hearing the voice of God, are seen as dangerous in Boisen's eyes, likening it to symptoms experienced by mentally ill patients he had treated, though Boisen does not see the movement as a whole as particularly dangerous. This is due to Pentecostals' tendency to detach from worldly affairs (thus lending support for Boisen's assessment that Pentecostalism is a mystic sect). In fact, he sees the movement as having value for individual members. This value is realized in the hope and courage it gives to those faced with difficulties, though this value is cloaked in a sincere perspective that views the Pentecostal as delusional and psychotic (1939b: 29). He also sees

harmful effects for children, such as cramping their natural development. He likens the “stability” found in the Pentecostal community to the “delusional system of a mental patient” (1939b: 29).

Though these assessments may come across as derogatory and offensive to the modern reader, Boisen’s analysis is quite favorable and without the disgust that was often found in studies of the Pentecostals. For example, compare Boisen’s article with William Clark’s “Sanctification in Negro Religion,” published just two years earlier in *Social Forces*. Clark, situating “sanctification” (or Baptism in the Holy Spirit) in the context of Black religion in the southern U.S., concludes that the religious practice “tends to impede social progress toward higher cultural levels” (1937: 551). Clark sees Pentecostal forms of religion as the product of those that could not keep up with the progress of culture and refinement. Pentecostals are the ones “left out” because of their “inability to adjust to cultural change” (1937: 550). He believes Pentecostalism appeals only to the “neurotics, and mentally retarded” and thus functions as an institution that helps those that would otherwise be housed in a mental hospital, to function on a basic social level (1937: 549, 551). Boisen’s experience as a psychiatrist allows him to speak about the “mentally ill” with a sensitivity that Clark is unable to achieve.

Walter Goldschmidt

Walter R. Goldschmidt, writing in 1944, was inspired by Richard Niebuhr’s insight into the class barriers that coincide with church membership of various denominations. He conducted a sociological study of rural churches in California, with the aim of determining the veracity of claims that church denominations are segregated along class lines, and understanding the nature of this phenomenon. His paper takes Niebuhr’s insight out of the theological context and poses it as a sociological problem, arguing that “Class denominationalism, as a church problem, must be viewed as a general problem of class discrimination” (Goldschmidt 1944: 348).

Decisive in his results is the presence of class denominationalism: traditional and orthodox Protestant denominations (Baptist, Methodist, etc.) service by and large the wealthiest individuals of the community, while Pentecostal churches service an overwhelming majority of the skilled and unskilled laborers of the community, the lowest economic and social groups. The segregation can be explained in economic terms, though there is a significant social aspect to the divisions. The mainstream Protestant denominations make up the “nuclear community,” while Pentecostals are relegated to the “outsider” sphere, the former being directly involved in the institutions of the community, while the latter remain largely uninvolved in community affairs and work primarily on farms and estates in the outlying areas of the city (1944: 348-349). Interestingly, Goldschmidt discovers that the hierarchy is not just a binary represented by

insiders/outside, wealthy/poor, traditional Protestant/Pentecostal; the hierarchy is detailed and distinctions can be made within each group. For example, while the Assemblies of God churches are a Pentecostal denomination and belong to the “outsider” group of churches, their members are more affluent than other, independent, Pentecostal congregations. In fact, there is an inverse correlation between the level of “emotionalism” displayed in a church and the economic and social class to which its constituents belong. Goldschmidt claims that while the causes of the sectarian divisions are clearly economic, there are also social and psychological aspects to consider. Socially, people are drawn to socialize with people of similar status, so as to reinforce their position in the society. They neither want to socialize with people above them, for feeling that they are “being looked down upon,” and they do not want to socialize with people that are “beneath them” (1944: 354). This explains why the churches each tend to have a rather homogenous constituency.

When it comes to explaining the “emotional” or “sensual” element and the inverse correlation with social and economic status, Goldschmidt reverts to psychological explanations as to why this style of religion is increasingly popular with the disinherited. Goldschmidt approves of the dominant theories of the day, claiming that ecstatic religion serves as “entertainment, as sensual thrill, as a release for people whose life is humdrum at best, oppressive as a rule” (1944: 354). However, Goldschmidt believes that such an explanation is superficial and “does not go far enough” (1944: 354). He then presents his own theory of how the Pentecostal faith attracts the poor and disinherited, and serves a valuable role in their lives.

The appeal of the emotional religion and the asceticism for the disfranchised is this: It denies the existence of this world with its woes; it denies the values in terms of which they are the underprivileged and sets up in their stead a putative society in the Kingdom of God, where, because of their special endowments (which we call emotionalism), they are the élite. (1944: 354)

He also draws attention to Pentecostal Millenarianism as demonstrating their rejection of the world, and their “emotional participation” is a public demonstration of their acceptance in the supernatural world (1944: 355).

Goldschmidt’s findings are important because they make a link between “formalization” of religious ritual and upward economic mobility. This is most clearly seen in the example of the Assemblies of God. An Assemblies of God church in Goldschmidt’s data begins humbly, meeting in homes, with farmers serving as ministers. Over time their gatherings become services, gaining more

followers and subsequently operating with a larger budget. At some point they can afford to build a building, and hire a full-time pastor with seminary training from the parent organization. The pastor, being an educated member of a religious governing body, strives to instill stability in the church, and adopts a “sane, intelligent presentation of the Gospel” in favor of the “inhibition of the spirit” (1944: 353). Those who have improved their economic and social position are, according to Goldschmidt, less tempted by the ecstatic release of emotions and are at peace with the gradual changes, while those whose position has not been bettered are dissatisfied and eventually break away from the church and form a sect more similar to the original structure in which “the spirit has the right of way” (1944: 353). This is a real account recorded in Goldschmidt’s data, though he presents it in general terms, as he sees this as the expected course of events, a pattern even. He calls the process which the Assemblies of God church underwent, “formalization,” though if we were to use Weberian typology, it could easily be called the “routinization of charisma.” However, Weber attributes the routinization of charisma as an inevitability intrinsic to charisma itself; Goldschmidt finds the formalization process a direct result of education, increased wealth, and (implicit) increased social mobility.

Walter Goldschmidt’s study of Pentecostal groups appears as a significant step forward in the history of sociological study of Pentecostalism, a step away from the racist and derogatory tone of earlier writers and toward a more objective approach to understanding the religious phenomenon. The shades of the past are still present in the ease in which he describes Pentecostal worship as “sensual,” an adjective that was used to describe Black religion, with the intent to illuminate the hyper-sexuality of African Americans and thus their lack of morality. Still, Goldschmidt’s study stands as the first sociological study to critically engage the role of Pentecostal religion on a micro-social level.

Goldschmidt, though he does not refer directly to Weber’s work, elaborates the process through which churches become formalized and lead to sectarian breakaways, which over time become churches themselves. This study would prove significant in future studies of both Pentecostalism and church-sect theory, as it would become cited in almost every major sociological article on the subject(s) in the following years.

Milton Yinger

Milton Yinger’s comprehensive 1957 book, *Religion, Society and the Individual*, deals with many issues surrounding the sociology of religion. The work is grounded in a functionalist approach to the study of religion and religious behaviors (both collective and individual), and draws heavily on the works of Max Weber, particularly with regard to “Religion and Economics” (1957: 195-229) and church-sect theory. Of interest to this study is Yinger’s position on

“sectarian growth” among America’s churches, that is, the unexpected rise in Pentecostal and Pentecostalist groups in the religious landscape.

Yinger is systematic in his presentation of sectarian religious groups, acknowledging, and making a case for, his functionalist approach to the role of religious sects in society, their limitations, and their consequences for adherents and society at large. He presents three factors that account for “sectarian growth” in the twentieth century. By “sectarian growth” Yinger is referring especially, though not exclusively, to Pentecostalist religious groups. The reader should be familiar with Yinger’s principle sources; they are: Richard Niebuhr’s (1929) *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*; John B. Holt’s (1940) article “Holiness Religion: Cultural Shock and Social Reorganization”; A.T. Boisen’s (1939b) “Religion and Hard Times”; and Liston Pope’s (1942) *Millhands and Preachers*. Yinger’s factors that account for this growth are: (1) increased isolation due to the “cultural shock” of mass migration from rural areas to urban centers; (2) poverty, and more specifically the powerlessness of the impoverished; and (3) “a need for an emotional expressiveness that is lacking in the dignified and ritualistic services of most of the churches” (1957: 167-168).

Yinger articulates the question that sociologists had been asking about Pentecostals for a few decades, a question that is still asked by sociologists today. “If one asks, as the sociologist of religion is likely to do: What are the total, long-run consequences, for mental health, for economic security, and the like? He is faced with a ... difficult question” (1957: 171). Yinger presents two differing views on this question. The first, from A.T. Boisen, describes Pentecostalism as a positive coping mechanism against the distresses of poverty and isolation. It gives them “hope and courage and strength” to face the various hardships endured by the lower class, and in so doing, likely has a positive effect with regard to the individual’s economic and social status (Boisen 1939a: 194). The second view, from S.D. Clark’s study of the Salvation Army in Canada (1948), sees the effects of lower-class, ecstatic religion as diverting attention away from the “real problems of an industrial society” and “retarding the development of working-class organizations” (Clark 1948: 424).

The problem, as Yinger puts it, is that there are many different social forces that can shape a sectarian faith and, by extension, shape the consequences for both the adherents of a given faith and the society at large. Yinger notes some variables which have a direct effect on the type of sect that forms under a given set of conditions. These variables include, but are not limited to: (1) the degree of hope that a group has with respect to improving their economic or social status (and general well-being), (2) the nature of the religious and/or cultural tradition(s) from which the group draws for tools of protest, (3) the concurrence of other (particularly) secular movements, (4) the degree of acculturation to the values of the dominant society by group members, (5) the type of leaders and the

degree to which they can influence a group, and lastly (6) the personalities of the group adherents and how they interact with each other. This last point makes it extremely difficult to predict how a particular religious sect will take shape, the influence it will have, or the consequences that will become evident for the adherents. This is because individuals compose a group, and two individuals may respond differently to the same problem, even in identical conditions. Because all of these forces (and possibly more) are at play in the formation of a religious sect, “any attempt to understand religion as a consequence of one or two factors alone will be inadequate” (Yinger 1957: 178).

Nevertheless, after taking into account these variables, Yinger presents his own thoughts on the consequences of “contemporary sects,” though it is of particular relevance for Pentecostalist groups. Yinger notes religious sects’ ability to act as a pain-reliever among those in highly underprivileged positions. For sects of the lower classes it is difficult to cause change in the economic and political institutions, because they generally lack the training, skills, and inclination to affect change. Yinger does note that in many cases the individual adherents benefit from the self-disciplines and can, consequently, improve their own status in society. However, as a whole, the sect is “irrelevant to the social and cultural causes that continue to create such disadvantaged individuals” (1957: 173).

Taking into account the many variables that are at play in shaping a religious group and determining its potential influence, how then can Yinger account for Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, which is comparably simple in its argument that modern capitalism emerged successfully as a result of Calvinists’ belief in occupation by “calling” and the development of an ethic of inner-worldly asceticism? Yinger bases much of his work on Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, not to mention that Weber played an important role in the development of church-sect theory itself. Though he supports the basic thesis of the *Protestant Ethic*, Yinger is critical of Weber’s narrow focus, believing that Weber was “insufficiently alert to the selective development of Calvinism” (1957: 215). He believes that though Weber found an important connection between Calvinism and capitalist enterprise, this was just one of many possible connections that could have been made and/or emphasized. Yinger elaborates, “Calvinism did not create the spirit of capitalism, but the needs and tendencies of capitalists were involved in the process which selected from the various possibilities of interpretations of Calvinism” (1957: 216). Largely, Yinger demonstrates that while Weber was correct, what he observed was in essence an historical accident that, if it could be repeated, may or may not produce the same results.

There are several significant aspects in Yinger’s work relevant to the present study. Yinger is unapologetically functionalist in his approach to the study of sects and the typology of religious groups. His concern with Pentecostalism is not direct, but part of his larger quest to make the classification of religious

groups more accurate. Yinger also made significant alterations to the typology of church-sect theory. He promoted a six-step classification method of typology, an extension of Howard Becker's (1932) four types. The classes are: (1) The Universal Church; (2) The Ecclesia; (3) The Class Church or Denomination; (4) The Established Sect; (5) The Sect; and (6) The Cult. The fifth type, the Sect, is further subdivided into three types, according to their *modus operandi*: (a) acceptance, (b) aggression, and (c) avoidance (1957: 147-158). This is a significant alteration to the typology of church-sect theory, and further distances the theory from the ideal types proposed by Weber. This taxonomic approach, as previously mentioned, is more closely aligned with Troeltsch's use of the terms.

In addition to his extension of church-sect theory, Yinger successfully illustrates the wide range of consequences of any sectarian movement. Though he would not go so far as to call them impossible to predict, he acknowledges the many factors (many of which are not directly related to the sectarian movement in question) that make it difficult to know how a sectarian movement will engage society. He proposes three general categories for sectarian action (acceptance, aggression, and avoidance), though ultimately there is a wide range of avenues whereby any of these categories may be expressed, and of course there may be overlap between categories in different spheres of engagement (i.e. a religious sect may accept the general political structures, but be hostile toward certain aspects of the dominant culture).

Benton Johnson's Pentecostal Ethic

Possibly the most sympathetic sociological study of Pentecostals appeared in 1961 from Benton Johnson. The title of his article, "Do Holiness Sects Socialize in Dominant American Values?" is presented hesitantly, because it had been long assumed, just as William Clark had explicitly stated, that Pentecostals and Holiness groups were the result of being alienated from society. Specifically, Johnson is arguing against "...most observers [who] emphasize that the other-worldliness of Holiness belief inclines the individual to make a kind of fantasy-like retreat from what many would call social reality" (1961: 312). Johnson also carried out fieldwork in North Carolina as part of his doctoral dissertation. Though he references "Holiness Sects" as the subject of his research, a closer look reveals that he is in fact speaking of Pentecostals (particularly white Pentecostals), which he sees as a small section within the Holiness denomination (see Johnson 1961: 311).

Johnson's article is the first to make a direct comparison between Pentecostalism and Weber's *Protestant Ethic* by ascribing Pentecostals with Weber's "ethic of inner-worldly asceticism" (1961: 310). This is done by demonstrating that Pentecostals and Holiness sects, as the title of the article states, socialize in dominant American values. Furthermore, it is already assumed that those dominant values of American society share a special relationship with "the values

and structure of industrial capitalism” (1961: 310). Therefore, by demonstrating that Pentecostals socialize in these dominant values it can be inferred that they share in the inner-worldly ascetic ethic that is “the Protestant Ethic.” We must understand that Johnson does not intend to present Pentecostals as uniquely capable in the industrial setting, nor does he imply that Pentecostals possess a greater share of the Protestant ethic; he merely seeks to challenge assumptions that Pentecostals are too “other-worldly” focused to share in the dominant American values that are presumed to make up an ethic of inner-worldly asceticism.

Johnson finds that the dominant emphasis in Pentecostal groups is one that is, or is closely related to, a focus on individual achievement. Secondary to this focus is an emphasis on “democracy, individualism, mobility, and moral respectability” (1961: 310). Johnson, following Yinger, believes that Pentecostals are not wholly concerned with societal or institutional reform, as this most likely detracts from the emphasis on individualism and individual achievement. The process through which people are generally accepted into the religious community is known as “conversion,” an intensely emotional experience which (expectedly) precipitates significant change in the individual. Johnson notes that this effectively acts “to propel Pentecostals to cross a value orientational borderline,” that value orientation being the dominant values of American society (1961: 311).

Johnson’s perspective differs from Yinger slightly when it comes to Pentecostals effecting change. Whereas Yinger believes Pentecostals would be unable to effect change and have therefore found a religious outlet for their frustrations, Johnson argues that a focus on struggling for broad changes in society conflicts with a general focus on individual experience and achievement. This perspective, however, is clearly limited by Johnson’s field research, as there are notable examples of Pentecostal fundamentalists whose primary concern is preserving the Christian society. As Robert Anderson notes, this concern paradoxically reinforces the lower classes’ position as the “disinherited” (see Anderson 1979).

Johnson uses Talcott Parsons’ terminology when he says “acceptance of secular values can be a passive matter or it can be positive,” to which he proposes that the Pentecostal acceptance of “much of society and its values is of a positive...nature” (1961: 313). Johnson draws the reader’s attention to the proscriptive elements of Pentecostalism, “the suppression of the esthetic, the erotic, the irrational chance-taking or immediately pleasurable aspects of life.” This is directly followed by Max Weber’s description of the inner-worldly ascetic’s mandate, the “destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment” (1961: 313). Throughout his argument Johnson maintains the dominant view that Pentecostal meetings are “erotically charged,” and this “serves for the lower class persons what more sublimated pursuits of immediate gratification serve

for middle and upper class persons.” Johnson then incorporates this to support his argument for the inner-worldly ascetic nature of Pentecostalism, saying that a function of “Holiness emotionalism” is to maintain a high level of motivation to remain committed to the ascetic lifestyle. Presumably, Johnson believes lower-class individuals require such motivation where middle- and upper-class persons do not (1961: 313-314). Essentially, Johnson understands Pentecostalism as having all the necessary qualities of Weber’s inner-worldly ascetic Calvinism, though catered to the Pentecostals’ needs of greater motivation through the promise of ecstasy.

The most interesting part of Johnson’s essay is where he tries to determine Pentecostal attitudes toward a “calling,” in the Weberian sense. Johnson’s aim is clear; he wants to qualify Pentecostalism in Weber’s “model”.⁵ His use of the Weberian model is almost seamless, as if it needed no qualification of its own. Johnson believes his case is made if the comparison to *The Protestant Ethic* is accurately presented, and offers no justification for the comparison itself. Johnson uses empirical data from interviews with ten Pentecostal pastors to demonstrate Pentecostalist attitudes toward a “calling.” He presents each of his respondents with a story of conflicting values, asking them to choose between a more active, goal-oriented approach toward life, and a more cautious, less achievement-minded outlook on life. The story is as follows:

Two young Christian men are talking about what they are going to do with their lives. One of them says that in his life he is going to aim high. He is going to use his opportunities as they come to him day by day, he is going to develop his talents to the utmost; he is even going to risk failure by setting his own aims so far beyond that he may only partly attain them. The other man says, no, that in his life he isn’t going to bite off more than he can chew, that he would rather do a little bit all right than make a big mess out of something that he can’t handle. Now if you had to give aid and encouragement to one of these two young men, which one would you agree with? (1961: 315)

In all but one of his responses was found some endorsement of the goal-oriented approach to life, though they were mixed in terms of which one they settled on to give aid and encouragement. Admittedly his sample was small, and respondents were all clergy, yet even still, it produced inconclusive results. However, there was one response quoted by Johnson in his essay that bears repeating here. One minister who, after giving a stern warning about the pursuit of “material things,” elaborates on his position:

Well, I believe God has a plan for every one of us. If we accept Him then we're obligated to follow that plan for the glory of God...When we're doing what God has planned for us we ought to give God our very best. We ought to aim high, like the man said. If you had a call to the grocery business, then you ought to be ambitious for the glory of God, to be successful for Christ's sake. That other man is a drifter. He's not interested in the glory of God. He's not industrious, just doesn't care. I'm trying to think of some Scripture. One that comes to mind is, "Be not slothful in business."...When I went into the painting business I said I was going to be the best in the business. And I was. (1961: 316)

For Johnson, this illustrates concern for individual achievement and Pentecostals' acceptance of the American ideal that hard work is a virtue. It also demonstrates that Pentecostals are not as other-worldly minded as was generally assumed. Johnson accepts the general hypothesis that the emotionalism displayed by Pentecostals serves as an inferior way of meeting emotional needs by the lower classes, whereas the upper classes achieve this through more "sublimated pursuits" (1961: 313). Acknowledging this, Johnson believes that this has no impact on the end result, which is, accommodating lower classes to the general American values. His measuring stick is Max Weber's Protestant (inner-worldly ascetic) ethic.

It is other-worldly in the sense of expecting the greatest personal joy in the hereafter, but it involves as a condition of this the devotion to doing the will of God in this world. This will can be realized in almost any kind of activity, but it demands consistent output of effort, a denial of distracting pleasures, and a focus on achievement. The positive emphasis on self-application, consistency, and achievement, are the principle Holiness themes that directly converge with dominant American values. (1961: 316)

Johnson's article is significant in the history of sociological analysis of Pentecostalism for several reasons. (1) It is the first to seriously engage questions about Pentecostalism that go beyond the novelty of what Pentecostalism had represented: an orgiastic exercise in self-abandon. Though he accepts such interpretations of emotional fervor in Pentecostal meetings, his analysis demonstrates that it is peripheral to the central foci of the sect (individual achievement, democracy, etc.). (2) It is also the first article to make comparisons

between Pentecostals and Max Weber's ethic of inner-worldly asceticism. The comparison is not direct, but rather apologetic, in the sense that his objective is to demonstrate Pentecostals' relative proximity to the general value orientations of American Protestants. In other words, Pentecostals share in the Protestant ethic as much as other Americans do, and their emotional displays sustain their motivation in the face of adversity. (3) His framework is thoroughly Parsonian, focusing on individual patterns of behavior and values. Appearing in 1961, Johnson's article would be one of the last sociological studies to take this Parsonian framework for granted, as Parson's work would come under fire in the coming years.

Conclusion

By the time Richard Niebuhr (1929) had articulated the economic lines of denominationalism, and wrote his treatise to encourage ecumenical developments, the seeds had already been sewn to move in that direction. A significant portion of Pentecostals were already becoming more socially and economically mobile, and there was a significant push toward non-denominationalism among "Spirit-filled" Christians. Pentecostalism continued to attract the marginalized to its ranks, which were the focus of sociologists as they elaborated and extended church-sect theory in a Parsonian framework. These sociologists would by and large come to the same conclusions regarding Pentecostalism and its role in society, though there is a noticeable progression toward a more sympathetic and inclusive perspective.

Looking at the relationship between Pentecostalism and the sociology of religion, it becomes apparent that sociologists had differing perspectives on Pentecostals. This seems directly related to the intentions of the individual study. We cannot easily compare Richard Niebuhr's (1929) perspective of Pentecostals to that of Milton Yinger (1957), as Niebuhr was writing with the goal to discourage denominationalism in Christianity, while Yinger was focused on detailing a comprehensive account of the formation of sects, and the dialectics that exist and create and sustain these sects (or cause them to dissipate). Yinger has a specific illustrative purpose for Pentecostalism to aid the development of theory, whereas Benton Johnson's (1961) work with Pentecostals led him to a critique of church-sect theory. Johnson's critique would resonate with many scholars who found the church-sect typology confusing and unhelpful. This would lead to the rejection of church-sect theory by many sociologists. Before the appearance of Hollenweger's *The Pentecostals* (1972) the study of Pentecostal groups was useful only insofar as it served the development (or critique) of theory. In sociology, the theories in question, when Pentecostals were mentioned, were invariably linked to Max Weber. Whether it was through the functional framework articulated by

Talcott Parsons, the illustration of sectarian processes, or comparison with *The Protestant Ethic*, the work of Max Weber was at the center of sociological analyses of Pentecostals.

Notes

- 1 This is especially clear in Milton Yinger's 1957 work, *Religion, Society and the Individual*, in which he can produce examples and counter-examples for the numerous theories regarding sectarian religious communities.
- 2 Though certainly pertinent for Robert Anderson's 1979 book, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism*, Anderson makes no mention of Niebuhr's study of religious movements of "the disinherited."
- 3 It is likely that Niebuhr's understanding of Weber's ideal type, as in an artificial and ideal construct that does not exist in pure form but serves only as a means of comparison, was taken directly from Troeltsch (1912), who originally employed this technique in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church*.
- 4 See: Boisen, A.T. 1939. "Religion and Hard Times: A Study of the Holy Rollers." In *Social Action*, March 15, 1939, pp. 8-35; and Boisen, A.T. 1939. "Economic Distress and Religious Experience: a Study of the Holy Rollers." In *Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 2, pp. 185-194.
- 5 I use the word "model" loosely, as it has already been pointed out for the reader that Weber made no such model, nor did he intend for *The Protestant Ethic* to be used as a model for modern analysis.

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