
In the ubiquitous academic triad of “race, class, and gender,” scholars of American religion have typically been drawn to issues of race and gender more consistently than class. Recognizing this deficiency, Sean McCloud argues that class analysis needs to be “resurrected, redescribed, and reincorporated” into religious studies (13). The result is Divine Hierarchies, a theoretically engaged, interdisciplinary work that is best thought of as a broad and extended thought-piece rather than a detailed, thorough, and comprehensive monograph.

Perhaps the most useful part of the book is McCloud’s thoughtful introduction, in which he carefully assesses past and current conceptualizations of class. McCloud argues that the quixotic scholarly search for “class consciousness” need no longer prevail. Instead, he suggests three alternate ways of thinking about class. First, he argues that class is an externally ascribed social-boundary marker. In particular, he points to middle class scholars whose condemnation of lower-class “sects” and “cults” from middle class “religion.” Conversely, class is also a discourse embraced by social outsiders in order to build a subcultural identity. Finally, class constrains available religious idioms—the broader one’s experience, education, and social networks, the more choice one has in selecting a religious culture.

Having established a promising intellectual framework, McCloud divides the main body of his book into two parts. The first part provides a critical interpretation of 20th-century scholarship on lower-class religion. In the 1910s and 1920s, scholars influenced by eugenicist theory depicted the religious behavior of immigrant Catholics, racial minorities, and especially Pentecostals as the result of biological deficiency. By the 1930s and early 1940s, “environmentalist” explanations supplanted biological determinism, and scholars increasingly viewed lower-class religion as the expression of “culture shock” that would inevitably erode as the forces of modernity advanced. Finally, after the Second World War, a varied body of scholars explained lower-class religion by arguing that economic deprivation produced cultural and psychological comforts in the form of religion. McCloud rejects all three models—biological determinism, cultural shock, and deprivation theory—charging that they fail to provide a convincing explanation for religious behavior and reveal more about the social position of the critic than about the religious worldviews of lower-class peoples.

In the second part of his book, McCloud illustrates how his own approach to class analysis might operate in both a historical and ethnographic sense. In the first of two chapters, McCloud describes four “theologies of class,” or, religious ways of explaining social grades. McCloud’s book title stems from his first theology of class, which he terms “divine hierarchies” (borrowing from John Winthrop). In this Calvinist-influenced worldview, God predestined each person to his/her social lot, and differences of rank were seen as natural and immutable. McCloud’s second theology, economic arminianism, arose during the Second Great Awakening and has been, according to McCloud, the most persistent American way of explaining class religiously. In this worldview, individual agency determines both the salvation of the soul and success (or failure) in the economic realm. The third theology, “social harmony,” arose during the Gilded Age and characterized both the Protestant Social Gospel and Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum. Social harmony theorists...
viewed labor and capital as interlocking parts of an organic whole—labor’s right to organize was as inviolate rights to property. Finally, McCloud describes a Gilded Age theology of the “class conscious Christ” which claimed Jesus as a member of the working class and viewed conflict between labor and capital—as between Jesus and sin—as inevitable.

Finally, McCloud presents ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the 1990s at two Pentecostal churches in urban Ohio. Although both congregations were composed primarily of working class whites originally from rural Appalachia, McCloud claims that deprivation theory cannot account for the specific cultures evident at these churches. Rather, he points to different patterns of congregational growth, different stylistic uses of music and preaching, and denominational versus nondenominational attachments in explaining the way working-class Pentecostals “lived” their religion in two seemingly similar congregational environments.

McCloud’s work should refresh scholarly approaches to class and religion, but his book is clearly just a starting point—and an occasionally limited one. For instance, McCloud’s extended focus on past academic texts unnecessarily turns attention away from the actual religious cultures of working-class peoples. Likewise, although McCloud usefully broadens the concept of class, religious scholars should beware losing sight of the traditional social location of class formation: the workplace. Future studies would do well to more deeply consider the relationship between the social experiences of work, discourses of power, and the formation of religious culture.

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