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Explanation in Yinger's sociology of religion

I first came to Professor Yinger's work as an undergraduate in a seminar in the sociology of religion with Sam Blizzard. I had begun to wrestle with the issue of the impact of religion in human affairs. While I doubted that religion had much impact, I was heading for the ministry and all around me people were claiming great things for religion. In addition, Lenski's *Religious Factor* had just been published and was brandished against my doubts by fellow seminarians. I decided to do a thorough review of the evidence indicating that religion has an observable and appreciable impact on human behavior and social processes. Hoping for insight, I turned to Yinger.

I found Yinger clear in his presentation, interestingly readable, and refreshingly free of the jargon and uninterpretably convoluted prose of some other authors we know. To my delight, I discovered that Yinger addressed my very question in *Religion in the Struggle for Power* (1946). The central concern of that work is an assessment of the relative impact of religion on behavior compared with other behavior-shaping organizations, institutions, and belief systems. That book remains one of the clearest and most accurate descriptions of the limits and possibilities for the influence of a religious meaning system or organization. *Religion, Society and the Individual* (1957) contains two chapters on "Religion and Social Change," including one treating religion as cause. Unfortunately, the complete lack of hard data indicating a causal role for religion left my question unresolved After reading *Sociology Looks at Religion* (1963b), I was at least open to the possibility that within the blur of "dynamic interaction" and interdependence, some religious influence might be isolated, but I was still looking for data.

I left reading Yinger at that time with two lingering questions. One took the form of a growing dissatisfaction with the way religion has been treated by sociology and the behavioral sciences The other was an interest in different approaches to explanation In this review of Yinger's sociology of religion, I shall touch on both of these issues I shall first examine Yinger's use of the concept religion. How does he define religion? How is religion measured? In other words, when Yinger uses religion as *explanans* or *explanandum*, what is it? Second, what modes of explanation does Yinger employ? What are the goals of explanation in his work?

Yinger defines religion quite consistently throughout the three decades of his

publication history. In *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, he defines religion as ". . . the attempt to bring the relative, the temporary, the disappointing, the painful things in life into relation with that what is conceived to be permanent, absolute, and cosmically optimistic" (1946: 5). Yinger consistently uses a *functional* definition. In *Religion, Society and the Individual*, religion is defined "as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with these ultimate problems of human life" (1957: 9). Yinger is least clear about his definition of religion in *Sociology Looks at Religion*. While a great deal of energy and ink is often spent defining religion, few sociologists then go on to take their definitions seriously. Once religion is defined, they usually begin looking at churches (presumably religious organizations) and church-oriented behavior. In the vast bulk of his work, Yinger follows this practice.

Sociologists of religion are often oblivious to the fact that the concepts they use are dominated by labels derived from and appropriate to primarily western religious institutions and experiences. The persistence of church-sect terminology is an excellent case in point. Yinger begins his work with a uni-dimensional church-sect framework. It is his strongest and clearest presentation on the organizational dilemma faced by a religious (or any other) group which seeks to influence the behavior of other groups and individuals.

In later publications Yinger adds many more dimensions to the discussion of the church-sect dichotomy. However, all of the various dimensions usually discussed under the church-sect rubric (1) are analytically distinct, (2) may be found to characterize conditions, tendencies, and dilemmas in many other organizations, and (3) can be found to combine themselves in so wide a variety of ways that no utility is served by grouping them under the rubric church-sect. In this case the labels once given to a historically limited phenomenon have come to be used as though they were analytical concepts. The continued use of the label prevents the development of more purely analytical ways of dealing with the several dimensions of organized religious life which could then be usefully applied to the analysis of analytically similar organizational situations. Many of the key concepts in the sociology of religion suffer from being in fact labels raised to the level of concepts: for example, church/sect, Protestant/Catholic, secularization, cargo cults, etc. By using labels instead of developing analytical concepts, sociologists of religion make it difficult for other sociologists to use their findings and gain insight from their research. Moreover, the use of labels only permits classification while the use of analytical concepts permits the development of theory

The one departure from the practice of defining religion one way and using churches and church behavior as *explanans* and *explanandum* is found in Yinger's attempt to develop an operational definition of religion. He, as would seem so obvious a thing to do with functional definitions, turns the functional definition back to front and says where one finds persons and groups aware of and struggling with the "continuing, recurrent, *permanent* problems of human existence. . .; 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). I consider this attempt at an operational definition of religion and its first use in an

attempt to locate religion empirically to be one of Yinger's most important contributions to the sociology of religion.

If taken seriously, Yinger's definition would bring a radically new approach to the study of religion. Individual religion almost needs to be diagnosed. The relation of individual religious responses to the persistent problems of life and the ways that individuals maintain a sense of cosmic optimism in the face of these permanent problems to institutionalized religion is problematic and variable. Just because a person is a Lutheran does not mean that that person's religion, according to Yinger's definition, is also Lutheran or Christian. Indeed, I doubt that denominational labels would be of much use. Yinger's definition enables the sociology of religion to transcend the trap of everyday, common sense categories and labels. Analyzing the results of research grounded in this approach to the definition and study of religion will require the development of analytical categories rather than the continued use of the labels with which we are so familiar. It is heartening to note that data generated by research using this definition of religion are beginning to be published (Nelsen, *et al.,* 1976; Yinger, 1977a). Hopefully some courageous soul will soon put the questions developed by Yinger to tap the religious phenomenon at the individual level to persons other than college students.

Thus, aside from a proposed operational definition of religion, the subject of most of Yinger's sociology of religion is church-oriented behavior. Yinger emphasizes religious organizations in his earlier work while his later work focuses more on individual behavior. This focus on churches and church-oriented behavior is enriched by the use of a great deal of cross-cultural material.

What are the goals and modes of Yinger's explanations? As we shall see, Yinger has a very consistent set of behaviors in terms of the explanations he produces in his analyses of religious behavior and organization. His stated goals are more varied. In *Religion in the Struggle for Power,* Yinger sets as his goal the assessment of "...how much, in competition with other powers, is it [religion] able to control behavior in accordance with its own standards?" (1946: 15). The way Yinger develops the problem to be studied in this work suggests that a causal model is to be tested. Indeed, had there been practicable and suitable data available, path analysis, analysis of variance, multiple regression, or some other technique of estimating the relative impact of several variables might well have been used. But that is not Yinger's style. In *Sociology Looks at Religion,* the search for empirical support for specific relationships is reduced to looking at the blur of "dynamic interaction." By the time he reaches *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970), Yinger begins to specify some of these "dynamic interactions" by decomposing them into their constituent sub-processes (e.g., 1970: 455 and 96, where he sets out a model which he does not then use). In *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior* (1965), he states that the task of a behavioral science is "... the understanding of how particular individuals will behave in the social context" (1965: 281). Earlier in the same work Yinger asserts that "... the final concern for most of us [behavioral scientists] is not with the isolation of independent relationships but with the understanding and predicting of behavior" (1965: 7). In fact, Yinger seldom does any predicting. In *Sociology Looks at Religion,* there are some suggestions about vague trends in the future development of religious organizations and the shape of future systems of religious belief. He never attempts

to predict the behavior of individuals. It is almost as if Yinger, like many of us, once heard that prediction and control were the goals of science and dutifully repeats them here. I contend that these are the goals of technology rather than science (cf. Kaplan, 1964: 346-351). Yinger's behavior is rather more scientific.

Elsewhere, Yinger makes statements which are more congruent with his actual practice. "What we need are generic propositions, applicable to all religions, and specific propositions, applicable to religious systems under stated conditions" (1957: 21-22). According to Yinger, "The sociology of religion is nonvaluative, objective and abstract. It studies empirical phenomena to try to isolate generalizations concerning the interconnection of religious behavior with other social behavior" (1961: 135). Even though Yinger held out the goal of "understanding and predicting" in *Toward A Field Theory of Behavior*, the strongest claim he makes for "field theory" is that it ". . . is a parsimonious way of organizing much of what is known about behavior. . ." (1965: 47). Yinger does use his version of field theory as a loose organizing principle and as a device to look for otherwise overlooked approaches to some problems in sociology, but he is weak in the development of broadly integrating generalizations.

Yinger is at his best when developing explanations which would fall into Robert R. Brown's category of empirical generalization (Brown, 1963: 133-164). Few, if any, of his explanations could be called functional explanations (Brown, 1963: 109-132). This may surprise some, but in my review of Yinger's work I discovered that the explanations he generated, as opposed to those of others which he reports, are not functional explanations but are empirical generalizations. Although Yinger's work is largely couched in the language of functionalism, he usually purges that language of inordinate teleology or intentionality and arrives at an empirical generalization (for a particularly apt example, see 1970: 123-125). Yinger proceeds to explanation by first trying to get the picture clear (1963b: 85), by trying to see in as much detail as possible the relationships that occur. Once this is done and some initial statements have been made about the relationships observed, Yinger usually moves to either a typological formulation or a statement of a generalization. His treatment of religious and secular alternatives to dealing with inequality is an excellent case in point (1963b: 55ff). The bulk of Yinger's work can be seen as an attempt to move from basic observation to empirical generalization, essentially using what Kaplan calls the pattern model of explanation as opposed to the deductive model (Kaplan, 1964: 327ff).

When I finished reading Yinger's work in the sociology of religion, I was left with a yearning for some integrating principles interrelating the empirical generalizations and a sinking feeling that most of the typologies are too familiar on the one hand and a bit facile on the other. But is this not expecting too much? Yinger is a grand man of the "lower middle range" synthesis. He does that well, some of it very well. Unfortunately, statements of the "middle range" suffer most because of their very position—too far from the data for some, insufficiently general for others. The typologies are generally weak. But that is the case with most typological methodology in the social sciences. We all hunger for classification systems for social organization, behavior, and social processes which are as soundly based and as useful as the periodic table or as biological classifications of both life forms and fundamental-life processes. Social science has not advanced that far. Most of

Yinger's typologies, like most of those of all social science at this point, are rather more like those of the alchemist. But we are a youthful science.

On the other hand, so little is known at this point that it is very difficult to transcend the categories of everyday language. Indeed, it is so difficult that some make the use of such categories a virtue. I suppose that it may well be a virtue until a new language and perspective can be shown to be grounded in something more substantial than just the viewpoint of another group or person. The rush to theory has prevented the building of a sound basis in observation. Scientific explanations do proceed inductively. Social science is under pressure to produce instant knowledge that will sell anything from potato chips to God, prevent strikes, win wars, calm racial tensions, make money (or in these days of austerity, save money), eradicate poverty, usher in the just society—in short, to produce knowledge that will provide a secular salvation, the basis of an effective social technology. Such demands are just the sort that produce alchemy.

Yinger's greatest contribution has been his ability to see the usefully descriptive in many different kinds of studies, from ethnographies to experimental social psychology. He is at his best when generating potential (i.e., testable) propositions of the "lower middle range." There is still the need for a more analytical organization of these propositions into perhaps a propositional inventory. Then, a more systematic program of research in the sociology of religion could be undertaken. At the moment, there are small scale empirical studies and many proposed grand theoretical propositions but no systematic relation between the two. Professor Yinger has done a useful service by beginning to bring together some of the descriptive material and by relating it to "lower middle range" propositions. These propositions now need to be restated using analytically useful concepts rather than labels, put in bold isolation as opposed to being buried as they now are, and then tested by both the collection of new data and the reorganization of old.

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