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Are white evangelical Protestants lower class? A partial test of church-sect theory

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ABSTRACT

Testing hypotheses derived from church-sect theory and contemporary research about changes in evangelical Protestants' social status, I use repeated cross-sectional survey data spanning almost four decades to examine changes in the social-class hierarchy of American religious traditions. While there is little change in the social-class position of white evangelical Protestants from the early 1970s to 2010, there is considerable change across birth cohorts. Results from hierarchical age–period–cohort models show: (1) robust, across-cohort declines in social-class differences between white evangelical Protestants and liberal Protestants, affiliates of "other" religions, and the unaffiliated, (2) stability in social-class differences between white evangelical Protestants and moderate, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Protestants, (3) moderate across-cohort growth in social-class differences between white evangelical Protestants and Catholics, and (4) these patterns vary across indicators of social class. The findings in this article provide partial support for church-sect theory as well as other theories of social change that emphasize the pivotal role of generations.

1. Introduction

The negative association between social class and affiliation with sectarian religions might be the first widely-accepted social fact about American religion. More than 80 years ago, Niebuhr (1929) wrote about the "churches of the disinherited"—congregations and denominations that disproportionately attract lower-class members. Churches of the disinherited are characterized by an otherworldly theology that promises a reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. From the eighteenth century Anabaptists and nineteenth century Methodists that Niebuhr focused on to the Pentecostal movement that began to grow in large numbers in the early twentieth century, sectarian Christian groups throughout U.S. history have been disproportionately lower class (Marsden, 1991); and evangelical Protestant churches are considered to be the contemporary incarnation of these churches of the disinherited (Park and Reimer, 2002).[1] Conforming to Niebuhr's description, evangelical Protestantism is relatively sectarian in nature—emphasizing voluntary association, often through a "born again" experience—and otherworldly in its theology (Marsden, 1991; Noll, 2001). Most importantly, empirical research has repeatedly shown that evangelical Protestants are relatively likely to be lower class (e.g. Davidson and Pyle, 2011; Demerath, 1965; Greeley, 1972; Kosmin et al., 1992; Pope, 1942; Roof and McKinney, 1987; Smith and Faris, 2005).

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[1] The term "evangelical" is used to denote conservative Protestant denominations (Steensland et al., 2000) that are distinct from Pentecostal (Garneau and Schwadel, 2013), liberal, and moderate Protestant denominations. Evangelical is not intended to indicate proselytization.

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But there is another part of Niebuhr's (1929) argument that is missing from this picture. Specifically, Niebuhr argued that churches of the disinherited tend to be upwardly mobile, eventually becoming middle-class churches. Nonetheless, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that over the last few decades evangelical Protestants have remained disproportionately lower class (e.g. Davidson and Pyle, 2011; Pyle, 2006; Smith and Faris, 2005). Again, however, there is another part of the argument that is missing from this empirical research. Specifically, upward mobility among members of the churches of the disinherited should occur across generations, not over time among all affiliates regardless of when they were born (Niebuhr, 1929; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Wilson, 1959). This is a crucial distinction, both theoretically and in terms of how we empirically examine social mobility among members of sectarian groups.

In this article, I argue that previous research has failed to identify robust declines in social-class differences between evangelical Protestants and other Americans because it has largely focused on changes over time rather than changes across generations, because it tends to employ measures of religious tradition that combine all conservative Protestants into a single analytic category, and because it sometimes confounds race, class, and religious affiliation. The presence of intergenerational changes may not be evident in analyses of changes over time (Firebaugh, 1997). Differences in the size of birth cohorts, for example, may distort estimates of social change (Easterlin, 1980). The few empirical analyses of generational differences in the association between religious tradition and social class (Park and Reimer, 2002; Massengill, 2008; Sherkat, 2012) have been hindered by analysis techniques that employ invariant simplifying assumptions restricting age, period, and cohort effects (Glenn, 2005). Recent advances in the analysis of period and cohort changes, however, suggest that Hierarchical Age–Period–Cohort (HAPC) models provide reliable estimates of period and cohort effects without resorting to assumptions that restrict variation in age, period, or cohort measures (Yang and Land, 2006).

Addressing the theoretical expectation of intergenerational upward mobility among affiliates of evangelical denominations, I analyze period and birth cohort changes in the association between evangelical Protestant affiliation and education, family income, and occupational prestige. Expanding the categorization of religious traditions generally employed to make distinctions within U.S. Protestantism (Steensland et al., 2000), I compare affiliates of evangelical Protestant denominations with those affiliated with liberal denominations, moderate denominations, Pentecostal denominations, and nondenominational churches; and with Catholics, Jews, affiliates of "other" religions, and the unaffiliated. To avoid conflating race and social class, I limit the analysis to white Americans. Results from HAPC models based on cross-sectional survey data spanning almost four decades show: (1) large across-cohort declines in social-class differences between evangelical Protestants and liberal Protestants, affiliates of "other" religions, and the unaffiliated, (2) stability in social-class differences between evangelical Protestants and moderate, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Protestants, (3) moderate across-cohort growth in social-class differences between evangelical Protestants and Catholics, and (4) these patterns vary across indicators of social class. I conclude by discussing the implications of the results for church-sect theory, social differentiation, and stratification in the United States.

2. Church-sect theory and the association between evangelical Protestant affiliation and social class

Although church-sect theory can be traced back to the work of Weber (1993[1922]) and his contemporary Troeltsch (1992[1931]) and Niebuhr's (1929) treatment of the subject has most consistently informed contemporary research on religion and social class in the United States (Swatos, 1998). Niebuhr saw churches and sects as occupying opposite ends of the socio-theological continuum. Niebuhr (1929: 31) noted that lower class denominations—the churches of the disinherited—were characterized by "a marked propensity toward millenarianism, with its promise of tangible goods and the reversal of all present social systems of rank." The middle and upper classes, according to Niebuhr, tend toward a more philosophical, formal, and abstract form of religion while the lower classes want a more high-tension religion with less accommodation to secular institutions. Contemporary theories emphasize the distinct "class culture" (Coreno, 2009) and class-specific worship practices (Nelson, 2009) of sectarian churches, which produce a relatively stable social-class hierarchy of religious traditions (Roof and McKinney, 1987). Researchers suggest that multiple mechanisms affect the association between religious tradition and social class, including how people choose their congregations (Schwadel, 2012a), their comfort level in congregations with people of other social classes (Schwadel, 2012b; Sullivan, 2011), the influence of theology and religious communities on views of finance, work, and education (Keister, 2007; Mirola, 2009), and the homphily of social networks (Reimer, 2009).

For the most part, empirical research has supported this depiction of class-based denominationalism (e.g. Demerath, 1965; Greeley, 1972; Kosmin et al., 1992; Roof and McKinney, 1987; Smith and Faris, 2005). Evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Protestants are considerably more likely to be lower class than are liberal and moderate Protestants, Catholics, Jews, affiliates of "other" religions, and the unaffiliated; and this is especially true for white Americans (Glass and Jacobs, 2005). In other words, for white Americans, the contemporary churches of the disinherited appear to be disproportionately evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Protestant churches. Due to the difficulty in distinguishing fundamentalist and evangelical denominations, these groups are generally treated as a single analytic category termed evangelical (Steensland et al., 2000). It is likely, however, that many white fundamentalists fall within the nondenominational category (Kellstedt and Smidt, 1991; Smidt, 1988). The first hypothesis addresses class divisions among religious traditions: *White evangelical, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Protestants are relatively likely to have low levels of education, family income, and occupational prestige.*