



CHARLES Y. GLOCK

Professor of Sociology
University of California at Berkeley

LOCATING CONSENT AND DISSENT IN AMERICAN RELIGION: *
A COMMENT

by
Charles Y. Glock

As I interpret his paper, the central issues with which Professor Marty and I are concerned have to do with the role of religion in social stability and social change in American life. It is contended that religion has played and continues to play an element in both phenomena though in somewhat different ways than are assumed ordinarily.

Professor Marty's portrait of how religion contributes to social stability is marred, I think, by his failure to make crystal clear how the two types of religion—denominational and societal—function in this regard. The general message which comes through is that there are elements in both kinds of religion which foster social integration. Societal religion does this by raising to "sacred" status the values and beliefs purported to represent a national consensus, by public rituals and ceremonies which remind the faithful about these "sacred" beliefs, and presumably, also, by a sanctioning system of rewards for conformity and punishment for disconformity. Denominational religion is seen to work hand and glove with societal religion especially in times of crisis by equating its conception with the society's vision of the "sacred."

Neither societal nor denominational religion are conceived to be instrumental in fostering social change. Societal religion has no power in this respect because it is part and parcel of the establishment. Denominational religion has the potential to be prophetic but in American history, the potential has been derailed into internal bickering and dissent between and among denominations. The religious contribution to social change stems from another source, namely, the religious ethos in secular reformist and revolutionary movements. "Whenever there is a movement," Professor Marty tells us, "there is a religious ethos."

To comment now on these themes, I am in substantial agreement that denominational religion has on balance contributed more to maintaining social stability than to fostering social change in American history. The process by which this has come about, however, seems to me less a result of religion offering direct ideological support for the status quo as by providing compensations for those ill served by existing social arrangements. Denominational religion, in effect, has been more a derailer of dissent than a generator of consent.¹

As to societal religion, there can be no doubt that values and beliefs, rituals, symbols all are included in the 'glue' which keeps societies from falling apart and as Professor Marty correctly points out, the 'glue' need not be progressive. Reactionary forms of social organization also make use of these ingredients to generate conformity.

What I mildly object to in Professor Marty's treatment is his passive

*All future publication rights reserved by the author.

LOCATING CONSENT AND DISSENT IN AMERICAN RELIGION:
A COMMENT

acceptance of the current fashion to label these phenomena religion, whether 'lay', 'folk', 'generalized', 'societal', 'national', or 'civil'. There are similarities undoubtedly between a belief in God and a belief in democracy, in worship services, and in public ceremonies, and in the symbolic meaning of the flag and the cross. There are also important differences between the two sets of phenomena. Affixing the label religion to them both has the biasing effect, I think, of masking differences in favor of discovering uniformities. Calling so much religion also makes extraordinarily obscure whether or not there is a distinctively religious component in human experience and if so, what it might be.

More conceptual confusion than light is likely to result if we now move also in the direction of conceiving of matters of "tribe, race, ethnic group, movement, or cause" as religious phenomena or as necessarily having a religious ethos. For those to whom it is important that religion survive the 'death' of God, it may be comforting to find a religious ethos in the various movements to which they subscribe. Adopting such a posture seems hardly conducive, however, to enhancing scientific inquiry into such movements or indeed, into other movements—the Ku Klux Klan, for example, or the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, or the Weathermen—whose religious ethos has, perhaps, more potential for discomfort than comfort.

All of which is not meant to deny the importance of considering the religious factor as one ponders and inquires about questions of social stability and change. The burden of these remarks is that for the pondering and inquiry to be fruitful maximally, a clearer, more consistent, and less value-laden vision of the religious factor is required than has informed the analysis which Professor Marty has presented.

FOOTNOTES

¹ I have recently had occasion to comment extensively on this theme. See Charles Y. Glock, "Images of 'God', Images of Man, and the Organization of Social Life," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 11:1 Spring, 1972.