

The problem of the two kingdoms: religion, individual, and society in the work of J. Milton Yinger

The publication of *Religion in the Struggle for Power* (1946) was an event whose significance has probably not yet been fully appreciated or interpreted. Regardless of the details of its influence on the work of others in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it can now be seen to have had two major forms of significance. First, that book contained the basis for much of Professor Yinger's subsequent thinking. Second, it crystallized a mode of sociological thinking which has to this day remained salient in American sociology of religion.

Building on the work of Troeltsch and Niebuhr, Yinger outlined a model of the relationship between "religion" and "society" (or "world") in terms of *the dilemma* of religious groups (which can usefully be re-phrased as the problem of the two kingdoms). That approach, with supplementation from Durkheimian, Parsonian, and other conceptions of the functions of religion, was to take its most directly influential form in *Religion, Society and the Individual* (1957). This was cast in more comprehensive sociological terms than *Religion in the Struggle for Power* and was quickly and extensively adopted as a paradigmatic text. In this discussion I accord great significance to *Religion in the Struggle for Power*. It is my purpose to follow Yinger's thoughts from that statement through *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970), commenting on the more continuous strands of his theoretical insights.

In his 1946 work, Yinger declared the tasks of sociology of religion to be, first, the discovery of "how much of the origin and development of religion can be attributed to the processes of sociation (that is, can be explained sociologically)" and, second, the assessment of "how religion in turn is involved as a factor in interhuman behavior" (1946: 3-4). This broad program was narrowed for Yinger's specific purposes to a focus upon what he called, in problematically reified terms, "the goal of religion" (1946: 27). As outlined by Yinger, this involved three major dimensions. First, to what degree does religion exercise influence over human behavior? Second, to what degree is religion, "in competition with other powers, . . . able to control behavior *in accordance with its own standards?*" Third, "how well does [religion] succeed in accomplishing *its own stated ends?*" (1946: 15).

Yinger set out to answer these questions (in relation to circumscribed empirical matters) by immediately adumbrating a typology of religious *groups*, a typology which was centered upon the axiom that all "churches" face a dilemma: "The institutional embodiment of religion manifests two contradictory sets of values, one clustering about the religious idea, the other centering in the secular power of the institution" (1946: 25). That dilemma apparently was more or less synonymous for Yinger with the problem of the degree to which religious groups, on the one hand, should accord greatest priority to maintenance of doctrinal purity or, on the other hand, should strive for maximum influence in a broad sociocultural setting.

Another of Yinger's early formulations of "the dilemma" was his specification of "the goal" of "religion" as one of establishing a "working synthesis" between "individual anarchy" and "social harmony" (1946: 27). It is difficult to see how "religion" as *institutionally embodied* could conceive of *individual anarchy* as one

of its aims, regardless of the contention that such an aim had to be balanced against another aim in an overall, synthetic goal. It may well be that this outcome of Yinger's attempt to distill the work of Troeltsch for modern sociological purposes in part accounts for the long neglect of Troeltsch's conception of mysticism, for Yinger combined Troeltsch's sectarianism and mysticism by in effect regarding the ideality of sectarianism in terms of extreme religious *individualism*. More to the immediate point, however, it is important to note that this "harmony-anarchy" continuum was retained by Yinger as a cornerstone of much of his subsequent theoretical work, one of the implications surely being that Yinger may well have believed for a long period that the purest form of religion, the adherence to the pristine religious *idea*, is to be found in the individual person.

Such a conception entails a commitment to the view that *any social formation* of religion constitutes a compromise of the purity of religious ideas. However, there seems no good reason to stop at that point. If religious ideas are, as it were, contaminated by their social embodiment, there is no good reason to argue that they are any less contaminated by their embodiment in *persons*. Only adherence to a notion such as the absorption of individuals into The Religious Idea (as if the idea existed as a thing in itself) could secure the thesis of non-contamination (and that, of course, would involve a definitely theological-mystical commitment). It must be concluded that commitment to the view that there is a dilemma concerning the relationship between purity of the religious idea, on the one hand, and institutional embodiment of religion or application of the idea to "the world," on the other hand, is *not* parallel to the maintenance of a dilemma involving individual anarchy *versus* social harmony. Such criticism is not, it must be emphasized, offered in a destructive mode, for these are problems which have plagued the sociology of religion from the outset. Ever since ideas concerning "the extra-religious dimensions of religion" were raised, in particularly acute form from the mid-nineteenth century onward, such problems have been at the center of the study of religion. Unfortunately, the works of such people as Weber and Troeltsch (not to speak of Durkheim and Simmel) have often been pruned so as to avoid these problems in the name of scientific objectivity. Discussion of Yinger's contributions assists in the resurrection of these far from resolved matters, matters which have been aired among sociologists in recent years with reference to the debate about symbolic realism.

The notion of *compromise* thus became central to Yinger's work, as it was a central component of Troeltsch's endeavors. For Yinger, the church was characterized by a disposition to compromise a great deal in the interests of maximizing its influence, while the sect compromised less, but did so at the expense of breadth of influence. However, even though such ideas were indeed central to *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, in his concluding chapter Yinger emphasized that "the religious interest is thoroughly entwined with secular interests and needs; and it is not by accident that the radical sectarian reaction to the dilemma of religion is usually chosen by the poor and the disinherited. . . . Were the religious interest alone involved in the choice of method, the wealthy religious would be sectarian as often as the religious poor" (1946: 221). This addition to the initial posing of the dilemma is very significant. Yinger seems at this point to agree tacitly with the interpretation that *all* religious ideas are always "compromised." If taken seriously this claim of the

entwinement of material and ideal interests leads to the view that there can be no approximation to the *religious* purity of the sect. Indeed, in this perspective there would seem to be little basis for arguing that one form of religion would be less or more religiously pure than another.

Yinger claimed that it was the *goal* of religion to effect a synthesizing of the compromising tendency of the church and the "puritanical" tendency of the sect. Indeed *Religion in the Struggle for Power* was largely written in the ostensibly sociological interest of discovering what might be called the compromise between two compromising tendencies. For, even though Yinger spoke often of the church as being the compromising type of religious group, his suggestion that even sects are just as likely to manifest what he called "secular interests and needs" as churches interferes considerably with the proposition that sects tend to be characterized by "withdrawal from the world" (a phrase which is not straightforwardly connected to the idea of individual anarchy). In any case, to argue that the *goal* of "religion" has *always been* the effecting of a synthetic compromise involves serious risks of confusing theology and social-scientific epistemology and, moreover, of confusing sociological-historical analysis with that which really happened. In any case, Troeltsch had, prior to *The Social Teachings*, emphatically rejected the reification of the idea of religion (Troeltsch, 1901). Indeed Troeltsch's program was largely dictated by the desire to analyze Christianity in terms of *social forms* (in which respect he acknowledged his debt to Simmel).

The transition from *Religion in the Struggle for Power* to *Religion, Society and the Individual* was marked primarily by an increase in attention to the functions of religion. While a loosely functional definition of religion had been used early in *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, the greater emphasis of that work was, as we have seen, upon the *goals* of "religion," operationalized as the goals of religious groups and elaborated primarily in terms of the purity-influence dilemma. The shift toward functional analysis was accomplished with remarkable continuity. The expression of "the great dilemma" in terms of achieving a synthesis of the tug of individual anarchy and the pull of social harmony was, so to speak, tailor-made for a transition to the language of functionalism. In fact it is difficult to avoid the impression that the Troeltschian-Niebuhrian notion of compromise was being used, even in 1946, not only in reference to what Yinger called the stated ends and standards of religious groups, but also in reference to the respective needs, in the functionalist sense, of "society" and "individual."

In any case, starting from a strong declaration of being interested only in what religion does, rather than what it is, Yinger proceeded in *Religion, Society and the Individual* to the adumbration of a revised typology of religious groups. In fact the typology in 1946 consisted simply of a continuum marked by the polar opposites of complete withdrawal and complete acceptance of the world, with particular interest in the mid-point of "greatest power in achieving the purely religious ends" (1946, 23). The 1957 typology was also expressed in terms of polar opposites, but what Yinger called "refinements" led to a much more definite array of types, as compared to the placing of empirical examples along the 1946 continuum. In spite of some introductory comments concerning the distinction between culture and social structure, the 1957 typology was actually developed entirely around the 1946 ideas of

social harmony (replaced by “integration”) and individual anarchy (replaced by “individual needs”). Concern with social integration was said to tend in the direction of an authoritarian pattern of order; concern with individual needs was claimed to tend in the direction of anarchy (1957: 142ff). The operational criterion of rejection-acceptance of the world was replaced in 1957 by two criteria: first, a synthetic criterion of the degree of societal-membership inclusiveness and the “degree of attention to the function of social integration” and, second, the degree of attention to personal need (1957: 147-148). The definite impression is that the six specified types (universal church, ecclesia, denomination, established sect, sect, and cult) were arranged in terms of decreasing attention to inclusiveness and social integration and increasing attention to personal need. In actual fact, however, the universal church was distinguished in part precisely by its *attention* to personal need, according to Yinger, while the cult was defined most specifically by its considerable “break with cultural tradition” (1957: 154). The apparent inconsistency was somewhat vitiated by the secondary specification that the cult is almost entirely concerned with problems of the individual.

The transition between 1946 and 1957 may be highlighted as follows. Concern with the purposes of groups, tinged by concern with societal and individual functions and dysfunctions, was reconstructed in the direction of a more definitely functional model. Ambivalence, remained, however, in that Yinger argued in 1957 that in the case of the church the “function-dysfunction” (as he called it) of social integration was “likely to be latent. . . , for its manifest intentions are more likely to be the assurance of *individual salvation*” (1957: 145; emphasis added). In the case of the sect (and presumably the cult) Yinger implied that purpose and social dysfunction coincided, in the sense that sectarianism involved dissociation from the prevailing social order and was thus manifestly dysfunctional in societal terms and manifestly functional in individual terms.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Yinger chose in *The Scientific Study of Religion* to deal much more directly and positively with the realm of individual religiosity, for up to that point—in spite of the presumably very conscious choice of the title *Religion, Society and the Individual*—his treatment of individual religiosity had been relatively unsystematic. In the 1970 volume, much more elaborate attention was devoted to the individual. An attempt was made to schematize the varieties of individual religious experience. In *Religion, Society and the Individual* the domain of individual religiosity had been discussed only diffusely under the heading of “religion and personality” and also treated residually in the mode of the anarchy-drift of sectarianism and cultism. In *The Scientific Study of Religion* individual religious experience was given positive typological treatment in its own right.

Although initially defined in terms of response to ultimate reality (1970: 144), Yinger’s typology of religious experience actually came to be defined operationally in terms of response to “the world” (1970: 147), a switch of emphasis making for some confusion. Not much less confusing is the use of types of prophecy as a variable of similar conceptual significance as asceticism and mysticism. However, the more important problem is that *all* forms of religious experience were expressed in terms similar to the manner in which Yinger had treated sectarianism in *Religion in the*

Struggle for Power. Yinger said that “in oversharped typological terms: the ascetic struggles with individual suffering, the mystic with ignorance, and the prophet with injustice” (1970: 147). Still leaving on one side the problems of using such concepts in ways which differ considerably from Weberian convention (in spite of numerous positive references to Weber), we should highlight the relationship between the typology of individual religious experience and the typology of religious groups.

Even though in 1970, in his introduction to another revision of the typology of religious groups, Yinger repeated the 1946 and 1957 statements that the sect places “primary emphasis [upon] the attempt to satisfy various basic individual needs by religious means” (1970: 255), the criteria which were actually used to elaborate the typology excluded any reference to the “level” of the individual. The variables employed for the distinctively typological endeavor were, first, a synthesis of degree of inclusiveness and degree of adherence to dominant values and, second, the degree of organizational complexity. (This led, through a complicated procedure which cannot be reproduced here, to a typology of eight types of religious organization, ranging in broadly polar terms from the institutional ecclesia through the charismatic sect, with the cult still dangling uneasily at the end of things.) It should not be thought, however, that Yinger ignored the problem of the relationship between the typology of religious experience and the typology of religious organizations. In fact, he linked them by *correlating types of religious experience with types of sectarianism*, so amplifying the idea that religious experience (religious individualism) is necessarily a form of alienation from “the world.” A caveat is needed here, in that the type of sect most closely associated with mystical experience was characterized as either disregarding or accepting “society.” Nevertheless, according to Yinger, mystical experience and acceptance sects involve alienation from “the usual motivational systems” (1970: 275). The latter, Yinger presumably regards as societally provided, and thus in the last analysis all forms of religious experience must indeed be seen in his perspective as forms of alienation from “the world” (or “society”). (Ascetic experience was said to involve alienation from the cultural system, and prophetic experience alienation from the social structure.)

Yinger’s tendency in *The Scientific Study of Religion* to “talk in terms of threes” derived from his having developed a so-called field theory of religion (1965). As specified in a brief statement in *The Scientific Study of Religion*, field theory was claimed to have the advantage over functional theory of being more sensitive to both individual and group functions, to cause-effect as well as to feedback processes, and to the avoidance of over-interest in system maintenance. Clearly such an approach had the distinct attraction to Yinger of making more sophisticated his long-held perspective on treating religion at the levels of both society and the individual. In *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior* (1965) Yinger delineated, in Parsonian manner, four levels of analysis (biological, psychological, social-structural, and cultural), but found it appropriate to combine the first two into the level of the individual and on occasions to combine the second two into the group (or societal) level. Analysis in terms of threes arose in connection with the desire for certain purposes to keep the third and fourth levels separate. Of more immediate importance, however, is that field theory constituted an attempt to loosen the functional theory of *Religion, Society and the Individual* in order to be more emphatic about, as it were, not

favoring one aspect of action systems (the field of human behavior) more than others—hence the continuing relevance of the extreme cases of societal authoritarianism (in the case of churchliness) and individual anarchy (in the case of sectarianism or cultism).

It is greatly to Yinger's credit that he was sensitive to such matters from the early stages of his work in the sociology of religion. In fact his *oeuvre* is characterized by an attempt to be "fair to all variables," for, in addition to the "egalitarianism" of his field theory, we should also mention again in this connection his (problematic) eagerness to pay due respect to both purposes and functions of religion. Yinger has, I believe, concerned himself with the kinds of issues that puzzled the classical sociologists more than many of his contemporaries have, and that this has resulted in numerous inconsistencies is probably of only secondary importance. Specifically, his ongoing preoccupation with the human location of religion and the consequences for society of different forms of religion is clearly the kind of question with which Weber, Durkheim, and others, were greatly concerned.

Whether we talk in terms of weaknesses of Yinger's work or in terms of the manner in which we can learn from it, two central, intimately-related questions arise. The first of these has to do with the relationship between individual and society, the second with the notion of the relationship between religion and "world" (the problem of "the two kingdoms"). The intimacy of the two problems is such that in my concluding comments they mainly will be considered as one.

Yinger's early work certainly tended to come close to conceiving religion in its purest form as religion of individuals, implying that the more social, particularly the more *societal*, religion became, the less purely religious it was. (On the other hand, it suggested that the more purely religious were individuals, the less religious was societal life.) Furthermore, in a manner consistent with some of Weber's major concerns, Yinger has remained implicitly interested in the degrees to which individualistic religion tends to inhibit commitment to the society and societalistic religion tends to constrain individual freedom. Overall, his views stand in a basically Lutheran tradition (regardless of Yinger's own conscious theological preferences). This is true in the sense that there appears to Yinger to be an individual realm of the more truly religious and a mundane realm of "worldliness." However, his being a sociologist also constrains Yinger to "protect" society. Being a sociologist (at least in part) requires him to defer to the welfare of society. Field-theoretic functionalism helped to avoid having to opt for either society or the individual, although using the language of alienation with which to address religious experience at the individual level confuses the issue.

Yinger has derived the thrust of his attitude of religion from the matrix of "the Lutheran problem" of the two kingdoms of individual religiosity, on the one hand, and "worldly" secularity, on the other hand. Discussion of this complex subject, involving as it must careful consideration of Durkheim and Troeltsch and spilling over as it does into more general matters concerning the degrees of differentiation between individual and society and different conceptions of the "natural" relationship between individual and society across cultural traditions is prohibited here by space limits. However, it must be noted that Durkheim in *his* use of the phrase "the two kingdoms" referred to the *society* as the realm of the spiritual in

relation to the profanity of the "unsocialized" individual. That makes the combination in Yinger's work of the idea of pristine, "anarchic" religiosity with Durkheimian ideas rather problematic. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Troeltsch (as well as Weber) was concerned about the asocial (in the particular sense of apolitical) tendencies of contemporaneous Lutheran views of pure religiosity. To that extent Yinger has achieved something of a synthesis of the ideas of Durkheim, on the one hand, and Troeltsch and Weber, on the other hand.

Some of the problems which have been discussed here revolve around Yinger's failure to address the issue of the degree to which "society" is differentiated from the individual realm. His work has largely been conducted as if the relationship between individual and society has not varied across the times and spaces which he has studied. (His own focus on differentiation has been mainly to do with such matters as social stratification and specialization.) Yet the characteristics of religious movements would seem to depend a lot on degrees of individuation and of differentiation of individual from society. Indeed, the greater the degree of differentiation of individual from society, the less appropriate it becomes for the sociologist of religion to place so many of his or her eggs in the religious movement basket. That may well be why Weber talked less of church and sect and more of types of individual salvation during the last, highly productive phase of his life.

A corollary of these suggestions is that it is a mistake—as Durkheim and Simmel, and perhaps Weber, knew well—to speak simplistically of socialization and individualism as standing in a zero-sum relationship, which is what Yinger tends to do throughout his work. Individuation and socialization are mutually amplifying trends, but their differentiation from each other makes them more, not less, interdependent. In some respects Yinger's 1970 analysis of individual religious experience indirectly recognizes this, but then, however, ties such experience exclusively to sectarianism.

I trust that the strength of some of my criticisms of Professor Yinger will be regarded more as a tribute than as an attempt to score points against his work, some of which was written more than thirty years ago. Yinger's ongoing concern to link the study of religion to larger sociological concerns and his wide-ranging interest in historical and contemporary empirical matters have been and remain important ingredients of the modern sociology of religion. That his work assists in raising immediately pressing issues requires our admiration. Finally, I must repeat that I have chosen to address the most continuous theme in Yinger's sociology of religion. A comprehensive survey would involve much more discussion of Yinger's research on the ubiquity of individual problems of ultimate meaning and its degree of alignment with what I have called "the problem of the two kingdoms." Yinger's invocation of the notion of "invisible religion" (1970, 33) raises intriguing possibilities in connection with this problem, for Luckmann's (1967) notion of invisible religion bears some resemblance to Luther's notion of the invisible church.

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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 archetypical 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