# Milton Yinger and the study of social movements

Milton Yinger's first and most provocative major work is *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, published in 1946. For many scholars this book and the contributions it made to "sect-church theory" have since been overshadowed by more elaborate formulations in later works, especially *Religion, Society, and the Individual* (1957), which was later extended and transformed into *The Scientific Study of Religion*, (1970). It is my contention, however, that scholars searching for analytic frameworks to illuminate the sectarian ferment and new religious tensions of the 1970s will find more potent and dynamic formulations in Professor Yinger's earliest work. I will also argue that Yinger's earlier categories are potentially applicable to all kinds of social movements and not merely religious collectivities. Some of this generality has been lost as Yinger allowed his concepts to become grist for the mills of formal typologies of religious structures, which grind slowly but grind exceedingly fine.

Yinger's original formulation centered on a poignant dilemma which forces itself upon any group which attempts to impose a norm on society and/or its own members. If the group demands too stringent an allegiance to its own ideals and requires extreme sacrifices, it will be "either persecuted or neglected." Yet, "on the other hand...if it does not make demands on behavior, in terms of its norms, it is also without sacrificing the goals for which the power was originally desired" (1946: 18).

There are two classical responses to this dilemma. Sectarians "prefer to maintain their ideal...in a small, intimate community, rather than have it sharply reduced in the competition with secular powers that it would face to a much larger degree if they tried to control the whole society" (1946: 220). Sects accept a position outside the dominant social structure and are thus "in a position to make a radical challenge, either directly (as in the case of sixteenth century Anabaptists) or implicitly (as in the case of medieval Monastics), to those aspects of society which contradict their ideal." In contrast the "church type" movement embodies an accommodative approach which permits the movement to gain "more formal influence than the sect" and establish "itself along side the ruling powers." But "the church no more escapes the dilemma than does the sect; it wins a place of greater importance in society, but only at the expense of compromise and the sacrifice of ability to challenge directly basic social patterns (slavery, inequality, war, etc.) which contradict its ideal" (1946: 220-221).

Although Yinger talks primarily about religious-theistic groups, the application of his concepts to non-theistic, "secular" social movements can be seen from the following passage from a recent history of the Antislavery movement:

> The Leaders most likely to bridle at "Garrisonianism" were the men who had taken primary responsibility in managing the postal and petition campaigns    conservative abolitionists ..
> felt strongly that abolition was progressing in a seriously flawed but basically healthy society.
> They pointed to the thousands of conventional northerners, suddenly sensitized to the evils of the
> "slave power," who were signing petitions, resisting Texas annexation, and supporting the fight
> against the gag rule  It would be a tactical disaster, they feared, to confuse abolitionism with
> causes like women's rights and nonresistance  The new antislavery constituency, just taking
> form, would certainly recoil at such heresies  To conservative abolitionists, moral suasion was

coming to mean arousing a mass of reachable Northerners, religious or not. In the meantime, Garrison and like-minded radicals had begun to espouse moral revolution on the totally opposite premise that the people's majoritarian values were themselves sources of chronical national disease By 1838, disagreements after strategy and tactics which were far too fundamental for compromise had surfaced in the American Anti-Slavery Society (Stewart, 1976)

Thus, John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Brewster Stanton were "churchly" anti-slavery leaders who saw power and mass support readily available to responsible leadership. William Lloyd Garrison was an abolitionist sectarian who welcomed the descent of "an avalanche of wrath, hurled from the Throne of God" upon sinful America and preached total moral reformation.

When this writer was a graduate student in the middle sixties, and also an antiwar activist demonstratively fasting for peace in Viet Nam (but cheating with nightly fig newtons), I was fascinated by *Religion in the Struggle for Power*. I was particularly intrigued by the possibility of an application to sixties' political groups. According to Yinger, when a group remains extremely strident and uncompromising, it alienates most people and exerts little influence. Thus, "peace" groups which chanted "Hey, hey, LBJ; how many babies did you burn today?" or "Ho, ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is gonna win!" may have exerted little actual influence by virtue of extreme sectarianism. Andrew Greeley and others have argued that the U.S. was forced out of Viet Nam in spite of rather than because of the efforts of "peaceniks," whose provocations generated reactive support for Johnson and Nixon.

On the other hand, as Jonathan Schell points out in *Time of Illusion,* radical antiwar activists directly influenced Nixon, who saw the antiwar movement undermining American "credibility," and whose efforts to suppress and discredit such movements contributed to the authoritarian patterns subsequently exposed in "Watergate." So extreme sectarian groups can exercise influence in unexpected ways.

However, Yinger's theory would also predict that if peace groups over-compromised, perhaps endorsing the quest for an "honorable" peace which the Johnson and Nixon administrations claimed to be engaged in, they would also have sacrificed influence. The trick is to find a point on the church/sect continuum which synthesizes sectarian and integrative elements and thus maximizes social influence, which is *curvilinearly* related to sectarian alienation. Such an optimal point may have been found by the short-lived but effective movement to nominate Eugene McCarthy rather than Lyndon Johnson for President in 1968. Accommodations were made, and Vermont primary campaign workers (often new left radicals) were enjoined to shave their beards and "stay neat and clean for Gene"; yet the anti-establishment quality of the movement was so clear that the movement was able to simultaneously maintain the allegiance of both committed antiwar radicals and persons who were not antiwar or leftist but were vaguely dissatisfied with LBJ or thought Gene McCarthy was Joe McCarthy.

The present tensions associated with controversial "new religions" afford an additional context for applying Yinger's categories and propositions. The persecution of movements stigmatized as "cults" and "pseudo-religions" has produced accommodative strategies on the part of vulnerable groups. Thus, today we see sectarian communal groups such as Rev. Moon's Unification Church or Hare

Krishna trying to establish better relations with parents of devotees to enhance their public image and undercut charges that they "brainwash" young people and "break up families." The Moonie campus front, CARP (College Association for Research on Principles) has been kicked off several campuses in the Northeast in part because they allegedly seduce students into dropping out of school and totally dedicating themselves to Moon. Moon subleaders now urge CARP members and Moonist students to remain in school. However, this avails them little because there is usually some "deprogrammed" ex-Moonist who loudly proclaims that the change has a merely "tactical" significance and that enslaving youth and seducing them from schools remains the "ultimate" goal. But *tactical measures have unanticipated consequences.* The Moon movement may be presently undergoing an institutionalization and accommodation process corresponding to Yinger's model.

Accommodation processes are also developing in other movements as a response to growing social hostility. According to one observer, the Nicheren Shoshu So Kaga K Kai have been strongly affected by the "deprogramming" controversy. "They've stopped doing street proselytizing, stopped wearing uniforms at mass gatherings, and have cancelled their annual convention. They're trying to 'move into society' and change it from within as opposed to standing outside and setting up an alien system. A few people have reported problems with non-members confusing them with 'Moonies.' Obviously, they're very upset by this" (personal communication from Jane H. Brandfons). One wonders, however, whether this accommodation will undermine the appeal of these movements by destroying their stance of alienation and prophetic challenge to the status quo. Harvey Cox has expressed anxiety over the possibility that harassment of new religions will not drive them out of existence, "but rather it could push them into premature accommodation, and we would lose the critical perspective that religion can bring to a culture that is in need of renewal" (Cox, 1977: A25). Thus, Yinger's model is clearly relevant to the visible evolution of today's "cults." Indeed, Yinger seems to have worked in the forties with ideas tailor-made for analyzing the religious tensions of the seventies.

In his later work Yinger is also concerned with a continuum of integrative vs. alienative orientations toward the dominant culture. He combines this continuum with continua of organizational dimensions to generate holistic types which purport to exhaustively typologize religious collectivities. Such holistic types sacrifice their generality as conceptualizations of the adaptive dimension of *all* social movements. But there is another problem with Yinger's work. Is the accommodativeness and compatibility of a social movement objective or subjective? *Is not alienation from the status quo partly in the eye of the beholder?* For example, might not the increasing persecution of the Hare Krishna cult be related to the decline of student radicalism and the New Left? As long as the New Left was around to take the flack, exotic non-political youth movements such as the Hare Krishna were perceived as relatively benign. In the early seventies a sociologist analyzing social movements and social change in America could write that "Krishna Consciousness offers for its membership the possibility of safe deviance " The Krishna cult was seen as providing "a relatively safe vehicle for the expression of deep estrangement from mainstream culture" (Howard, 1974 206-207). Today, however, the New Left is gone, and Hare Krishna leaders have been indicted for using "mind control" to imprison their membership

Apparently during the late sixties Americans became accustomed to watching "dangerous youth" becoming "the people our parents warned us against." Now that the campuses are quiescent, Americans are taking a harder look at "cults." Thus, even if the alienative or accommodative posture of a movement is "objective," the social reaction elicited by the movement is hardly under its own control and may depend upon the movement's relative hostility to the status quo as perceived by an audience which *makes an implicit comparison of the group with other protest movements*. Yinger's typology of church-like integrative vs. sectarian alienative orientations of movements is similar in some respects to Robert Merton's famous typology of deviance, which assumes that deviant orientations such as "rebellion" and "retreatism" are fixed properties constituted objectively, rather than the situated and negotiable perceptions of an audience.

Yinger's typology has been criticized for an exclusive or excessive concern with the management of a movement's relationship to its social environment. Indeed Yinger's original typology was univariate, and its generality and broad applicability to social movements is linked to its univariate quality. Sect, Established Sect, Universal Church, and Ecclesia are positions ranged on a single continuum, which really *embodies the adaptive dimension of all social movements*. But why is it necessary to convert these concepts into holistic typifications of a group's essential organizational and ideological pattern? What is important is not whether Reverend Moon's movement "is" a sect or a denomination in some holistic sense, but whether its response to a hostile social environment is shifting along a sect-church continuum.

Groups with varying organizational patterns may share sectarian or churchly responses to social pressures. Concepts which focus exclusively on the "external" or adaptive dimension of socioreligious movements can be quite useful. What is lost in one kind of generality (ability to typify a total religious pattern in holistic terms) is compensated by a gain in terms of another kind of generality: the same concepts may be employed to analyze the adaptive dimension of "religious" movements, "political" movements, feminist movements, etc. The potential generality of Professor Yinger's early categories has been diminished through their assimilation to the hoary tradition of "sect-church theory," conceived as a subarea of the sociology of religion. Yinger's ideas have not benefited from becoming grist for the slowly grinding mills of formal organizational typologies.

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