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## Milton Yinger's sociology of religion: On slaying the father and marrying the queen

According to the *Oedipus Rex* myth, that archetypal tale of incestuous relations and our unconscious inability to grasp the measure of our own antecedents, Oedipus slays his father the King and marries his mother Queen Jocasta. Perhaps everywhere, but especially in the intellectual realm where a false premium is placed on creativity, we tend to avoid both paying our debts and recognizing our potentially incestuous relationships with our mentors. While all of us in this symposium claim a heavy debt to Professor Yinger for his inspiration, or for his factual good sense, reservations and ambiguities appear. The reason for this is unavoidable, or so it seems to me, because in all good analysis, even in a bowdlerized Freudian one, we are trained as academics to latch on to the particular and to avoid the whole, the complex context of discussion. Nevertheless, let me emphasize at the outset the indebtedness of all of us to Milton Yinger as well as our strong praise for his work.

My colleagues in this symposium have all made cogent and important observations, some of which I would like myself to address if space would so permit. Rather, however, I shall try to avoid too much repetition and shall place my emphases on other matters in Yinger's work which I feel deserve our careful and considered attention.

Yinger has opened up for us some basic issues, in particular that the sociology of religion must be concerned with the philosophy of science, the history of religions and historiographic issues, and the problems of symbolic language. He has attempted to put down his fundamental theoretical point of view in his *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior* (1965). Although this book has nothing to say about the sociology of religion *per se*, it has *everything* to say about Yinger's theoretical presuppositions. And, in my estimation, Yinger has been quite consistent, amazingly so, perhaps even unwisely so, in following his theoretical program in most of his work and especially in the case of his sociology of religion. Thus, it seems to me the way to understand much of his sociology of religion is through this basic theoretical work where most of his essential concerns from the past to the present are articulated. The following comments are based on my understanding of this as well as Yinger's other works.

I will begin with a focus on Yinger's philosophy of science. In a day of wild subjectivism and open attack on rationalism, one may be praised for defending the scientific spirit. On the other hand, the thrust of Yinger's comments do not quite

square with his theory, and much of his commentary seems dated because much of his view of science is, at least to me, so limited and parochial. Since it has become fashionable to refer to Thomas Kuhn as a critical jumping off point, I am surprised Yinger has not struggled more with the problems of science—a point he seems to take for granted (Ravetz, 1971, Ziman, 1968). The new criticism of science is even widely extended to the realm of religion (McClendon & Smith, 1975; Barbour, 1974). Now I recognize these works come late, but they represent decade-old traditions of criticism and also indicate that the analytical philosophy of science has shifted emphasis. Is it that Yinger is still seduced by the epistemology and philosophy of science of the early A. J. Ayer and L. Wittgenstein? Or is it a *mens rea* doctrine that operates, a guilty mind, so those interested in religion have to then outlast the scientific skeptics and justify their worth to other academic colleagues called scientists. I doubt if anything of the kind operates in Yinger's case. As a matter of fact, his footnotes are replete with references to contemporary linguistic philosophy and, for that matter, the works of the process philosopher, Whitehead. It may be he has not thought very much about this potential contradiction, or if there is one. I think there is. In any event, Yinger's philosophy of science has always puzzled me, and I find in it enough contradiction or ambivalence to feel it is a key to his personal dialectic. That is, his philosophy of science *may not* be congruent with his theory of religion.

Nevertheless, since Yinger engages in a long discussion of the dimensions of religious phenomena, particularly in his *Scientific Study of Religion* (1970) where he discusses the pros and cons of Glock and Stark's work, he makes it almost obligatory that such ambiguity exists. The interesting criticism, or so it seems to me, is that from the view of Western Christianity (a tradition none of us can quite escape) even Yinger's religious definitions are almost always Palagian and definitely Docetic. From an American sociologist, one might ask, what else could they be? But Bouma is quite correct in calling our attention to different emphases: at some points on belief systems or theology as the main defining unit and at other points on action or behavior as the essential element of religion. I see little contradiction in this, but rather chalk it all up to a rather healthy sense of the meaning of dialectical reasoning.

Furthermore, I am not much bothered by the various levels of explanation in Yinger's analysis. As Robert Brown (1963) makes clear, there are inevitably a number of levels of "explanation" possible in social science research. And recent symposia and studies indicate the classical, empirical, and operational definitions of science are quite open to debate (Ryan, 1973; Keat & Urry, 1975; Strasser, 1976).

In this connection, Bouma makes a very important, indeed crucial, observation. This is simply that whenever Yinger wishes to illustrate the "meaning" of religion *per se*, he uses empirical generalizations and speaks in the behavioral mood. This seems, at least on the surface, surprising. His work is crowded with historical examples and illustrations (something all too unusual in the sociology of religion), and there are many examples of functional analysis, cross-cultural comparisons, and references to anthropology, all of which indicate a tremendous erudition and scholarship. Usually, however, he does not use these in the "explanatory" sense. When it comes to "fish or cut bait," Yinger always seems to side with what I would call the naive empiricists. In fact, I would go further and say there is an almost brittle

Lundbergian positivism embedded in his work; after *Religion, Society, and the Individual* (1957) he did title his next major work in religion *The Scientific Study of Religion*—with an added emphasis on “The Scientific.”

The issue may be one of the differences between “synthetic” and “analytical” propositions, or deductive and inductive reasoning. But the point is that these distinctions are coming under increasing attack; in other words, they are not exclusive, if not rejected (Diamond, 1974). And furthermore, the functional explanations, when dealing with the idea of intention, may not be as divorced from straight forward scientific analysis as is often traditionally assumed, or at least some analytically trained philosophers are saying that. (See especially Harre & Secord, 1972). This would, in itself, make the controversy I have suggested somewhat a moot point in Yinger’s work. Yet, if he doesn’t recognize this, indeed even describe it or address himself to it, then at least the student who uses his books as textbooks, as I can attest from using Yinger in my teaching, will be misled by Yinger’s notion of science as: SCIENCE.

Last but not least in this connection, almost all commentators on Yinger’s work speak of his tendency to use typologies. As a matter of fact, I would say this is as close to a fetish as the man gets, and it may be that this comes from his preoccupation with traditional science, that is, operational definitions, survey research, and so forth. Yet I think this is mistaken. Surely Yinger is the master of the typology; sometimes as I read his works I think he is the WORLD’S Master.

This leads us to the second issue, that of the history of religions and historiographic issues. Fundamentally typological generalizations concerning religious movements always arise close to the study of specific historical events and are usually based on, or tacitly assume an underlying philosophy of, religious history. This is especially significant in relation to the Troeltschian analysis since several commentators have pointed out that the Church-Sect concept (and variations thereof) is a close approximation of the “Protestant” reading of the history of Western Christianity. Thus the underlying issue that *Religion in the Struggle for Power* (1946) raises may be the issue of Yinger’s underlying philosophy of history or historiography.

Much recent work indicates the dominate historical understanding of Christian history, especially in America, has been in fact based on a Protestant philosophy of the nature of religious organization and religious history (Bowden, 1971; Brauer, 1968; Mulder & Wilson, 1978). This means that the voluntary church or denomination itself becomes a consequence of a specific theological ideology, and the understanding of religion and power becomes thereby transformed according to a Protestant framework. This process need not be conscious. But with this in mind, we need to make several observations on Yinger’s use of historical materials.

First of all, his work is full of historical references and allusions to the standard works of religious historical analysis, but especially to those of Protestant historiography. This is in itself a certain virtue, but again it also may be a limitation. In short, I think Yinger unconsciously assumes the Protestant view of church history. (I am not suggesting he accepts such concomitant doctrines as faith in inevitable progress.) What I am saying is that he seems to accept the necessary evolution of the sect and to stress the individual separation of religious experience

from more organic units, in particular, the state and politics.

Thus, it may be that Yinger's philosophy of history actually puts him in a poor position to explicate the relationship between organic religious groups, ideology, parties, and state power. And so, in his framework, the possibilities of the theocratic state (for example, Israel or Saudi Arabia) or even the deadly clashes between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland become rather hard to deal with. The leading edge of history that is Protestant separatism should eventually wipe the slate clean and make such aberrations as the above impossible. What goes on here is typically American (with a touch of Tocqueville), for it really assumes that the voluntary church, that is, the American religious experience, is where history is leading us. I rather hope so, but a church history based on these premises is more problematical than once thought.

Secondly, although unusually well versed in history and using his historical examples well, Yinger does not seem much interested in the problem of causal explanation in history—with the obvious exception of his discussion of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis. (Incidentally, contrary to the opinion of Robertson, I have always thought of Yinger as more of a Durkheimian than a Weberian. This is not due so much to his functionalism as to his insistent sociologism.) In consequence, it may be he accepts too uncritically the standard Protestant church history, which is coming more and more under attack.

Now there is no reason to expect Yinger as a sociologist, even as a sociologist of religion, to transform himself into a historian. However, inasmuch as he is interested in religious social movements, he has to assume some philosophy of history connected to Christianity. There may be a Protestant tinge to his thought that leads him to minimize the relation of religious groups to parties and state power even if this was one of his most original and early interests. In any case, some sociologists of religion never create a level of analysis which even raises the historiographical questions—but quite in Yinger's favor, his work certainly does.

Our next focal point in Yinger's work is language or linguistics. The warrant for his use of typologies does not lie in "straining gnats and swallowing camels" or in spawning a thousand and one new operational terms. Rather, the function of the typology in Yinger's work, it seems to me, is that of a linguistic matrix, much in the same tradition as that of Levi-Strauss' dichotomies. It is a way of constructing an adequate symbolic system to talk about religion, and not just another esoteric empirical exercise. In any case, Yinger is well aware of the problems of language, and sensitive to the issues of linguistics. Indeed, so much of the focus of his discussion is related to factors of linguistics and symbols that it is my contention that if he had carried this interest more clearly into his sociology of religion (the ideas are there, but not developed), he might have built a more "systematic" sociology of religion.

In illustration, let me call your attention to Yinger's justifiably famous analogy of the "Stained Glass Window," which he uses in various places in his writings (for example, 1963b: 17, 18). "Can one see a stained glass window from the outside?" The answer is, of course, But this can mean various things. Does it mean one has to join a religious group to understand it? Decidedly no, but you could argue it might help. The analogy may imply simply a Lockean or Humeian epistemology, that is, only that the sensate, direct perception is real. One doesn't know, but the thrust of the analogy

is to obscure the question of meaning and to overemphasize the reality of sensate or direct observation (if you will, naive realism). This is true of his epistemology, where his ontology seems quite idealistic, sociological, and historical.

Yinger's work, I propose, is replete with such contradictions. Not that I wish him to solve the issue by becoming a neo-Kantian, but Robertson is right, he does live in "Two Kingdoms." (It is just that Robertson may have the wrong kingdoms.) As I see it, there is the world of hardheaded, Lazarsfeldian style empirical generalizations; and there is the other world of meaning, symbol, historical reality, configuration, gestalt organization, and intention. Somehow, they are never systematically connected. For that matter, no one does this very successfully, and maybe it cannot be done. I suspect the issue of the "Two Kingdoms" is actually only one of analogy, not of substance. Furthermore, I think Yinger has found a way out of this dilemma, although I must admit he hasn't really followed through on one of his basic insights.

I suspect that an increased elaboration of the problems of symbolic language might lead Yinger out of the Two Kingdom dilemma. His comments on language are salutary. What is surprising is that he doesn't follow his own insights more systematically, beginning with the all too neglected work of Joyce Hertzler on *A Sociology of Language* (1965) and the powerful works of Hugh D. Duncan (1962; 1968) to more recent sociolinguistics. All this he grasps but does not develop, and it could lead into an interesting and, I think, fruitful development in the sociology of religion. The irony is that he is the only prominent sociologist of religion of the last decade who seems to stress this. I fully believe that the reason he did not develop his philosophy of language is that his philosophy of science is ambivalent and, in a fundamental epistemological sense, based on an empirical positivistic methodology which is more or less taken for granted.

Last, but not least, it may be all too narrow to ignore Yinger's other interests. For example, although he is steeped in functional theory, one of his original papers applied functional theory to conflict situations (1960), which gives the lie to the absolute notion that functionalists did not recognize "conflict" as an important theoretical issue—no more than they necessarily neglected history. In addition, Yinger has made important contributions, in research and writing, in the field of minority-group relations.

Under the tutelage of Dr. Robin Williams, Jr., I was first introduced to Yinger's writings on the sociology of religion, and I must say I have been somewhat hooked on the subject, for better or worse, ever since. On almost every page, time and time again, I learn something new and of great value from Yinger. In these short comments, I have tried to stress some broad issues, at least as I see them, in Yinger's sociology of religion. We are all in his debt, but the question remains which side of the ledger, which aspect of the account, shall we add up and then use as our own capital on which to build a growing discipline.

There is something almost funeral, like an Irish wake, in presenting an academic symposium. Somehow after a man reaches sixty, publishes a number of books and journal articles, and is elected president of the ASA, we have a tendency to speak of him in the past tense. In a way this makes the Oedipus game easier. We might latch on to the particular, the Queen, and forget about the general, the King: "Long live the King, the King is dead!"

I suspect we will hear more from Professor Yinger on these matters, and we might simply think of what he has done so far as a *prolegomenon*. The King is not finished yet.

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## Response to Professors Bouma, Robbins, Robertson, and Means

It is fascinating to see one's work put under a microscope by skilled and keen-eyed observers. Fortunately, they are generous-spirited as well as perceptive, so I find it easy to share many of the views of Professors Bouma, Robbins, Robertson, and Means regarding the incompleteness and the weakness of my work, along with its possible strengths. Because they are looking at my work in the sociology of religion as a whole, and not at a particular book or article, and because their statements are based on a panel discussion before a live (and lively) audience, one