

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND COLLECTIVE ACTION:
A STUDY OF VOLUNTARISM IN A RURAL
APPALACHIAN CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

This study is a theoretical inquiry into the nature of collective action in the local church, with application to an evangelical Protestant congregation in the Southern Appalachian Region. More specifically, the study examines the various interrelationships between the use of religious language in the church and the organization of the church as a voluntary association. The studies objectives are three-fold. It (1) examines voluntaristic collective action; (2) develops a theoretical model connecting religious language with collective action in the local church congregation; and (3) applies the model to a case study of a rural Appalachian church in South Western West Virginia. The method utilizes a case study approach in which the author became a participant observer for two years while serving as pastor. During the two years of observation an association became apparent between religious language and various collective action events. The model in this study connects and analyzes this association. The study also reveals several implications in relation to a culture of poverty analysis of Appalachian culture and religion.

INTRODUCTION

This study is a theoretical inquiry into the nature of collective action in the church, with application to an evangelical Protestant congregation in the Southern Appalachians. More specifically, the study is designed to examine the various interrelationships between the use of religious language in the church and the organization of the church as a voluntary association.

Statement of the Problem

Religious language has been traditionally understood as a means of communicating the spiritual message of the church (Whitley, 1964: 40-50). The local church, unlike other voluntary associations, relies upon its message of spirituality as the primary motivational attraction to its present and prospective members. It does not use coercion, or to any large extent selective benefits in sustaining a viable membership. The church of the Southern Appalachians articulates a message which is embodied in a idiosyncratic language system. Although the Christian-Biblical symbols used are traditional to Protestant Christianity, they sometimes differ in meaning from one local church to another due to subcultural differences and denominational interpretation. If the local church relies upon language in attaining new members and in the continued motivation of existing members, then the following two questions arise:

(1) Is there an association between religious language and collective action in the local church? (2) If there is such an association is it positive in sustaining collective action or is it negative in prohibiting collective action?

These questions acquire greater significance when applied to the local church of the Appalachians. Previous writers who have examined the Appalachian church describe it as housing "fatalistic" frontier religion which has an "individualistic" emphasis as opposed to a "social concern" (Weller, 1965, 1970, 1978; also see Brewer, 1962; Caudill, 1963; Erikson, 1976). Jack Weller (1965, 1978) one of the foremost contenders of this position concludes that the religion of the Appalachian is "personalistic," which in turn leads to a "socially passive ethic." This prevailing view¹ originates from a "culture of poverty" paradigm (Lewis, 1966) but has also been integrated into the terminology of a variety of Appalachian theorists.

In general, these descriptions of the Appalachian church result in an overall impression that the church exists only to serve the extreme individualism found within the subculture. And, no doubt, people do affiliate or attend the local church for personal reasons. This point need not be contested. But, are these descriptions completely accurate? Is the religion of the Appalachian solely for some inherent trait of extreme individualism? Is there no collective consciousness?

It is the purpose of this paper to examine these questions in view of Olson's (1971) theory of collective action.

By doing so it demonstrates that the local church provides an array of "generalized benefits" which can only be accrued from collective action, not extreme individualism. These "generalized benefits or collective goods" must be re-evaluated in lieu of the previous descriptions of Appalachian religion. Religious language is then seen as a vital link in the ability of the local church to provide these "generalized benefits."

Objective of the Study

The studies objectives are essentially threefold. First, the theoretical framework defines the purpose of organization and the implications posed by the "free rider" problem, which is inherent in collective action based on voluntarism. The size or scale of the organization is also considered. Religious language is then recognized as establishing a set of common "terms and conditions" which are instrumental in the organizing of the local church.

The second objective is the elaboration of a theoretical model. It is designed to examine the associational or nonassociational relationships between collective action types and the symbolic language of the church.

The third and final objective is the application of the model to a specific congregation in rural Appalachia. Thus, a brief summary is presented of a case study (Carter, 1979) of a rural parish in Southern Wayne County, West Virginia where the writer served as pastor from September 1977 to September 1979.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The church, like any organization or voluntary association, exists so as to serve the common interests of its members. Mancur Olson (1971: 15) states: "the achievement of any common goal or the satisfaction of any common interest means that a public or collective good has been provided for that group." In other words, the provision of "collective goods is the fundamental function of organizations generally" (Olson, 1971: 15). By collective it is meant that no one is excluded from the "benefit or satisfaction brought about by its achievement" (Olson, 1971: 15). Even those who do not pay or contribute to the collective good cannot be "kept from sharing in the consumption of the good, as they can where noncollective goods are concerned" (Olson, 1971: 15).

The local church provides an array of collective goods and services, e.g., worship, education, congregational singing, fellowship dinners, etc. They are usually available for both the membership and the surrounding community. Therefore, if the church is a provider of collective goods it must also engage in the process of collective action; for in fact, the collective goods are the end result of a process of collective action.

The Free Rider Problem

"The free rider" problem is always present in collective action based on voluntarism. Olson (1971: 21) describes the problem as follows: "Though all of the members of the group... have a common interest in obtaining the collective benefit or

good, they have no common interest in paying the cost of providing that collective good." Each member within the organization would, in fact, prefer that someone else pay the entire cost of the collective good. This phenomenon of allowing an unequal distribution of the burden of collective action to occur can be called "the free rider" problem. It may occur to some extent in both large and small voluntary associations.

The "free rider" problem consists of two stages. The first is an "assurance problem," and the second, a "commitment problem." In the "assurance problem," the participant needs to be assured that his or her action or contribution, whether it be money, energy, or time, is a shared collective event and not an individual enterprise. The ability of each individual to derive a full benefit from his or her own contribution depends upon the contribution of others. If the participant suspects that other members in the organization will not engage in a similar manner of collective action an incentive is created for withholding one's own contribution.

The second stage is the problem of maintaining a commitment to the provision of the collective good. If the participant has been assured that fellow members will contribute another opportunity exists for the "free rider." Once he or she is assured of the contribution of others, the "free rider" can continue to enjoy the collective good without contributing to the collective action.

This inherent problem of sustaining collective action has traditionally been confronted in one of two ways. The

first is by coercion or compulsion; and the second by rewards or selective benefits (Olson, 1971: 13; see also Parsons and Smelser, 1954: 50-69).

Size or scale of the voluntary association adds a dimension which is usually overlooked when considering viable options in seeking a solution to the "free rider" problem. Human organizations, including the church, must then be analyzed according to scale (Simpkins: 1977), whether it be large, small, or intermediate in size. It is then necessary to consider the implications posed by size to the voluntary association.

The Large Organization. It would seem plausible that large organizations of an emotional or ideological element would not need to resort to a coercive or reward system in order to sustain collective action. One such example is patriotism in the modern state. Patriotism usually draws its strength from a common ideology as well as culture or common religion. But, to support the modern state, taxes are compulsory by law. Collective action based upon voluntarism will not support most large organizations (Olson, 1971: 13). Max Weber (1947: 319-320) recognized this when he spoke of "leveraging" individuals through a selective benefit, reward or special sanction so that individuals might have a greater incentive to contribute.

The Small Organization. In some small organizations each of the members or at least one of them will discover that personal gain or interest in the collective good goes beyond the entire cost of providing some degree of the collective good. There are some members in these organizations who would be

better satisfied even if they had to provide the entire collective good by themselves than to go without it. This would occur if the benefit exceeded the cost for the individual (Olson, 1971: 34). The single most important point is that a small group, association, or organization may very well be able to provide the members with a collective good simply because of the individual attraction of the good.

The Intermediate Organization. In an intermediate organization a member may or may not acquire enough of the generalized benefit to justify his or her own contribution. Groups of this size are large enough that an individual would not find it profitable to pay for the entire collective good; yet, the group would sufficiently notice the loss of only one member. If a member decides not to contribute the cost will noticeably rise for the others in the group; they too may then refuse to contribute and the collective good would cease. On the other hand, a member might realize that he or she would be worse off without the collective good even though a contribution had to be made. Therefore, the member might or might not decide to contribute for the provision of the collective good. The result is indeterminate (Olson, 1971: 43).

The local church is just one organization which falls into the intermediate classification. Although it can be found as both large and small, it is primarily an organization that belongs in the intermediate category. It is the size of this organization which renders it indeterminate as to whether it (the local church) will provide enough incentive for the provision of collective goods. Therefore, the church like other

intermediate organizations may or may not be able to sustain enough collective action to supply an optimal level of collective goods. If the church is to continue the provision of collective goods it must then overcome the inherent problems (i.e. assurance and commitment) of collective action.

Collective Action and the Local Church in Appalachia

The local church in the Appalachians stands as a curious institution when interpreted through a culture of poverty paradigm. This paradigm maintains that the subculture of the Appalachians is one of self generating or cyclic poverty (Walls, 1976). Moreover, the organizations therein do not exist to provide Olson's concept of a "generalized benefit," but rather to meet the "personalistic" needs caused from the subcultures extreme individualism. Jack Weller contends that the Appalachian cannot engage in collective action, except it meet individualistic needs; hence he or she must rely upon the outside, more general culture for assistance.

The puzzle within the culture of poverty analysis of collective action in Appalachia can be summed up with the following question: How does one account for the omnipresence of voluntary associations, i.e. the local church, which depends upon collective action over time? It is with this question that a culture of poverty analysis becomes somewhat anomalous. The local church, in its varied forms, is one voluntary association that can be found throughout the Appalachians. Its survival, according to a culture of poverty paradigm, has been in a

subculture of (questionable) nonjoiners. In other words, the local church in Appalachia has had to overcome subcultural traits, as well as the inherent problems of collective action. How then does one explain the prevalence of the local church, much less its continued provision of collective goods? In the up-coming discussion language will be linked to culture and the local church so as to set forth a plausible answer.

Culture, Language, and Organization

A culture and the organizations contained within depend upon the existence of common languages. Human communication and human transactions cannot occur without reference to the common understanding which is inherent in a common language (Olson, 1978: 5).

Language is especially important due to its ability to affect human interaction. Whorf has emphasized that language as a system of "conceptual categories tends to shape and channelize thought processes" (Ostrom, 1977: 2).

The church must depend upon language if a common understanding is to prevail among the membership. People cannot effectively participate in the affairs of the church without first knowing what the "terms and conditions" are. Furthermore, the participation in the church, as a social organization, implies that the members are in some basic agreement about the "terms and conditions and standards of value that guide the endeavors" of the membership whether it be in individual or collective action (Ostrom, 1978: 5). If a general agreement does not prevail and the people do not perceive their interest being served, one cannot expect the membership to participate

constructively in the affairs of the local church.

The church has developed a highly specialized language system. This language system for the Protestant Church is virtually uniform in content, but not in application. Cultural traits such as language patterns and modes of organization differ from one cultural setting to another. The language of the church, although basically the same as far as Christian terminology, is not always applied in like manner.

If an analysis is made of religious language, whether it be an examination of the analogy, the statement, or the parable, signs and symbols must be understood within the "sub-cultural ethos" (Stackhouse, 1972) of which it forms a part. Because signs and symbols have a cultural meaning many social scientists have either misquoted, misunderstood, or simply ignored their importance (Hadden, 1968).

In summary, the church stands as one social organization which provides an array of collective goods, but does not rely upon the conventional methods of motivation, such as coercion or selective benefits (to any large degree). The primary type of leverage lies in the symbolic nature of a highly specialized language system. Collective action, must in part, be motivated by this symbolic mode of communication.

THEORETICAL MODEL

The purpose of the theoretical model is to analyze the composition of religious language when it accompanies collective action events in the local church. It is designed to show the

association between certain religious symbols and voluntaristic acts in the congregation. The model is based upon the working hypothesis that religious language serves as an instrument of collective action in the local church.

The highly specialized language system of the church has traditionally been viewed as a system antagonistic to the process of social organization (Whitley, 1964: 42). Contenders of this view believe the church to be a divine fellowship, not a social organization. Language may however perform two functions. The first function of religious language is to communicate the spiritual message of the church. But, it also, secondly, establishes a set of common terms and conditions among people as necessary for a viable social organization.

The model is composed of two complementary sections. The first half analyzes the symbolic material found within religious statements; and the second half distinguishes three criteria so as to establish collective action typologies.

Symbolic Types

Religious statements can be analyzed in terms of five symbol types: (1) God Type, (2) Commitment Type, (3) Pragmatic Type, (4) Eschatological Type, and (5) Environmental Type.

The God Type. This symbol is any symbolization which directly refers to a superior being, force, or intelligence defined as being "God like." In most instances it will be revealed through one of the three trinitarian concepts of God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Each of these have various derivations, e.g., Lord, Heavenly Father, Master, Good Shepherd.

The Commitment Type. Symbols in this category place an obligation on the individual to support a specific cause or event within the work of the church. Some "commitment" symbol useage would seem to be imperative in any voluntary association due to the constant need for volunteers. Commitment is expressed in a variety of ways within the evangelical church. It is most vividly portrayed by the "altar call" which is voiced by forms of challenge or questions such as: "Won't you give your heart to Jesus?"

The Pragmatic Type. The "pragmatic" symbol is closely related to the commitment symbol; however, the distinction lies in the difference between commitment to a future obligation and performance of that obligation. This symbol is related to actual participation in the provision of collective goods. Examples such as "I'm working for the Savior" or "I do what the Lord would have me to do," emphasize performance in the present as opposed to commitment for the future.

The Eschatological Type. The "eschatological" type symbol refers to a futuristic and other-worldly event or place. "God's Heaven and Satan's Hell" are the most common examples. Others include "the Second Coming" (of Christ) and "Armageddon." Many times this symbolization will appear in phrases such as: "a land of no more tears," or "when the roll is called up yonder I'll be there." These, no doubt, convey a powerful emotional yearning within the local church.

The Environmental Type. This type provides a means of characterizing the immediate surroundings of the church. Titles of hymns and sermons often tell of the environmental setting. One case in point found in the Appalachians is that of the folk hymns "God Walks the Dark Hills" and "The Unclouded Day." These vividly portray this symbolic type within a specific cultural ethos.

Collective Action Types

The second half of the theoretical model is composed of three attributes so as to establish collective action typologies. These attributes are to distinguish (1) type of action, (2) type of leadership for initiating the action, and (3) degree of congregational involvement.

First, within the church, collective action occurs in one of two modes: contributions of money and contributions in-kind. Second, it is initiated by either the pastor or a member or officer of the congregation. And third, collective action takes place with various degrees of congregational involvement, ranging from an individual to the entire congregation. These criteria are not entirely inclusive nor mutually exclusive; however, they do yield a manageable classification system when examining the evangelical church in Appalachia.

The Application

The application of the model rests upon Ostrom's (1978: 5) observation that "people cannot effectively participate in the affairs of the community without knowing what the terms and conditions are." These terms and conditions for the church rest

in the symbolic meanings found within its highly specialized language system. Religious symbols establish a set of terms and conditions which then act as common instruments of collective action in the provision of collective goods in the church.

The five symbolic types and the three examining criteria for collective action provide this model with an operational set of parameters. By cataloging the symbol type and observing the three criteria of collective action, associations will or will not exist between the two respective halves of the model. The utility of the model lies in the association between language and the church to sustain collective action for the provision of collective goods.

CASE STUDY²

This is a brief account of an indepth case study about a rural church located in the southern half of Wayne County, West Virginia near the town of Fort Gay (pop. 700). Since its founding in the late 1860's the church has affilated with the American Baptist Convention due to their early evangelization of West Virginia.

Organizationally, the church is congregational in polity and led by a minister employed by majority vote of the congregation. The current membership is one hundred and twenty five, with approximately eighty five active members. The difference between formal membership and active membership lies primarily in outward migration rather than lack of participation.

Doctrinally the church is conservative-fundamental, although distinguished by its heterogeneous membership in terms

of social class. For instance, the Sunday School superintendent is a retired banker; the treasurer, a retired school teacher; the clerk a housewife; and the board of deacons are composed of skilled technicians and farmers, as well as a top administrator for the State Department of Welfare.

FINDINGS OF THE CASE STUDY

Three things appear to be necessary to connect language with collective action at this Appalachian parish. First, the symbols must be recognized as "spiritual." If the symbols are not associated with the spirituality of the church then the congregation does not find them compelling. Second, the symbolic expression must contain a reference to the "God" type symbol. This symbolic type provides an authority base for undertaking collective action, one that is well recognized within, as well as outside the church community. Third, the symbolic expression must contain the "pragmatic" type symbol, the use of which depends upon a general sense of commitment articulated separately through "commitment" type symbols.

The expression may or may not contain "eschatological" or "environmental" symbols. The pragmatic symbol, though it can stand alone, acquires greater weight if associated with eschatological or environmental symbols, or both. The eschatological type symbol is also helpful in establishing the spirituality of a symbolic expression.

Collective action, whether it be "contributions of money or in-kind," occur with a high frequency at this rural church.

The members rise to meet a variety of challenges in the provision of collective goods. For example, if money is needed for a new fixture in the church it is given by the congregation. If a family of the congregation needs financial assistance it is provided. If volunteers are needed in Vacation Bible School the members volunteer. If an individual is sick or hospitalized assistance is made available. If a fellowship dinner is "pot-luck" food appears by the car load. The congregation provides these plus many more collective goods because of their deep sense of commitment to this voluntary association and the members within. If asked why, their response is voiced through one or a combination of the five symbolic types previously mentioned.

Symbolic language in this church works as an instrument for overcoming the "free rider" problem inherent in collective action. First, the language is addressed to the "assurance problem," i.e., the need for each member to be assured that others will contribute by articulating a ground of authority and jointness and establishing a shared sense of congregational participation in the provision of collective goods. The combination of "God" type and "pragmatic" type symbols, e.g., "working for the Savior," or "giving your all to Jesus," convey pragmatic terms and conditions which carry the assurance that those who believe in "the Savior" will "work."

Second, the language addresses the "commitment" problem, i.e., the need for individuals to feel committed once assured of other's contributions by providing an authoritative means of expressing a continuing commitment to the church. The occasion

for expressing commitment at this rural parish is most often the altar call. By responding to the altar call individuals manifest signs of commitment. In addition to coming forward, individuals articulate their sense of obligation through symbolic expressions both to the pastor and the congregation. To "give your heart to Jesus" is to make a basic commitment with a profound sense of personal obligation.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Local church congregations throughout America and especially in rural Appalachia are for the most part "intermediate" sized groups. This case study is one example. Given that collective action is indeterminate for this size of collectivity, what makes the difference at this rural parish in its ability to sustain congregational collective action on a voluntary basis? Religious language composed of meaningful symbolic expressions holds the key.

Consensus is a necessary condition for voluntary collective action to occur. Language cannot elicit collective action in the absence of consensus. Language is an essential instrument in the act of sharing consensus. The congregation's consensus in this case study rests upon common terms and conditions embodied in a language system which is composed of symbolic types representing "God," "commitment," "pragmatic action," "eschatology," and the "environment."

Implications of the Study: Appalachia/America

This study raises several questions in relation to Appalachian culture and religion as portrayed by several previous writers, especially the proponents of a culture of poverty paradigm. The study poses an anomaly for this paradigm in at least two points.

First, in a culture of poverty analysis, Appalachian religion and culture are described as "fatalistic." The tentative conclusion reached by this research is that within the domain of the local church "spirituality" has been misinterpreted as "fatalism." Eschatological symbolism is not fatalistic for the congregation of this case study. To the contrary: rather than symbolizing passive acceptance and resignation, these symbols stir to action.

Second, the general effectiveness of leadership in a process of collective action in the rural Appalachian congregation may depend on using the right language. Perhaps ministers who were educated outside the Appalachian Region that failed to find viable collective action used the wrong language in communicating to the congregation. It would appear that Weller and others may have disregarded the importance of conservative Christian-Biblical symbols as instruments of collective action.

Outside the Appalachian context religious scholarship in the liberal tradition has held the principle of voluntarism in high esteem (Adams, 1976), while disparaging the use of conservative Christian-Biblical symbols. The results of this

study would seem to indicate that the traditional liberal point of view is internally contradictory. Conservative symbolism may in fact be an important source of voluntarism and collective action in the local church congregation.

FOOTNOTES

1. A recent exception to this prevailing view of religion in Appalachia can be found in the "Introduction," by B.B. Maurer and "The Theoretical Supplement," by John D. Photiadis in Religion in Appalachia (1978). Also, an exception to the prevailing view of fatalism etc. concerning culture can be found in O.N. Simpkin's article on "Culture," found in Mountain Heritage (1975).
2. In the space of this paper the case study cannot be fully developed, therefore the writer will only be able to give a brief summary of the results. The full study is contained in the Masters Thesis of the writer (See Bibliography).

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