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# THE INVOLVEMENT OF SOCIETY IN THE RELIGIOUS DECISION

## A CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIOLOGY TO THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

*by William G. Mather*

### THE SOCIAL NATURE OF MAN

Sociology as a science came into being gradually. It came as students of mankind began to observe that most of man's activities are carried on not singly but by men in groups. Whether the activity is religious in nature, or economic, or political, or reproductive, it is an activity carried on by men who find themselves grouped by geography, or age, or sex, or kinship, or who group themselves by interest in a common goal. The goal of the activity, the method of attaining the goal, and the membership of the group are all set by the group. This was observed so regularly that man came to be called "the group animal," or "the social animal."

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some scholars began to have interest in the group and the grouping tendency in themselves, primarily as objects of study somewhat apart from their economic, political, or religious contexts. They made the group their concern, as biologists did the cell, chemists the element, physicists the atom. They classified the various kinds of groups, took them apart to learn their

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function and structure, their growth cycle from origin to decline, their subgroups, the relations between leaders and followers, the relations between groups, and the effects of group membership upon the individual members.

It is at this point—the effect upon the members—that sociology and psychology found themselves approaching each other and created a sort of bridge science—"social psychology." Across this bridge, contemporary sociologists and psychologists move in each direction with considerable freedom and general friendliness. Much research is done by teams drawn from the two disciplines.

This, then, is the general field in which sociology and sociologists work today. Because it is a study of man, it is fascinating, for people are interesting. Because it is a study of man, it is difficult, for the high values placed upon human personality by all men prevent them from being cracked open like rocks, shot around the tracks of a cyclotron, or even manipulated like laboratory mice. And there is always the fact that the sociological observer is studying others of his own species and has a built-in bias.

For all of that, however, certain principles are being accepted as well established in the field. Like all such basic principles of science, they are simple, almost child-like in their simplicity. They are, however, enormously complex in their effects.

The *first principle* is that societies of men may differ. This is peculiar to the human species. In general, among animals society and species are coterminal; the social patterns are primarily specified by the genetic heritage of the species. Although all men belong to the same species, their ways of living—types of religion, forms of marriage, kinds of government, and the like—differ extremely. A society, as the sociologist uses the term, is a large number, usually, of people in a more or less well-defined territory with a type of religion, a form of marriage, a kind of government, a system of economics, and the like, which together form a complex pattern of behavior different from that of other groups of people.

These patterns of behavior, together with the tools or things necessary to perform them, and the ideas or value systems associated with them, are known as "culture." All people in a society have in general the same culture.

Societies are of great importance in the life of a person. They are the primary source of his behavior patterns and value systems insofar as these are not specified genetically. Ralph Linton put it: "Societies, rather than individuals, are the functional units in our species' struggle

for existence, and it is societies as wholes which are the bearers and perpetuators of cultures."[1] A person is immersed in his society as a fish is immersed in a lake. It is his world, beyond which he can reach only with the greatest effort and risk, because his society contains within itself all the behavior patterns that are approved by his people and recognized by them as necessary for his survival.

This must be immediately qualified as not utterly true. Societies are generally too large for any one person to participate wholly in all of their parts. The lake is too big for any one fish. Any one fish will participate in the life of only a limited part of the lake—a bog, an inlet or outlet stream, a deep or a shoal—whichever provides the food supply, the temperatures, the hazards to which he has become accustomed. What he knows of the lake is his inlet.

Our *second principle,* then, is that societies have subcultures. It is in these subcultures that individuals participate, especially in contemporary societies, which are large and complex. These subcultures are not new or alien cultures, for their elements are found in the total culture; they are, rather, selective acceptances, or differential emphases, from the whole. And here again we must qualify, for some subcultures in large and complex modern societies may actually incorporate, as the result of immigration, culture traits from without the territory of the general society. These come about when ethnic groups on the move bring in, to complete our figure of speech, water from another lake. This water immediately becomes heavily diluted and becomes not a substitute for the local culture but a sort of contaminant, or catalyst, or flavor, or blend. The "Pennsylvania Dutch" subculture is still more Pennsylvania than "Dutch."

### The Role of Subcultures in Shaping Individuals

Subcultural differences are most easily understood by community studies. Harvard University has in the past decade been contributing heavily to this from its series of human relations studies in our Southwest.

From one of these, we have a comparison of Rimrock and Homestead, fictitious names given to two locality groups, each of about two hundred fifty persons, forty miles apart on the edge of what geologists call the Colorado Plateau.[2] It is dry, arid country, with erratic rainfall. Rimrock was settled by Mormons from the north, a people with a strong group consciousness, brought on partly by their religious beliefs, partly by the resulting persecution. The people of Rimrock do everything co-operatively, as groups. Many of these have their origin in

church action, while some of them are kinship-based. They have a co-operative irrigation company and co-operatives for operations of production, processing, and selling. When a construction company built a gravel road down the valley, the people of Rimrock formed a co-operative and had the same company pave their main street. Co-operation and mutual aid have high values for all Rimrock citizens, adults and children alike.

Homestead was settled by migrants from dried-out, blown-out Texas and Oklahoma in the early thirties. They were attracted to this area by free government homestead land. They raise pinto beans and cattle by dry farming. Their enterprises are independent, private, competitive. When the construction company building the road down the valley made Homestead the same offer it did Rimrock, Homestead, after long delay, held a meeting and turned it down. A few of the business establishments then privately paid for the dumping of a few loads of gravel before their stores, but the main street is still largely dust and mud. There is a larger out-migration of young people from Homestead than from Rimrock. Some of them, moving to irrigated areas along the lower Rio Grande, introduced a new culture trait—the use of individual water meters in the irrigation ditches.

It is obvious from the complete study that the personal value systems of the children reared in these two communities are quite different in some important ways, that these differences persist in residents after they leave the communities, and that the origin of the differences lies in the differences in community values.

But the matter is far more complex when communities much larger than little Rimrock and Homestead are examined. Then we find that such communities, while generally having certain distinguishing characteristics of their own—we speak of industrial, commercial, educational, and recreational communities, for example—also have subcultures within them.

Warner and Lunt[3] and others have thoroughly established the existence of such factors as social and economic class which strongly influence the aspirations and the behavior of the families and individuals in their different categories. I use this term in preference to "group," as there is usually no true group that includes all the members of a category; but within any such category, the several groups that do develop encounter certain common opportunities and restrictions. The unskilled laborer is not likely to be a college graduate, to belong to groups that require white tie and tails at social events, to be active in one of the standard churches, or to plan on sending his many children

through college and professional school. A heart surgeon who is chief of staff in the most fashionable hospital in the city will do all of these things with fewer children. The two may live in the same city but be sociological worlds apart, divided by a precarious bridge that they and their children can cross only with difficulty and at the great cost of alienating themselves from the groups in which they have lived.

Havighurst and others, in their study of a small midwestern city, which is partially reported in the book *Growing Up in River City*,[4] followed the children from their eleventh year and sixth grade until most of them were twenty. They have established the strong influence of class and group upon the life style of the families and the life chances of the children and their relative opportunities for growth in the direction of the dominant community values. The authors divide the causes for failure between the families and the community, each of which can strongly help or hinder.

John S. Coleman's study of youth in ten high schools[5] indicates that the center of the society of adolescents is the high school, which permeates their values and affects their images of themselves. It does this largely through formal and especially informal groups, cliques, and "elites," which exert far more control on ideas and behavior than do families, faculties, and churches. These are generally termed "reference groups" in sociological discourse and can be found in adult as well as adolescent life.

What will probably be the classic in this area was recently published by Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif, under the title *Reference Groups*. After a deep and extensive study of such groups, they report:

> The individual's lasting and directive claims for acceptance, recognition, possessions, and enjoyment of good things in life are typically relative to other individuals. But who are the other individuals relative to whom the individual makes his claim . . . ? Many studies have shown in recent years that the individual's personal goals are affected in no small way by the groups to which he belongs and aspires to belong—in short, by his reference groups. . . . When the individual participates in a group of his own choosing, he contributes his bit—small or large—to its character, to the pattern of relationships, the standards for behavior, to mutual goals. . . . What is needed is a conception of the individual in his group and cultural setting, and a conception of group and cultural setting relative to its members.[6]

While the Sherif study was made by trained observers of such "natural" social groups in their "native" habitats, the strength of such influence has been best revealed by the famous "Asch Experiment" in a social psychology laboratory.[7] In this experiment, volunteer subjects were placed one at a time with two "stooges," or laboratory assistants

who were previously instructed. The job was to judge the relative lengths of two lines of quite clearly different lengths presented together. The stooges always judged wrong, and the naïve subject at first was always right. Only one-fourth of the subjects held true to what their senses told them in the course of the repetition of the presentation of the lines, eighteen times in all. At the other extreme, one-third yielded to the pressure and went with the majority over half the time. The remainder fell in between. Some of the subjects deliberately went with the majority, even when convinced that they were wrong; some of them felt that there was something wrong with their vision; and some felt they were making errors of judgment. But the interesting thing is that this little experiment, often repeated since, shows how the individual can be persuaded by others in a group to behave against his own judgment.

A variation of this, performed by R. S. Crutchfield at the University of California, resulted in the finding that 58 per cent of the subjects tested could be induced to agree with a statement denying freedom of speech.[8]

We can state a *third principle* now, that the subcultures in a society, whether of community or reference group type, are powerful in forming the goals and shaping the value systems and behavior of the individuals within them.

Because individuals at the same time do have some part in reinforcing or weakening the reference groups to which they belong, we cannot state this in a way that goes to the lengths of determinism; but we are obligated to say that the society at large, and the subcultures and groups within it, must therefore share the responsibility for what any one person is and does.

### Implications for Understanding Religion in History

To some extent this was known to, or felt by, the ancient Hebrews. The covenant of Jehovah was made not with a man but with the tribes of Israel. Israel, not as a man but as a tribe or nation, was the servant of God. The Commandments were given not to a man but to a man and all his household. The village of Gibeah was practically exterminated because of a crime committed by "some base fellows" within it. The family, household, livestock, and even the tent and equipment of Achan were destroyed in punishment of an act of disobedience which he alone had done. There was a proverb in ancient days, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Although both Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke against it, it was so much a

part of the common folklore that much later Jesus was asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The message of the great prophets was that the tribe, the nation, had sinned and would be punished; Amos placed his famous plumb line "in the midst of my people Israel"; it was the case of Israel as a people that Micah pled before the mountains; it was Israel that Hosea said had forgotten "who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold, which they used for Baal." Likewise, it was a remnant that should be brought back to the fold, to be fruitful and multiply; the Lord was to be the redeemer of Israel; and salvation was to be published to Zion.

In the Hebrew tradition, individual persons are mentioned in this sense generally because they have led others to sin, or led others to restoring righteousness; but more frequent than individuals are categories of people such as those who alter weights and measures, those who make certain kinds of foreign alliances, those who buy land away from family inheritances and form for themselves large estates. When Job and Solomon try to prove their worth before God, they do so almost exclusively in their relationships with other people—family, servants, widows and orphans, unfortunate strangers. The social context is always there.

Jeremiah, in spite of his insistence that "he who eats sour grapes, *his* teeth shall be set on edge," has a most remarkable extension of the idea of a common lot in his letter to the Hebrew captives deported to the Gentile cities of Babylon around 600 B.C.:

> Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply them, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare [Jer. 29:4–7].

For a people who had so long been endogamous, whose main claim upon the Almighty was their bloodline running down from Abraham, to whose descendants God had given forever the land of Israel, whose capital city of Jerusalem was the city chosen by God to be his earthly seat of power and the central government of his world state, this message of practical adjustment must have been very difficult to accept. There is little evidence that there was anywhere any great effort to carry Jeremiah's philosophy into effect. One does not abandon over

night a thousand years of clannishness and become in the morning a friend of all the world.

What seems to have happened was that the dispersed Hebrews tried to clump together wherever they were, but they were not able to form large enough communities to isolate themselves completely from the peoples and cultures of their diverse locations. They created local synagogues and developed lay leaders, but uniformity of customs, ritual, and theology among them was probably never achieved. The diversity among such important centers of the Dispersion as Babylon, Elephantine, Leontopolis, and Media supports such a conclusion.[9]

Certainly, by the time of Jesus of Nazareth there was considerable religious confusion, partly from these causes and partly due to the flooding of Palestine by wave after wave of alien soldiers, priests, politicians, and merchantmen from many other cultures. Sects and movements had developed within Judaism—the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Nazarenes, Essenes, Hellenes, the early Hasidim, and others. The Jews did not have the unity, the monolithism, of the Hebrews, such as it was.[10] Under these circumstances, families were turned inward upon themselves, not all in a village following the same customs, not all within a family, even, accepting the same ideas. The individual had to choose. Even Jesus at one time raised the question, " 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.' "

By the time of the origins of Christianity, the old, old concept of group religious responsibility in family and community had been greatly weakened. As far as New Testament accounts go, Jesus did little to revive it. In fact, he seems to have discouraged it, calling individuals to leave "house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands" to follow him. He said he had come "to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And when a young man schooled in the Jewish law asked him, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (note the singular pronoun "I"), he replied with the great traditional reply of the Jews to such a question—by affirming love of God and neighbor. The young man pushed it further with, "And who is my neighbor?" The reply was the now familiar parable of a Samaritan, not a Jew, who cared for a robbed and beaten stranger on the Jericho road after religious men of his own people had passed him by. The strong suggestion is that Jesus was radically changing both kinship and neighbor-

hood concepts away from their original blood and territorial meaning to a voluntary, specialized interest grouping based upon individual beliefs and behavior.

We must grant that these beliefs were for the most part very lofty and exalted, and the behavior as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount and in Jesus' own actions pushed against the outer limits of man's philanthropic abilities—but they were socially rootless, lacking in the strong reinforcement which comes from the kinship group and the neighborhood. Had Jesus led his followers out into the wilderness, as did the Essenes, he might have founded a community that would eventually have provided this need—but it would have died as the colony of the Essenes died when society finally touched it.

As it was, Jesus did not have long to work. Too soon for consolidation, the movement passed into the hands of his disciples. Too soon the split between the Jewish and Gentile wings of early Christianity forced each to develop independently. And too soon the total destruction of Jerusalem by Vespasian turned both Jew and Gentile out as orphans in the world. The early Christian churches, ethnically rootless, on their own in hostile communities, were split by bickerings over doctrine, ritual, and practice. The letters of Paul were for long the only supplement to the Jewish scriptures that the churches had, and these reflected their diversity. The gospel accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus were also written about this time and reflect the quarrels and uncertainty, too. Both letters and gospels were too contemporary to carry any authority beyond their own surface appeal. The consequent multiplication of Christian sects was far more serious in its impact upon Christianity than the development of Jewish sects had been upon Judaism, because the Christian sects came so very early in the life of Christianity, before it acquired strength, tradition, or direction. Paul's advice to the members of the church at Philippi—"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"—doubtless came from his heart.

Even more than Judaism, Christianity turned inward. Its strongest leader was Paul. His message was oversimple. Believe that Jesus was the Messiah, that he died to save those that believe, and live a moral personal life—this was the essence of it. Those who accepted this would be caught up into the air when the Messiah came again, which would be within Paul's lifetime, and rewarded in Heaven. There was slavery in Paul's day, and slaves and slave owners became Christians—but he never challenged the institution of slavery. There was profligate corruption in government, but one would never know it from his letters. Armies marched and countermarched in bloody, senseless wars of

naked imperialist conquest, but he never mentioned them. In A.D. 80 Titus inaugurated the huge Colosseum with the slaughter of five thousand animals, and this was followed by the customary gladiatorial battles in which hundreds of men were killed in duels and group fights —an old Roman custom, which Pliny the Younger approved, saying these public massacres engendered courage by showing how the love of glory and the desire to conquer could lodge even in the breasts of criminals and slaves. Pliny was a contemporary of Paul's. Paul never took issue with these degrading customs.[11]

This does not mean that Paul approved of the society and the culture around the early churches. It does mean that he saw no relevance in it for the gospel of Christ or for the churches. His call was not to change the world but for individuals to endure it and to receive a personal reward for the endurance.

The best example is the misuse of Isa. 52:11 in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (6:14–18). Addressed originally to the Hebrews as a people, a nation, and calling them to return to Jerusalem from their early captivities around 600 B.C., the words of the prophet were quoted by Paul (and not very accurately) in a passage of his own apparently directed to Christians who were married to non-Christians: "Do not be mismated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? . . . Therefore come out from them and be separated from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." This has been often used since as scriptural grounds for non-co-operation of various kinds, and is the reason the Amish use for not connecting their barns and houses to electric and telephone lines. In any case, it has encouraged withdrawal from, not participation in, the community around the congregation.

All of these immediate comments are predicated on the assumption that the gospels and the letters give a fair account of the teachings of Jesus and Paul. We know that in some particulars they probably do not. But, whether or not they do, they have been accepted as genuine by most Christian congregations and they have followed in this way.

Out of the rough-and-tumble of the early Christian churches came, finally, the emergence of authority vested in the congregation at Rome and with this the institutionalizing of Christianity for some thousand years. Salvation was by and through the church, which was cold toward spiritual innovation or experimentation. Such deviation as occurred,

the church guided and controlled by means of its suborders and censorship, with more extreme measures taken when deemed necessary.

But things got out of hand again with the periods of Reformation and Enlightenment and with the printing of Scriptures in the vernacular, the breakup of the peasant village by the factory, advances in agriculture, the discovery of new countries of apparently limitless lands, and the fall of old kinds of governments and the rise of new.

One of the fundamental religious ideas that resulted from the Reformation was that a person could, and should, make his own approach to God. No intervening priest was needed. Nearly all the religious reformers held, in varying degrees, the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. This returned the Christian religion, or at least the Protestants, to a highly personalized status. The idea caught on rapidly in the early American colonies. They were separated by long and slow sea miles from the institutionalized churches of the continent, they were settled by persons of adventurous spirit or of habits too wilful for their former neighbors, and the settlers were rugged enough so that in the westward expansions they left the more gentle clergy well behind. This doctrine enabled them to make do enthusiastically with the spiritual resources and opportunities they had.

Especially on the American frontier, the religious entrepreneur seemed at home with his individualized religion. The problems at hand were small in size and narrow in scope—clearing the land, growing the crops, making use of the local waterfall, quarrying the surface rock, smelting the local pocket of ore, getting along with the wife and the neighbors a half-mile away, raising the children, keeping sober, and fighting fair. Problems of national and international politics and finance were left to the cities along the seaboard. The ultimate consequences of stripping the slopes bare of their protective tree covering and permitting the soil to wash away, of dumping waste and raw sewage into water that would be drunk in towns downstream, and ethical questions such as the rights of the Indians to the land, troubled but few of the pioneers. Their life struggle was highly personal, physical, and tangible, and so was their religious faith. It served all the responsibilities of which they were aware.

Most of the great American denominations of today, if not born on the frontier, had their childhood and adolescence there and still bear the crudities of its marks.

Regarding Methodism, William W. Sweet said:

> From the very beginning, Methodism's emphasis in religion was individualistic. John Wesley told that religion was a personal matter; his appeal was for

"individual, concrete experience," and his sermons were so effectual because they were addressed directly to men and women. He had no use, however, for extreme quietism and would have nothing of "solitary religion." He once stated that "the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness." Wesley, however, sought to "combine the qualities of an individualistic intense religious piety . . . with those qualities characteristic of the church." He expected the Methodist movement to remain within the Anglican Church, not only in England but also in America.[12]

His concept of the "social gospel" seems in practice to have been narrowly applied, mainly to the "immediate others" in the local congregation, the kinship group, the shop, and the neighborhood.

And yet the frontier produced some who saw vaguely the wider extension of their personal problems. Sweet quotes part of a letter written by a slave-holding Methodist who moved to Ohio from Virginia in the early 1800's to get away from slavery as an institution. The writer bemoans his ownership of slaves, stating that "they are a hell to us in this world, and I fear will be in the next. But what to do with them, I know not. We cannot live with them or without them; what to do is a question. . . . Unless the whip be forever on their backs, they do nothing. . . . Is this a life for a Christian to lead? I wish some good advice upon this head."[13]

Indeed, the very spirit of individualism in both economic and religious life on the American frontier may have laid the groundwork for our modern questioning of its validity. Individualism was not able to cope with the problems of farmers whose milk may make unseen babies ill three hundred miles away; of stockholders of chemical companies whose waste insecticides contaminate a whole mighty river; of chambers of commerce and labor unions in cities where inefficient defense industries are faced with closure; of voting citizens in a great country whose suspicion of strangers is such that their representatives in government feel compelled to escalate a brushfire war in a distant and confused land. The spirit of individualism was not able to do this because it was not aware of the connection between the moral man and his larger, unethical society.

The gospel had to wait for the discovery—and distribution—of the germ theory of disease, for greater knowledge of the effects of chemicals upon biological matter, for further development of economic and political theory, and for the invention and use of broader and swifter means of communication before it could become aware of its own need for growth. It is but another example of cultural lag.

Our despairing Methodist slaveholder faced a problem too large for his individual gospel to handle. At least he knew this. Whether he went

on to join an abolitionist society, whether his son died on the slopes of Lookout Mountain, whether his great-grandchildren were beaten up in a Mississippi lunchroom, we do not know. But at least he raised the question that we are still trying to decide. We have learned that the solution is not an individual matter and that society has to set the limits within which individuals may act responsibly.

### Implications for Religion Today

It is in the setting of these limits that religion comes into the area of its own responsibility, for these limits reflect the value systems of the people within the society—and even the most personal and individualized religious system is a system of values, of rights and wrongs, of goods and evils, of shall and shall not, of "I hate this" and "let the other roll down as a mighty stream."

What we face in this modern world, complex even beyond our present suspicions, is at bottom the extension of the powerful drive of our traditional self-centered religion into a world-centered religion.

When we read of thirty-eight people in a small neighborhood of a great city cowering behind their window blinds for forty-five minutes while a young woman is attacked three times by a man with a knife and finally slain, because they "did not want to become involved," we realize that we hardly have a religion competent for neighborhood use yet.

Here is where the recent discoveries of social psychology can help us greatly. The "individual gospel" has through all these weary years been based upon the assumption that each individual is a free and independent agent, forming his own personality, making his own choices, self-made and hence self-responsible, and standing solitary, at the last, at the judgment bar, where, as Kipling sings in his ballad of Tomlinson, "the sin ye do by two and two ye must pay for one by one." It simply is not so.

The Asch experiments, cited earlier in this paper, in every reported replication, have shown the strong effects on individual decision making of even the slightest group pressure—whether real pressure of a real group or the simulated pressure of a group existing only in prerecorded voices.

The Gluecks have demonstrated the quite accurate predictability of juvenile delinquency by measuring certain conditions in the families of boys in a neighborhood in New York City.[14]

A Pennsylvania State University study of three thousand high-school boys indicates an almost one-to-one relationship between social and economic status of the family and the probability of attending college.[15]

The Philadelphia Health Research Fund is currently working on a project to help the parents of elementary-school children withdraw from the smoking habit, since numerous studies have shown that youngsters as they grow older are more likely to develop the pattern of smoking if their parents set the example.[16]

J. A. Hostetler's study of the Mennonite church found that of 8,218 accessions to that church, 80 per cent were from families already within that church, most of the rest from families of other Mennonite bodies or other "general American" churches, and only 8.4 per cent of the whole from families whose heads had no connection with any church.[17]

The religious decision is no different from any other decision—basically it is not personal, but social. It is made in consequence of all the previous social experience the individual has had, and under the influence of the social aspects of the situation in which it is made.

George Cross, without benefit of the sociological laboratory, some forty years ago asked a question concerning any man who had "sinned":

> Was he never a member of a family or of some other group that under certain conditions encouraged deeds of this kind? If now he repudiates such acts will he not place himself in an unfriendly relation to these persons? That is, does not the act represent the character of human community? Is any sinner, indeed, an absolute anarchist? Is he alien to mankind? In his sinning has he set his will against the collective will of the whole of humanity? There can be but one answer—certainly not. The attraction of another person or other persons was operative in his will. To this degree his act was a community act.[18]

Cross continued his discussion by indicating that the sinner shared in the guilt because none but he could have done his sin in that particular way. The community consciousness, he said, is never static but constantly under process of modification by the self-directed action of the man: "If, therefore, the community makes the man, the man also makes the community."

It would clearly seem that the doctrine of *individual* salvation—that the *individual* sins, the *individual* repents, and the *individual* is "saved"—is largely false. His fellows stand with him all the way.

Further, it would clearly seem that in our kind of society, where none can have pure water unless all have it, none can have wholesome food unless all have it, none can be well unless all are well, none can be healed unless facilities are at hand for all to be healed, none can be educated unless there is education for all, none can be at peace unless all are at peace—in short, where the whole complex community and complexes of communities rise or fall together—any doctrine that an

individual can save his own skin or his own soul apart from his fellow men is not only false and irresponsible but dangerous, hindering family, community, national, and international efforts to better the future of mankind.

A theology is needed which will take account of, indeed draw its strength from, the fact that no man can escape his being involved in the welfare of his fellows, that only in their welfare will he find his welfare, and that apart from their salvation he will not be saved.

NOTES

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9. George Barton, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928; cited from the Perpetua edition [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961]), pp. 263 ff.

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