LECTURE NOTES (MERTON’S quote follows lect. Notes)

Religious and Gender Minorities

Introduction

An argument could be made that with over 1,500 identifiable religious groups, around thirty of which have more than one million adherents, the United States is one of the most religiously pluralistic countries on Earth (Parrillo, 2009). The Pew Forum shows that 67.4% of Americans are Mainline (18.1%), Evangelical (26.3%), Historically Black (6.9%), or Unaffiliated (16.1%) Protestants; while 23.9% are Catholic, and 0.9% are Orthodox or other Christian groups. This means that around 92.2% of Americans identify themselves as "Christian" in some traditional way. The Mormon (1.7%) and Jehovah Witness (0.7%) adherents add to western-associated sects, and the other religions of Judaism (1.7%) and Islam (0.6%) bring the total of Abrahamic-related religious adherents in the United States to 96.9% of the population, leaving only 3.1% to Hinduism (0.4%), Buddhism (0.7%), other world religions (0.3%), other faiths (1.2%), and no response (0.8%) (Pew Forum, 2008).

Often religious intolerance, even within the same religion, arises from racial or ethnic/cultural prejudices being super imposed upon sectarian or doctrinal differences, frequently resulting in highly segregated religious gatherings. For example, while evangelical Christian churches (which tend to be growing) are 81% 'white' in membership. Mainline Christian groups (which are losing members) are composed of 91% 'white' members. The historically 'black' churches remain 92% 'black' in membership, and the Jewish community is 95% 'white' (Pew Forum, 2008). Individual congregations, of course, may be somewhat more or less segregated than their category, yet the overall comparisons are indicative.

The Catholic Church in the United States draws only 65% of its membership from the 'white' communities, while 29% of American Catholics are Hispanic, making the Catholic Church arguably the most ethnically integrated of Christian traditions. Interestingly, though they are relatively small in total numbers, the Jehovah Witness religion in America is made up of 48% 'white,' 22% 'black,' and 24 % Hispanic, making it a more diverse group in terms of race and ethnicity, and finding its identity more in terms of doctrinal unity. Even more diversely, Muslims in the United States are composed of 37% 'white,'24% 'black,' 20% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 15% non-Hispanic mixed-race people. American Buddhists are 53% 'white,' 32% Asian, and an assortment of other groups. Hindus in America are 88% Asian, nearly all from India (Pew Forum, 2008).

Religious Ethnocentrism

Nearly every immigrant group arriving in what has become the United States of America brought their religious belief system as a central part of their culture and values, and their religious leaders tended to play major roles in their communities and often wielded considerable authority. Many groups came seeking the liberty to practice their own religion freely, yet in many cases, they came to deny that same liberty to others, including those indigenous peoples who inhabited the land long before the arrival of the new groups.

"The secular man is the slave of his own prejudices, preconceptions and limitations. The man of faith is ideally free from prejudice and open...I say 'ideally' in order to exclude those whose faith...is also another form of prejudice enthroned in the exterior man...For there exists a kind of hard and rigid religious faith that is not really alive or spiritual, but resides entirely in the exterior self and is the product of conventionalism and systematic prejudice." (Merton, 2004, p. 55).

There are at least two aspects or expressions of *religious ethnocentrism* or *religious bigotry*. The first has to do with the people of a religion internalizing an attitude which enables them to "derive a sense of superiority from believing that he is a member of some elite group that is superior to other groups" (Freethought Crossroads, 2008, p.1). This same concept (bigotry) can be applied to other areas such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and nationalism. Many varieties of bigotry justify their elitist views by appealing to their religion and its holy writings. For example, anti-Semitism (at least among Christians) often may assert that Jews killed Jesus; men may claim superiority over women by imputing disobedience and seduction to Eve; Scriptures are used to condemn people and behaviors differing from one's own (Freethought Crossroads, 2008).

A second aspect of *religious bigotry* pertains to judgmental attitudes and actions toward other groups. This is commonly expressed through "the intolerance, fear, and hatred of those different from ourselves" (Wodening, 2008, p. 1). Such bigotry is not always manifested by violence, but may be seen in negative stereotyping, hateful speech, harassment, ostracism, or open discrimination.

Political, economic, or military tensions and events can easily take on religious overtones and lead to religious bigotry. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Shintoism and the Japanese who were ostensibly guided by it became targets of judgmental attitudes and fears, and all who were (or appeared to be) Japanese and Shinto were incarcerated in concentration camps, mostly in desert areas. Similarly, the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York on 9-11-2001 stirred up anti-Islamic bigotry which expressed itself in negative stereotyping, fear, and numerous incidents of prejudice and discrimination against any thought to be Muslim. One need only invoke such terms as 'crusades,' 'holocaust,' or 'jihad' to realize how readily forms of religious bigotry can arise in this and every society or religion, in spite of the almost universal religious teaching to "love your neighbor as yourself".

Hate Crimes and Religious Bigotry

In 2006, 7,722 hate crime incidents (involving 9,080 offenses) were reported in the United States, of which 18.9% were motivated by religious bias. The targets of these hate crimes portray an interesting profile of the more extreme expressions of religious bigotry in America. 64.3% of religious bias hate crimes were anti Jewish, 12 % were anti Islamic, 5.1% were anti Catholic, 3.9% were anti Protestant, 8.8% were anti other religions, 5.5% were anti multiple religions (groups of individuals together of varying religions; e.g., interfaith gatherings), and 0.5% were anti atheism/agnosticism (FBI, 2006).

Conclusion

What is the stereotypical image of a 'Muslim' (follower of Islam) in the United States? How well does that widely accepted stereotype fit the reality of the Islamic community in America (37% 'white,'24% 'black,' 20% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 15% non-Hispanic mixed-race people)? Can one say that there is often a 'sense of superiority' within religious communities in the United States, and are there still widespread 'judgmental attitudes and actions toward other groups' ? Do these sorts of phenomena also express themselves in prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions regarding gender differences in America? What can we learn from this brief discussion?

References

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MERTON’s QUOTE

“The heresy of (religious ethnocentrism): thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary ‘unity against all others. The affirmation of the self (or group) as simply ‘not the other.’ But when you seek to affirm your unity by denying that you have anything to do with anyone else, by negating everyone else in the universe until you come down to you: what is there left to affirm?

The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say ‘yes’ to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my heart says ‘yes’ to everyone.

I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can *affirm* the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot ‘affirm’ and ‘accept,’ but first one must say ‘yes’ where one really can.

If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic, and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.”

--Thomas Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*