

CONCERN FOR GOD AND CONCERN FOR SOCIETY: RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

EVANS W. CURRY, JEROME R. KOCH, and H. PAUL CHALFANT
(DECEASED)

Department of Sociology, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

This paper adds to the integration of sociology of religion and social stratification by bringing together work in social justice from sociology of religion and economic issues from social stratification. The research focuses on the narrower topic of attitudes toward economic justice. Specifically, it focuses on the contributions of both religiosity and religious affiliation to such attitudes. The contributions of the religious components are assessed independent of other factors identified to be important in the two areas. Using data from the 1987 panel of the General Social Survey, multiple analyses of variance reveals relatively strong structural effects but no relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward economic justice. Religious affiliation is statistically significant, but of sufficiently limited “captured variance” that substantive interpretation must wait future research.

INTRODUCTION

Does religious affiliation and religiosity among the various types of American Christians produce behaviors or ideologies which support social justice? Davidson (1986) reminds us that the Biblical tradition is replete with regulations which would, if implemented, over the years, bring about some

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Address correspondence to Evans W. Curry, Dept of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Box 41012, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409–1012, USA. E-mail: evans.curry@ttu.edu

degree of restructuring of economic means favoring the least privileged. Davidson (1986) argues both the monied elite that profit from the present structure and the working class that subsist under it appear to have little impetus to seek change. In more recent analyses, Davidson, Pyle, and Reyes (1995) conclude that liberal¹ Protestants such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, etc. continue to be disproportionately represented among the power elite in the United States. It would not be surprising, therefore, to find liberal Protestants supporting an economic status quo which contributes to inequality; this is the antithesis of social justice.

This paper analyzes individuals' concern for God and their (perhaps) subsequent concern for social justice in the broader theoretical context of social stratification. Kluegel and Smith (1986) give clear focus to the thrust of that tradition in addressing the narrower issue of social justice that is hereafter called economic justice. They conduct extensive multiple regression analyses investigating sources of support for economic justice. Using nineteen structural and socio-psychological variables their monograph explores support for welfare support, guaranteed jobs, guaranteed income, limitation of incomes, limitation of inheritances, and government ownership of industry (Kluegel and Smith 1986, pp. 160, 168). Their success was limited in that the strongest coefficient of determination in any of the six models was 0.28 (Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 160). This seems likely due to the fact that each of the dependent variables was a single item and thus of limited reliability.

¹The authors recognize that the term "liberal protestant" taken as a descriptive appellation is problematic. Along a social dimension, results of analyses are mixed (see Wuthnow [1988] versus Hadden [1969], Quinley [1974], and Hoge [1976]). Indeed, the present research raises questions as to the social liberality of the group. Similarly, when one views the group along a theological dimension, members of the grouping contain not just conservative elements but even those reactionary elements that would return to some imagined *status quo ante* (e.g. Daly [2000] documents precisely such a collection within the Presbyterian Church [USA]). Nevertheless, this research employs Smith's (1990) taxonomy of religious affiliation/preference as an important variable in its analysis and "liberal protestant" is the name of a subclass within his structure. The reader is consequently encouraged to recognize the expression liberal protestant/liberal Protestantism as used herein as a technical one connoting a particular collection of protestant denominations rather than a descriptive one implying a particular social, theological content.

Limited though their success may have been, Kluegel and Smith provide an important model for exploring the issue of economic justice. We use this model here to explore the role of denominational affiliation in shaping attitudes toward issues of economic justice. This paper addresses the major weaknesses of that earlier work. First, we include measures of religiosity and religious preference as independent variables in our empirical model. The effects of these independent variables are estimated independent of a number of important attitudinal and demographic variables thus reducing the probability of spuriousness. Denominations are carriers of social norms and also reflect class-interests. Finally, the dependent variable is based on multiple items thus giving it a reliability not possible in the Kluegel and Smith work.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several case studies exist which describe specific religious congregations and their involvement in what they deem to be pressing issues of social justice (Geaney 1983; Greenwood 1967; Kenrick 1962; O'Connor 1963; Webber 1960, 1964). Other bodies of research develop organizational typologies which suggest religious involvement in justice issues depends on several converging factors, among which are the church's denomination, pastoral history, social location, or local tradition (Carroll and Roozen 1990; Driggers 1979; Dudley 1991; Dudley and Johnson 1993; Mock 1992; Roof et al. 1979; Roozen et al. 1984; Smith 1981; Trexler 1972).

Empirical research tends to focus in individual-level attitudes and behaviors among various groupings of religious people. For example, Tamney and Johnson (1990) explored clergy attitudes, *per se*, as they related to approval of ecumenical agencies with social action programs, finding broad support from clergy for programs for reducing drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and family abuse. A more broadly-based research agenda has linked religiosity to ethnic prejudice. Gorsuch and Aleshire (1974) concluded that in general those affiliated with religious groups were more likely to be prejudiced than those not so affiliated. Chalfant and Peek (1983) report evidence that deep involvement in fundamentalist type religions, especially Southern Baptist groups, did not diminish the findings of greater ethnic prejudice.

Studies of attitudes toward minorities in the U.S. and England (Perkins 1983, 1992; Chalfant and Heller 1985) confirm the conclusion reached in the Gorsuch-Aleshire analysis.

These bodies of research lack an integrating theory linking attitudes to social structure. However, this issue has given rise to theoretically grounded research in the literature. Tamney (1991), using "Middletown" data, tested classical Marxian analysis of the role of religion in social restructuring. He found that pastors at black or Catholic churches, as well as socially liberal white clergy, were devoted to liberal activism regardless of the class make up of their congregations. Tamney's Marxian analysis opens the theoretical question linking more general religious affiliation and individuals' support for the economic restructuring of society.

Wuthnow (1988) tests laypersons' attitudes toward issues of personal morality and on the redistribution of wealth. He reports positive associations for religious conservatives on both sets of indicators. However, his operationalization of orthodoxy leaves out the structural component which we believe is critical in linking theory to survey research of this type. Wuthnow's use of the terms "conservative" and "liberal" when asking respondents to self-identify as such is problematic in that these terms have a political meaning which confounds the religious (Davis and Robinson 1996). Second, those terms carry a relative meaning for respondents who may have been denominationally affiliated since position statements or directives for normative behavior are published within these religious groups and disseminated to affiliates. Using this distinction, Davis and Robinson (1996) disagree with Wuthnow and report data which indicate religious conservatives are quite inegalitarian when it comes to redistribution of wealth and economic justice.²

²While religious homogeneity among denominational subcultures is waning (Roof and McKinney 1987), Gay and Ellison (1993) report that Episcopalians and Presbyterians continue to exhibit subcultural distinctiveness on indicators of political tolerance. We find this particularly noteworthy in light of Davidson, Pyle, and Reyes' (1995) data showing these particular denominations continue to represent disproportionate numbers of America's power elite.

On the other hand, Gay and Ellison (1993) concede that while members of specific Conservative Protestant groups are relatively homogeneous on political issues, subgroups of this type are often, in aggregate, quite diverse in their views on moral issues. This leads us to question whether class interests may help us distinguish denominationally affiliated respondents on issues of social justice more readily than on issues of personal morality.

Several studies indicate that religious belief is linked to opinions about morally charged issues such as abortion, sexuality, or gender-roles. Gay, Ellison, and Powers (1996) review this literature and provide empirical evidence for linking affiliation to the above concerns. However, support or opposition of this type on the part of either church leaders or affiliates is conceptually distinct from advocacy or action initiatives which seek to redistribute social wealth and power. Davis and Robinson (1996) report specifically that religious orthodoxy is positively associated with attitudes toward gendered division of labor, sexuality, and reproductive rights, but their work shows no evidence which connects orthodoxy to support for government intervention in reducing racial or economic inequality. Why the difference?

Pettigrew and Campbell (1959) were early contributors to the study of the conflict of orthodox Christian belief and action on social issues. Hadden's (1969) work *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* portrays a widening division between mainline clergy dedicated to issues of social justice and congregants unconcerned, if not opposed, to the issues the more liberal clergy were pursuing. This theme has also been developed by Hoge (1976) and Quinley (1974).

Dawes (1986), Hadden and Longino (1974), and Long (1991) report case-studies of religious organizations embarking upon justice ministries which involve explicit advocacy and action toward economic restructuring. When these Alinsky-style strategies threaten the economic interests of an organization, or even the economic status quo of society, the survival of the organization is at serious risk.

While these represent the dramatic and chaotic side of addressing social justice from within specific religious organizations, Davidson (1985) and Koch and Johnson (1997) provide evidence that ecumenical coalitions can be more successful, albeit only after reconciling theological or ideological differences as they form. Moreover, these coalitions only form and persist when their work does not threaten the specific interests of any constituent. Indeed, Koch and Johnson's (1997) case study illustrates a successful outreach coalition whose work advanced constituent congregations' interests as well as advocated for social change. However, Davidson and Koch (1998) and Davidson and Pyle (1999)

argue that the '90s have brought a shift in congregational emphases making it more likely that churches will perpetuate inequality rather than seek social change to redress unequal distribution of wealth than was the case in the 1960s.

Previous empirical studies connecting religious affiliation and economic justice issues tend to suggest class interests also prevail. Tamney, Johnson, and Burton (1988) studied general support for the Catholic Bishops' economic proposal which advances a call for government intervention in the redistribution of economic resources. They found, in a telephone survey of "Middletown," that, contrary to expectations, fundamentalist Protestants were more likely to support the Catholic Bishops' proposal than were Catholics (although support did vary by education, income, political view, age, and race). Catholic support for the proposal came primarily from the non-fundamentalist Catholics.

In an earlier study, Johnson, Tamney, and Halebsky (1986) found that fundamentalists were more economically liberal (see also Hertzke, 1988, cited in Tamney et al. 1989). Further research was conducted with a sample of older (over 60) residents of "Middletown." Only white Protestants were included. While it was again found that fundamentalists were more likely to support economic restructuring, it was the measure of belief in Biblical inerrancy which was actually related to support (Tamney et al. 1989).

Finally, Pyle (1993) using data from NORC's 1983–1989 General Social Survey explored the issue of religious ideology and belief in economic restructuring employing a dependent variable based on two items from the GSS. Pyle found that Black Protestants demonstrated most support for his operationalization of economic justice while Liberal and Moderate Protestants showed the least support. While support among Conservative Protestants was somewhat mixed, Pyle (1993, p. 394) found them to be more supportive than Liberal and Moderate Protestants of policies of economic justice.

This array of theoretical and empirical evidence leads us to an important juncture. In broad form, the question asks the extent to which organizational and class interests prevail over "doing the right thing" (in the Christian sense of selfless giving) among the various groups of American Christians.

Kluegel and Smith's (1986) model points to the importance of class location and of attitudinal factors which motivate individual support for economic justice. A growing body of literature also documents the connection between religiosity and religious affiliation to individual support for economic justice issues. Little literature has examined the independent contribution of all of the above factors when they are considered simultaneously. This research adds to the body of knowledge by doing precisely that.

METHODS

Data for this analysis are drawn from the General Social Survey (Davis and Smith 1990). The data are taken from the 1987 panel, the only year containing the items constituting the dependent variable analyzed herein. The panel contains 1,819 observations, 1,704 of which were used in the present analysis. Although mean substitution was used to minimize missing data, there were still cases lost due to missing data. Thus the difference between panel size and number of cases analyzed.

Support for government involvement in various aspects of the maintenance of economic justice is the dependent variable in this analysis. While this is a highly specific aspect of the broader issue of economic justice, it makes possible a measure with sufficient reliability to give confidence that failure of statistical significance of the independent variables is unlikely to be due to the limitation of the measurement of the dependent variable. On the other hand, demonstration of nontrivial links between aspects of religious involvement and this dependent variable should encourage others to explore broader areas of economic justice for contributions from these independent variables.

The raw data from which the dependent is constructed, consist of six items asked in 1987. These are:

"It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes."

"The government should provide more chances for children from poor families to go to college."

- “The government should provide a job for everyone who wants one.”
- “The government should spend less on benefits for the poor.”
- “The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.”
- “The government should provide everyone with a guaranteed basic income.”

The response alternatives ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In this analysis, the scoring has been arranged so that strongly agree always receives a five. The fourth of the six items is clearly a counter item to the other five. It is scored in reverse of the other items so that both the correlations with other items and the factor loading are all positive.

The above items were combined into a factor score for each person based on a principal components factor analysis. The first principal component captured just over 51% of the total matrix variance. Since no other factor captured as much as 15% (less than one third of that of the first factor), the authors considered that fact alone sufficient basis for retaining a single factor. Factor scores were created so as to possess a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. The software used in the factor analysis (and all other data analysis requiring the computer) is that provided by the SAS Institute (1985). The scale has an internal reliability of 0.806 as measured by Cronbach's alpha (see Ghiselli et al. 1981 for a discussion of this measure of reliability).

Drawing from past research, especially that of Kluegel and Smith (1986, p. 160), a number of control variables is included in the analysis. Control variables included herein are both categorical and interval. Categorical control variables are discussed first followed by interval control variables.

Gender is included and operationalized as female and male. Race, operationalized as white-nonwhite, is also included. While this is certainly less than ideal, it provides a basic control and is within that which the GSS allows. Employment status operationalized as employed-unemployed and marital status operationalized as married-unmarried are both included as dichotomous control variables. Region is operationalized as South-nonSouth. This

is consistent with the use by Kluegel and Smith (1986). Political party identification is included and operationalized as Democrat, Republican, and other.

Control variables, treated as interval measures are as follows. These include age in years; education in years of school completed; family size as count of parents and children; income as twelve ranks; prestige of respondents occupation; size of place in which respondent lives; and additional persons other than family living at home. The above list of control variables may be considered structural.

Additionally, control variables which are social psychological in nature are included. Two such variables, belief in opportunity as dependent on the person's structural location in society and belief in opportunity as dependent on personal characteristics of the individual are developed from twelve items operationalized as factor scores created from a principal components factor analysis with an oblique, quartimax rotation. This operationalization of the above two variables makes them consistent with Kluegel and Smith's (1986) use of the base items. Two additional social psychological control variables are included in the analysis. One variable locates a person's attitude toward government involvement in limiting income differences. Complete support for government involvement is scored one and complete opposition to government involvement is scored seven. The last social psychological control assesses one's attitude toward the income gap in America with one indicating strong agreement that the gap is too large and five indicating strong disagreement to the assertion that the gap is too large.

This rather extensive set of control variables should assure that any relationships identified between independent variables of primary concern and the dependent variable are unlikely to be spurious. The independent variables on which we focus include measures of religious preference and measures of religiosity. These variables are as follows.

Religious preference is measured for the time of interview and as a recall of the respondents' preference at age 16. Both variables are categorical variables with six possibilities. The categories include Catholic, Jewish, Liberal Protestant, Moderate Protestant, Fundamentalist, and No Religious Preference. The discrimination between Protestants for both preference variables uses Smith's (1990) classification to

collate the extensive NORC listing into a manageable set. Inclusion of both current religious preference and early religious preference makes independent assessment of the degree to which early influence and current circumstance influences support for government involvement in issues of economic justice possible.

Items indicating degree of religiosity include the following. Attendance at religious services is measured on an eight-point scale ranging from zero indicating never attends to eight indicating attendance several times a week. A subjective sense of closeness to God is measured on a five-point scale ranging from one indicating extremely close to five indicating that one does not believe in God and presumably therefore does not feel at all close. The frequency with which one prays is measured on a six-point scale ranging from one indicating several times a day to six indicating never. Finally, the amount that a respondent tithes is reported in dollars given. These indicators of religiosity are all treated as interval level for purposes of analysis.

The mix of categorical and interval level of measurement in both the control variables, the similar mix in the independent variables of interest herein, and the level of measurement of the dependent variable clearly call for analysis of variance and covariance as the appropriate analytic tool (for detailed discussion of this method, see Hays 1988, pp. 734–761). Such an analysis was conducted using the GLM Procedure in SAS (1985). This particular software has the capability of producing unbiased results even where there are unequal frequencies among the categories of one or several nominal variables SAS (1985, p. 437). That capability is absolutely necessary in the current analysis. The procedure has the additional convenience of allowing single degree of freedom post hoc comparisons of the subclass effects of a particular categorical variable.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of variance and covariance indicates that the model employed in this study captures 39.34 percent ($\eta^2 = 0.3934$) of the total variance of the dependent variable. The probability of chance occurrence of such a

multivariate relationship is 1 in 10,000, well below any value the authors would interpret as statistically trivial. Consequently, we proceed to investigate the effects of the independent variables of interest.

It should come as no surprise that a substantial majority of the structural variables are significant. Although not the central question of the research, these findings contribute to a partial answer to a question raised concerning the Pyle (1993) research. While based on a different measure of attitude toward economic justice, race is by far and away the stronger effect when measures of religious affiliation and measures of religiosity are included in the same analysis with race. In fact, the race effect is the single largest effect in the analysis as indicated by the sum of squares due to race in Table 1.

The social psychological controls also tend largely to produce statistically significant results. It is interesting to note that belief in opportunity as structural is significant while its parallel measure, belief in opportunity as dependent on the individual, is not. This may imply a fruitful path for later analysis in terms of current American belief systems.

Both current religious preference and religious preference at age 16 are statistically significant. Both have probabilities of chance occurrence below the level of 0.05. However, based on a magnitude of the sum of squares criterion, any detailed interpretation of this finding need wait additional research. Were this relationship to persist over time and different data sets, pursuit of substantive importance may be warranted.

None of the indicators of religiosity had a significant effect. In fact, none of the four indicators is even close enough to statistical significance to be considered marginal thus warranting consideration in some future replication. The effects of the four individual indicators of religiosity are so limited that even if the effects were combined and treated as a single variable with three degrees of freedom, the "new" variable would not achieve significance at the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, were one to combine these variables into a composite indicator of religiosity, it is highly unlikely that a relationship of any interest would result from the effort. On the surface, involvement of some religious tradition would seem an obvious source of sensitivity to the plight of others. This analysis does not support such an inference.

TABLE 1 Analysis of Variance and Covariance of the Effects of Selected Variables on Support for Government Involvement in Maintenance of Economic Justice

Source	DF	Sums of Squares	Mean Square	F Value	Pr > F
Gender	1	810.973	810.973	12.90	0.0003
Race	1	21147.530	21147.530	336.52	0.0001
Employment Status	1	583.500	583.500	9.29	0.0023
Marital Status	1	950.698	950.698	15.13	0.0001
Occupational Prestige	1	2214.072	2214.072	35.23	0.0001
Political Party	2	6611.060	3305.530	52.60	0.0001
Region	1	426.738	426.738	6.79	0.0092
Age	1	119.587	119.587	1.90	0.1679
Educational Attainment	1	1119.471	1119.471	17.81	0.0001
Family Size	1	242.859	242.859	3.86	0.0495
Income	1	1330.129	1330.129	21.17	0.0001
Others in Home	1	585.284	585.284	9.31	0.0023
Size of Place	1	61.414	61.414	0.98	0.3230
Opportunity Structural	1	7461.607	7461.607	118.74	0.0001
Opportunity Individual	1	0.785	0.785	0.01	0.9110
Income Gap Too Large	1	14599.471	14599.471	232.32	0.0001
Equalize Incomes	1	6086.065	6086.065	96.85	0.0001
Religious Preference	5	2226.122	445.224	7.08	0.0001
Age 16 Rel. Preference	5	1154.360	230.872	3.67	0.0026
Attendance	1	36.697	36.697	0.58	0.4449
Feel Near God	1	133.122	133.122	2.12	0.1457
Pray Often	1	149.168	149.168	2.37	0.1236
Tithe	1	70.707	70.707	1.13	0.2890
Error	1,671	105008.883	62.842		

CONCLUSIONS

In general, the large number of control variables obtaining significance and the substantial majority of the explained variance which they capture creates a clear context within

which to understand the contributions of religious activity or affiliation. While the authors are not willing to argue that study of the contribution and influence of religion is to be abandoned, this work is an important reminder that such study must be pursued in the larger sociological context. That said what of our findings?

This work should not be taken to trivialize the work of Pyle (1993). In fact such analyses as Pyle's (1993) in which more highly articulated classifications of religious affiliation are explored may give a more refined understanding of the relationship between race and religious affiliation and involvement.

That religious affiliation (both current and in adolescence) is statistically significant is interesting and warrants additional investigation. Since the η squared is so small, a single finding such as this one is hard pressed to "make sociological currency" from the finding. However, were the relationship to be demonstrated to persist over time and different data sets, one might have a basis for developing a sociological understanding for the phenomenon, small variance notwithstanding.

Perhaps most interesting in this work is the negative finding. That is, that virtual absence of any effect of religious involvement on attitudes toward economic justice. The failure of four different measures gives some confidence to the assertion of no effect. What makes this interesting here, is that it points to possibilities for future exploration.

We know that Christianity has emphasized separate spheres, temporal and sacred. Do those highly active in their churches become so enmeshed in this dualism that the one sphere is rarely, if ever, considered in the context of the other? Consequently secular issues are considered no differently from those not involved in the church.

On the other hand, perhaps involvement, per se, shields one from pressing secular issues. That is, regular involvement deflects one's attention from issues such as economic inequality in such a way that response to such questions as those eliciting attitudes toward economic inequality is essentially random. This too, would produce a situation in which there was no apparent difference between the highly involved and the noninvolved.

Another possibility for understanding the nonsignificance of religious involvement may involve a different perception

entirely. Perhaps church involvement leads individuals to believe the “problem” has been fixed by the church. Researchers simply haven’t caught up with that fact.

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