

The poor, then, are more likely to be religious and to rely on religious institutions. In some cases their dependence on these institutions is such that they call on their religious leaders to help them deal with the real world, even in rebellious ways. As one sociologist argues, “[religion] can serve as an apology and legitimation of an unjust status quo, on the one hand, yet also as a source of resistance and protest” (Nepstad 1995:107). Two of the most-cited examples of this are the aforementioned historically black churches (and many supportive white churches, especially in the North) in the civil rights movement, and the role of many local Catholic churches in the revolutions by the poor in Latin America. The latter is often discussed under the rubric of liberation theology.

Perhaps the most striking relationship between stratification and religious choice, however, can be seen in the way that the Hindu caste system has affected the birth and growth of various religions on the Indian subcontinent. Among Hindus, the caste system provides a relatively rigid and religiously sustained ordering of people into a social hierarchy. In Hindu doctrine, people are born into different castes, which have different functions in the society. The system has sometimes been called Brahmanism because the Brahmin (or priestly) caste is at the top of this pyramid. At the bottom are the enormous number of untouchables or dalits, with other castes ranged in between. One cannot escape the social standing of one’s caste in this lifetime. Where one is born is supposed to be ordained by one’s behavior in one’s previous life. Good behavior mostly consists of submitting to the status and conditions into which you were born.

Weber called this system one of the most logically consistent theodicies ever invented. A theodicy is an explanation of why bad things happen to good people. To oversimplify, in Hinduism bad things happen to you because of what you did in a previous life, not because of what you do in this life. Being good now gets you a better situation in your next life. It is a potent means of social control—probably much better than the Christian notion that God “has his reasons” for doing bad things to good people.

Not everyone is willing to accept the strictures of caste. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of so many different religions in India. Although he accepted reincarnation, the Buddha (an Indian) was strongly opposed to caste, saying that “Birth does not make one a priest or an outcaste. Behavior makes one either a priest or an outcaste.” Sikhism was partly founded in rejection of caste. Although Baha’i was developed in Persia, the largest Baha’i community in the world—2.2 million—is in India. There are an estimated 2.4 million Christians in India. All of these religions were and are particularly attractive to members of lower castes and the untouchables who sought to escape their karmic fate. For example, two-thirds

of Indian Christians come from the untouchables (scheduled groups) or lower castes.

Particularly interesting is the attractiveness of Islam to the same constituencies. Islam came to India as the religion of Mughal conquerors from the sixteenth century onward, so there were other reasons for conversion if one was ambitious. But Islam also became a major way out of the caste system for many Indians and continued as an alternative for a very long time. Ironically, some scholars describe a “caste” system among Indian Muslims which divides the upper-caste Ashraf, supposedly descended from the invading Arab and Persian rulers, from the lower-caste Ajlaf, who were Indian converts. Status advantages are not easy to erase.

What about in the contemporary United States? How are class and social status related to religion? Because they come from such different backgrounds—educationally, geographically, and in other important characteristics—different denominations in the United States contain surprisingly different kinds of people. Figure 14.2 shows, for example, that Jews, Hindus, and Episcopalians in America are about three times as likely to be college graduates as Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Baptists. Fewer than one in five Baptists earns more than \$75,000 per year, while more than half of Episcopalians make that much (Leonhardt 2011).

In some ways Figure 14.2 underrepresents the background differences among denominations. Methodist college graduates are much more likely than Baptist college graduates to be the children of college graduates. The children of first-generation collegians may be more comfortable in an urban, middle-class society than their parents and may find the appeal of conservative Christianity fading. Or perhaps it will be their grandchildren? On the other hand, they may remain most comfortable in the church in which they were raised. That church itself, however, might subtly or markedly compromise its points of difference with mainline Protestantism as its members become more like their neighbors in their lifestyles and experiences. For conservative Christians this is a time of change, as the grandchildren of the Bible Belt in the deep South accommodate the urban world of modern America.

Conversion

14.2.3 Explain who converts to what denomination or religion, and why.

Even if most do, not everyone remains in the religion they were born into. So who converts to what, and why? Leaving aside moves to giving up religion altogether (discussed in a later section), we know that in the United States people convert from one denomination or religion to another for a variety of reasons.