

or services in Vietnamese on the West Coast, featuring Hispanic and Vietnamese priests, respectively.

Many once flourishing immigrant churches, however, have disappeared. Throughout American history, as immigrant groups become more settled and assimilated, their churches tend to disappear. Consider America's largest immigrant group—the Germans. Some came to America in colonial times, but the largest wave arrived in the first half of the nineteenth century and settled mostly in the upper Midwest. They were a varied group—they thought of themselves as Prussians and Bavarians (Germany was not unified until 1871), and they were Catholic and Lutheran and Amish and Mennonite. But for all of them there were immigrant churches where German was spoken and where German culture was central to daily life. In Milwaukee and Chicago, there were German counterparts to the Polish Catholic Church. The Germans practically dominated American Lutheranism.

Where is it all now? Besides a few Amish or Mennonite settlements, most of the edifice of the German church is gone, and so are the Swedish-, Polish-, and Italian-speaking churches. The process might take three or four generations. It probably requires a significant decline in immigration, so that those uncomfortable in the host American culture are not replenished with newcomers.

Undoubtedly, the most important—and enduringly segregated—churches in the United States are the historically black churches. About 60 percent of all African Americans (more than 80 percent of African American church members) belong to traditionally black denominations, and additional African Americans belong to denominations that are integrated but attend almost completely segregated churches (Greeley and Hout 2006). Until fairly recently (and in many churches, even now), African Americans have not been welcome in most white churches in either the North or South, and certainly not as equals.

Most black churches were established by free blacks—both in the North before the Civil War and most importantly after the Civil War. Black churches are generally religiously conservative, but because they represent a severely exploited and repressed minority, they also have emphasized a kind of **liberation theology**, a theology that emphasizes Christ's focus on helping the poor and down-trodden. For black churches this is particularly reflected in the biblical story of the Exodus—the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. “Let my people go” is a favorite theme of sermons and prayers.

The importance of the black church became very clear during the civil rights struggle of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The movement leaders were mostly ministers from black churches, especially in the South. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was the son of the pastor of the largest and most affluent black church in Atlanta.

This gave King the backing he needed so that he could dedicate himself to the movement. No other institution in the South could provide financial support, space for meetings, and community-supported professionals like the ministers who were not so dependent for their livelihood on the white power structure. The churches also provided sanctuary for activists—although that sanctuary was sometimes bombed or attacked. The church was also the source of the gospel songs and the liberation message that buoyed the spirits of the activists. Almost all observers agree that without the black church the civil rights movement could not have developed as quickly and with as much strength as it did.

Social Class and Religious Preferences

14.2.2 Discuss the relationship between class stratification and religious choice.

Probably the most famous sociological statement about religion was penned by Karl Marx ([1844] 2001), who wrote relatively little more about religion but once declared that religion was the “opiate of the masses.” Marx was provocatively linking religion to inequality and human suffering in a way that was convincing for many observers. As he saw it, religion was an illusion and a distraction that both dulled the pain of economically exploited people and offered a false substitute for the politics of class struggle necessary for their liberation. Religion, as he famously declared, was the “opiate of the masses.”

If Marx is right, religion should appeal most to the poorest members of society—and perhaps to the rich and powerful who exploit the poor and who profit the most from their piety. The real picture, however, is much more complicated.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) recently undertook a global investigation of Marx's thesis, based on surveys they conducted around the world. They conclude that growing up in societies that provide less personal security (physical, financial) is in fact more likely to lead people to find security through religion and prayer than is growing up in societies that provide a sense of security to more people. Those individuals who live in poverty are generally the most insecure of all. A sick child can mean the inability to go to work and a spiral into the loss of housing and other necessities. Notice, however, that Norris and Inglehart do not simply equate “security” with current or personal poverty. People who grow up insecure but manage to prosper may still feel very insecure. Most importantly, people who do relatively well in societies that are insecure still are influenced by the collective attitudes toward religion and therefore share the **religiosity**—that is, the importance of religion in one's life—of their mostly insecure compatriots.