Revision Notes

Syllabus Section: Religion

Syllabus Area: Religion and Social Change (2)

Issue: **New Religious Movements**

Introduction

Thus far we have looked at the relationship between religion and social change in terms of:

1. Religion as a conservative social force (using Marx's argument as a "classic" elaboration of this basic theme).

2. Religion as a potential force for social change (using Weber's study of Protestantism and Capitalism as a "classic" elaboration of this particular theme).

In the final part of this Study Pack we can briefly examine a third perspective on the relationship between religion and social change, one that places the emphasis on the concept of "social change" rather than the concept of "religion".

This change of theoretical emphasis compliments the work we've already done in this Study pack, since it is clear that neither Marx nor Weber would dispute the idea that changes in the way in which societies are organized (their "social structure") produce changes in the organization of religious activity.

in addition, this section performs the useful purpose of both reinforcing and pulling-together some of the themes we have elaborated in earlier in this series, namely:

a. Perspectives on religion and

b. New Religious Movements (sects and cults).

In the above context, what we are concerned with here are a couple of recurrent themes in sociology generally, namely:

1. The relationship between the individual and society (considered in the basic terms of the relationship between individual consciousness ("social action") and the collective life of the individual in society ("social structure")).

2. The nature of the relationship between structure and action.

Whilst the above are, of necessity, variations on a basic theme, they are nonetheless significant ideas in relation to the way in which broad changes in the structure of society affect the ways in which people behave (or respond to / cope with these changes).

New Religious Movements.

One way of understanding the relationship between social change and religion is to look at contemporary, comparative, examples of the emergence and growth of NRM's, to see if there are any common developmental patterns involved (since the identification of "patterns of behaviour" is a classic starting-point for all forms of sociological analysis).

The "classical debate" between (the ghost of) Marx and Weber at which we have just looked concerning the relationship between Capitalism and Protestantism should alert us to the inherent dangers involved in this type of methodological procedure (that is, the difficulty of disentangling "cause" from "effect" in the social world). However, since the concern here is simply to describe correlations rather than seek causation, the technique of identifying possible patterns should be adequate for our purposes...

In the following, therefore, we will look briefly at:

a. A review of recent literature on NRM's.

b. An outline of various conclusions reached by different writers on the relationship between social change and the emergence / growth of NRM's across the world.

c. A broad summation of basic theoretical themes involved in the understanding of the phenomenon of NRM's.

In this respect, it's important to note that all sociologists, from whatever theoretical perspective, generally agree that we can only understand a (social) phenomenon (such as religious belief / activity) in terms of it's overall social context. Whilst sociologists may disagree over such things as the "correct" (that is, most valid) way to study and interpret social phenomena, it is sufficient for our purpose here simply to establish this basic principle.

Robert Wuthnow: "Religious Movements and Counter-Movements in North America" (1986).

1. Rapid changes in science and technology in the post 2nd World War period, allied to the expanding role of education produced a clearly-developed ideological framework ("science") that challenged the role of religion as an explanatory framework in American society.

2. With religious ideas / explanations being challenged by science, organized religion was forced to adapt to this challenge. Changes were expressed in the form of an increasingly liberal form of established religious organization.

3. In turn, the changes forced upon established religious organization produced schisms ("counter-movements"), resulting in the rapid development of various forms of New Religious Movement by the early 1960's.

4. By the 1970's, as the rate of technological and educational growth declined, NRM growth and activity also declined (or "solidified").

Wuthnow argues that the growth of a new, technological, well-educated section of the population created tensions within established religious movements (prior to this, such movements had largely been organized along broad regional and ethnic lines), resulting in pressure for change and reform within these movements (and hence schisms).

James Beckford and Martine Levasseur: "New Religious Movements in Western Europe", (1986).

1. Improvements in the means of communicating ideas (the development of relatively cheap, effective, easy to use forms of mass communication systems) in the post-war period allowed would-be religious movements to reach a mass audience. Effectively, this meant that the overall visibility of various New Religious Movements was increased.

2. In this respect, the" growth" of NRM's was not seen to be particularly significant (Beckford and Levasseur basically argue that there was not a sudden, significant, explosion of NRM's, for example, that needed to be explained in theoretical terms). Rather, NRM's were simply following a "traditional path" of emergence / growth - it was simply that because the means of communicating to an audience was more-developed, the "message" could be transmitted to far greater numbers of people in a more-sophisticated way.

3. The audience for NRM's was seen to be mainly the urban young (both working class and middle class) - those people most affected by (technological / social) change and therefore receptive to "new" ideas about the nature of the world and their position in it.

4. Membership of NRM's was - and remains - relatively tiny. Perhaps an interesting question to ask is not that of why people are attracted to NRM's, but why so many people are not attracted to the kinds of "solutions" they appear to offer?

5. Beckford and Levasseur offer three basic "ideal types" in their typology of New Religious Movements (an "ideal type" is a concept used by Max Weber. You look at the world and construct an "ideal" of something - such as a religious movement- and use that ideal as a way of measuring the extent to which the behaviour you observe approximates to it. The "ideal type", therefore, is a kind of measuring stick that we can use to standardize and measure "reality").

In so doing, they adopted Bryan Wilson's definition ("The Social Impact of New Religious Movements", 1981) of a sect as having an:

"...exotic provenance [that is, history]; new cultural lifestyle; a level of engagement markedly different from that of a traditional church Christianity; charismatic leadership; a following predominantly young and drawn in disproportionate measure from the better-educated and middle-class sections of society; social conspicuity [that is, highly visible]; international operation; and emergence within the last decade and a half".

Type	Description	Examples
Refuge	A sect that provides a "safe haven" from the world.	Krishna Consciousness; Children of God.
Reform	Offers people the possibility of changing society through religious teaching and practice.	Moonies; Scientology; Natural Law.
Release	Claim to release "inner spiritual potential" of members in order to enable them to cope more successfully with the world in which they live and work.	Transcendental Meditation (TM); Erhardt Seminar Training (EST).

Said Amir Arjomand "Social Change and Movements of Revitalization in Contemporary Islam" (1986).

1. Arjomand argues that "Islam" is not a single, homogenous, religion. On the contrary, it appears to consist of a number of different religious movements that can be grouped under the heading of Islam (this is similar to the idea that "Christianity" consists of a number of different - and frequently competing - religious movements (Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity, for example).

2. He identifies five processes of social change "which are likely to strengthen disciplined religiosity [that is, the level of religious commitment] and, under favourable conditions, give rise to movements of orthodox reform and renewal of Islam".

    a. Integration into the international system (that is, in basic terms, political and economic colonialism from Western societies / Christian missionary activity).

    b. The development of transport, communication and the mass media.

    c. Urbanization.

    d. The spread of literacy and education.

    e. The incorporation of the masses into political society.

3. Arjomand argues that each of the above are usually taken to be indicative of a process of secularisation. However, he argues that such processes tend to create conditions under which the "revitalization of religious activity" (and the development of Islamic sects) is also likely to result.

New Religious Movements and Social Change

Finally, given the above (admittedly brief) overview of the relationship between New Religious Movements and social change, we can identify a couple of basic theoretical themes involved in the explanation for the emergence / growth of NRM's.

1. Firstly, the concept of anomie is significant, since it would appear that rapid forms of social change (be it technological, educational, economic, political or whatever) tend to leave some sections of a population "lagging behind" - unable to change their normative / evaluative perspective rapidly enough to accommodate changes in the normative / evaluative system that develops in the wake of change.

People who suffer from this form of anomie are, therefore, considered more-likely to find the "safe havens" and "simple truths" offered by NRM's attractive. Wuthnow and Arjomand use this type of explanation in their work as do writers such as Syn-Duk Choi ("A Comparative Study of Two New Religious Movements in the Republic of Korea", 1986) and Laennec Hurbon ("New Religious Movements in the Caribbean").

In this form of explanation, NRM's are seen to have grown in significance as a response to some form of social change.

2. Secondly, an alternative - but complimentary - form of explanation (advanced by writers such as Beckford and Levasseur) is that the "growth" in NRM's is not necessarily a "real" growth (in the sense that people are simply becoming more receptive to religious sects). They argue that the explosive growth of cheap communication systems (especially satellite television / radio) have simply widened the potential audience for NRM's. In this respect, NRM's are simply seen to be tapping an audience that would have been receptive, in the past, to the type of messages NRM's seek to get across if the communications systems had been available.

In this respect, NRM's have only grown in the sense that they have been able to reach a wider audience (people already receptive to religious ideas). They have not, in this view, actually been very successful in converting people who were not formerly very religious to NRM's.