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RELIGION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

DR J. O. UMOH
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF UYO, UYO.

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in a Mid-Western rural community in South Dakota, U.S.A. It has a lot of implications for Nigeria because of typical social and historical similarities. The purpose of the study is two-fold: first, to assess the presence, or lack thereof, of alienation in a sample from this rural farm population; second, to assess the role of the church in reducing feelings of alienation in times of crisis. Accordingly, the following questions are addressed:

1. Is there evidence of alienation in this rural farm population?
2. If so, is alienation associated with church membership?

Berger and Neuhaus' work on mediating institutions serves as the abstract theoretical frame of reference. The data, collected through interview and observation, are analysed statistically and qualitatively. Some of the major findings include:

1. Some alienation is observed in the sample studied.
2. Farmers with church membership demonstrate less evidence of alienation than farmers without church membership.
3. Finally, farmers with church membership are more likely to display spontaneous evidence of transformative action than farmers with no church membership.

INTRODUCTION

Modernization brings about an historically unprecedented dichotomy between public and private life. In addition, there are the large economic conglomerates of capitalist enterprise, big labour, and the growing bureaucracies that administer wide sectors of the society ... These megastructures are typically alienating, that is, they are not helpful in providing meaning and identity for individual existence ... Not everyone experiences this crisis in the same way. Many who handle it more successfully than most have access to institutions that mediate between the two spheres. (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981:2-3).

The quote above by Peter L. Berger and Richard I. Neuhaus attests to the dilemma confronting the individual today. Technological break-throughs and modernization have reduced the burdens of the pre-scientific age, making life easier and replete with "cheap pleasures". Yet this all-time conquest over the physical world has left behind a feeling of discontent about life as the by-product of the very institutions created by man.

Today, the general attitude is not a belief in, but a doubt about, technology. Relating this experience to the American people, Slater (1970:51) states:

"Americans have lost their manhood and their capacity to control their environment. The technological institution appears in effect to assume the role of the authoritarian father in our society because... it is a servant that now dominates the household, too powerful to fire, upon whom everyone is helplessly dependent" (Ibid:44).

The dilemma, then, is how to cope with these impersonal and, often, insensitively remote, technological monsters. The daily increase in delinquent subcultures suggests that the stress-management techniques now offered in and outside of the classrooms are far from providing the answers. Survival in a technological culture is an endless struggle against an "unseen" enemy.

The dangers and evils of bureaucratization are by no means new to the modern social scene. These were already foreseen by Max Weber about a century ago. In Weber's foresight, while bureaucratic megastructures are in keeping with increasing rationalization, as is technological and scientific development, they also have a dark side of impersonalization and the risk of becoming traps, hence, contributing to modern powerlessness. The unrestrained movement toward increasing bureaucratization led Weber to be pessimistic and even fearful of what he saw as an expanding "iron cage." (Kerbo, 1983:114).

Once overcome by the impersonal forces of the institutions of the society, the individual loses a sense of orientation and becomes alienated from both society and self. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) indicate that one behavioural response by the individual to the bureaucratic entrapment is withdrawal from established norms. The concern of Berger and Neuhaus, as well as others, like Slater, over the administrative institutions of

bureaucracies as sources of alienation in contemporary society reflects the apprehensions already expressed by Weber.

According to Berger and Neuhaus, one way to deal with the problem of alienation and withdrawal is through mediating institutions, which they define as "... those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life." (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981).

Four such institutions have been identified which, they maintain, "figure prominently in the lives of most Americans," and are most relevant to the problems of the welfare state: the neighbourhood, family, church, and voluntary associations (Ibid:13). Lenski (1961:44) referred to such institutions as sub-communities that provide the essential reference point from which the individual can relate himself to a mass society which, otherwise, threatens to reduce him to a statistical digit.

The inclusion of the church among mediating institutions raises serious questions and challenges the traditional notion of the church as serving primarily the spiritual needs of its members.

With the birth of the functional/conflict distinction in the social sciences in general, and sociology, in particular, the place of religion in social life must be given a new definition because:

- (1) Although much of the sociological literature has stressed the social relevance of religion (Weber, 1963; Durkheim, 1965; Lenski, 1961) critics have insistently questioned the ability of the religious institution to deal meaningfully with social issues (Welmreich, 1976; Marx, 1971); and
- (2) It has been argued that the decline in Church membership in recent times in much of the developed world is an implicit reminder to examine once more if, in fact, the church may not have outlived its social usefulness.

Scholarly literature (Gustafson, 1981; Heffernan, 1972) as well as community literature (Dillman and Hobbs, 1982; Bown, 1977) indicates that farmers in much of the United States are under great pressures and stress from national and international economic and political forces. These forces, they suggest, have origin in the operation of the megastructures of modern life such as those identified by Berger and Neuhaus, as well as the growing bureaucracies that administer wide sectors of the society. Their thesis suggests that the potential for farmers to experience alienation is great.

Considering the high - alienation potential to which farmers are exposed on account of the growing bureaucracies of the society and the need for mediating structures in their private life, this research proposes to examine as follows:

- (1) The incidence, or lack thereof, of alienation among a sample of rural farmers;
- (2) The extent to which church membership and participation reduce feelings of alienation among rural family farmers.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodologically, this is an ethnographic, case study, incorporating statistical as well as qualitative procedures for data analysis. Qualitative statistical procedures are used functionally, that is, in so far as these serve to check relationships between critical variables. For data collection, in-depth interviews and direct observation were heavily relied on, to secure the benefit of both. Two concerns provide the rationale for selecting this methodology: First, direct observation has the advantage of providing a close description of the details of everyday life of the individuals under study. Second, being concerned with what the Loflands (1971:14) call "amorphous social experiences" intensive interview proves most felicitous.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Family farmers in one rural county in South Dakota (U.S.A.) are the population for this research. The farmers are mainly ranchers, grain producers, and dairy farmers. For the selection of farmers for interview, stratified purposive sampling is employed. Thirty farmers were chosen for the study from across the county such that three socio-economic categories - stable, unstable, critical - were evenly represented. This classification was made by officials of a lending institution which serves the farmers in this county. The three economic categories based on the farmer's actual financial standing with the agency, are also suggestive of objective crisis conditions among these farmers.

The intensive nature of the interview, along with direct observation, makes it necessary to limit the sample size to thirty farmers. Such sample size is necessary because, as the Loflands (Ibid) further suggest, it provides a manageable number given the intensive interview strategy used and the

time frame of ten to twelve weeks, a period during which farmers were, generally, likely to be off the fields and available for the interview.

VARIABLES

When the question, "does church membership reduce levels of alienation among family farmers in crisis?" is addressed, the pre-determined socio-economic status of farmers serves the purpose of control while the following variables are treated as independent variables: church membership and participation in church programmes. Such programmes were identified in prior interview with clergy serving the county area. In considering the above question, alienation is treated as the dependent variable.

Alienation is measured in terms of Seeman's five components: powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, and normlessness. The Srole Scale for Social Integration has been used to measure the five components of alienation, each item measuring one specific component. These items are supplemented with five others from Dean's Scale that measure similar aspects to ensure greater validity.

DATA ANALYSIS

Two kinds of data analysis are used in this research: statistical and nonstatistical, and the Fisher Exact Probability Test serves the purpose of the statistical analysis. This is a useful non-parametric technique for analysing data, nominal or ordinal, when the two independent samples are small in size, and fall into one or the other of the two mutually exclusive classes, as in the present study. Furthermore, the nature of the variable and size of the sample both preclude the use of more sophisticated statistical techniques, as well as the most common statistical procedures for nonparametric data, like the chi-square. Since in the use of the Fisher Test the probability level is doubled for a two-tailed test (Siegel, 1956:103), the level of significance employed in testing the various hypotheses of the present research is .025. The Fisher Test, however, has the following limitations: First, it cannot be used when N is in excess of 30. Secondly, none of the totals in the right hand margin of the 2x2 contingency table must be larger than 15. In spite of this, it is seen to be the most appropriate statistical tool for analysing this set of data.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

TABLE 1

| Farmer Profile | | No. | % |
|-------------------------|--|---------|-------------|
| Total | | 30 | 100 |
| Age | 20-29 | 2 | 6.7 |
| | 30-39 | 10 | 33.3 |
| | 40-49 | 8 | 26.7 |
| | 50-59 | 7 | 23.3 |
| | 60 and over | 3 | 10 |
| | Some high School High School graduate | 1 17 | 3.3 56.7 |
| Education | Some College | 7 | 23.3 |
| | College graduate | 4 | 13.3 |
| | College work | 1 | 3.3 |
| | Owner | 19 | 63.3 |
| | Owner/Tenant | 1 | 3.3 |
| Farm Operation | Tenant | 6 | 20 |
| | Owner/sharecropper | 3 | 10 |
| | Partnership | 1 | 3.3 |
| Farm Experience (years) | 1 - 9 | 2 | 6.7 |
| | 10 - 19 | 12 | 40 |
| | 20 - 29 | 5 | 16.7 |
| | 30 - 39 | 9 | 30 |
| | 40 - 49 | 2 | 6.7 |
| Off-farm Employment | Yes | 7 | 23.3 |
| | No | 23 | 76.7 |

Total: 30; Percentages (%) in extreme right hand column.

**DISCUSSION
ALIENATION**

The scores for alienation range from a low of 10 (high evidence of alienation) to a high of 60 (low evidence of alienation). The arbitrary cut-off point of 35 between alienation and nonalienation, i.e. mid-point between the range 10-60 is considered necessary for purposes of statistical test. Since the Fisher test operates only on 2 x 2 contingency tables, the various measures of low, very low, and high, very high, are collapsed into two simple categories of "alienated" and "unalienated".

THE PRESENCE OF ALIENATION AMONG COUNTY FARMERS

TABLE II
ALIENATION AND ITS DIMENSIONS

| Dimensions Of Alienation | No. (%) Not Alienated | No (%) Alienated |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Overall Alienation | 23 (76.7) | 7 (23.3) |
| Powerlessness | 12 (40.0) | 18 (60.0) |
| Meaninglessness | 16 (53.3) | 14 (46.7) |
| Social Isolation | 21 (70.7) | 9 (30.0) |
| Self-estrangement | 22 (73.3) | 8 (26.7) |
| Normlessness | 16 (53.3) | 14 (46.7) |

The data show some evidence of alienation in the sample, although most (76.7%) give no indication of overall alienation. Evidence of alienation in varying degrees is also observed for the five major components of alienation.

In order to address the question: who are alienated among rural family farmers?, a series of hypotheses with various independent variables is examined. For purposes of statistical analysis and in response to the main hypothesis of the research, the following null hypothesis is examined first:

THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE IN FEELINGS OF ALIENATION AMONG FAMILY FARMERS BY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

TABLE III
ALIENATION AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

| | Alienation | | |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| | | Alienated 10 - 35 | Unalienated 36 - 60 |
| Church Membership | Yes | 0 | 15 (100%) 15 |
| | No | 7 (46.7%) | 8 (53.3%) 15 |
| | | 7 (23.3%) | 23 (76.7%) 30 |

Fisher Test of Significance: B Value = 15
D Value = 8
P < .025

The data in Table 3 indicate that farmers with church membership do not experience alienation when the overall measure of alienation is considered, unlike their counterparts with no church membership. While

all fifteen (100%) of the farmers with church membership show no significant evidence of alienation, seven (46.7%) of those with no church membership manifest evidence of alienation. Thus, farmers with no church membership are more alienated than those with no church membership (P.025). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. The same conclusion was observed across the various dimensions of alienation.

TABLE IV
OVERALL ALIENATION AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

| Economic Well being | Stable Unstable Critical | No.(%) Not Alienated | No. (%) Alienated |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| | | 7(70%) 7(70%) 9(90) | 3(30%) 3(30%) 1(10%) |

TABLE V

| Economic Well-being | Stable Critical | Alienation | |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| | | Alienated 10 - 35 | Unalienated 36 - 60 |
| | | 3(30%) 1(10%) | 7(70%) 10 9(90) 10 |
| | | 4(20%) | 16(80%) 20 |

Fisher Test of Significance: B Value = 7
D Value = 9
P > .025

When farmer economic well-being was considered in relation to alienation, the sample showed that the farmers in both the stable and unstable groups tended to be more alienated than farmers in the critical category. Table 4 shows that while three (30%) of the farmers in the stable as well as the unstable economic groups are alienated, only one (10%) farmer in the critical group experiences alienation. When the five dimensions of alienation were considered in relation to farmer economic well-being, it was seen that, except for the dimension of normlessness, farmers in the stable group were consistently more alienated than farmers in the unstable group, who in turn were more alienated than farmers in the

critical group. This means that in this sample, the experience of alienation increases in relation to farmer economic well-being, except on the dimension of normlessness.

But in order to test for the statistical significance of the relationship between alienation and farmer economic well-being, the following null hypothesis was considered:

THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE IN FEELINGS OF ALIENATION AMONG FAMILY FARMERS BY ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

For the purpose of applying the Fisher test of significance, only farmers in two extreme categories (stable and critical) were contrasted. While the data in table 5 show some differences in feelings of alienation between the two groups, the difference was seen to be too small to be statistically significant and the same was observed for the various dimensions.

Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in feelings of alienation among family farmers by economic well-being, is not rejected. Does the absence of alienation, then, among farmers in the economically critical condition indicate access to mediating institutions of some sort? In order to answer this question, it was necessary to consider another null hypothesis as follows:

THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE IN FEELINGS OF ALIENATION AMONG FAMILY FARMERS WHO BELONG TO COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND THOSE WHO DO NOT

The following organisations were identified as the most common in the community to which farmers retained membership: Farmers' Union, Extension, Lion's club, American Agricultural movement, American Legion, and Jaycees. In general, eighteen (60%) farmers had memberships in some kind of community organisations and twelve (40%) had none.

TABLE VI

| Community Membership | Yes No | Alienation | |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| | | Alienated | Unalienated |
| | Yes | 4(22.2%) | 14(77.8%) 18 |
| | No | 3(25%) | 9(75%) 12 |
| | | 7(23.3%) | 23(76.7%) 30 |

Table 6 above shows a rather slight difference in feelings of alienation between farmers with community organisation membership and those without. Four (22.2%) of those who belong, as against three (25%), show feelings of alienation. The data, however, indicated that eight (66.7%) of those farmers with no affiliation to community organisations were church members. This may probably explain why the farmers with no community organisation membership and expressing feelings of alienation are as few as three (25%).

TABLE VII
FARMERS WITH NO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND ALIENATION

| Community Organisation Membership | Yes No | Alienation | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| | | Alienated | Unalienated |
| | Yes | 4(36.4%) | 7(63.6%) 11 |
| | No | 3(75%) | 1(25%) 4 |
| | | 7(46.7%) | 8(53.3%) 15 |

Fisher Test of Significance: B Value = 7
D Value = 1
P > .025

To test the null hypothesis that membership in community organisations other than the church reduces feelings of alienation, data from farmers with no church membership were examined. Table 7 above reveals that the difference between them in regard to feelings of alienation is not statistically significant. Thus, the null hypothesis is not rejected. But on visual inspection, the differences appear to be quite substantial, suggesting part of the problem may be the Fisher technique, which is somewhat conservative. A larger sample would be necessary to more adequately test this relationship.

When membership in community organisations was considered in relation to the various dimensions of alienation, there was no substantial difference between members and non members, except on the dimension of powerlessness. Even here, the difference was not statistically significant. A larger sample would be desirable to more adequately test the relationship.

CONCLUSIONS FROM FINDINGS

The study indicates that farmers with no church membership, regardless of economic condition, are more likely to be alienated than farmers with church membership. But in contrast to what was expected, alienation was not found to be statistically significantly different among the different levels of economic well-being. This is, however, in contrast to Berger and Neuhaus' contention that those in critical economic condition are more vulnerable to encroachment by the megastructures of society; hence, more likely to be alienated than those in economically stable condition.

In general, the findings of this research tend to lend support to the Berger-Neuhaus' theoretical model in particular, and the functional perspective, in general, that is, that religion can serve a mediating function in the society. In coming to this conclusion, however, the following precautions are deemed necessary. The sample from which the conclusions were reached was too small to allow statistical tests of significance with all the hypothesised relationships. Therefore, the conclusions are preliminary but noteworthy because of their similarities to other studies. Second, any attempt to apply the findings must be prudently done with particular attention to the unique characteristics of the sample, even when they are seen to be reasonable and logical in the light of the theory.

The findings that farmers with church membership participate less in community organisations than farmers with no church membership could be attributable to the time factor, as some farmers said, or the belief that one need become involved in public issues only when one becomes concerned with threats to the interests of ones' self and ones' community. Similarly, Bellah and Associates (1985:251) observed, "The American search for spontaneous community with the like-minded is made urgent by the fear that there may be no way at all to relate to those who are too different." Neighbourliness among farmers is an indication of this.

In view of the above, Berger and Neuhaus' (1981:29) observation that "it is precisely in the interest of public polity to advance a positive approach to the church as a key mediating structure," seems reasonable. As further pointed out by these authors (Ibid :27), "without falling into the trap of politicising all life, our point is that structures such as family, church, and neighbourhood are all public institutions in the sense that they must be taken seriously in the ordering of the polity," because they are vital to modern democracy. Nigeria is at present in search of an enduring

democracy. An alienated and frustrated polity remains a potential threat to the achievement of this noble ideal.

Here in Akwa Ibom State as is common with most other Southern States of the country, the biting economic conditions that result from an historically unprecedented inflationary trend constitute a major threat to an enduring democracy. With such negative social forces like high unemployment rates, decreasing purchasing power of the Naira, high cost of medical services and the incidence of poverty in general, the potential for the working class category of the society to be alienated is very high. Along with the need to put a strong political structure in place it is recommended that the leaders work tirelessly at eliminating, or at least, reducing those factors that tend to breed alienation, noninvolvement, and powerlessness. There is need, therefore, for a greater empowerment of the institution of religion and the recognition of the vital role played by the church in public and social life as church participation would encourage both political and social involvement despite the prevailing economic crisis.

The observation of Bellah and Associates (1985:219) that: "Religion is one of the most important of the many ways in which Americans get involved in the life of their community and society", does not show in this sample. However, it is suggested that the society can benefit immensely by the church's very presence by recognising that "... the central way into the problem of the 'role of the church in society' or its implications for modernization or political development is through the evolutionary and comparative study of its basis, strategies, and structures of influence" (Vallier, 1970:22). An understanding of the church's history might be necessary in appreciating its present unprecedented involvement with social issues and development.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following limitations are built into this research:

- (1) Although in essence, this was a qualitative case study, some quantitative techniques were employed for data collection and analysis. Because of the sample size, the data distribution did not allow for statistical tests of significance with some of the variable relationships, even when such tests were seen as appropriate. Thus it became necessary to draw some conclusions inferentially through observation.

- (2) The data suggest that farmers with church membership are less likely to be alienated. What this set of data failed to indicate is whether church involvement is the "consequence" or the "cause" of lack of alienation. As a result of research, social scientists are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that in human affairs influence occasionally operates on two-way streets. Hence, positive associations between variables frequently reflect mutual re-enforcement rather than a simple relationship where one variable is the cause and the other the effect.

Finally, the study cannot provide a conclusive test of the theoretical model since it lacks the statistical data to do so. Future research could fill that gap by using a broader sample from which quantitative data are gathered. By so doing the conclusions can allow for greater generalizability and a statistical test of the model provided.

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