10

Social Stratification and Religious Ideology

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Religion and Minority Status

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African American Religion: Present Themes and Future Trends

Summary

Questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- *How is one's theology related to one's position of privilege or disprivilege?*
- *Does religion mobilize minorities to protest against an unjust system or does it act as an opiate to pacify them?*
- *What are some unique features of African American Christianity?*
- *How has religion served as a resource to minorities in coping with oppression?*

In chapter 9 we began to explore the relationship between religion and socioeconomic status, but an important issue regarding religion and social status remains: How does theology serve as a social ideology appropriate to one's economic circumstances? The underlying questions are these: How is the religion of the affluent different from that of the poor? What are the consequences of the religions of the affluent and of the disfranchised for social change or stability? How does the religion of the disfranchised affect the larger society? Does it always act to justify the status quo, or does religion sometimes inspire oppressed people to militant resistance and advocacy of change? We address these questions in this chapter.

THEOLOGY AS SOCIAL IDEOLOGY

Early in this study, we discovered that one of the functions of religion is to address issues of meaning. When people experience suffering or encounter injustices, they want to know why—or why me? Why is it that the good often seem to encounter suffering and hardship, while the evil seem to flourish like the green bay tree? On the other hand, when a family member or a good friend meets tragedy or death, people sometimes question, "Why couldn't it have been I?" The arbitrariness of suffering causes people to want an explanation; the world should make sense—it should have some ultimate meaning. If these events do not make sense, then life somehow seems a cruel joke. Any belief system that attempts to explain the reasons for evil, suffering, and injustice by placing them in a divine master scheme is referred to as a **theodicy.**

In trying to make sense out of the world and out of human experience, religious ideologies frequently provide explanations for the inequalities that exist in the social system. Sometimes religious beliefs endorse the current social system as established under divine will. For example, the present social arrangements may be viewed as God's divine plan, or the structures of this world may be viewed as a testing ground established by God to determine the truly faithful. Alternatively, the structures of this world may be viewed as the province of an evil force (e.g., Satan). Because lower-class persons are more likely to experience frustrations with the existing social system and to feel it is unjust, they are likely to have a rather different theodicy—one that views current social arrangements as something other than God's will. Max Weber maintains that the lower their social class, the more likely people are to adhere to an otherworldly religion (1963).

The theodicies of the lower classes are essentially "theodicies of despair" or "theodicies of escape," whereas theodicies of the upper classes tend to be those of "good fortune." People who are socially oppressed and who are experiencing a great deal of suffering need some explanation of a deeper justice or a deeper meaning that will ultimately prevail. In many lower-class religious groups, financial affluence is defined as the root of avarice and as a sign of evil. Human experience is divided into worldly and spiritual realms, and attachment to the latter requires a rejection of worldly success. This rejection makes economic deprivation much easier to bear, for poverty is espoused as a noble choice; it is made a virtue. In fact, a frequent text for preachers in lower-class Christian sects is the saying by Jesus, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the King-

dom of Heaven." The saying is likely to be understood literally and as applicable to the present day. (In affluent churches, this saying is often treated as a comment directed specifically at the rich young ruler Jesus was addressing or strictly at the rich people of that day and age. Its application to today's world is minimized.)

Other devices can also be used to make deprivation and suffering meaningful. When the ancient Hebrews were exiled from their homeland and were made slaves of the Babylonians, their plight seemed hopeless, and many of them felt their God had forsaken them. These people awaited a Messiah who would rescue them and take them back to their homeland. (The expectation of a Messiah was a distinctly Jewish theodicy.) The Messiah, they believed, would be a military general who would show forth the power of God and liberate them from captivity. However, the Messiah did not come. Eventually, a prophetic genius came along who reformulated the theodicy. He insisted that the ultimate victory would come not through military might but by the ability to endure suffering. The suffering of the Jews was part of God's master plan to provide salvation to all of humanity. The Messiah was recast as a "suffering servant." Suffering was not meaningless; indeed, it was a high calling. Release from the suffering would come in Yahweh's time—only after the divine purposes had been fulfilled. The idea of being a chosen people was preserved by being redefined. Rather than being chosen for privilege, the Jews were chosen for service. They were handpicked to be God's tools to transform the world. Jews have been persecuted and oppressed for 2,500 years, yet their theodicy of suffering has sustained them and held them together. Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55) was the first to articulate a theodicy for their oppression.

This provides only one of many possible examples of religious groups that recast their theology and worldview to fit their social circumstances. Groups that are composed of members of the privileged class also develop theodicies to justify their good fortune. As Weber puts it, "the fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this one needs to know that one has the right to good fortune, . . . that one 'deserves' it" (1963: 107). Elizabeth Nottingham elaborates:

> Almost equally important for a society [as a theodicy of disprivilege] is a morally acceptable explanation of its successes. Since a successful society often enjoys its worldly accomplishments at the expense of less fortunate peoples, its members are frequently driven to find a moral formula that will not only provide positive meaning for their own good fortune but also will help diminish any guilt they feel about the less happy situation of other groups (1971: 126).

One reason for differential denominational affiliation by social class may be that the theodicy of one denomination may have a better fit with the needs and concerns of those in certain circumstances. Weber (1946) introduced the concept of **elective affinity,** the tendency for members of certain social and economic groups to be drawn to certain religious beliefs. Hence, Weber himself recognized that during the reformation many people whose fortunes were rising may have been drawn to Calvinism. John Calvin's emphasis on individualism and his refusal to condemn usury as intrinsically evil may have attracted upwardly mobile people. This could be seen as a modification by Weber of his earlier suggestion that Calvinist beliefs caused upward mobility. No doubt Weber would assert that both processes are at work; upward social mobility and Calvinistic beliefs were mutually reinforcing.

As we found in chapter 3, Karl Marx believed that economic self-interests are the driving forces of social behavior. He was convinced that the economic self-interests of the rich—those who own the industries and corporations—caused them to develop a religious view that justified their wealth and alleviated any sense of guilt. Because those with wealth and power can do much to control the belief systems of the society, Marx viewed religion as a system that sacralized the cur-

rent forms of inequality and even oppression. For conflict theorists, theodicies of privilege are not so innocent as to be called an "elective affinity." They are, instead, insidious tools of the "haves" that "mystify" the true causes of inequality and serve to keep an unfair social system in place.

Whether the theodicy of privilege simply attracts the affluent because of compatibility with their own circumstances (a functional perspective) or is a consciously developed instrument of the wealthy to help them maintain their privileged position (a conflict theory view), the theological virtues and vices of the different socioeconomic groups do tend to be different. Liston Pope (1942) found that for lower-class Protestant mill workers in North Carolina the world is a battlefield where God and Satan struggle for each individual soul. The sacrificed "blood of Jesus" and Bible reading by the faithful are the critical elements that allow God to be victorious in any given situation. Richard Niebuhr (1957) has further pointed out that the lower-class concept of the deity is one of a comforter, protector, and savior. The role of God is to "take care of His people."

The chief decisions that control the lives of unskilled laborers occur at a level that they cannot control directly. They are often bystanders as the owners of corporations close plants, move factories to new locations, and make other decisions that profoundly shape the lives of wage laborers. Likewise, Pope found that mill workers viewed their role in the supernatural realm as one of observer, cheerleader, and marginal supporter. The battle is viewed as one between superpowers (God and the devil), and it is largely the action of a third party (the sacrifice of Jesus) that will determine the outcome. This passive-observer posture is typical of lower-class religiosity, especially for those groups stressing a theodicy of escape. A content analysis of hymns used in lower-class congregations illustrates the emphasis on dependency, alienation from this world, and blood sacrifice. Notable also is the negative concept of human character and of one's self evaluation ("such a worm as I"). (See Box 10.1 for examples.)[1]

According to Pope, alienation from upper-class values was also expressed in lower-class concepts of immorality, for upper-class forms of entertainment are typically viewed as vices. Niebuhr also stressed the social ethic inherent in lower-class expressions of Christianity. It is not only the individual who needs saving but also the whole social system. The current social arrangements are often viewed as unjust and inequitable; hence, they are in need of redemption and transformation. In fact, sin is not just thought of as wrong actions but as a "state of being" that is all-pervasive. Sin is a depraved condition that infects both the individual soul and the fabric of society. Today this seems more true of African American churches and the churches of the very poor than of white working-class churches.

Another characteristic of lower-class churches, pointed out by Niebuhr, is a high degree of emotionalism in the worship services. One explanation of this is that religious liturgies may provide an emotional outlet for frustrations and humiliations experienced in the society. Weston LaBarre discusses the extreme emotionalism in snake-handling churches of the Appalachian hills. The members are impoverished, many having only a few years of formal education. Some are illiterate. Although their religious life involves shouting, dancing, seizures, and trances, these people are not more emotional in everyday life than any other Americans. LaBarre comments that for these poor folks of rural Tennessee and Kentucky, "their church is the only place where they can freely and spontaneously feel and act out their feelings" (1962: 174).

In the upper classes, economic prosperity is defined as a blessing of God or even as a sign of divine favor. Moreover, members of the upper classes are accustomed to controlling their own destinies.

1 Of course, the hymnals of the various denominations carry many of the same hymns. In analysis of differences in hymns, two factors can be viewed as significant: the character of hymns that are *not* common to upper- and lower-class hymnals and differences between denominations in the popularity of those hymns that *are* common to all of the hymnals.

Box 10.1 Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Hymns in Churches of the Less Affluent

In lower-class and working-class churches, the hymns frequently depict the world as a place of suffering and hardship, and the inherent worth of the individual is viewed rather dimly ("Naught of good that I have done"; "a worm such as I"). Sin is viewed as a state of being rather than as a specific action. A major focus is comfort in this world combined with hope for the next. Finally, the decisive action which determines one's changes is not accomplished by the individual, but by some external force or action (e.g. the sacrificial blood of Jesus).

"Nothing But the Blood"

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Nothing can for sin atone, Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my hope and peace, Nothing but he blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

(Baptist hymn)

"A Gathering in the Sky"

There'll be a great gathering in the sky
When all of God's children get home
We'll join the happy millions as they sing
There around the great white throne
I'm speaking of a big tent meetin'
Where we never shall say good-bye
I'm longin' for the day
When I hear my savior say
There's a gathering in the sky.

One by one we passed through the valley dim,
Our load seems hard to bear;
But I'm going to a great reunion,
Where people's not afraid of prayer.
There'll be a lot of old time singing,
Somewhere up there on high.
It seems I can hear them saying
There's a gathering in the sky.

(Rural Appalachian hymn)

"Remember Me"

Alas! and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sov'reign die?
Help me, dear Savior, Thee to own, And ever faithful be;
Would He devote that sacred head, For such a worm as I?
And when Thou sittest on Thy throne, Dear Lord, remember me.

Was it for crimes that I have done, He hung upon the tree?
Help me, dear Savior, Thee to own, And ever faithful be;
Amazing pity! grace unknown! And love beyond degree!
And when Thou sittest on Thy throne, Dear Lord, remember me.

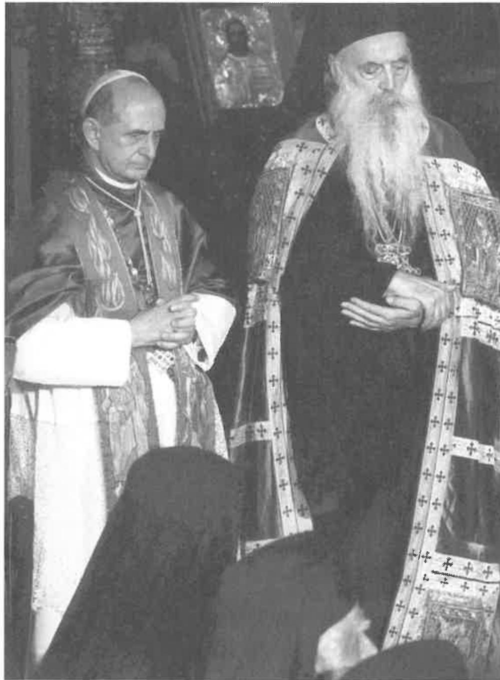
(Nazarene hymn)

"No One Understands Like Jesus"

No one understands like Jesus, He's friend beyond compare;
Meet Him at the throne of mercy, He is waiting for you there.
No one understands like Jesus, When the days are dark and grim:
No one is so dear as Jesus—Cast your ev'ry care on Him.

No one understands like Jesus, Ev'ry woe He sees and feels;
Tenderly He whispers comfort, And the broken heart He heals.
No one understands like Jesus, When the days are dark and grim;
No one is so dear as Jesus—Cast your ev'ry care on Him.

(Country and Western hymn used in Independent Baptist and Methodist Sects)



Ara Guler/Magnum.

H. F. Pickett.

Religions of the affluent tend to be very orderly and decorous in their ritual (high church), and the theology is very logical or cognitively oriented (Apollonian). The formal garb and demeanor of Pope Paul VI and Athenagores (Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church) in the photo on the left illustrates this pattern. The religious ritual of the disfranchised is more often spontaneous or lacking in a formal order (low church), and the appeal is more emotional and expressive (Dionysian) than logical-rational. The photo on the right depicts a worship service of Appalachian snake handlers, a sect of very poorly educated and impoverished Americans located in the hills of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee. While some worshipers pass copperheads and rattlesnakes back and forth or drape them around their heads during worship, others sing, dance, play instruments, or pray "in tongues" (glossolalia).

Their outlook stresses individual accomplishment, a positive assessment of their ability to change things in this world, and a high valuation of individual initiative. In fact, Niebuhr suggests that the American middle and upper classes[2] characterize the deity as "energetic activity" and as a being who expects the same sort of productive activity from humanity. "The conception of God which prevails in bourgeois faith is that of dynamic will" (Niebuhr 1957: 84). This set of values is vividly illustrated by the hymns that are sung in upper- and upper-middle class churches (see samples in Box 10.2).

2 Niebuhr focused on the characteristics of what he called the middle-class churches—but because he was juxtaposing them against the lower-class churches, it is clear that he was describing the religious tendencies of all nonpoor—including both middle and upper classes.

Box 10.2 Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Popular Hymns in Affluent Denominations
In upper- and middle-class churches, the hymns frequently express a positive value of this-worldly activity, an affirmation of individual self-worth, a high valuation of individual initiative and accomplishment, and a sense that persons are in charge of their own destinies. In one of these hymns, Jesus is depicted as an *example* to humankind rather than as a bloodied sacrificial Lamb. Furthermore, the saints of God are depicted in one hymn as common folks rather than as a highly committed elect.

"O Brother Man, Fold to Thy Heart"
O brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother;
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.

Follow with reverent steps the great example
Of him whose holy work was doing good:
So shall the wide earth seem our Father's temple,
Each loving life a psalm of gratitude.
(Congregational hymn)

"I Sing a Song of the Saints of God"
I sing a song of the saints of God
Patient and brave and true,
Who foiled and fought and lived and died
For the Lord they loved and knew
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
And one was a shepherdess on the green:
They were all of them saints of God,
And I mean, God helping, to be one too.

They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
And his love made them strong;
And they followed the right, for Jesus' sake,
The whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
And one was slain by a fierce wild beast:
And there's not any reason, no, not the least,
Why I shouldn't be one too.

They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still:
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too.
(Episcopal hymn)

"Rise Up, O Men of God"
Rise up, O men of God!
Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and soul and mind and strength
To serve the King of kings.

Rise up, O men of God!
His Kingdom tarries long;
Bring in the day of brotherhood
And end the night of wrong.

Rise up, O men of God!
The Church for you doth wait,
Her strength unequal to her task:
Rise up, and make her great!

Lift high the cross of Christ!
Tread where His feet have trod.
As brothers of the Son of Man,
Rise up, O men of God.
(Presbyterian hymn)

Equally important is the way in which conventional secular norms and values are embraced in upper-class churches. Pope points out that in the mill town he studied, the concepts of sin in the affluent uptown churches emphasize failure to pay one's debts, participating in "shady business activities," failure to live up to one's contracts or agreements, and lack of involvement in social and civic obligations.[3]

Niebuhr also pointed to the narrowing of the scope of religiosity among the affluent, indicating a transformation in the concept of Christian

3 The sociology student should be cognizant that this generalization refers to a statistically significant difference that exists between the groups; there is clearly not a categorical difference between the classes in these matters.

morality. In the process, the conception of sin is changed in a very fundamental sense—a sense much more important than simply a matter of upper-class churches defining different behaviors as sinful. Whereas the lower-class churches focus on "Sin" as a state of being, the middle-class churches limit their concept to the plural "sins"—specific actions or personal characteristics. In the middle classes, "sin is not so much a state of soul as a deed or a characteristic; it is not so much the evil with which the whole social life and structure is infected as it is the personal failure of the individual" (Niebuhr 1957: 85).

In middle- and upper-class churches, individuals are encouraged to cultivate a sense of self-worth and self-esteem; members do not often sing on Sunday morning about an Amazing Grace that "saved a *wretch* like me" or about how the blood of Jesus was shed "for a *worm* such as I." Such negative self-images are characteristic of lower-class hymnology where the conception of sin is more pervasive. The upper-class churches are likely to respond positively to such theologians as Harvey Cox when he writes of sin: "I believe a careful examination of Biblical sources will indicate that humanity's most debilitating proclivity is *not* pride. It is *not* the attempt to be more than human. Rather it is sloth, the unwillingness to be everything humanity was intended to be" (1964: xi).

As one reviews the hymns in Boxes 10.1 and 10.2, one can see this difference in emphasis. These distinctions are not a categorical or exclusive difference between upper- and lower-class churches. Clearly, there is wide variation of religious expression and theology within denominations and between persons of the same social class. Niebuhr and Pope describe trends and attempt to make us aware of the fact that socioeconomic status does affect religiosity in important ways.

The specific issues have changed since Niebuhr and Pope published their findings in the mid-twentieth century, but differences continue between the churches of the privileged and those of the lower and working classes. In the United States, the churches of the less affluent are also those that are normally identified as "conservative churches." They include Southern Baptists, Churches of Christ, Nazarenes, Pentecostal and Holiness sects, Assemblies of God, Churches of God, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various evangelical and fundamentalist groups. Conservative white Christians tend to define the moral issues of our day as secular humanism, which includes the ban on prayer in the schools, the teaching of evolution rather than creationism in the schools; changing roles of women; increases in the divorce rate; and the new morality (which includes nonmarital sexual behavior, legalization of abortion, tolerance of pornography, and tolerance of homosexuality).

The most affluent churches in the United States are also those that are the most theologically and ethically liberal: Unitarian, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterian. (Methodist, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, American Baptist, and reformed churches serve as a middle-class buffer and are often referred to collectively as "moderate Protestants.") The moral issues of our day for these churches—at least as identified by their clergy and their official denominational boards and agencies—tend to be war and peace issues; protection of the environment; social justice (especially the elimination of institutionalized discrimination against women and minorities); and the lack of tolerance of those who are different (including those from other cultures, those with different sexual orientations, and those with different definitions of morality). Pluralism and tolerance seem to be the central moral themes of the churches of privilege (Roof and McKinney 1987).

The bar graphs in Figure 10.1 illustrate the divergence in attitudes toward the "new morality" and toward "tolerance" of civil liberties. The measurement of civil liberties here specifically assessed attitudes toward atheists, while the new morality was measured in terms of support for unrestricted legal abortions, permissive attitudes toward nonmarital sexual relationships, and nonjudgmental attitudes toward sexual relations between two adults of the same sex. On both graphs, a score of zero (at the center of the graph) represents the national norm. Scores to the right represent permissive (liberal) attitudes, and those

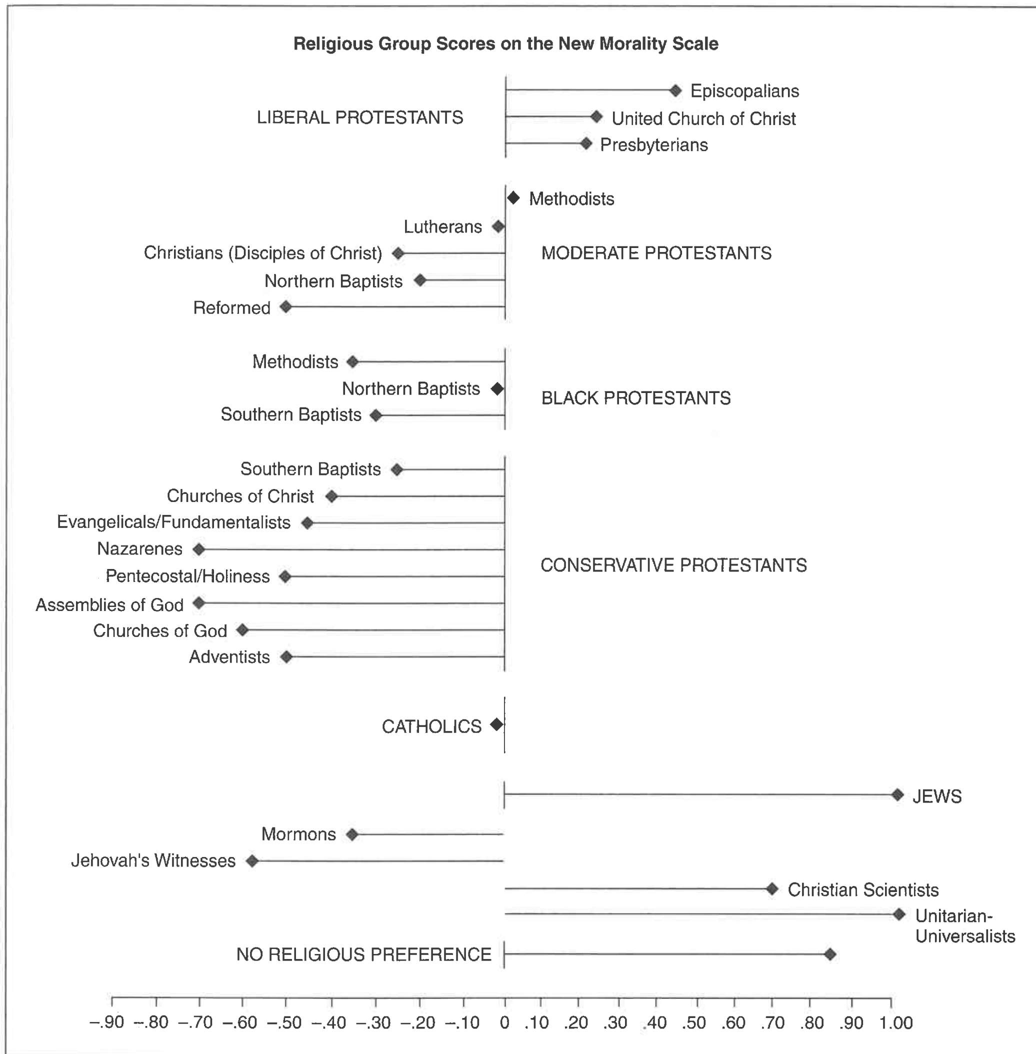
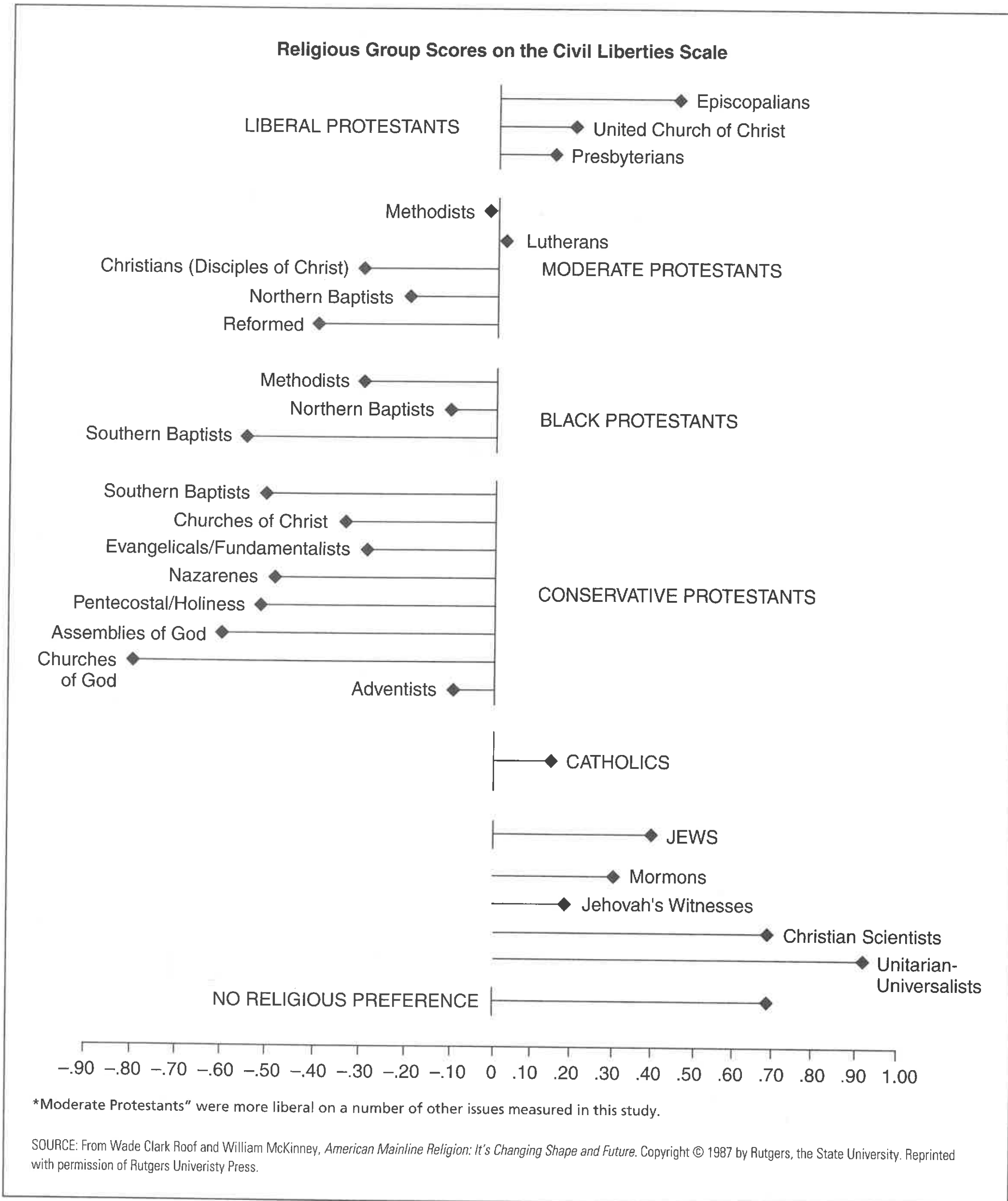


FIGURE 10.1 Social Attitudes of Members of Various Religious Groups

to the left represent restrictive (conservative) attitudes. The differences of opinion shown in the figure reflect variations in definitions of the "real" issues of our day.

The churches of the less affluent define moral relativism as evil. They stress absolutism and obedience to rules. Of course, we might acknowledge that people in lower- and working-class jobs usually find that obeying rules of the workplace and adhering to the instructions of the employer or supervisor are qualities that are central to success on the job. Lack of conformity can have serious consequences, and parents socialize their children to develop those attitudes and behaviors that they

Religious Group Scores on the Civil Liberties Scale



*Moderate Protestants" were more liberal on a number of other issues measured in this study.

SOURCE: From Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: It's Changing Shape and Future*. Copyright © 1987 by Rutgers, the State University. Reprinted with permission of Rutgers Univeristy Press.

FIGURE 10.1

believe will serve their children well in life (Bowles and Gintis 1976; McLeod 1995). Further, if one works in an occupation where brute strength is essential and often gets the job done, one may look for clear, decisive, and forceful solutions to religious problems as well (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993).

For the churches of the affluent, relativity is valued, and lack of tolerance of other perspectives or values is condemned. Those forces that limit individual opportunity (e.g., institutional racism and sexism) and curb individual freedom in decision making are more frequently viewed as evil or as evidences of a sinful world. In the churches of the well educated and the well heeled, conventionalism for its own sake is often shunned.

It is important to note that many of the people in these churches are paid to be divergent thinkers—to be creative and to solve problems. They often manage organizations and are frequently rule makers. They will not do well in their fields if they merely obey rules. They must respect divergent or nonconformist thinking because creativity and innovation are often necessary to solve new problems. Acknowledgment of ambiguity and utilization of careful analysis of problems are essential (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993; Bowles and Gintis 1976). It is not surprising then that their conception of good and evil embraces tolerance of differences and condemns rigidity, absolutism, and conventionalism. These people also are self-conscious about socializing their children to develop those characteristics that they believe will help them in the world of work. Their experience tells them that critical thinking, creativity, and even a streak of independence are valuable characteristics.

Social class variations are found among other world religions as well. For example, Hinduism in the upper classes of India conforms much more to the official religion of that faith; it is monotheistic and stresses concepts of transmigration of souls (reincarnation). The lower classes have a sort of Hindu folk religion, which is polytheistic. Lower-class Hindus tend to identify Hindu statues as gods in themselves (rather than as symbols), and they believe in heaven and hell rather than in reincarnation. In fact, in some areas, the folk Hinduism of the lower classes can hardly be recognized as Hinduism at all (Noss 1949).

In each society where members of several social classes share a common religion, the faith tends to be modified and reinterpreted to fit the needs and the values of each socioeconomic group. It is difficult to say which socioeconomic group is most faithful to the religious teachings. In the United States, various studies have shown that upper-class church members tend to have much more accurate knowledge of the official teachings. However, lower-class members tend to be more willing to apply their faith to everyday life—including all realms. Perhaps this is why Ernst Troeltsch insisted that the "sects" of the lower classes and the "churches" of the upper classes each accurately depicted certain biblical teachings and core themes while they each distorted other central concepts. The important point for our purposes is to recognize that one's social status and one's economic self-interests do tend to affect one's theodicy and one's style of being religious. As Box 10.3 points out, the theodicy of a religious group and the social conditions in a society can also affect the spread of a religion into that society.

Of course, this discussion would be incomplete if we pointed merely to economic self-interest as a determinant of religious ideologies. An important and interesting phenomenon in today's world is the fact that many denominations whose members are affluent have directly and rather aggressively challenged the structures of inequality and privilege—as their scriptures and religious traditions urge them to do. For example, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Catholics all have commissions or task forces on racism, poverty, and social inequities. These task forces do not just attack the problem at an individual level; they challenge the very structure of society and point to systemic causes of poverty and racism. They issue statements calling for change—sometimes for radical change—in the basic social and economic structures of society.

Box 10.3 Global Perspectives

Theodicies, Social Conditions, and the Spread of a Religion to Other Cultures

The ability of a religion to spread to other cultures may be affected by the nature of its theodicy. Most religions in the world are limited to a particular tribe or nation of people. The theodicy is articulated in terms of what is good and bad solely for that one group. The chosen people imagery of the ancient Hebrews (prior to Second Isaiah) tended to view good and evil strictly in terms of the fortunes of their own group. This highly ethnocentric view was repeated in the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century. Many Americans held the view that it was the divine will that America dominate "underdeveloped peoples" (such as Native Americans) in order to "civilize" them. This doctrine justified incredible exploitation of Native Americans within the United States and tragic colonialism abroad. The ideology obviously was only intended for one group, Anglo Americans. The earlier English doctrine of "white man's burden" (the responsibility of whites to "take care of" nonwhite peoples who supposedly could not take care of themselves) is another example of a secularized theodicy.

Religions that focus on tribal ancestors or that define good and evil solely in terms of the self-interests of one nation are not likely to spread and become world religions (ones that are found around the world and in a variety of cultures). Only when the theodicy addresses conditions common to all of humanity will the religion be acceptable in other cultures. The sense of universalism—the idea that the victory over pain, suffering, injustice, and death is appropriate and available for all people—is a first step in a religion diffusing to other cultures. For Christianity, this was implemented by Saint Paul. However, even after the religion is articulated in universalistic terms, its spread will be affected by the compatibility of the religious outlook with the values and outlooks in the host culture. One factor in this compatibility is the economic circumstances of the group in question. If the people are impoverished, oppressed, disfranchised, or otherwise in despair, a theodicy of escape is much more likely to take hold. If the people in question are affluent or are otherwise comfortable with their position and their circumstances, a theodicy of despair will not likely have great appeal. The spread of any religion to other cultures is limited in part by the fit between its theodicy and the social conditions of the people hearing the message.

Many of the liberal positions taken by the National Council of Churches and by various denominational boards, of course, have not been supported by a majority of the lay constituencies of the churches (Hadden 1970; Jenkins 1977). These controversial policies have been formulated and approved by highly trained professionals who are insulated from direct contact with conservative laity. Craig Jenkins (1977) suggests that because these religious professionals are not paid in proportion to their level of training, their major sense of occupational satisfaction comes from their sense of mission—the sense that they are involved in a moral issue of great importance and that they are making a significant contribution to its resolution. The fact that they work for causes that are *not* in their own self-interest is part of their professional identity and serves to enhance their self-esteem. Because these officials are somewhat removed from the local congregations and have a good deal of autonomy, they are able to develop programs that may not be supported by their affluent and sometimes economically conservative constituency.

However, bureaucratic control by liberal clergy is only part of the reason that denominational boards of middle-class churches have championed causes of the poor, for there are also many relatively affluent church members who are highly supportive of programs—denominationally sponsored or otherwise—that challenge the status quo. This concern for the disprivileged among affluent congregations appears to be stimulated by religious teachings. The prophets of the Bible consistently called for social justice as the primary indicator of true religious expression, and this

theme is frequently developed in the adult education materials of the Catholic Church and most mainline Protestant denominations. James Wood (1981) has found that congregations will often act collectively in ways that members would reject individually. This is largely because the clergy are able to call on beliefs that are commonly held but that do not coincide with the self-interests of the members. In the context of a group that they view as important, these members will support policies and actions that they might otherwise oppose.

An ethical or prophetic theme is also central to the Reform branch of Judaism. Although Jews are generally among the more affluent members of American society, they have often championed the cause of blacks and other minorities. For example, Jews were instrumental in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, two organizations that have had crucial roles in fighting for equal rights for African Americans.

Likewise, migrant farm workers (predominantly poor Mexican Americans) have received support from affluent Christian and Jewish congregations, which send financial aid to the United Farm Workers and encourage church members to participate in boycotts of grapes, lettuce, and other products. The boycotts end only after wages are increased, conditions improved, and a union contract is signed. However, this usually means increases in the cost of the produce. In other words, affluent church members knowingly boycott goods with the ultimate result that they must pay higher prices. Such behavior is not in the narrow self-interests of these affluent individuals, yet they persist in this behavior because they are convinced that it is the moral thing to do.

The point I wish to make is that while the theology of a group has a tendency to be shaped by the group's economic circumstances and self-interests, the causal relationship can run the other way. Theological teachings can cause people to behave in ways that one might not expect from looking only at their socioeconomic circumstances. Religious teachings can become a tool for justifying one's self-interests, or they may cause one to advocate positions that run counter to one's own economic interests. The reasons for this lie in the theodicies that people adopt. In the following section, we will see that a theodicy may mobilize people to action, or it may encourage accommodation and passivity.

CRITICAL THINKING

Do you think the fact that affluent people tend to be attracted to certain kinds of churches is a simple matter of "elective affinity," or is there a more sinister motive: the affluent are using religion to justify the status quo, sanctify their own position of privilege, and keep the less affluent in their places? What evidence supports your position?

RELIGION AND MINORITY STATUS

Is Religion an Opiate for the Oppressed?

A good deal of recent sociological research has focused on the religion of the disprivileged. This has been stimulated by a debate over the role of religion for the poor: Does it act as an opiate of the masses, or does it inspire the dispossessed to militancy? Karl Marx maintained the former, that religion gave the poor a feeling of solace and a hope of compensation so that they would not rebel. They were, in essence, drugged. Those who hold to this position insist that religion serves as a tool of control for the dominant economic class and ethnic group. Critics of religion have maintained that when European missionaries went to regions that were later colonized, they had the Bible while the natives had the land. When the missionaries left, the natives had the Bible, and the Europeans had the land (Marx 1967). Although examples of this view that religion is a tool of exploitation abound, they neither provide proof nor establish causality.

Other researchers point to contrary data, such as the facts that most civil rights leaders have been members of the clergy and that as many as 60 percent of the members of the Congress of Racial Equality (a civil rights group) attend church weekly. Many historical analyses have also found that black religion was frequently a motivating force in slave revolts, for religion asserted the intrinsic human worth of slaves (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilmore 1972). Scholars from several disciplines have used a variety of research methods to clarify the relationship between religion and activism regarding social injustices. Our treatment in this section focuses on the function of religion in minority groups—specifically ethnic minorities.[4]

One landmark empirical study of the effects of religion on blacks in the United States was conducted by Gary Marx (1967). Using a sample survey method of research, Marx discovered that blacks who were members of higher-status (and predominantly white) denominations were more likely to be militant in their civil rights positions than were those from lower-class churches or sects (including exclusively black churches and sects). A militant black was defined as one who actively and consistently opposed discrimination and segregation.[5] Percentages of blacks who were militant for each denomination were as follows: Episcopalian, 43 percent; United Church of Christ, 42 percent; Presbyterian, 36 percent; Catholic, 36 percent; Methodist, 28 percent; Baptist, 25 percent; and sects and cults, 15 percent (Marx 1967: 99). For most scholars, the fact that blacks in lower-class churches were more passive was not really unexpected; but the evidence that blacks in *entirely black congregations* were more passive than blacks in predominantly white congregations was something of a surprise to many sociologists.

Gary Marx also correlated several measures of religiosity to civil rights militancy. He found that infrequent church attendance and indifference to religion were positively correlated with militancy. Eighteen percent of those who attended church more than once a week were militant, while 32 percent who attended less than once a year were activists (Marx 1967: 101). When asked how important religion is to the person, 22 percent of those who said "extremely important" were militant, while 62 percent of those who answered "not at all important" were militant (Marx 1967: 100). Marx also found that orthodoxy was inversely related to militancy.[6] When he combined these factors into an overall index of religiosity, he found a negative relationship between religiosity and militancy. Furthermore, the finding held even when he kept certain key variables constant: age, sex, denomination, and region of the country in which the respondent was raised. Marx concluded that there apparently is an "incompatibility between piety and protest."

Seymour Lipset, by doing a cross-cultural political analysis, has come to a similar conclusion but offers an added dimension to Gary Marx's investigation. He maintains that rigid religious dogma-

4 The sociologist uses the term *minority* to refer to groups that have less power to control their destiny than do others. It does not mean the group is necessarily smaller in numbers. (Blacks constitute three-fourths of the population of the Republic of South Africa, but they are still referred to as a minority group.) In the United States, women, homosexuals, the disabled, and the elderly are often referred to by sociologists as minority groups. In suggesting that we will be focusing on ethnic minorities, I wish to make clear that we will not be treating these other groups in this section.

5 Gary Marx asked seven questions to determine attitudes toward civil rights policy. Only those who answered with activist responses to at least six of the questions were considered militant. Those who gave activist responses on three, four, or five questions were classified as "moderates." Those who took activist responses on two or fewer were called "conservatives."

6 The way in which Marx operationalized orthodoxy may be open to some question. He used three items to measure orthodoxy: having no doubt about the existence of God, about the existence of the devil, and about the existence of the afterlife. The second of these is not accepted by all Christian denominations as a central tenet of faith or as "orthodox."

tism is based on the same underlying personality characteristics, attitudes, and dispositions as political radicalism. In fact, he insists that the most radical political movements often have developed from seedbeds of religious fanaticism. However, he also points out that religious fanaticism and political fanaticism tend to serve as functional alternatives; one usually finds only one or the other at any given time (Lipset 1960). In this respect, his finding supports that of Marx. Lipset's study adds a new insight, however, because of its diachronic (historical) methodology. He found that in certain circumstances religious groups may be the spawning ground for political militancy, but in the process of development, these militant groups frequently become less religious (at least in the traditional sense of the word). The sample survey method used by Marx would not indicate this type of pattern, for it focused on attitudes at one given time period.

Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (1990) maintain that regardless of the belief system, African American religious structures have enhanced resistance to subjugation. These scholars insist that churches can empower people simply by establishing stable institutions, fostering networks, and forging a sense of common identity in suppressed peoples. Regardless of the intent of the religious group, those interested in change are able to use the networks and sense of common interest to mobilize a social movement. Since religious bodies were the first black organizations locally and the first national institutions, they contributed to social activism and sense of potency irrespective of intent. Religious institutions spawned various types of protest organizations by providing networks, leadership training in organizational management, and an overall sense of organizational competence. This sort of contribution by religion to the civil rights movement is not assessed by Gary Marx's survey research.

Other sociologists have challenged Gary Marx's findings more directly by questioning the accuracy of his data on black religion. Follow-up studies have indicated a much more varied effect of black religiosity. Hart Nelsen, Thomas Madron, and Raytha Yokley (1975) have provided empirical data that demonstrate that black religion sometimes does stimulate social change. In two other studies, Larry Hunt and Janet Hunt (1977) and Hart Nelsen and Anne Nelsen (1975) found that, regardless of denominational affiliation, blacks who are churchlike in their religiosity are more likely to be inspired to militancy than are blacks who are sectlike. When this variable is held constant, the inverse relationship between militancy and church attendance disappears. Hans Baer (1984) points out that even these analyses deal crudely with the data, for "sectarian" movements themselves are not all the same. Some black "sects" are highly militant, while others—such as the black spiritual movement—encourage passivity. A more in-depth understanding of the worldview or the theodicy of a subjugated group is necessary before one can predict passivity or militance.

CRITICAL THINKING

In what ways can religion be an "opiate" to oppressed people? What kinds of evidence support this view of religion? In what ways can religion mobilize suppressed people to greater self-respect and to work for social change?

Theodicies and Levels of Activism

The worldview of many sectarian groups is otherworldly. The reality or at least the importance of this world is denied except for its function as a testing ground. Only the faithful will be saved and will reach heaven in the afterlife; only the true believers will have "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by" (as it is sometimes referred to affectionately by believers and derisively by skeptics). This afterlife experience is expected to commence for each individual immediately after death. This sort of otherworldly religion is frequently associated with passivity in this-worldly affairs. Members of the dominant social groups are usually more than happy to have their subordinates believe that vindication will come only after death. Slave owners in this country

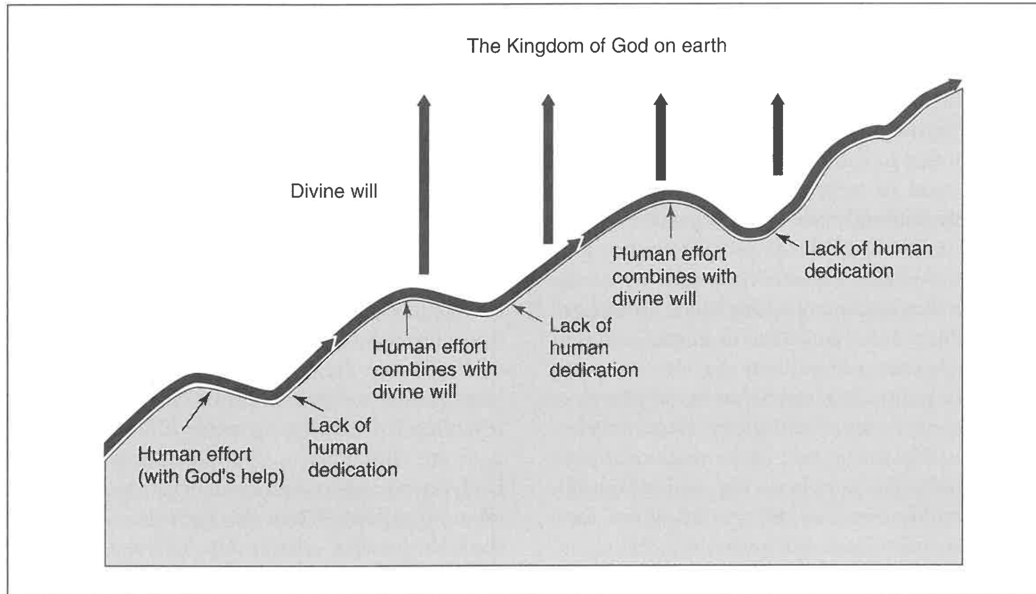


FIGURE 10.2 The Progressive View of History

often had that sort of doctrine preached to their slaves and coupled it with warnings that the saved would be those who lived out their status in this world without causing any trouble.

Another sort of worldview is eschatological. In the eschatological worldview, the ultimate victory over suffering and death will commence at some future time in history. Eschatology may be expressed in either of two forms: progressivism or millenarism. Furthermore, millenarism sometimes has a subtype known as apocalypticism.

In the progressive view, the day of perfection will be reached when God and humanity have worked together to attain it. This involves a gradualistic concept of social evolution. The view is based on the idea that God is the creator and rules over the earth. God's master plan is for the evolution of the world into an ever more humane, just, and Godly kingdom (the Kingdom of God on earth), but it is believed that God will not establish this without human effort and participation. According to this evolutionary eschatology, trust in God is often equated with trust in the goodness of God's creation. Believers are to look for signs of God at work in this world and are to become actively involved in the material world. Progressive eschatology was characteristic of much of the Social Gospel movement in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. In a somewhat modified form, this sort of outlook—with its positive view of this world—continues to be a force in many mainline denominations and is the predominant view of Reformed Jews.[7] The progressive view of history is depicted in Figure 10.2.

7 Actually, this-worldly eschatology is the predominant theodicy in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. In the entire Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament), the idea of life after death is mentioned only four times. Salvation was expected to be this-worldly and was anticipated within history. God was thought to be in charge of creation and of history, both of which were viewed as good. The idea of the soul, as something separate from the body that would live on after the material body died, was an idea introduced by the Greeks and is found in later rabbinical writings and in the Christian New Testament.

Another form of eschatology, **millenarism,** assumes that the transformation of the world will be sudden rather than gradualistic and will be inaugurated primarily by supernatural powers. Norman Cohn, an historian who has done extensive comparative studies of millenarism, points to five defining characteristics of these movements. The millenarian vision is:

1. Collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group.
2. Terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some otherworldly heaven.
3. Imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly.
4. Total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself.
5. Accomplished by agencies which are consciously regarded as supernatural (1964: 168).

The word *millennium* means a thousand years and refers to the new era to come. Although the term originates from the New Testament prediction (in the Book of Revelation) that Jesus will return and rule for 1,000 years, the word is also used to refer to non-Christian groups with this sort of worldview. Hence, millenarians are those people who await a future event by which the Kingdom of God or the new era will begin. Many millenarian Christians have their own life-after-death scenario. This involves a bodily resurrection of the dead at the time the new Kingdom begins. This is a rather different concept from the belief that eternal life for an individual begins immediately after death and that the spiritual world is coexistent with the material one. Nonetheless, many people hold some combination of both beliefs and are not much troubled by the need for coherence and consistency in their theodicy.

The concept of salvation for millenarians, then, is time-oriented, terrestrial (although life on earth in the new era will be quite different from present life on earth), and collective (rather than individualistic). Although the transformation will ultimately be accomplished by supernatural forces, humans do have an active and important role in preparing the way. Life in this world is viewed as a time of suffering and of being tested, but the new era will mean the advent of a new social order where justice prevails.[8]

For disadvantaged groups, the millenarian view offers great hope for the future. (See Box 10.4.) Groups that hold this view are frequently highly emotional in their religious expression and become fanatical in their efforts to inaugurate the new Kingdom. Hence, it is not uncommon for millenarian groups to precipitate active revolt against the established authorities. Yonina Talmon writes:

> Comparative analysis seems to indicate that, generally speaking, the more extremely millenarian a movement is the more activist it is. . . . There seems to be a correlation between the time conception of each movement and its position in the passivity-activity continuum. Movements which view the millennium as imminent and have a total and vivid conception of redemption are, on the whole, much more activist than movements which expect it to happen at some remote date. . . . It would seem that truly great expectations and a sense of immediacy enhance the orientation to active rebellion while postponement of the critical date and lesser expectation breed passivity and quietism (1965: 527).

8 Each of these theodicies (salvation in an afterlife, progressive eschatology, and millennial eschatology) are within the mainline tradition of Christian theology and are given different emphasis by various denominations. For example, one study revealed that 94 percent of the Southern Baptists felt that Jesus would definitely return to earth some day. By contrast, only 13 percent of the Congregationalists fully believed in that prediction (Stark and Glock 1968). This is one reason that it is suspect to operationalize orthodoxy only in terms of one of these views and then assume that those who are more "orthodox" are also more religious.

Box 10.4 Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Milleniarian Anticipation Expressed in Hymns

These two hymns express vividly the revolutionary and earthly expectations of the millenial vision. The first stresses the collapse of the present social order and the destruction of kingdoms. The second expresses a mood of waiting until the supernatural does its work. Compare the messages to those in the hymns in Boxes 10.1 and 10.2.

"Jesus Comes"

Watch ye saints with eyelids waking, Lo, the pow'rs of heav'n are shaking;
Keep your Lamps all trimmed and burning, Ready for your Lord's returning.
Lo! He comes, lo! Jesus comes; Lo! He comes, He comes all glorious!
Jesus comes to reign victorious, Lo! He comes, yes, Jesus comes.

Kingdoms at their base are crumbling, Hark, His chariot wheels are rumbling;
Tell, O, tell of grace abounding, Whilst the seventh trump is sounding.
Lo! He comes, lo! Jesus comes; Lo! He comes, He comes all glorious!
Jesus comes to reign victorious, Lo! He comes, yes, Jesus comes.

Nations wane, tho' proud and stately, Christ His Kingdom hasteneth greatly;
Earth her latest pangs is summing, shout, ye saints, your Lord is coming!
Lo! He comes, lo! Jesus comes; Lo! He comes, He comes all glorious!
Jesus comes to reign victorious, Lo! He comes, yes, Jesus comes.

"Our Lord's Return to Earth Again"

I am watching for the coming of the glad millennial day
When our blessed Lord shall come and catch His waiting Bride away
Oh! my heart is filled with rapture as I labor, watch and pray
For our Lord is coming back to earth again.
Oh! our Lord is coming back to earth again,
Yes, our Lord is coming back to earth again,
Satan will be bound a thousand years,
We'll have no tempter then,
After Jesus shall come back to earth again.

Then the sin and sorrow, pain and death of this dark world shall cease
In a glorious reign with Jesus of a thousand years of peace;
All the earth is groaning, crying for that day of sweet release,
For our Lord is coming back to earth again.
Oh! our Lord is coming back to earth again,
Yes, our Lord is coming back to earth again,
Satan will be bound a thousand years,
We'll have no tempter then,
After Jesus shall come back to earth again.

Talmon points out that millenarism has enjoyed popularity at all levels of society at one time or another—including relatively affluent middle- and upper-middle-class people. Nonetheless, it has normally appealed to deprived people—oppressed peasants, the poorest of the poor in cities and towns, and populations of colonial countries. The millennial outlook usually develops as a reaction to especially severe hardships and suffering. Talmon writes: "Many of the outbursts of millenarism took place against a background of disaster—plagues, devastating fires, recurrent long droughts that were the dire lot of the peasants, slumps that caused widespread unemployment and poverty and calamitous wars" (1965: 530). In most cases, millenarism is a phenomenon of ethnic groups that have endured sustained subjugation.

For example, when simple tribal societies encounter complex ones and the people in the simpler society are attracted by advanced technologies and tools, there are generated enormously inflated expectations without an adequate development of institutional means for their satisfaction. This was the case in the Cargo cult of Melanesia where exposure to an American military base caused poor indigenous peoples to feel frustrated with their own lack of possessions. Their response was to develop a mystical cult around a flag pole. They believed that if they cracked the mystical marching code of the soldiers, an airplane loaded with cargo for

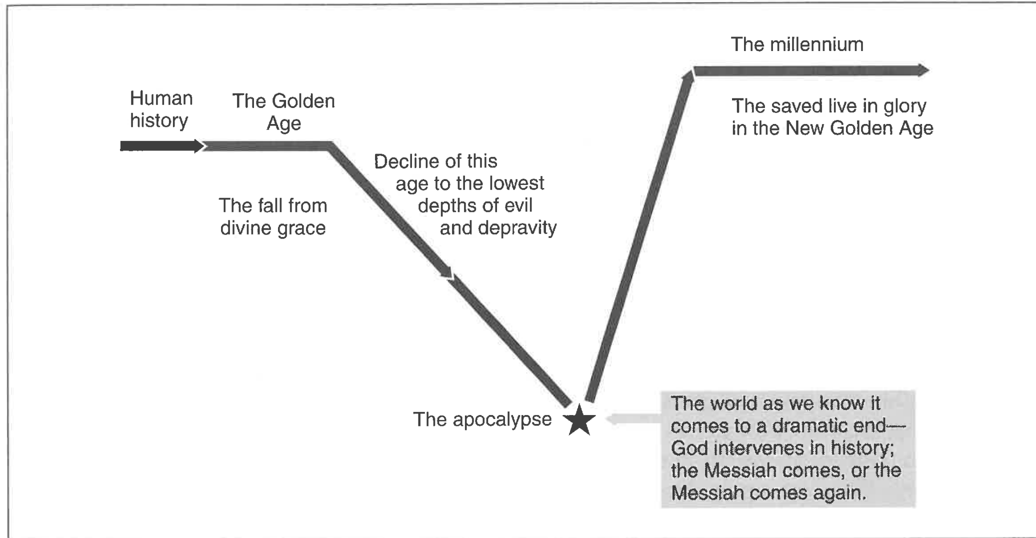


FIGURE 10.3 The Apocalyptic (Premillennial) World View

the natives would arrive. The discrepancy between desire and reality is often bridged by millenarian hope. The millennial hope, in turn, sometimes leads to action.

Unlike the progressivists who see the present order as good and getting better, millennial movements usually seek total transformation of this world—which they view as unjust or even inherently evil. Many groups that begin with a rational approach become progressively more strategic and more rational (more secular?) if they begin to meet with success. This is illustrated by the tendency, which Lipset described, for religious movements to spawn radical political movements and the political movements, in turn, to lose much of their religiosity (Lipset 1960). Of course, for sociologists who insist that a worldview may be religious without being supernaturalistic, these secular political movements are no less religious than their predecessors. They simply have this-worldly and rationalistic systems of faith.

To complicate matters further, there are actually two types of millenarism. Within Christian circles, **postmillenialism** holds that Christ will come to reign over the earth, but only *after* humans have prepared the way. This is sometimes thought to involve a 1,000-year period of justice and peace prior to Christ's arrival. Obviously, this stimulates this-worldly activism and is what has been described so far.

The other type of millenarism is common among the most destitute—those who feel utterly vulnerable in relationship to another group of people. This form emphasizes much more strongly the idea that the world is evil and controlled by Satan. Contrary to the evolutionary eschatology, this view describes human history as being on a hopelessly downward spiral. Ironically, this depressing circumstance is viewed as a sign of hope because it indicates that the end is near. God will intervene in history and bring forth the new era. Nothing humans can do will significantly alter the course of history. The believer can only be ready for the day of judgment, preparing his or her own soul and perhaps engaging in mystical ritual action, such as dancing around a fire (the Ghost Dance), marching around a flag pole (the Cargo cult), or spreading the word until everyone is informed of the noble story (Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses). This extreme form of millenarism is called **apocalypticism,** or **premillenialism** (see Figure 10.3).

This latter phrase means that Christ will come before the 1,000-year period of justice, peace, and divine rule.

Within Christianity, apocalypticism is normally based on a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Its utter rejection of the present age and present world disallows any attempt to bring change. For this reason, it usually leads to passivity in terms of the social structure. Groups or individuals are more likely to adopt this posture and this worldview if they are powerless and utterly despairing.[9] If some hope exists of social change through human action, the group or individual is more likely to develop a rational strategy.

Christianity, then, has within it several theodicies, which in numerous ways are quite different. Some congregations and some denominations stress one of them exclusively. Most congregations have some people who do not believe in a Second Coming or in an imminent end to the world; rather, they believe in a spiritual world that is coexistent with this world and that is attained by individuals if they have a right relationship with God. Others do not believe in life after death, at least not immediately after death; rather, they expect the millennium to occur sometime in the future. Many Christians believe a little bit in each of these outlooks, but have no coherent explanation of how the views fit together.[10] The important point is that, depending on which worldview is stressed among an oppressed minority group, one may expect very different levels of activism or militance. Those whose hope lies in a coexistent spiritual world that is attained by individual means are frequently passive. Those who hold an apocalyptic view are also usually passive. However, millenarians are frequently activist and militant. For them, religion is not an opiate; it is the inspiration that gives them hope, provides them with vision, and shores up their courage. The progressive view, with its suggestion that the present social system is already a good one and is constantly improving, has little appeal to the oppressed. This view is frequently held by social activists in more affluent religious groups.

Judaism also has within it several theodicies. Reform Jews await a "messianic age," which they believe will be established by combined human and divine effort. Orthodox Jews hold to a belief in a coming Messiah who will bring the Kingdom of God into being, will reunite the Jews, and will rebuild the temple. This millenarian view has been especially emphasized in times of Jewish history when oppression of Jews was most severe. A belief in resurrection from the dead was introduced to the Hebrews through the Persians nearly 2,000 years ago and is now part of the messianic expectation as well. Another theodicy—the belief in life after death in heaven or purgatory[11]—was also introduced by the Greeks. Orthodox Jews affirm this doctrine as well, even though it represents quite a different theodicy from the more this-worldly messianic expectation. Conservative Jews vary a great deal from one congregation to another in which of these theodicies they emphasize.

9 This does not mean that *only* the destitute will develop such a worldview, but they are more likely to be inclined in this direction than are those in other socioeconomic circumstances.

10 Lack of logical coherence or consistency is not uncommon; many people hold more than one worldview, even though those worldviews may be contradictory in many respects. Melford Spiro (1978) points out that some Chinese say devotions at both Taoist and Buddhist temples; some Japanese worship the gods of both Shinto and Buddhism; certain Singhalese pay homage to both the Hindu *deva* and the Buddhist Gautama; and many Burmese Buddhists believe firmly in the Thirty-Seven Nats (the folk religion of Burma). In many cases, the outlook on life of two theodicies is utterly different, yet local people claim allegiance to both worldviews.

11 Jews believe that no soul is so evil that it deserves a permanent condemnation. Hence, they have no concept of hell. The worst that can happen to an utterly evil person is that his or her soul will cease to exist and the person will not be remembered among the living. A person who has lived a life that is less than holy may spend up to eleven months in purgatory, but is eventually united with God. Jewish theology spends much less time on speculations about the nature of the afterlife than does Christian theology.

Reform Judaism (at least in its official form) does not accept the beliefs in resurrection or in heaven and purgatory. Its members are messianic, but they anticipate a messianic age—a time of peace and justice—which will be inaugurated due to the work of God and of many people. They do not expect a single individual to arrive who will solve the world's problems. The confidence of Reform Jews that human action can be effective in bringing significant change is itself a product of a people who are not destitute and powerless. The social circumstances of Reform Jews has allowed for and encouraged this modification of the traditional theodicy. Likewise, the theodicy has justified and encouraged social activism. The Reform branch of Judaism is often noted for being especially prophetic and activist in its attention to social and political change.

The Jews have been subjugated and persecuted throughout much of their history, and the theodicies that they have developed have usually been ones of disprivilege. Sometimes the theodicies have motivated Jews to militancy and activism (such as the times of the escape from Egypt and the Maccabean revolt), and sometimes they have called for passivity—waiting for the Messiah. There can be little doubt, however, that these theodicies have served to bond the Jews together and have helped to sustain them through incredible hardships.

What we have found is that oppressed people frequently adhere to a worldview that is either otherworldly or is millenarian; the answer to life's frustrations is sought in a transformed future or in a different realm of existence. Given the subjugation of women throughout the history of the Western world, the role of women in millenaristic movements is especially interesting. Cohn (1964) points out that millennial movements are common when there is a substantial group of wealthy, leisure-class women who are without social function or prestige. He points out that a number of millennial reformers during the Reformation were able to survive because they were sheltered and supported by women of the nobility. These women were experiencing extreme status inconsistency; they had high social status in terms of wealth and family political prestige, yet as individuals they had no respected function and could demand little personal prestige or respect. Weber (1963) also noted that women showed a great receptivity to all religious prophecy except that which is exclusively military in orientation. He emphasized that prophets challenge the status quo and are usually rather egalitarian in their relationships with women. Jesus and Buddha are both cited as examples of charismatic figures who ignored many traditional gender-role norms. The point here is that women—like many oppressed groups—are disproportionately attracted to world-transforming charismatic religious leaders and movements. This should not surprise us since women have actually experienced minority status—a position of less power—across the world.

One conclusion can safely be drawn from our foregoing discussion: The experience of social and political disprivilege can have a significant impact on one's worldview and on one's style of religious expression. Likewise, the worldview and sacred ethos of a group may have a significant effect on how its members respond to the experience of social and political subordination. To understand better the workings of religion in the experience of a specific subjugated group, let us turn to a brief overview of religion in the African American experience.

RELIGION IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The vast majority of African Americans who are religiously affiliated are members of a Methodist or a Baptist denomination. In fact, well over 80 percent of the black Christians in this country are members of one of the seven largest independent black denominations of Baptists and Methodists (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Roof and McKinney

1987).[12] Nonetheless, one must be cautious about making generalizations about African American religion in the United States, for there is tremendous diversity of religious expression among African Americans. There is a strong local autonomy emphasis in the independent black denominations, and this means that local churches within the same denomination may vary considerably in theology and in style of ritual. Of course, there is also wide variation in the white denominations, but these denominations tend to be somewhat more centralized. The localistic bias of black churches tends to facilitate local variations and to exaggerate intradenominational diversity.

Gayraud Wilmore (1972) points out that in Cincinnati in the 1930s only 10.6 percent of the population was black, but black churches accounted for 32 percent of all churches in that city. Similar figures reveal the same pattern in Detroit and Philadelphia. Wilmore cites these crude figures as illustrations of the high degree of divisiveness and separation that often exists in the black religious community. Perhaps the most important variation in black religiosity is that due to socioeconomic standing. The lower-class churches are characterized by emotionalism and fundamentalism, and the minister is unlikely to have had any formal theological training. On the other hand, the religious expression of the black professional class is quite similar to the religiosity of the white middle class. It is characterized by orderly and rational worship conducted by a well-educated, theologically-trained minister. Beyond the variations of Christianity in the African American community, there also exist a large number of black religious cults. Yet, regardless of variations, we can still safely say that African American religiosity tends to be more emotional in character than white religiosity.

We are able to discuss the existence of black religion as a distinct phenomenon in large part because the vast majority of African Americans do belong to all-black churches. This is not due to theological differences but to the castelike nature of American society relative to African Americans. During the time of slavery, black Christians were required to occupy the balcony while whites were seated on the main floor. This allowed slave owners to keep track of their slaves and ensure that religious meetings were not used to incite rebellion. Gradually some "trusted" black preachers were allowed to meet separately with slaves to have religious services. This was virtually the only official leadership role slaves were allowed, and it should not be surprising that the African American pastor enjoyed tremendous prestige and occupied the primary leadership position in the black community for more than two centuries (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

However, it was free blacks who actually founded the first independent all-black denominations.[13] In Philadelphia two African American clergymen, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, started the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794, and a group of free blacks in New York started the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1820 (Wilmore 1972). The segregation in the white churches was unbearable for free blacks. To Allen and Jones, it seemed to be a

12 Roof and McKinney estimate the rate at 85 percent, and since Niebuhr found that the figure was 88 percent in 1929, it appears that little change has occurred in seventy years. The seven largest black denominations include three Methodist ones (the African Methodist Episcopal, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal) and four Baptist associations (National Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., National Baptist Convention of America, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention). There are also four additional independent black Baptist denominations, but they are quite small. For more information and a history of these black churches, see Lincoln and Mamiya (1990).

13 The first black Baptist churches predate the Methodist ones—in 1758 the African Baptist or "Bluestone" Church was founded in Mechlenberg, Virginia, but the Baptists did not organize a denominational network or structure until long after the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches were established.

direct contradiction of the Christian faith. Furthermore, predominantly white denominations were very little concerned about the needs of African Americans. The ability of all-black churches to minister effectively to the social and religious needs of their people resulted in a tremendous increase in the membership of these denominations and eventually in the spawning of others. The result is that most African American Christians have continued to this day to worship in segregation from European-American Christians. As one theologian has put it, "Sunday morning at 11 o'clock is the most segregated hour of the week in America" (Winter 1962). It is precisely this separateness that makes it possible to speak about black religion and the black church as a distinct entity.

The Unique Character of the Black Christian Experience

There are two different schools of thought regarding the origins and central character of African American religion. One group of scholars believes that the conversion of blacks was a final step in obliterating any remnant of African culture among the slaves. The experience of being torn from their homelands and their families and being involuntarily relocated on a new continent was a stunning experience for the first generation of African Americans. Furthermore, slaveholders frequently had policies that blacks from the same African culture or who spoke the same African language were not to be placed on the same plantation. Hence, no common language, religion, or culture could enhance communication and solidarity among slaves. In fact, members of enemy societies were sometimes thrown together in the most unhappy of circumstances.

At first, the white masters refused to allow preachers access to their slaves, for most Christian denominations maintained that a Christian could not own another Christian. Hence, if a slave converted, the master would either have to give up his or her own church membership or would have to free the converted slave. For this reason, slave owners prohibited proselytization. Because many Christian missionaries wanted to preach to the Africans, they gradually compromised their position: conversion did not automatically require manumission. Eventually, slave owners found that religion could be a powerful tool for controlling slaves, for they could use the aura of sacredness to reinforce desirable behavior patterns: submissiveness, industriousness, and obedience. By providing blacks with a worldview that is profoundly otherworldly, slave owners hoped to replace the last vestiges of African hopes for freedom with a sacred system that the whites could control.

E. Franklin Frazier (1957, 1963) and Arthur Fauset (1944) first developed the thesis that the Christianization of blacks was the final step in the deculturation of Africans. However, they also pointed out that these African converts used the imagery of Christianity to forge a religious expression appropriate to their own needs. In this view, Christianity became functional for the slaves in that it established a common base for unity and solidarity among otherwise disparate peoples. This view of African American religiosity stresses the fact that slave religion was a synthesis of white religion and black experience, and it developed its own unique character and history. The emotionalism that is characteristic of African American churches is attributed to the fact that it was mostly Baptists and Methodists who evangelized the slaves. Because the revival-meeting style of those denominations is highly enthusiastic and emotional, it is not surprising that black Christianity was also revivalistic. Furthermore, poorly educated and economically impoverished groups are frequently more emotional in religious expression than are more educated and affluent coreligionists. This would also add to the highly emotional tenor of African American religion (Baer 1984).

Other scholars, such as Melville Herskovits (1958), Gayraud Wilmore (1972), Joseph Washington (1972), Peter Williams (1980), and Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya (1990), have insisted that slave religion was influenced by certain patterns of religiosity that are common to many African religious ceremonies. According to Herskovits, the

tendency to turn to religion rather than to political action to alleviate frustrations is typical of African cultures. Moreover, the rhythm and motion that characterize the singing, preaching, and congregational responses in black churches is also common in Africa. Hence, the style of religiosity of the African American church is viewed as a survival of previous cultural patterns in much the same way that the sentence structure of the black dialect is viewed by linguists as a survival of African languages. The specific religious belief systems are granted to be a product of the new world and of contact with white missionaries, but the mode of expression is viewed as uniquely African.

The debate continues between those holding each of these views (Glenn 1964). We cannot expect to resolve the issue here, but I do want to highlight the significance of the alternative views. For those who deny that African culture had any real influence on slave religiosity, the characteristic features of the African American church are thought to originate in socioeconomic subordination. If this view is correct, the emotionalism of black religiosity may fade, even in all-black churches, as members of those congregations improve their socioeconomic standing.[14]

On the other hand, African American religiosity will continue to have a different flavor from European-American religiosity if the variation is rooted in ethnic differences that are preserved in segregated religious organizations. There is empirical evidence to support both views, but I do not believe that one can fully understand the religiosity of the first slaves without some understanding of their previous experiences of religion. Through the transmission of religion from one generation to the next, the remnants of African religiosity have been passed down to the contemporary black church. Only history will be able to answer the question about whether assimilation to white American culture and changes in socioeconomic status will result in a more subdued and rationalized religious style among blacks. My own expectation is that the unique, expressive style of the black church will continue.[15]

CRITICAL THINKING

Which argument is more convincing to you: African American religious style is rooted in religious patterns and styles of Africa or it is shaped by socioeconomic circumstances? Why is this position more convincing to you?

Regardless of the causes of black religious patterns, there is a consensus that black religion in the United States does have a unique character (Cone 1972; Johnstone 2001; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Washington 1964, 1972; Wilmore 1972; Winter 1977). In fact, Washington refers to black Christianity in the United States as a form of folk religion. First of all, the Christianity that was preached to blacks was a truncated and manipulated version of Christian theology; it was designed to help pacify and compensate them for their inferior position in life (see Box 10.5). Furthermore, religion became the means by which slaves could express their frustrations and their hopes—both of which emanated from their subordinate standing in society. Other scholars point out that all world religions adapt to local needs and that while African American Christianity has

14 The assumption here is that religious emotionalism is an expression of socioeconomic deprivation (a thesis discussed earlier in this chapter and in chapter 8). According to this argument, emotionalism will give way to middle-class forms of religiosity—which are more cerebral and more subdued—as blacks achieve economic affluence. A second line of argument is that, although the origins of black religious emotionalism were due to socioeconomic subordination, the pattern is now institutionalized and will continue independently of economic changes among blacks.

15 It is interesting to note that middle-class black theologians, such as James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, continue to support the emotionalism of the black church. Although they are not personally impoverished, they do not conform to the subdued style of worship of white churches. Most black preachers—despite their economic standing—take pride in the distinctiveness of black preaching and the emotional expressiveness in black worship services.

Box 10.5 Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Excerpts from a Catechism for American Slaves

These questions from a catechism designed for slaves illustrate the way Christianity was twisted to serve the interests of the powerful group. Several denominations established special catechisms for slaves which were, at best, truncated interpretations of the faith.

Question: What did God make you for?

Answer: To make a crop.

Question: What is the meaning of "Thou shalt not commit adultery?"

Answer: To serve our heavenly Father, and our earthly Master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything.

SOURCE: Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

its unique character, it is no different than other expressions of Christianity in adapting a local flavor. Like Christianity in Poland, Brazil, or Anglo America, African American Christianity has both folk elements and strong universalistic themes (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Religion of the Oppressed and Coded Messages: The Black Spiritual

One of the characteristic expressions of this African American religiosity was the black spiritual. Surprisingly, few African American spirituals were Christ-centered; in fact, many do not even mention God (Wilmore 1972). The message of most spirituals was an expression of hardship and a hope of freedom. Those spirituals that do focus on Jesus stress his suffering, his experience of being scorned, and his role as liberator. Some spirituals were based on biblical stories (such as "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho"), but many were commentaries on contemporary events. "Oh, Lord, What a Morning, when the Stars Begin to Fall" emerged right after Nat Turner's insurrection (1831) when slaves were under the tightest scrutiny. The slaves hoped for that day when the apocalypse would come, the revolution would be successful, and the sky would fall on slave owners. Washington insists that slaves used the vocabulary of white ministers and of the Bible and that whites believed the slaves were being socialized in the values that owners wanted. However, content analysis of these hymns, combined with reports from former slaves on the role of the spirituals, has suggested a different interpretation. Washington writes,

> The popular view that [the] spirituals are of Christian origin is based upon the preponderance of otherworldly themes, Biblical words, and the instruction and messages of the missionaries. These were the tools the [slaves] had at hand, but this view assumes the credulity of the slave. It overlooks the awareness of [blacks] that religion was methodically used to hold them in check, and their capacity to use it for other purposes than worship. Thus, the distinction between spirituals being forged from materials presented by Christians and forged from the Christian faith itself is essential . . . (1964: 218).

Scholars have found that many spirituals were, in fact, "code songs" that communicated one thing to blacks, while white masters sat by—content that their slaves were getting a heavy dose of otherworldly religion. For example, the spiritual "Let Us Praise God Together, on Our Knees," which is included in the hymnbooks of many mainline white denominations and many sects, was actually a call to a secret meeting of slaves at dawn. The chorus of that spiritual is as follows: "When I fall on my knees *with my face to the rising sun,* Oh, Lord, have mercy on me." Likewise, when a slave working in the

fields began singing "Steal away, steal away home; I ain't got long to stay here," he or she was indicating this-worldly intentions to other slaves. Participation of the other slaves in the chorus was a way to wish the person well and a promise to try to cover for the slave's absence as much as possible. Some of the spirituals were rather thinly veiled codes, such as the one that went

> I am bound for the promised land;
> I am bound for the promised land;
> Oh who will come and go with me?
> I am bound for the promised land!

"Canaan, Sweet Canaan" did not point only to an otherworldly realm, but it referred to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and even Canada. Similarly, references to the Jordan River usually meant the Ohio River. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" provides an example. When the underground railroad was ready to take another group of escapees north, African Americans could let others at a worship gathering know about it without giving themselves away to white attendants who came to ensure that nothing subversive happened at these religious gatherings. Someone would begin to sing, with great emotion,

> I looked over Jordan [the Ohio River] and what did I see;
> Coming for to carry me home;
> A band of angels [Harriet Tubman or another conductor of the underground railroad] coming after me;
> Coming for to carry me home [freedom in the North]
> Swing low [deep into the South] Sweet Chariot [the underground railroad]
> Coming for to carry me home.

The slaves at those worship services understood the symbolism and double meanings very well (Cone 1972).

In some cases, it is hard to know whether a particular spiritual was otherworldly in its meaning or a code song. Some spirituals, like "When the Saints Go Marching In" had a definite otherworldly character. Other songs had a here-and-now double meaning, but they were not necessarily calls to action. A biblical theme was being rehearsed, but contemporary characters were clearly identified with historical figures in the story. The spiritual "Go Down, Moses" emerged at the time when Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Church was instrumental in formulating antislavery planks in the Methodist code of discipline. Asbury had himself referred to South Carolina as "Egypt" when he had been there to preach (Washington 1964) and that theme was expressed in the chorus of this popular hymn:

> When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go;
> Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.
> Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land;
> Tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"
> Oh let us all from bondage flee, let my people go;
> And let us all in Christ be free, let my people go.
> Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land;
> Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go.

It doesn't take much imagination to figure out who represented "Moses," "the Israelites," and the "Egyptians" in the eyes of those slaves.

The use of religious language for coded communication is certainly not a new phenomenon, for there are other reports of oppressed people communicating in a similar manner. Most biblical scholars believe that the Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation) was a coded message from John the Elder (a prisoner on the Island of Patmos) to his people in the churches of Asia Minor. At that time, one was required to worship the emperor of Rome. Because Christians refused to do so, they were persecuted. The Book of Revelation is an encoded book that is very difficult to translate because many of the symbolic meanings of that day have been lost.

CRITICAL THINKING

Slave owners used religion to manipulate and control slaves, while slaves used religion as a coded system to help them with escape plans. Is it at all troubling to you that religion was used as a tool to prevent or to stimulate change? Why or why not?

An understanding of the double meanings requires fluency in Aramaic and Greek. The book was not destroyed by the Romans, for they viewed it as a harmless fantasy about another world. They never recognized the political references that abound in the book and that served as a resounding criticism of Rome.

All of this simply serves as a warning against facile generalizations regarding the otherworldliness of the religion of the oppressed. Of course, some blacks did understand Christianity in otherworldly terms, and it served to compensate them and to discourage any rebellion in this world. They believed they would get their just deserts in the next world. The important point here is that slave religion was not a simple adoption of white Christianity; it was a reworked Christianity that had its own character, style, and outlook. Much of the black church today has been influenced by this heritage. Even where the message is otherworldly, political issues have never been entirely foreign to black churches. Most black Christians today feel that it is utterly appropriate to use the church for political purposes: 92 percent of African American clergy surveyed nationally support the idea of churches expressing their opinions on social and political questions, 91 percent of black laity believe it is appropriate for clergy to participate in civil rights protests, and nearly a third of the black churches house civil rights organizations and/or voter registration programs. The African American church has historically been much more involved in political affairs than its white counterpart (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Wilmore 1972).

The Leadership Role of the African American Minister

One reason the African American church has been involved in political matters has been the fact that the black preacher was the main spokesperson for the African American community. During the period of slavery, the role of plantation preacher was often the only leadership role afforded southern blacks. Hence, it became a position of considerable prestige within the African American community. Following emancipation, this position continued to be the most important leadership role; the black preacher became the spokesperson for the community and the liaison between the dominant white class and the subordinate black one. Because whites often owned the buildings where blacks worshiped and could impose various sanctions on the black community, the black preacher had to be sensitive to the interests of both whites and blacks. This liaison role was certainly not just religious in character; it was often explicitly political.

The preacher's role as the central spokesperson for the community has largely survived to this day. The African American church has served since emancipation as the heart of that ethnic community. It has sponsored social and cultural affairs, established insurance programs for members who did not qualify for insurance under white-controlled corporations, started schools and colleges to educate young people, sponsored political debates held in church sanctuaries, initiated economic recovery and growth programs for African Americans, and generally served as a community center. In fact, Gunnar Myrdal called the African American church a "community center par excellence" (1944: 938). The preacher was the person who gave impetus to most of these programs and thus came to be highly esteemed in the community.

Because the preacher held a position that afforded leadership opportunities and offered status in the community, his was a highly coveted position. Hence, there have often been young would-be preachers waiting in the wings to have their chance to preach and start their own congregations. Perhaps this is another reason for the large

number of small black churches, each with its own semiautonomous preacher. The ministry was attractive to energetic African Americans because other professions were essentially closed to them. However, there has been a significant decline over the past fifty years in the ratio of blacks in the ministry (per 10,000 people in the population); increasing numbers of African Americans now enter law, medicine, politics, and other professions. The black minister no longer holds a monopoly on leadership and status as was once the case. Nonetheless, the preacher still holds a more substantial position within the African American community than does his or her white counterpart. It is noteworthy how many African American political figures have begun their careers as ministers. Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young are among the better-known politician-preachers on a long list of such leaders.

Partially because of the acceptance of clergy being involved in political affairs, ministers in the black community were able to gain ready acceptance as civil rights leaders. Martin Luther King Jr. provides a particularly good example. King's civil rights speeches were constructed and delivered in the style of African American preaching. His nonviolent resistance strategy of the 1950s and 1960s required resistance to injustice but forbade participants from using violence. He insisted that blacks would change social structures by appealing to the conscience of the nation and by economic boycotts. If a white police officer struck a black protestor, African Americans were to resist the temptation to strike back. They were instructed to turn the other cheek and to love their enemies. They were told to hate injustice but not the person who perpetuated it. They were taught that love would be the weapon by which opponents would be transformed (King 1958). The mixture of religious teaching and political action did not seem at all inconsistent to King's followers, for they were used to African American preachers also being political figures.

It is hard to imagine how the many rallies that King led could have remained nonviolent without the influence of religious teachings. Moreover, when people's homes and churches were being bombed and rallies were dispersed by police officers swinging billy clubs, religion served to shore up the courage and conviction of the people, for they were assured that God was on the side of justice and ultimate victory was certain. Some African American critics of nonviolence felt that King's religion was another form of opiate and that blacks should fight back. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s gained much of its impetus from a black Baptist preacher—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Clearly, the role of the minister has been a central one within the African American community.

© Bob Adelman/Magnum photo.

Dr. Martin Luther King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, lead a civil rights march in Alabama. Black clergy have considerable social status and are often looked to for leadership on political and social justice issues within the larger community. This is another way in which a religious group—if it is an open system—can have "output" on the larger society.

The role of the pastor was not the only leadership role that the black church has afforded. In a society where African Americans have often held menial and low-status jobs, the roles of elder, deacon, Sunday school superintendent, or choir leader have provided leadership opportunities and respected positions in the community. Often

these positions have been given exalted and lengthy titles. Such roles in exclusively black denominations enhance the self-esteem of individuals who have rather humble standing in the larger society (Baer 1984).

New Religious Movements in the African American Community

African American religion in the United States has also included many black sects and NRMs. There are a great variety of them, each emerging out of the common black experience of subjugation, but each offering its own unique characteristics (Washington 1964, 1972; Wilmore 1972; Lincoln 1994; Fauset 1944). Two of the best-known African American NRMs were Father Divine's Peace Mission and the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims). The Father Divine movement started in 1932 when a man by the name of George Baker opened a mission in Harlem. He took the name of Major J. Devine and quickly gained notoriety by distributing alms among poor blacks. He taught that God is everywhere, everything, and everyone, and eventually his followers came to believe that Devine was God incarnate. Baker then came to be known as Father Divine. Under his direction, the mission developed into a communal living settlement and maintained extremely high standards of cleanliness and of morality. Although the group was highly ascetic in character, the emphasis was not otherworldly. It was directed toward changing the socioeconomic system. The strategy of change focused primarily on benevolence for the poor rather than radical political changes. Because of its moderate stand, it did not incur the opposition of powerful conventional organizations. The movement spread across the country and was one of the larger African American NRMs in the United States.

The Lost/Found Nation of Islam was more radical in its outlook and has had considerable influence in many of America's prisons—where much of the proselytization took place. The movement started in the summer of 1930 when an Arab peddler, known as Wali D. Fard, came to the ghetto of Detroit. He sold silks and other materials and preached that black people in Africa and the Middle East were Islamic, not Christian. Christianity was depicted as the religion of the white people with a white God and a white savior. Being a Christian was equated with worshiping white people and was described as the white society's way of duping blacks into subordinate roles.

Fard insisted that whites are incapable of telling the truth, and he sought to tell the real story of black civilization in Asia and Africa. He told fantastic stories about black culture on other continents. All African Americans were viewed as Muslims in their origins and were referred to as the "Lost Tribe of Shebazz." Many African Americans were delighted with this stranger's stories of sophisticated and advanced black culture and his insistence on black superiority. It provided a basis for a sense of dignity and pride, which was often denied to poor ghetto blacks. Furthermore, the preacher's claim of Arab heritage lent credibility to his claims of first-hand knowledge of Africa and Arabia.

Fard developed a substantial following—estimated at 8,000 adherents. One of his devotees was a dynamic African American whom Fard renamed Elijah Muhammad. (Black Muslims refused to accept the names they received from slavery and were given a new name when they joined the Islamic temple.) When Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad was named Minister of Islam. One of Muhammad's main disciples, in time, was Malcolm X.

The Black Muslims originally insisted that only black people could join. This political-religious group experienced its heyday in the 1960s. Malcolm X became the primary spokesperson and gained national attention as a militant civil rights leader, being among the first to stress "black pride" and "black is beautiful" as central themes. Propelled by his forceful and articulate speeches, the Black Muslim movement grew rapidly. Attention was also focused on the movement when such notable sports personalities as Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar converted to the Nation of Islam.

The Black Muslims have been a religious group that is as thoroughly political as it is religious. For them, the distinction between politics and religion is meaningless. They explicitly reject any otherworldly views, so the socioeconomic-political structures of this world are of central importance to their view of "salvation." In fact, the ultimate goal of the original "Nation of Islam" was an autonomous and separate black nation in the United States. (Whites, they believed, belong in Europe.) The movement advocated a program of social, economic, and political segregation of blacks from whites. Because the "original man" was declared by Allah to be black, whiteness meant a lack of purity and truth. In short, whiteness was a sign of evil.

The larger Islamic world did not recognize the legitimacy of the original Black Muslim theology. In terms of official Islamic orthodoxy, the teachings of the Lost Nation of Islam were heretical. In short, the Lost Nation of Islam was a folk religion (see chapter 4), which had grown out of the experience of black America (Washington 1972). However, to call such a movement a folk religion is not to denigrate its importance as a religious movement. Scholar Eric Lincoln has described the Black Muslims as one of the most important religious developments in twentieth-century America. Because of the ascetic teachings, the emphasis on industry and hard work, and the extreme sacrifice and devotion to the cause, the Lost/Found Nation mobilized a significant amount of financial and personal resources on its behalf. Moreover, because of high levels of internal discipline, Muslim ministers have also been able to deliver a significant block of votes to politicians. By acting as a unified front, they were able to make their presence felt in the larger society (Lincoln 1994).

Malcolm X formally broke with Muhammad in 1964 after a trip to Mecca. On that trip he learned that the teachings of the Black Muslims were quite different from Orthodox Islam. He established the Muslim Mosque, Inc., that same year, but was assassinated in 1965. Before he died he repudiated the views of whites as intrinsically evil and introduced a movement toward a more orthodox Islamic faith. When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, Warith Deen Muhammad became the new leader of the Nation of Islam. He has modified doctrine and has changed the name of the group twice; it is now known as the American Muslim Mission. This mission is recognized in the Islamic world as a branch of orthodox Sunni Islam and has a North American membership estimated at 100,000. A splinter group continues to call itself the Nation of Islam and is led by Minister Louis Farrakhan, having a following of somewhere between 20,000 and 70,000. Farrahkan continues the black separatist teachings of Wali Fard and Elijah Muhammad (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Lincoln 1994).

Of course there are other forms of African American religiosity as well. Some of the earliest Muslims were brought over as slaves and worked hard to preserve their faith. Only remnants of those early carriers of Islam remain (Austin 1997), but more recent Islamic adherents have immigrated to the United States in the past half-century and a number of them are African in their heritage. Other African Americans have been part of the Voodoo tradition brought over from the Caribbean (Pinn 1998).

In earlier chapters, we discussed the fact that sectarian movements are more common among socially and economically disfranchised groups. Because blacks in this country are disproportionately represented in this category, it is not surprising that African American religion is characterized by a large number of sectarian movements. Movements like the Black Muslims and the Father Divine Mission actually comprise a relatively small percentage of the religiously-affiliated African Americans in this country, but they express an alternative mode of coping with the experience of being a subjugated minority.

African American Christianity: Present Themes and Future Trends

James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore are two of the outstanding black theologians of our day, and they both stress the eschatological theme in Christianity and de-emphasize the otherworldly one. Cone

CRITICAL THINKING

Do you think that the black intelligentsia will ultimately have much influence on local black churches? Why or why not?

and Wilmore are among the best known of a core of black theologians who have been articulating a "liberation theology," an emphasis on social and economic liberation at some future time in history. Otherworldliness is viewed by Cone, especially, as an opiate to black people. The true worldview of Christianity, according to these theologians, is eschatological. In fact, a Christianity that is not supportive of black power is viewed as no Christianity at all. Liberation theologians insist that because Jesus advocated for the poor and the oppressed, so also must all true Christians. This has also led black theologians to seek common voice with peoples who are oppressed in other parts of the world. This sort of unified and liberation-oriented Christianity would certainly incline believers toward militancy rather than passivity. It is noteworthy that Cone finds a rejection of otherworldliness and an endorsement of eschatology (millenarism) to be a first step in making the black church an effective tool of social and political change.

African American religion includes a wide diversity of styles and emphases. However, religion in the black community is more highly emotional than is most European-American religiosity, it places a heavy emphasis on freedom and equality (either in the next world or at a future time in history), and it is characterized by a distinctive rhythm in singing, preaching, and congregational responses. Some of the distinctiveness of African American religion is probably due to survivals from African religion. Much of it is also due to white racism and to the distinctive place that African Americans have held in the stratification system of North America (Baer 1984).

Even a brief look at the African American church is enough to illustrate the fact that the religion of any group is affected by the socioeconomic status of its members. Furthermore, the outlook the religion fosters may motivate people to seek change, or it may enhance acquiescence. If African American theologians who teach at major seminaries—scholars like Cone and Wilmore—are any indication of what the future will be, black ministers are likely to continue to be more politically involved than their European-American counterparts. Moreover, if these theologians do set a course for the black church (and that is a big "if"), then the black church is likely to be increasingly an inspiration to social and economic militancy rather than an opiate. However, one empirical study indicates that while many African American pastors are interested in instilling ethnic pride and identity, the majority are not actively asserting liberation theology, as such, in their preaching (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

SUMMARY

In providing meaning in life, theology must address the real issues that face people. Because the problems of meaning in people's lives are different for the affluent and the disfranchised, it is not surprising that theodicies are different. The theodicy of privilege tends to justify one's good fortune, whereas theodicies of despair tend to provide certain psychological compensations for and a sense of victory over one's adversities. Even the basic values and sense of morality tend to be different. Those in occupations where obeying rules is fundamental to success are more comfortable with religious systems that are precise and absolute about moral expectations. Those who are in fields where creativity and divergent thinking are the keys to occupational success are more comfortable with relativity, ambiguity, and open-endedness in systems of meaning.

Religions of the disfranchised can either cause passivity and inaction in the face of social injustice, or they can inspire people to work for change. Theologies that are either otherworldly or apocalyptic (premillennial) tend to cause

passivity, whereas postmillennial theologies tend to inspire activism.

African American religion provides an interesting example. Slave Christianity often inspired change and was used to transmit coded messages for escape, despite the efforts of slave owners to control slaves with religion. Further, the black church has often provided roles and leadership opportunities that enhanced self-esteem. African American pastors often became the central leaders in civil rights struggles and were the spokespersons for the African American community in the political arena. This opportunity for leadership by the black pastor made the role so attractive that a number of aspiring charismatic blacks started their own sects and NRMs as channels to gain prestige and power within their own community.

Clearly, religion is correlated to socioeconomic status, and theology often serves as an ideology that is appropriate to one's economic circumstances.