

**YINGER, J(OHN) MILTON (1916-)** The son of a minister and a writer, Yinger received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1942 and is now Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Oberlin College. President, American Sociological Association, 1976-1977.

Yinger has written extensively on religion, race and ethnic relations, education, social theory, and the sociology of contracultures, with some of his works being translated into Italian, French, Spanish, Oriya, and Portuguese. It was he who first coined the idea of a counterculture (although he used the term *contraculture*) in 1960. The concept has a good deal of relevance for the study of sects and new religious movements. Yinger's widely used text of the 1950s, *Religion, Society, and the Individual* (Macmillan 1957), was significantly overhauled into *The Scientific Study of Religion* (Macmillan 1970). Although intended as a textbook, the latter was also a classic summary of the field of sociology of religion at the time, and offered several innovative approaches to concepts and theories. Yinger is perhaps best known among religious scholars for his functional definition of religion and his contribution to the study of "invisible religion," for his sect-church model, and for his field theory of religion.

**Definition of Religion and Invisible Religions**  
Milton Yinger was among the first to set forth an inclusive "functional definition" of religion. He suggests that religion be defined not in terms of what it

essentially is but on what it *does*. He proposes that a social phenomenon be identified as religious if it fulfills the manifest function of religion: the provision of purpose in life and meaning in the face of death, suffering, evil, and injustice. Religion helps individuals cope by providing a strategy to overcome despair, hopelessness, and futility.

Using this type of definition, a wide range of phenomena become relevant as forms of religion. Yinger insists that nontheistic and even nonsupernatural systems of belief and practice can be appropriate foci for the student of religion. Religion is manifest wherever one sees a closing of the gap between fact and hope, or a leap of faith that allows a person to believe that suffering and evil will someday be defeated. A secular faith that science and technology will ultimately solve all our problems or a deep faith in the ultimate value of the nation or of capitalism becomes religious in nature. The functional definition of religion asks what *new forms* religion is taking rather than *whether* people are religious.

Yinger's definition of religion, then, is as follows:

Where one finds awareness of and interest in the continuing, recurrent, *permanent* problems of human existence—the human condition itself, as contrasted with specific problems; where one finds rites and shared beliefs relevant to that awareness, which define the strategy of an ultimate victory; and where one has groups organized

to heighten that awareness and to teach and maintain those rites and beliefs—there one has religion. (1970:33)

Yinger suggested that in rapidly changing societies, religion itself may be changing and may “look different.” New forms of religion may be emerging—forms that are not measured by traditional questions. Rather than starting with traditional concepts of religiosity and trying to assess its effect on everyday life, functional definitions begin with the consequential dimension.

Using such a functional definition of religion, Yinger operationalizes his research in a very different way. Rather than asking about one’s *religion* (a term that brings to mind traditional concepts of ritual, prayer, and orthodoxy for most people), Yinger tries to elicit the level of agreement—on a five-point, strongly agree to strongly disagree scale—with various statements aimed at identifying one’s “ultimate concern”:

- Suffering, injustice, and finally death are the lot of humanity; but they need not be negative experiences; their significance and effects can be shaped by our beliefs.
- Somehow, I cannot get very interested in the talk about “the basic human condition” and “humanity’s ultimate problems.”
- A person’s most difficult and destructive experiences are often the source of increased understanding and powers of endurance.
- Despite the often chaotic conditions of human life, I believe that there is an order and pattern to existence that someday we will come to understand.

Depending on how respondents answer these questions, Yinger feels one has an indication of the basic religiosity of the individual. He then seeks to determine what it is that serves as an ultimate concern for those religious persons by asking an open-ended question:

In your most reflective moments, when you are thinking beyond the immediate issues of the day—however important—beyond headlines, beyond the temporary, what do you consider the most important issue humanity has to face? Or, to put the question another way, what do you see as the basic, permanent question for humankind? (1969:93)

Because Yinger also believes that religion is essentially a social phenomenon that takes on its most sig-

nificant aspects in social contexts, he also seeks to discover in what groups the individual may be participating that support the emphasis on this ultimate concern and that develop a strategy to address it. His follow-up question is this:

Are you a participant or member of some group, whether large or small, for which the “basic, permanent question” and the beliefs connected with it are the focus of attention and the most important reasons for its existence? If so, please characterize the group briefly. (1969:93)

Yinger uses an inductive method, seeking to discover what concerns people ultimately and what provides people with a sense of meaning and hope. This approach is not very conducive to quantitative research and analysis, but his model has generated a good deal of work on “invisible religion” in a society; it is also very compatible with etic approaches to the study of religion in society.

**Yinger’s Church-Sect Model** Yinger also developed a church-sect model that tried to avoid cumbersome typologies (with their odd combinations of both social and theological variables). He opted instead for a model emphasizing three variables, and he stressed the dynamic evolution of groups over time rather than a stable typology. His three variables are as follows:

1. The degree to which the membership policy of the group is exclusive and selective or open and inclusive.
2. The extent to which the group accepts or rejects the secular values and structures of society.
3. The extent to which, as an organization, the group integrates a number of local units into one national structure, develops professional staffs, and creates a bureaucracy. (1970:257)

Yinger acknowledged that the first two variables are closely correlated: groups rejecting secular values are likely to be exclusive and selective in their membership policies. He also pointed out that institutionalization may occur independently from membership policy and acceptance of secular values.

Using membership policy and attitude toward societal values as one axis of variation and the extent of institutionalization as the other, Yinger developed a model that illuminates a multilinear evolution of groups from sectlike to churchlike. This model invited analysis of the external social pressures and internal characteristics that cause groups to change along each of these

Inclusiveness of the religious structures  
Extent of alienation from societal values

	<b>High</b>		<b>Low</b>		
Extent of organization, complexity, and distinctiveness of the religious structures.*	<b>High</b>	Institutional ecclesia	Institutional denomination	rare	null
		Diffused ecclesia	Diffused denomination	Established sect	null
		rare	rare	Established lay sect	Sect movement
	<b>Low</b>	null	null	null	Charismatic sect

\*Measurement of degree of complexity of religious structures:

	Are religious units integrated?	Are there religious professionals?	Is there a bureaucratic structure?
4. Most complex	yes	yes	yes
3.	yes	yes	no
2.	yes	no	no
1. Least complex	no	no	no

Figure Y.1. Yinger's Schema: Types of Religious Organizations

two axes. It also allows recognition that a group may stabilize at a particular position or type along the way because of internal or external factors. For example, sects whose primary concern is social evils and injustices are more likely to become established sects and may never become ecclesiastical or denominational bodies. Economic recessions also may slow a group's assimilation to the values of the larger society. His model (Figure Y.1) makes social characteristics the defining factors; theological orientations become variables that

may influence the rate or the direction of the group's evolution.

**A Field Theory of Religion** In *The Scientific Study of Religion*, Yinger made an attempt to synthesize insights of conflict, functional, and structural-functional theories into a "field theory" of religion. Objecting to the tautology of some functional reasoning and to the oft-made assumption by functionalists of "system normalcy," Yinger tried to depict systems *simultaneously*

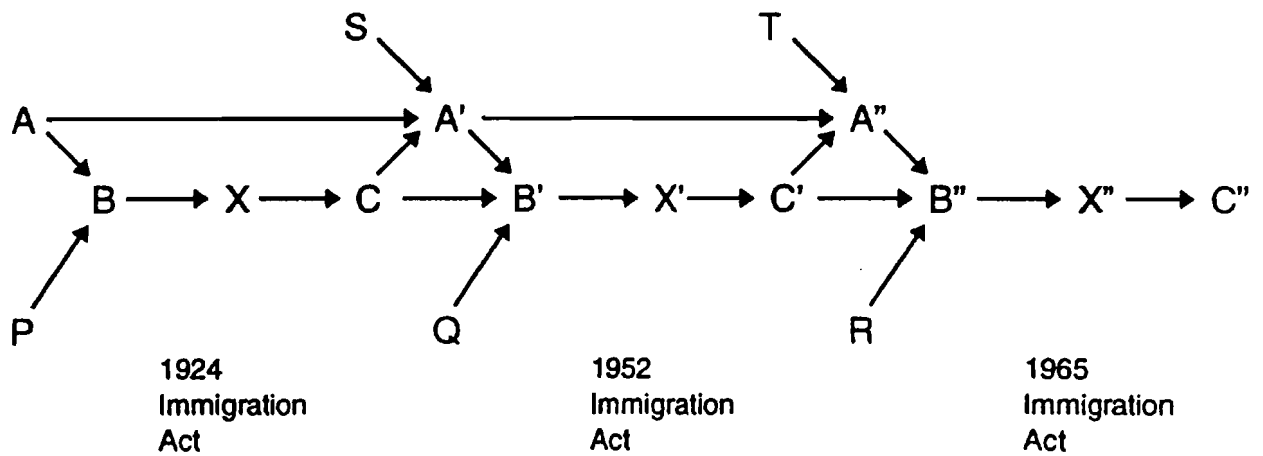


Figure Y.2. Yinger's Field Theory

as integrated and coercive, as evolutionary (changing) and relatively stable, as protecting the vested interests of those with power and meeting needs of individuals and of the larger system.

The first problem of functional models that had to be addressed was the idea of a feedback loop, because consequences clearly cannot go back in time to influence their antecedents. His model is therefore diachronic, indicating ongoing change of individuals and of systems. In his model (see Figure Y.2), structural forces (A) influence individual or "character" factors (B), which result in some specified action, policy, or law (X). For example, church leaders vote on immigration law based on structural needs and pressures (e.g., competent leadership) and on personal attitudes and biases. That action in turn has consequences, and the consequences influence both individuals and the system. But because both the individual and the system have changed, they become  $A_1$  and  $B_1$ . The modified society with different structural forces ( $A_1$ ) influences individuals ( $B_1$ ) whose values and attitudes may have changed over time. These changed individuals—perhaps decades later—pass new immigration laws, which become  $X_1$ , and those laws influence individuals and the social system, becoming  $A_2$  and  $B_2$ . This conceptualization avoids the confusing idea in functional feedback models that consequences influence their causes, and also moves beyond the ahistoricism of classical functional models.

The model is also an open field model in recognizing that an outside force—a process external to the system (P, Q, R, S, T)—may have an effect on the structure and on individual character within the system. No subsystem or institution is autonomous—as the functionalist feedback loop implies. Examples of outside influences on immigration policy might include a war, changes in

birthrates within the country resulting in a need for more workers, conflicts or alliances of ethnic groups within the country, changes in educational level of the public, and globalization of technology and of the economy. These factors originate outside the normal loop of action regarding immigration law but may enter the field of action at some point. Yinger suggests that religion must be seen as a dynamic, changing process through time (as conflict theorists point out) but as having consequences that may satisfy needs within the system (as functionalists insist).

Yinger's field theory remains one of the more interesting efforts to synthesize elements of functional and conflict analysis.

See also Church-Sect Theory, Definition of Religion, Ethnicity, Functionalism, Invisible Religion, Racism, Paul Tillich

—Keith A. Roberts

#### REFERENCES

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**YOGA** Beliefs and practices originating in Indian religion that operate on different levels. An ancient Sanskrit text called *Yoga Sutra* is attributed to Patanjali