

# MAN: NOT ONLY AN INDIVIDUAL BUT A MEMBER

*by Clara Mayo*

Asked to look at religion from his particular scientific perspective, a sociologist might look at structures and institutions, and a psychologist might look at the inner direction that religion gives the values and beliefs of the individual. But a social psychologist looks first at the interaction between social and personal forces, namely, at the meaning that membership in an organized religion has for man.

Man is a social animal, one of a species that is naturally gregarious. Roots of this sociability are laid down early and deep in the necessary relationship of mother and child. The human infant requires the attention of a mothering adult to survive. In man, this dependence of offspring is much longer than in animals and is guided by more than the biological heritage. Only sustained social contact enables the child to develop a sense of self and a capacity to cope with the tasks that the environment presents. When children are deprived of social contact, as is sometimes the case with institutionalized or hospitalized children, they experience social and emotional damage. Prolonged isolation and emotional deprivation lead to irreversible damage. Harlow's<sup>1</sup> noted studies of monkeys, raised with surrogate mothers under varying conditions of isolation, dramatically demonstrate that these monkeys are severely disturbed, particularly when their time comes for mothering behavior.

Social isolation is even stressful for adult humans. Accounts by prisoners tell of the destructive impact of isolation and of their turning to befriending animals or populating the environment through imagination. Volunteers in experiments in sensory deprivation describe a world filled with fantasied imagery and hallucinatory experiences.

## THEORETICAL GROUNDS FOR MAN'S SOCIAL NATURE

Psychologists have drawn on a number of explanations according to the prevailing theories of their time. At the beginning of this century, the

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need for human association was called an instinct by William McDougall, the first to be considered a social psychologist. The instinct theories were opposed vigorously by men like John Dewey, who wished to explain social motives in terms of habits formed in interaction with the social environment. In time, it was thought that men join with others to accomplish together what they cannot as easily accomplish alone. Production of goods, trade and commerce, defense against enemies, all could be carried out more adaptively by several than by one. The awareness that men unite for a common purpose is, of course, no discovery of the social scientist. Throughout history, philosophers from Plato and Socrates through Thomas Aquinas to Locke, Rousseau, and Hegel have offered theories of social behavior that attempted an integration with the religious doctrines of their time. More recently, social scientists have attempted to apply to the religious ideas of the twentieth century their observations of man's need to join with others. The better known attempts at such integration are those of the sociologists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Durkheim described society as an organized system of beliefs, values, and activities, a systematic force capable of directing the behavior of individuals. Current social psychological definitions tend to emphasize that society is a group of people who come to share common goals, beliefs, and ways of behaving in mutual support. Durkheim based his ideas of the relation of society and religion on a study of the beliefs of a group of Australian tribes.<sup>2</sup> He noted that, among these primitive people, the tribe itself was both source and object of religious devotion. While social scientists do not now believe that this view explains worship in more complicated societies, the view that society is God and God is society has relevance for those who make the state or political party the object of worship.

Whatever the merits of Durkheim's conclusions, it was his methods that had the greatest impact. Durkheim drew attention to religion as a social phenomenon that can be studied as such. He stressed the fact that society could not be understood without reference to the values and ideas that bind members together. He called these "collective representations" (an example of the social scientist's unfortunate tendency to resort to linguistic invention when words fail him). "Collective representations" are images or memories of group experiences found in every individual, which, taken together, constitute the "collective conscience" of a society, the moral consensus without which it could not exist. Those values most highly held are sanctified in the religion or religions to which the society adheres. By thus placing under sanctions the most

important elements of consensus, religion facilitates the existence of a moral community. It is this aspect of Durkheim's work which has become the guiding force of the functionalist approach in social anthropology (as noted in the work of Malinowski) and in sociology (as represented by Talcott Parsons). The functionalist approach attempts to analyze social phenomena in terms of their role in the network of patterns and forces that function to maintain the society as an integrated whole.

In contrast to Durkheim's emphasis on the objective character of social phenomena, the work of the German sociologist-historian Max Weber stresses the subjective meaning of such phenomena. Writing at approximately the same time as Durkheim, Weber put greater emphasis on the meaning of social processes to the individual, an approach that appeals to the social psychologist. Weber suggests that beliefs, ideas, and values not only are products of society but also help to determine the direction social processes will take. His work influenced those studies, now much in vogue in social psychology and sociology, which strive to demonstrate the effect of religious affiliation or conviction on various aspects of human behavior, such as voting, career choice, and family size. Weber's own study of the effects of Protestantism on economic processes is the precursor of this line of investigation.

#### RELIGION AND THE LEGITIMATION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER

From the study of the political order, Weber developed the concept of *legitimation*.<sup>3</sup> Weber suggests that the survival of any organization of power depends on finding a theoretical justification for this power. Power seeks legitimation for reasons of both economy and self-justification. Naked force is an uneconomical and inefficient method of staying in power. Every tyranny attempts to develop consensus among its subjects and sometimes even among its captive enemies. There has been recent concern among psychologists and others about the use of group process and group consensus to produce a change in beliefs by a technique known as "brainwashing." Effective use is made of man's desire to produce order in his system of beliefs and to gain approval by those in his immediate environment. Controlled manipulation of attitudes is an old and powerful weapon—one sometimes disturbingly underestimated. Weber noted that power also seeks legitimation because those who wield power wish to believe that they have a right to it. Some men in positions of power come to believe their own propaganda, perhaps only because self-deception is psychologically easier than true Machiavellianism.

The sociologist Peter Berger applied the concept of legitimation to

religion. In secular states, the most powerful legitimations of power are the religious ones. Berger noted that this is most evident in acute crises of the political order, in times of war or revolution. "As the drum rolls before battle there is always a moment of silence in which the impending carnage is commended to the super-natural powers."<sup>4</sup> Power stands in need of the ideas men hold in reverence, the ideas that can motivate them to altruistic action and death for a cause. It seems to me that it is this transitory aspect of religion, the consequence of religion's value in the marketplace, that has alienated many from organized religion. For religion has often legitimated society or come to its defense without regard for moral content in any ultimate sense. Religion has defended equally cannibalism and vegetarianism, infanticide and maternal love, slavery and brotherhood. The current agony of conscience within organized religion in this country concerning the Vietnam war is centered in the dilemma of legitimation. Attempts are made to separate religious belief from religious institutions, but the attempts are artificial because, in all societies, religion becomes organized into institutions beyond its expression in religious belief or sentiment. There is a natural, indissoluble evolution from sect to church, from ideology to organization.

Let us seek the roots of this development in the roots of man's social behavior. We have seen that man's tendency to seek the company of others was at one time attributed to instinct, later to common purpose. More recently, a social psychologist has suggested that anxiety undergirds man's affiliative behavior. Schachter<sup>5</sup> offered young people a choice between awaiting a painful outcome with others in the same anxious state and awaiting it with a carefree, uninvolved group. Overwhelmingly, students chose the company of others in the same situation as themselves. According to Schachter, being with others serves two major functions for the anxious individual. First, the company of others in a similar plight is anxiety-reducing. In some way as yet unknown, the mere physical closeness of others is reassuring. Second, being with others in the same situation can realistically bring help from them on how to deal most adaptively with the frightening situation. Our literature is rich in accounts of the experiences of shipwrecked, imprisoned, or otherwise isolated groups, demonstrating that co-operation and mutual help are found in such situations.

Everyone is led by a search for reassurance and security to *join with others* in expressing dependence on something. In joining with others, he forms groups that exhibit two common characteristics: The members are *interdependent* (each member's behavior influences the behavior of each of the others); and the members share an *ideology*, a set

of beliefs which regulate their conduct. As a group's values and beliefs develop over time, the beliefs become more specific to the members of this group alone and eventually may come to separate them from other groups. These two criteria of interdependence and ideology apply to many kinds of groups, from families to churches. It is abundantly clear that in our society no one group satisfies all the needs and desires of any one individual, still less does any one group satisfy all the needs and desires of all its members. Consequently, all of us belong to many groups, and we have many reasons for joining. A number of studies have investigated the reasons people affiliate themselves with organized religion. Douglass<sup>6</sup> surveyed 357 Protestant churches in this country and found thirty-three different kinds of church activities, all non-religious in the traditional sense of the word. Social events, concerts, fairs, child care, self-improvement classes, and social action are carried on without reference to a supernatural power. Douglass attributes the proliferation of functions in religious groups to the changing needs and goals of group members, and he asserts that the functions of the group must show corresponding changes if the group is to survive.

In my opinion, flexibility of religious functions is critical, for it is clear that people accept group goals only to the extent that they perceive them to fulfil individual needs and goals. Church leaders rightly express concern over the quantity and quality of participation by nominal members in the activities of the church. Religious institutions and practices must keep pace with the changing needs of individuals if a given church, rather than religion in general, is to survive. Current examples of the problem abound—from the struggles of the Catholic church to reconcile doctrine to problems of population control to the crisis of the urban church as it seeks to become relevant to changing populations. The problems are crystallized by the fact that not only must group goals in some measure fit individual goals but also group goals must appear to be leading to success. As members of a group work together, individual acceptance of the group fluctuates with the perceived probability of success. If an individual member comes to fear that his group isn't making it, he may withdraw.

In a recent study<sup>7</sup> of the interaction of participation in religious and work settings, it was found that there is a strong conflict between involvement in the communities of work and religion for "minority men in majority settings." The investigators define minority men as those whose religious affiliation is not the predominant one for their occupational group, and they report that such people reduce their participation in religious affairs. It is clear that this group responds to the pres-

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sure to change in the direction of the majority by dropping religious affiliation and friendships. Those whose religion is dominant in their occupational group are apparently freer to exercise individual choice about participation.

Social pressures on religion to legitimate the uses of power and the individual pressures to meet a wider variety of needs may be changing the role of religion in our society. We are told that we live in an age of religious revival with church membership at unexcelled heights; yet the religious influence in our daily lives is said to be negligible. Perhaps these seemingly contradictory statements come to be reconciled in the tension between legitimation and secularization of church functions.

### RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

In order to achieve stability and cohesiveness, group processes function to minimize or retard major changes in beliefs. The existence of a well-defined, shared ideology, clearly understood by group members, tends to reduce behavioral differences arising from the idiosyncratic needs of members. A common ideology creates common needs in group members, or at least a common method of expressing different needs. In all groups, but especially in religious groups, the task of defining the common ideology rests heavily with the authority of the leader. It is a social reality that the expertness of the leader is often one of the attractions of a group (whether a fundamentalist sect or a fashionable suburban church) and is one of the reasons group membership may be sought by particular individuals.

Since the leader of a religious group is often the main source of information concerning religious beliefs, his followers tend to develop a common set of beliefs based on this limited range of information. Control of information by leaders or by the groups, through censorship or approval, stabilizes the group ideology. Therein lie the roots of the traditional conflict between religion and science, where science may present information that challenges existing beliefs. The individual beliefs of scientists who are also members of religious groups may diverge from the beliefs of the rest of the group members. The outcome of this conflict is more often the departure of the scientist from the group than the change of the group ideology. Group beliefs are extremely resistant to change.

Social scientists have identified at least three main reasons for this resistance to change. First, group beliefs resist change when the changes would disturb the meaning the beliefs give to human experience, in-

cluding when a change in one belief would disturb the balance of others. Malinowski described the source of this power among preliterate societies, but it seems almost equally potent in our own complex society. He wrote:

Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. . . . Studied alive, myth is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an exploration in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary group beliefs can have the tenacious quality of the myths described.

Group beliefs also resist change because group membership itself provides constant reinforcement for the old beliefs. Experiments have shown that members who value a group highly and who are confronted with evidence in contradiction to the group's beliefs will tend to conform to the group norm after it has been attacked even more closely than before. The magnitude of this effect has been described by Festinger and his colleagues in a book called *When Prophecy Fails*,<sup>9</sup> which tells of the development of a religious movement initiated by a woman who received a message foretelling a flood. She acquired followers who prepared for this event. When the flood failed to come, she received another "message" which explained that the devoutness of the believers had prevented the disaster. Her followers accepted this "fact," Festinger believes, because they valued their group membership highly, many having given up homes and jobs in anticipation of the flood foretold.

Group beliefs resist change, then, because from them we gain a sense of order that, once acquired, is hard to relinquish, not only because we value highly our membership in the groups that hold these beliefs but also because we respond to coercion. Most groups possess a variety of enforcing methods and techniques which tend to be applied to the beliefs of members as well as to their actions. Rules of behavior or beliefs which are of central importance to a group will be most rigidly enforced. Deviation from such central norms will seldom be tolerated, and the non-believer must be prepared to deal with pressures from fellow group members to conform.

In voluntary groups (and this includes many religions), the cohesiveness or attractiveness of the group to its members constitutes the main policing power. A member who finds the group attractive will be more

willing to conform, particularly when a severe initiation (whether waiting period, ritual, or examination) has increased the value of group membership for him. A non-voluntary group is one whose members are forced to join and forced to remain because the costs of leaving are in some way too high. A common example is a labor union, but a traditional religion into which one has been born and consecrated may have, for some, as potent a quality. In a non-voluntary group, punishment for deviation from beliefs can be enforced, and, if the monitoring system is effective, there will be a high degree of conformity among members.

Note the qualification concerning the effectiveness of the monitoring system. Monitoring is most effective when beliefs are made manifest in behavior. Adherence to ritual can be monitored, but adherence to beliefs cannot as easily be checked. There are always differences between public and private behavior. When the effectiveness of monitoring breaks down, a curious set of circumstances develops within a group—a set of circumstances which has been called “pluralistic ignorance.” The term refers to conditions in which “no one believes, but everyone believes that everyone else believes.” Perhaps it will come as no surprise that this condition was first noted in the study of a religious community. The psychologist studying a predominantly Methodist town found that, in his interviews, everyone subscribed to the church prohibitions against smoking, drinking, and card playing. Yet, before he had been in the community too long, he had played cards and drunk hard cider with church members in the privacy of their homes, each assured that he was unique in his rebellion against the church. Not an uncommon experience, surely.

#### PROBLEMS OF INDIVIDUAL INDEPENDENCE

This brings me to the topic of conformity and independence, which is, it seems to me, a central issue in group membership and religious belief. Conformity is a yielding to group pressures and, as such, presupposes conflict between the forces in the individual which lead in one direction and the pressures from others which push in another direction. Seldom need the pressure be explicit. Often the mere existence of a belief different from one's own will exert detectable influence. Conformity or independence of the individual depends more on the nature of the situation than on the enduring characteristics of the individual. This has been studied by Asch<sup>10</sup> with a task as clear-cut as judging the length of a line. The subject is shown a card with a line of standard length and is asked to pick the matching line from a comparison card showing three lines. This is not a difficult task. However, when the sub-



ject finds himself in a group of others who have been instructed to select the wrong line as matching the standard, a conformity problem is created. Asch found that over one-third of all judgments made under these conditions are made in conformity with the group, that is, objectively wrong. Most subjects, even those who consistently make the independent choice, tend to question their own judgments, not those of the group. It follows as no surprise that the task of forging religious ideas different from the traditional ones leaves us uncomfortable and groping, especially when experimenters report that the conformity behavior increases as the difficulty of the task increases. Surely reconciling the theological and scientific accumulations of the ages is more difficult than judging the length of a line. There are specific factors in the situation which increase conformity, namely, the size of the group and the characteristics of its members. A layman will often conform to the views of those he judges to be experts in the matter at hand, even when they are wrong. Conversely, an expert may resist group pressure, even when the laymen are right. There are obvious religious parallels there.

Yielding to the beliefs of a group is reduced when there is even a single voice on the other side, a partner who agrees with the dissident judgment. This seems to me to constitute a mandate for stating a dissident opinion; it may not change the beliefs of the group, but it will protect and strengthen the minority. A clearer indication of the importance of protest to a society could hardly be found. Also, the amount of coercion is clearly a factor in whether people conform; threats of punishment for non-conformity or reward for conformity, silent reproach or silent contempt, real or imagined, all can increase conformity.

If these are the factors of the conformity situation, what are the mental postures with which they are met? First, the individual can blame himself, can believe that the error is his, and may try to reduce his discomfort by finding a "reasonable" explanation for his lack of skill. Second, he may blame the group. This stance can support either an independent judgment or a departure from the group. A third way enlists reason in still a different cause: a reinterpretation of the situation that satisfactorily accounts for different judgments. This method can be used in support of either conforming or independent behavior because the person who "sees both sides" may still decide to join the majority. Fourth, some people simply accept the fact of individual differences, maintaining that there is no reason why the group should agree. Our values may make this an admirable position, but it is a good deal more sensible in matters of opinion than in matters of objective fact. And, finally, some people conceal the disagreement from them-

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selves. In the case of the experimental situations, they do so by plugging their ears so as not to hear the discrepant judgments. In the religious setting, this might apply to non-believers who maintain that they like the traditional liturgy because they pay no attention to the words.

In this discussion, I have placed primary emphasis on the situations that make for conformity or independence and have not spoken of conformist and nonconformist "personalities." I am aware that we commonly speak in these terms and that people do vary in their tendencies to conform. But when we find one person in a situation conforming where another does not, we may still be observing situational differences. One man, fearing reprisals against his family, may yield; another, having no family, may resist. I could not call the first man more of a conformist than the second.

Studies done on the personalities of those who yielded to group pressures in experimental situations find them to be less intelligent, less able to cope with stress, more lacking in self-confidence, less accurate in their judgments of others, more conventional and moralistic. In the light of the scientific evidence so far, I would question the universality of these traits and would argue instead that there are times when each of us is lacking in self-confidence, unable to cope, and inaccurate in our judgments. Yielding in one situation may well give us strength to stand independently in another.

The ideal balance between the individual and the group would allow individuals freedom of action and belief and opportunities to develop their creative potential while enabling groups to function peacefully and effectively together. No society as yet has found this balance fully. Perhaps there are some that have done better than our own at present. We must not look to the social psychologist alone to provide the answers to this final solution. He can struggle to adapt scientific methods developed largely for the study of other than human behavior. He can then apply these methods to describe man's interaction with others as carefully and precisely as possible. If final, or at least better, solutions are to be found in our society, I believe they will be found collaboratively. I hoped to give you who are concerned with religion the impression that the social scientist's contribution might be helpful and that he is willing to try.

### NOTES

1. Cf. Allan M. Schrier, Harry F. Harlow, and Fred Stollnitz (eds.), *Behavior of Nonhuman Primates: Modern Research Trends* (New York: Academic Press, 1965).
2. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Crowell-Collier, 1961).

3. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press of Glencoe, 1957).
4. Peter Berger, *The Precarious Vision* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961).
5. Stanley Schachter, *The Psychology of Affiliation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959).
6. H. P. Douglass, *1000 City Churches* (New York: Doran, 1926).
7. H. I. Wilensky and J. Ladinsky, "From Religious Community to Occupational Group: Structural Assimilation among Professors, Lawyers, and Engineers," *American Sociological Review*, XXXII, (October, 1967), 541-61.
8. B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Religion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1926).
9. L. Festinger, H. W. Riecken, Jr., and S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).
10. S. E. Asch, "Studies of Independence and Conformity," *Psychological Monographs*, LXX, No. 9 (1956).