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Does religion always help the poor? Variations in religion and social class in the west and societies in the global south

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ABSTRACT From Marx’s famous dictum that religion is “the opium of the people” to Weber’s recognition of the dignity reaped by the “religiously musical,” disagreement about both the prosocial and deleterious—even violent—effects of religious beliefs and practices has been a long discussion in social theory. The social scientific literature shows that religion is shaped by social structures—including economic and political structures—and also that, as an integral element of many cultures, it can shape those same structures in turn. This article discusses the dialectical relationship between religion and social structures to consider when and how religion has the capacity to alleviate poverty and where it might figure in inequality’s endurance or exacerbation. The range of the empirical cases considered here not only suggests the power of religion to address poverty, but also and importantly, the ways in which religion can be co-opted in sustaining the *status quo* for poor and politically subjugated groups. Taking a global view in case selection, this article shows that although differences in these processes do exist based on global location, there are many similarities that cross national and religious lines.

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Introduction

Questions about the ways in which religion may help to alleviate poverty are of concern to a broad interdisciplinary audience that includes theologians, religious studies scholars, and scholars of human development, as well as a wide range of social scientists. Those of us interested in these issues know that answers to such questions are by no means simple. This is the case, at least in part, because the relationship between religion and poverty is often mediated by social structural, political, and cultural factors implicated in the very class-based relationships that religious groups seek to change in order to lift themselves, or those they seek to help, out of poverty.

What are the major factors involved in reaping religion's pro-social benefits for those in poverty? Conversely, when and how does religion become implicated in perpetuating and exacerbating economic inequalities? This essay explores significant strands of social scientific research on religion and social class¹ in order to demonstrate the variability of the relation between the two and to clarify some of the common ways in which religion can be involved in either the alleviation of poverty or its exacerbation.

We organize this discussion along two axes: social-theoretical tradition and global location. Sociological discussions of religion and social class generally distinguish different perspectives based on their affinities to either Marxist or Weberian approaches, and we do the same, since they can be quite helpful in identifying the various ways in which we might explain how religion may alleviate or exacerbate the conditions of those living in poverty in particular cases. We enter this discussion as sociologists working primarily in the sociological literature, although we do draw in works from other disciplines, such as political science and anthropology, that have been influential in the sociology of religion. As we discuss work in both the Marxist and Weberian traditions, we divide our analysis along lines of studies which examine, in Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) terms, a globalized world's center versus its periphery. We show some clear differences in religion's relation to poverty with respect to global location. We also show that there is a notable consistency between center and periphery both in some of religion's pro-social benefits and also in the ways in which it may be used to reinforce economic (and other) inequalities. These findings suggest that some elements of the relationship of religion and poverty are, within limits, generalizable and thus useful to a wide range of scholars interested in the how religion might best be involved in projects addressing poverty.

"A camera obscura:" Marxist lenses on religion's role in the plight of the poor

In order to understand Marxist conceptions of the relation between religion and social class, we must first understand Karl Marx's positioning of this relation in the materialist conception of history, which grounds human beings in the process of producing and reproducing their real lives. Pushing back against earlier philosophical work that prioritizes consciousness, he argues that, as he says in *The German Ideology*, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (1978, p 155). Aspects of consciousness, including "morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology" (p 154), are not independent of the material conditions of humans' existence but rather dependent upon them. However, religion and other forms of ideology serve to mask and misrepresent the nature of the social relations that result from our material conditions by, as Riesebrodt and Konieczny (2005) put it, "expressing the alienation inscribed into class structures" (p 127). Religion, then, functions as "a camera obscura" (Marx, 1978, p 154), which distorts human perceptions of social and material worlds.

Marx finds this distortive effect of religion to be especially pernicious in capitalist societies, where it serves to legitimate the interests of the dominant capitalist class and uphold the *status quo* by preventing the exploited working class from recognizing the roots of their alienation. For an alienated people, religion provides a form of comfort that they can turn to alleviate their suffering—hence Marx's famous dictum that religion is "the opium of the people" (1978, p 54). However, by focusing on the eternal rather than the temporal, religion turns the gaze of the oppressed away from the exploitation that shapes their everyday lives, thereby discouraging them from challenging the established social relations and pushing for changes that would positively impact their lives. In the process, religion helps foster a form of false consciousness that encourages cultural values and beliefs that support and validate the continued dominance of the ruling class. The result, then, is that religion functions as a problematic conservative force in society, and in Marx's view it will continue to do so until workers finally overthrow capitalism and establish a classless socialist society. When this happens, unequal social relations will no longer need to be legitimated, people's alienation will fade away, and with them will go any need for religion.

In short, Marx largely views religion and its relationship to social class in a negative light, and this negativity has generally predominated in Marxist research on the topic since—although in a few cases, scholars working in Marxist categories have identified conditions under which religion may help foster class consciousness and collective action. In the negative vein, different lines of theorizing underscore Marx's conclusion that religion often serves as a coping strategy for the deprived that prevents them from recognizing their oppression while also legitimizing and preserving the social structures that keep them in poverty. On the more positive side, research shows that when inequality is recognized and challenged, as is the case within liberation theologies, religion and religious ideas can provide powerful tools for those opposing the *status quo*.

Marxist studies of religion and social class based in the Western world. Marxist studies that concern religion, poverty, and social class in the West draw in varied ways on the interplay of the different strands of Marx's theory discussed above. For example, in his influential book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), E.P. Thompson shows how Methodism disciplined members of the emerging working class in every aspect of their life, including providing workers with an inner compulsion to work and encouraging them to respect temporal authority—thereby making it very popular among the bourgeoisie. Thompson demonstrates the utility of this strategy through the lens of Marxist categories, for religion was indeed also popular among members of the working class; the doctrines, prayers, and communal gatherings infused rare instances of emotionalism into their lives, which helped them cope with their hard working and living conditions and thus maintained the bourgeoisie's interests and oppressive class relations.

However, Thompson also shows that religious action did not always support existing class structures. He discusses the case of a Methodist pastor who interpreted his faith in a way that impelled him to attempt to go up against the factory owners for the sake of the workers. Even though his efforts ultimately failed—as Marxists might expect of actions borne of consciousness distorted by religiousness—Thompson's discussion nevertheless illustrates that religion can not only encourage acquiescence to the *status quo* but also produce leadership that can attempt to mine religion for the purposes of liberation from poverty.

Similarly, in *Millhands and Preachers* (1942), Liston Pope offers a foundational study of the 1929 strikes among textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina, in which he examines the links between religion and economics in a Marxist flavor. He also finds that religion is primarily a conservative force that reinforces oppressive and exploitative class inequalities. As with Thompson, he shows that religion served to mold people into docile and passive workers who supported the source of their own exploitation, thereby perpetuating an unjust *status quo*. When communists led a strike at the mills, the clergy of the mainline churches in town, whose churches received a great deal of support from local industrialists, not only failed to support the striking workers but also proactively worked to uphold the existing social order by organizing religious activities meant to distract workers from the strike. In contrast, the local Holiness and Pentecostal churches, which primarily served the lower classes and received no funding from the mill owners, supported the workers, but they had less influence in the shaping of these events. The strikes ultimately failed. Pope argues that religion thus plays a key part in this failure.

At the same time, Pope's work is not only an account of the labor strikes; it is also a community study of Gastonia, one that highlights religion's role in legitimizing and maintaining the unequal structures of local society. He and other community studies scholars find stark religious stratification in the communities that they researched (see, e.g., Warner, 1942a, 1942b, 1963; Warner and Lunt, 1941). As Marx predicts, religion is used to naturalize these religious and economic divisions, thereby discouraging the oppressed from even seeing, much less acting against, the exploitation inherent in the local social structures. For example, in their study of Muncie, Indiana, Lynd and Lynd (1929) observe that a binary class division existed between the business class and the working class, one that dominated community life. Religion served to uphold this divide: the business class attended only a small number of the town's churches, where the sermons emphasized the importance of being a member of a religious community and religion stayed confined to the church. The working-class churches, by contrast, emphasized regular religious practice, and religion infused everyday conversation. As other community studies scholars also found, both religious stratification and divergent class cultures served to legitimize and maintain class divisions.

However, for all the negative conclusions that Marxist theorizing about the relationship between religion and class tends to prompt, other work, such as studies of labor movements, complicates this view. Harkening back to Thompson (1966) and Pope's (1942) identification of rare instances when religion was used for a liberationist cause, even some studies with Marxist theoretical leanings nevertheless highlight the ways in which religion can be a proactive force for social change. In particular, they highlight how religious ideologies provide a common vocabulary that workers can use to create a "culture of solidarity" (Fantasia, 1989) or to call explicitly for social change (Billings, 1990; Corbin, 1981; Fantasia, 1989; Mirola, 2003; Pehl, 2016). Workers' ability to draw on religion for opposition is not automatic, however. Billings (1990) builds off Gramsci's work of hegemony and counterhegemony to examine "how socially dominate groups attempt to influence the interests and preferences of subordinate groups and how subordinate groups attempt to resist domination and achieve autonomy" (p 3). He compares labor strikes among Pope's (1942) textile workers with coal miners in a culturally similar part of the southern United States after World War I. In doing so he identifies three factors that can determine whether religion encourages the maintenance of the *status quo* or fosters opposition in labor protests: leadership resources (i.e., the development of organic intellectuals who can

articulate oppositional interpretations of religious ideologies), organizational autonomy (created through the mass abandonment of company churches and the formation of alternative sites of worship), and plausibility structures that support these new beliefs (such as the ritualized group singing of rewritten Protestant hymns that link religious faith with union activism). Billings finds that all three factors were required for religion to be used to take an oppositional stance, as was the case among the coal miners, who successfully unionized. Even today, religious people are highly involved in a revitalized labor movement, with faith-based labor support organizations such as Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) and Interfaith Worker Justice playing an important role (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008). In short, these studies show that religion can serve as a powerful unifier that helps to foster class consciousness.

Religion does not only serve as a force for change in the context of labor movements, however. In the study of religion and collective action more broadly, scholars have found that religion and religious communities often play important roles in a range of social movements and advocacy efforts, including many that can profoundly impact the lives of the poor (Nepstad and Williams, 2007; Smith, 1996a; Williams, 2003). Well-documented U.S.-based examples include the Civil Rights movement (Harris, 1999; Morris, 1984) and community building and neighborhood improvement movements (Braunstein, 2017; Braunstein et al. 2017; Jeung, 2007; Warren, 2001; Wood, 1997, 2002; Wood and Fulton, 2015). As with Billings' (1990) Gramscian-infused recognition of the importance of interests, resources, organization, and culture and beliefs for the coal miners' successful unionization, social movements scholars, particularly those working in the resource mobilization tradition and including many who do not directly draw on Marxist theorizing, point to these factors as being vital for movement success. Importantly for this article, religion and religious organizations are recognized, as Zald and McCarthy (1987) describe it, as vital "half-way houses" for wider social movements, providing powerful foundations for all of these factors. After all, religious organizations have strong preexisting infrastructures and resources, and even religion's focus on the eternal, of which Marx is so critical, can provide a powerful lens through which injustice is recognized when it is activated to evaluate the world using a divine standard (Williams, 2003).

One such example can be found in Mark Warren's (2001) discussion of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio, Texas. Founded in 1974 by a community organizer who was influenced by Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), COPS successfully pushed for massive investments in the services and infrastructure of San Antonio's low-income neighborhoods while also building a regional network for the movement. An important COPS innovation was their extensive reliance on religion, particularly the city's Hispanic Catholic parishes. Warren found that religion provided the moral rationale for their mobilization efforts and the infrastructure necessary to organize and motivate a sufficient number of people to attend rallies and vote for change. Although this and similar works (e.g., Braunstein, 2017; Wood, 2002) are not necessarily Marxist in their theoretical orientation, their attentiveness to issues of power and domination, concerns that are central to Marxist theorizing, highlight the ways in which religion, including the use of religious ideologies and ritualized religious practices such as ecumenical prayer, can play an important role in building effective movements across class, racial, and cultural lines.

A final important insight from Western studies discussing research with or through a Marxist theoretical framework comes from a recent book on the very type of religious stratification that

community studies scholars have often identified. James D. Davidson and Ralph E. Pyle (2011) point out that an important strand of Marxist theory has largely been neglected in the study of religion and social class: the conflict perspective. On one hand, stratification scholars, who make good use of conflict theory in their studies of race, class, and gender, largely ignore religion; if they touch upon it at all, they assume that it is primarily used as a tool for ideological legitimation. On the other hand, religion scholars, who are well aware of the stratified nature of the socioeconomic status of members of different religious denominations in the United States, tend to draw on functionalist or Weberian perspectives in theorizing religion and class and use conflict theory only rarely.

In contrast, Davidson and Pyle turn to conflict theory to explain the development and sustainment of religious stratification in the United States, arguing that it can be traced back to colonial-era conflict and competition between denominations. Even with some post-World War II shifts in the general socioeconomic status of members of certain denominations (Pyle, 1996; Wuthnow, 1988), the religious stratification that developed in the colonial era remains largely intact (Pyle, 2006; Smith and Faris, 2005). This stratification has real-world implications for members of lower-ranked denominations: they are less likely to engage in behaviors known to facilitate economic upward mobility, such as pursuing higher education (Beyerlein, 2004; Schwadel, 2014) or building up savings (Keister, 2003, 2008, 2011). We believe that Davidson and Pyle (2011) are right: that much more work can and should be done to examine what the conflict perspective offers to better our understanding of the development of religious stratification within societies and its impact on religious individuals.

Marxist studies of religion, poverty, and social class based in the Global South. Moving beyond the confines of the West, Marxist-inspired studies of the relationship between religion and inequality in the Global South both confirm and further enrich the findings gleaned from Western contexts. On one hand, they identify similar structures and causes of oppression and domination of the poor that we see in the West, including religious stratification, religion being used as a coping mechanism in the face of deprivation, and religion acting as a conservative force that supports the *status quo* and discourages calls for change. On the other hand, these studies show more: they highlight the processes of exclusion that religion can be implicated in or reinforce. In addition, they also show some places, perhaps unexpected, where religion is liberatory and not merely a form of “opium” that helps people endure their oppression.

First, we find that the power dynamics that Thompson (1966) and Pope (1942) observed in Western contexts are not unique to that specific global location. For example, Nanlai Cao (2011) finds clear parallels to Thompson’s industrializing Methodist England in the role of religion in the industrializing city of Wenzhou, Zhejiang, known as China’s Jerusalem for the number of Christians there. Wenzhou has a concentration of wealthy, largely native-born factory owners who are Christian, but it also has a number of Christians among the rural migrants who come to the city in search of economic opportunity. The working conditions in these factories are labor-intensive and come close to, in Cao’s words, “crude capitalist exploitation” (p 140)—it is not uncommon for laborers to work for ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with only one day off per month. He finds that many of the wealthy “boss Christians” use Christianity to legitimize their success and validate their continued support of these dismal working conditions. Furthermore, through their sermons, boss Christians teach newly converted migrant workers²

that their deplorable working conditions are the result of their own sins, which encourages docile acceptance of the *status quo*, just as Thompson (1966) and Pope (1942) found to be the case in their studies. While there are some preachers emerging from the migrant worker community who challenge this dominant narrative, they are without the resources, institutional support, and cultural legitimacy enjoyed by the boss Christians. As such, they have had little luck in opposing the *status quo*, both in the church communities and the migrants’ working environment.

Other researchers find similar processes of religion being used to legitimate social inequality, maintain the *status quo*, or provide coping strategies for the dispossessed happening in other contexts around the world, including locations as diverse as Latin America (Berryman, 1994; Nash, 1996; Peterson 1994; Slade, 1994; Smith, 1996b), the Middle East (Mahmoud, 2005; Masoud, 2014; Wickham, 2002) and colonial South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991). However, as we saw in the Western context, some of these cases also illustrate instances when religion has been activated to oppose oppression and call for social change.

In the negative vein, Slade (1994) examines the growth of Pentecostalism among the poor in Latin America and sees the same oppressive and dominating elements that were present in the old forms of spirituality being transferred to this new form of popular spirituality. Specifically, he points to the absence of a loving God, the absence of a just God, and the absence of an incarnate God. He traces these elements through the region’s history, arguing that they have served to maintain a feudalistic system in which extreme social inequality is normalized and efforts to mobilize for change are seen as a rebellion against God. In this context, Protestantism does not offer poor converts a liberatory reinterpretation of their oppression that can help spur collective action; instead, it serves as a new coping mechanism that helps them submit and endure.

However, other research complicates this picture of religion functioning primarily as opium that helps maintain oppression and domination. Instead, this work shows how religion can help people cope with deprivation while also providing them with a powerful channel for change. As with Billings’ (1990) example of coal miners in the U.S., another Latin American example highlights the ways in which religious beliefs and rituals can, in contrast to Slade’s (1994) findings, foster class consciousness and resistance to domination. In her study of tin-mining communities in highland Bolivia, Nash (1996) shows that key religious beliefs and rituals that tie them to their agricultural past, such as recognition of the hill spirit *Huari* and linking commemoration of political events with the ritually charged days of the winter and summer solstice, help create a unified common identity, a sense of solidarity, and communal recognition of when they are being exploited. In this way, religion “generate[s] a sense of self that rejects subordination and repression” (p 87) and, in the Bolivian context, has produced social movements that have changed society. Similarly, even though some Catholics in El Salvador advocated for a type of Catholicism that preserved the *status quo* during the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s, the progressive church developed new forms of religious worship and ministry that facilitated social change (Berryman, 1994; Montgomery, 1982; Nepstad and Williams, 2007; Peterson 1994).

Although not explicitly working the Marxist tradition, recent work on the growth of conservative religious groups in the Middle East similarly highlights the role of economics in the groups’ development. Take, for example, Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in pre-Arab Spring Egypt: political scientist Carrie Wickham (2002) argues that the growth of these religious groups can in no small part be explained by the economic and political exclusion that many of the country’s young people faced. Upon graduating from university and being

unable to find work commensurate with their education, many turned to Islamist groups, which did, as Marxist scholars would argue, provide them with consolation for such disappointment and their relative deprivation. However, contrary to fostering the political quiescence that Marxist-inspired arguments may lead us to expect, such groups also served as an important channel for political activism under a dictatorship that offered few opportunities for political engagement (Masoud, 2014). As Wickham (2002) emphasizes, “Though couched in religious terms, [these groups’] vision of a better society embodies many of the same hopes and aspirations—for freedom from dictatorship and for social justice and public accountability—that have inspired secular movements for democracy elsewhere around the globe” (pp 10–11). In short, the appeal of these groups is not merely due to their religious ideas but also the liberationist opportunities that they offer (see also Mahmood, 2005), and their impact is not confined to Egypt alone; a wide range of Islamic social movements throughout the Middle East play an important role in the provision of social welfare (Delibas, 2009; Jawad, 2009).

In a different vein, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (1991) provide an important addition to the conversation on the relationship between religion and social inequality in their examination of how religion can play a central role not just in maintaining or legitimizing structural inequality but also in producing it in the first place. Working as cultural analysts in the Marxist tradition, they show how the encounters of Nonconformist missionaries and the Southern Tswana from 1820 to 1920 resulted in Africans’ domination and eventual impoverishment in colonial South Africa. In a prime example of how the conflict perspective can be profitably applied in Marxist studies of religion and class, they illustrate how, in the midst of conflict and misunderstanding, hegemony was being created. This was done not merely through discourse but also through place, space, and material culture. As the missionaries tried to reshape Tswana daily life into one of Christian modernity, conflict and conversation about objects such as mirrors and clocks and the control of water served to refashion the Tswana consciousness in ways that reshaped local power relations to the benefit of the colonial government—despite the good intentions of the missionaries and active Tswana efforts to resist the changes. In other words, the Comaroffs show how cultural domination—and by extension, economic domination—comes to occur even in conflict; as Marx argues, the role of economic inequality and its relation to power is decisive. In short, this work illustrates how the conflict perspective can be fruitfully applied to analyze the role of religion in producing inequality, helping us to better understand how religion is implicated in processes of exclusion.

Social class, status honor, and power: studies in Weberian and related traditions

Like Marx, Max Weber is also highly attentive to the relationship between religious ideas and economic behavior. But Weber is highly critical of the Marxist view that religion is part of an ideological superstructure arising from an economic base. Instead, while Weber acknowledges the power of the economic sphere in human life in general and industrial capitalism in particular, he understands religion and the economic sphere to potentially be mutually constitutive. Despite his recognition that “not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct” (1946, p 280), he pays particular attention to the ways in which “the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (*ibid.*)—religion being an important source of these ideas. His most well-known example is that of “the Protestant ethic” and its role in the development of

modern Western capitalism (Weber, 2011). He traces this ethic to specific Protestant ideas, particularly the Lutheran notion of vocational calling and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, whose interplay fostered a form of “inner-worldly asceticism” that focused on the wealth accumulation necessary for modern capitalism even after the religious roots of these ideas had fallen away. As a result, he sees religious ideas as having an important influence on the highly rationalized, bureaucratized, and unequal nature of modern capitalist societies.

The example of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination that Weber emphasizes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2011) is illustrative of how this process works: since Calvinists had no way of knowing if they were among God’s elect, they looked to worldly success as confirmation of their salvation. In a departure from medieval Catholic teachings, poverty thus became a sign of God’s disfavor. Such doctrines legitimated social inequality; although Calvinism also included the notion of “brotherly love” (p 122), which included the imperative to care for the community, once these doctrines became divorced from their religious roots, it became easy to see the poor as undeserving, their poverty resulting from their own laziness, and ignore the structural factors that perpetuate inequality, an orientation that remains common among Calvinist-influenced societies and Reformed Protestant religious groups to this day (Emerson and Smith, 2000; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). As we can see, although Weber approaches the issue in a very different direction from Marx, he also sees religion as, in certain contexts, legitimizing and maintaining social inequality. However, this is not a necessary outcome in using Weberian methods. Instead, because Weber conceives of religion as a separate cultural sphere, he paves the way for understanding how religion is a more or less agentic entity with respect to social class, though the two are, at times, intertwined. This approach helps us better identify the points at which religion can positively intervene in mitigating the effects of poverty.

Weber (1946) also directly theorizes about the relationship between religion and social class, including an important additional dimension: the distinction between class and status. Class, he argues, is determined by economic position, but status is determined by status honor, and both have an elective affinity—that is, a degree of connection—with religious preference. He links specific classes and status groups to particular theodicies, suggesting that the social group within which a religion developed has a lasting impact on it (1993). For example, he argues those with high levels of class and status tend to develop theodicies of good fortune, which see wealth and status as a deserved blessing, thereby legitimating their own social position. By contrast, the less privileged have an elective affinity with theodicies of misfortune, which tend to see wealth and status as a sign of evil and that focus on the rewards to come in the eternal rather than temporal world. To be clear, Weber pushes back against purely materialistic explanations of religious preference, but he also works to avoid idealism as an explanation; instead, he sees ideas as grounded in the social world. Economics, social class, and status, in other words, are continually interacting and mutually influencing each other.

Finally, it is important to point out that Weber, unlike Marx, does not have a grand theory. His work is full of examples of how historical outcomes are often unintended and are instead contingent upon meaningful social action. To illustrate how this works, he thinks comparatively through ideal types and elective affinities to establish causal relations in particular cases, and then he compiles these cases to draw more general conclusions. Part of his utility for scholars of religion and poverty is the case-specific flexibility of his methods, which scholars also use to build generalizations from the analysis of specific cases. We see this utility

at play in the studies covered in the next sections, which explore how religious ideas, styles of religious behavior, and the social structures of religious institutions can positively or negatively impact the poor in ways that do vary based on global location but that nonetheless show remarkable consistency across national, cultural, and religious lines.

Weberian studies of religion, poverty, and social class based in the West. Scholars have made good use of Weber's theorizing on religion and its relationship to social class and poverty in studies of Western contexts. For example, comparative-historical research conducted in the Weberian tradition has shown that religious ideas, conceptualized as Weber did, continue to form "tracks" that direct action even in modern secular contexts where the religious roots of certain ideas have already been shed, as Weber found in the *Protestant Ethic* (Gorski, 2003; Grzymala-Busse, 2012; Morgan, 2009; Van Kersbergen and Manow 2009). Moreover, studies have found that this process often has profound unintended consequences for the poor, both positive and negative. For example, in studies of poverty policies in Western nations, Sigrun Kahl (2005, 2009) explores how popular understandings of the poor as deserving or undeserving and variation in the ways that national poverty policies emphasize welfare and work can be traced back to the religious doctrines of most influential religious denomination in each nation. Predominantly Catholic countries such as France and Italy see the poor as deserving and emphasize welfare; Lutheran countries such as the Scandinavian nations see both individual and structural factors in poverty and emphasize a balance between welfare and work; while Reformed Protestant countries such as the United States tend to see the poor as undeserving and thus prioritize work in their poverty policies. As a result, the poor's experience of public support varies widely from country to country for reasons that, in no small part, can be traced back to religious ideas. Such findings underscore Weber's observation that there can be an elective affinity between religious ideas and today's secular institutions and cultures.

In addition to drawing on Weber's theorizing of the ways in which religious ideas influence a society's social structures, scholars working the Weberian tradition also direct our attention to the ways in which religion, class, status, and power are intertwined. Indeed, the observation that one of the ways that class influences religion is through the development of class-specific religious behaviors, which in turn can reproduce the existing social structure, has long been a part of the study of religion and social class. In his influential work *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), H. Richard Niebuhr works in this vein to emphasize that social structures such as race and class impact the development and growth of religious movements, resulting in religious forms that reflect their social position. He draws particular attention to the role this plays for the poor: the disinherited do not find their needs met in the churches and thus form their own sects. Elmer Clark (1965), drawing on Niebuhr (1929) and Ernst Troeltsch's (1960) church-sect typology, suggests that sects "elevate the necessities of their class—frugality, humility, and industry—into moral virtues and regard as sins the practices they are debarred from embracing" (Clark, 1965, p 17, qtd. in McCloud and Mirola, 2009, p 13). In Niebuhr's view, such practices provide members with a religious discipline that lifts them out of poverty. However, once they have achieved a degree of cultural respectability, they neglect the poor that have taken their place, which leads this new body of the poor to develop their own sects as well, thereby continuing the cycle.

This question of what types of differences in religious behavior and organization are seen in churches that appeal to the working

class versus those dominated by the middle or upper classes and how such divisions may serve to support or reproduce social inequality has continued to remain a subject of interest in different bodies of literature, including the community studies highlighted in the section on Marx and deprivation theory studies that tend to focus on the lower classes (see, e.g., Glock, 1964, for an early sociological example). McCloud and Mirola (2009) summarize the conclusions of these various works:

- 1) There are class differences in denominational affiliation,
- 2) These affiliational differences foment divergent class cultures in local congregations, and
- 3) These class-cultural religious differences play out in religious beliefs, practices, styles and how they think about the dynamics of their community and world (p 8).

As they argue, such works show that class as Weber conceives it (one's economic position) is not the sole determinants of the relationship between religion and social inequality; instead, cultural dimensions linked to one's status also reinforce and maintain religious stratification (Coreno, 2009; Mirola, 2009; Nelson, 2009).

Much of the recent work on religion and class that continues to grapple with this issue of class-based differences in styles of religious practices now does so from a Bourdieusian perspective (see, e.g., McCloud, 2007; Nelson, 2009). Scholars have begun applying Bourdieu's theory of practice, and in particular his concept of *habitus*, to better explore the relationship between religious styles and other cultural practices and specific class or status groups (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Bourdieu's theory dialogues with and builds upon both Weberian and Marxist theorizing, and he sees class as not just about income, education, or occupation, but also about habits, tastes, consumption, and even the way we move our bodies. Class, in short, involves boundaries, the way we distinguish between ourselves and others (see, e.g., Lamont, 1992, 2000). Situating the concept in Bourdieu's broader theoretical project, we know that class-based *habitus* and differential access to cultural capital is by nature exclusionary and thus reproduces social inequality. This process happens in multiple cultural fields, including the religious one: members of the same class not only have an affinity for the same styles of religious practice but also "feel hostile to, ridicule or reject the cultural choices of those unlike themselves" (Nelson, 2009: p 53). People naturally sort themselves into different religious institutions where they can, as Nelson puts it, "be at ease with [their] kind"—and learn the types of behaviors and religious ideas linked to their specific class position. It is important to emphasize that the stratifying effects of *habitus* are often unconscious and unintended—a form of class *unconsciousness* rather than consciousness—which makes them difficult to counter, especially since, in Bourdieu's view, one's *habitus* is difficult to change.³

Returning to Weber, scholars have also found aspects of his work that do not explicitly address religion, such as his theorizing on bureaucracies and organizational cultures, to be useful in evaluating the effectiveness of religious institutions in addressing poverty. Such research directs our attention to the ways in which the structures of religious organizations and the religious and interactional cultures within them can have unintended but dramatic impacts on an organization's ability to, on one hand, recognize the needs of the poor in their community and, on the other, develop and successfully execute initiatives to help them. As this research shows, even when religious organizations identify a need in the community and make an effort to assist the poor, such attempts may go awry for reasons that have nothing to do with theology. Rather, their institutional or group culture may work against these efforts. Furthermore, as Mooney (2009) illustrates in her study of Catholicism and the Haitian diaspora in

cities in three different Western countries, the broader social context in which religious organizations are operating, particularly local laws and cultural views of religion and ethnicity, plays an important role in fostering or constraining social action that religious groups organize on behalf of the underprivileged.

We highlight three strands of this work here: how religious institutions' cultural orientations towards the poor condition the poor's engagement with these organizations (Sullivan, 2011); how the institutionalized ideological orientations of religious institutions shape the congregations' understanding of the poor in their community and the nature of their community involvement (McRoberts, 2003; Unruh and Sider, 2005); and how the culture and customs of interaction in religious groups working to relieve poverty or enact other forms of social change can, on one hand, provide valuable movement resources or, on the other, inadvertently derail even the most well-intentioned efforts (Harris, 1999; Lichterman, 2005; Morris, 1984; Patillo-McCoy 1998; Smith, 1996b; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002; Zald and McCarthy, 1987).

In her book on religion and mothers in Boston who are on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Susan Crawford Sullivan (2011) raises an important question that can bring religious institutions' cultural orientations towards the poor to light: "How do [religious institutions] see the disenfranchised poor—as charity recipients or fellow congregants?" (213). In her own research and that of others who have studied religion among the urban poor in the United States (e.g., Laudarji and Livezey, 2000; Price, 2000; McRoberts, 2003), a key finding is that many churches, even those in poor neighborhoods, see the very poor as charity cases rather than potential fellow congregants. Both the church members and the marginalized poor draw on discourses of "respectability" to explain why the very poor are not viable members of the congregations that assist them through charitable action. As a result, even though Sullivan finds that religion plays a key role in the private lives of the poor single mothers whom she studies, and that many will go out of their way to make sure their children attend church, very few are involved with religious communities themselves. They feel excluded, which is an unintended result of churches' cultural emphasis on respectability. Although these women are individuals who are often desperately in need of the support, sense of belonging, and social capital that religious communities can provide, they frequently feel ashamed of their circumstances and their failure to be respectable and thus avoid churches and other religious groups. In turn, many, although certainly not all, of the churches studied rarely make the effort to reach out to them as fellow Christians and potential members of their congregation.

Omar McRoberts (2003), in his study of churches in a poor African American-majority neighborhood in Boston, provides insight into the religious institutions' perspective on why they might treat the very poor as charity cases rather than potential congregants. He shows us how the institutionalized ideological orientations of churches condition their view of and interaction with the poor in the local community. For these churches, many of which drew their membership from commuters from middle-class suburbs rather than the impoverished locals, "the street" outside the church walls was either something to avoid, convert, or serve or was some combination of the latter two; such understandings had theological roots but were not tied to specific denominations. In turn, such orientations helped shape the churches' approach towards local "activism," which in McRoberts' view is determined not by common binaries such as worldly/otherworldly, church/sect, instrumental/expressive, or resistance/accommodation but rather a continuum based on whom they primarily serve (priestly/pastoral/prophetic orientations) and what kind of change they advocate (personal/

socialization/social). The rare churches that actively engaged in the community were those with prophetic and social transformation orientations, a finding echoed by Unruh and Sider (2005), who show that churches with a holistic orientation that focus on meeting both the spiritual and social needs of the communities that they serve have the most successful missions. However, McRoberts does emphasize that congregations are dynamic organizations, and as such, their ideological orientations can change, which then, in turn, shifts their activism efforts. He finds that such adjustments are due not to large-scale political or economic changes (e.g., Davidson and Koch, 1998) but rather institutional shifts within individual religious organizations: leadership transitions and congregational growth. Unruh and Sider (2005) make a similar observation in the Anglo-American evangelical context: congregations draw on ethnic, denominational, and historical scripts to shape their mission orientation, but they also add in their own innovations in ways that continually renegotiate historical patterns.

Finally, even when religious institutions do recognize their distance from the community's poor and make explicit efforts to bridge it, the culture and customs of interaction within the groups that are reaching out to the poor can either facilitate or hinder their efforts. Paul Lichterman (2005) shows how the efforts of religious institutions to bridge social divides can easily be derailed not due to lack of effort or declining interest but rather because the contexts in which they are doing this work reinforces taken-for-granted—and class-infused—modes of action that strongly limit their group's reflexivity and thus their ability to make real connections with the poor they are hoping to serve. Out of nine middle-class Christian civic groups of various political orientation that he observes in the American city of "Lakeburg," only one group succeeded in their efforts to build bridges with the poor. The process was fraught and required the group to reflexively evaluate and change the way they were operating, moving from an orientation of "helping" the poor to one of "partnership"—a change that harks back to Sullivan's (2011) question of whether religious institutions see the poor as charity cases or potentially equal congregants. Even when it became clear that their well-intended efforts to build bridges with the city's poor were faltering, the other groups shied away such reflexivity because it threatened their group norms, and as a result their initiatives all ultimately failed. This micro-level work illustrates how it may not be enough for a religious institution to identify poverty as a problem and create a program to address it; when groups involved in such efforts inevitably encounter problems—such as a clash between the class-conditioned expectations and modes of interaction on each side—the communications among group members may prevent them from making the changes necessary for the program to succeed. In this case, it is not a failure of religion to address poverty but rather a failure of the religious groups' organizational cultures.

That being said, the extensive body of research on religion's role in various movements for social change discussed in the section on Marx illustrates how successful movement organizations have cultivated specific interactional practices that help participants bridge a range of social divisions, including race, class, culture, and religious tradition, that often derail activist efforts. Prayer, for example, has been identified as particularly powerful, in that it adds a transcendent dimension to political action, sets an expectation for adherence to certain ethical values, and does important identity work (Wood, 2002; see also Braunstein, 2017). Other practices that Wood (2002) sees as important for the organizational success of the faith-based Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) in Oakland, California, include one-to-one organizing, credentials, political conflict, and evaluation sessions. Just as certain religious

interactional practices and organizational cultures can impede efforts to assist the poor, other ones—often consciously chosen to facilitate the development of social capital—strongly support such endeavors.

Weberian studies of religion, poverty, and social class in the Global South. As we saw with the Marxist literature, Weberian work on religion, social class, and poverty in the Global South illustrates basic similarities with the structures and dynamics found in the West while also further enriching our understanding of these processes. In particular, the works discussed here provide additional insight into, on one hand, the ways in which religion can exclude the poor through class and status-based behavior and through the structures of local religious institutions that allow the more powerful to reap the benefits of development aid. However, on the other hand, we also explore how religion can also strongly benefit the poor; this occurs when religious communities commit themselves to more egalitarian structures that empower the poor in the religious context.

Even though comparing the ways in which religious ideas shaped not only a society's economic structure but also its bureaucracy and culture more broadly in societies as diverse as India, China, and ancient Judea was a vital component of Weber's research agenda, this line of inquiry has received less attention in the context of the Global South than it has in the West. One exception has been Robert Woodberry's (2011, 2012; Woodberry and Shah, 2004) work on Christian missions around the world. He finds that locations that had Protestant missions in earlier eras now have more stable democracies than countries that did not. This association holds across countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. He argues that conversionary Protestants instituted programs and reforms, such as mass education and printing, an emphasis on religious liberty, and colonial reforms, that provided a "crucial catalyst" for "creating the conditions that made stable democracy more likely" (2012, p 244)—even after many of these programs had been secularized. A nation's political system, in turn, can have a profound impact on the government's ability to address poverty. Overall, however, this type of work has not been a major focus in sociological studies of religion in a global context; other issues and theoretical and methodological strands have been more important.

One of these strands takes up Weber's focus on the elective affinity between religion and class and status as well as the dimensions of power inherent in this relationship; included here is also Bourdieu's discussion of *habitus* and the ways in which it serves to build boundaries between people of different classes through the class-based nature of religious practice styles. Research in various global contexts illustrate that even if religious organizations do create communities that reach across class lines, the power dynamics of class and status do not remain at the doors of a church, temple, or mosque, often to the detriment of the less privileged. Returning to the example of Cao's (2011) study of Christians in Wenzhou, China, he observes that many of the Christian rural migrants found that the prejudice and discrimination that they faced as outsiders in Wenzhou followed them into the church community, where native local believers doubted the reality and quality of their spirituality. Some converts had hoped that their religious involvement would provide them with the opportunity to network with local Christians, but they tended to remain in subordinate positions within the church community and had few opportunities to access important institutional resources such as intensive Bible training. As such, although they valued their faith and found it personally meaningful, Cao uncovers little evidence that their religious involvement helps to substantively improve their lives in any economic or social sense.

In terms of the role of class-specific religious cultures and styles impacting the poor's inclusion in or exclusion from certain religious communities, anthropologist John Burdick (1993) provides a good example of the unintended and unforeseen effects of instituting specific styles of religious practice on the poor in Brazil. Burdick examines why the progressive Catholic church failed to expand its constituency among the poorest in the community but instead remained a largely middle-class movement. He finds that liberationists emphasized literacy and middle-class status symbols such as clothing and home furnishings in their community and small-group interactions, leaving the poor and illiterate feeling uncomfortable and excluded. Many of the poor found the local evangelical Protestant groups to be more welcoming and less judgmental. These churches also helped them solve their individual life problems, such as providing networks for decent jobs or otherwise improving their life chances, in ways that the Catholic church did not.

Furthermore, research outside of the West also shows us that religious institutions' bureaucratic organization and institutional cultures can have far more profound effects on vulnerable populations than simply failing to engage with the poor or successfully execute poverty assistance programs, as is often the case in the West. Political scientist Timothy Longman (2010) provides a stark example in his study of Christianity and the Rwandan genocide. He presents case studies of two Presbyterian parishes to show how the social structures and theologies of churches, who are frequent conduits for development aid for the poor, can affect the degree to which those most in need are able to receive it. He shows that some parishes can be patrimonial and may distribute resources in a paternalistic or clientelistic fashion. In the case of Kirinda parish, this meant that those most favored by the pastor were chosen for parish jobs—a source of a more secure living than enjoyed by most in the parish—and that the businesspeople in the community likewise secured a prominent place in the parish. They headed committees that made decisions about workers on development projects and distribution of development aid to people, and they used this power to create clientelistic relations with those to whom they gave aid. This process included a focus on their own self-benefit, often through forms of corruption including kickbacks. The poor who did not have the ability to enter into such relationships were critical of the leadership but could do little to change the system. Moreover, this structure did not just disadvantage the poor; it also had deadly consequences: Longman argues that such structures ended up dividing the parish and facilitating the genocide.

By contrast, a poor rural parish located not far away in Biguhu was led by a pastor with a strong commitment to liberation theology and had a more egalitarian social structure that resisted hierarchies among those belonging to the church. Instead, the parish encouraged community involvement among all its members. In terms of its benefits for those living in the most abject poverty, the parish empowered its poor by positioning those most in need in leadership positions in cooperatives and small development projects. They were encouraged to see themselves as working in unity with others and did not create or support distinctions with those who were better off. They empowered the poorest among them. As a result, this was (to use the expression a bit idiosyncratically) a "rising tide that lifted all boats." Importantly, in contrast to the patrimonial structure found in the Kirinda parish, this structure made genocidal killings, which mostly happened when Tutsi fled to what they thought was a safer location, more difficult to accomplish at Biguhu parish.

If we link the success of liberation theology at the Biguhu parish back to its failure to help the poor in the Brazilian context, we can see a clear difference in religious style and culture, which

in turn has important implications for whether the poor feel excluded: the Biguhu parish did not emphasize literacy, as did the liberationist Catholics in Brazil. Instead, Rwanda's history and living culture of oral storytelling permitted the illiterate to participate as equals. At a time when the global middle class is growing rapidly (Heiman et al. 2012) and studies of middle-class religious culture in very different global locales find, as Weber leads us to expect, remarkable similarities in their rationalized and text-oriented style of religious practice (Burdick, 1993; Koehrsen, 2016; Madsen, 2007; Rogers, 2017), such works sensitize us to the fact that there is a danger of middle-class religious styles becoming the normative expectation, to the detriment of the poor, even as the increasing wealth and political confidence of these religious communities fosters new avenues of charitable outreach (Koesel, 2014; Madsen, 2007). Rogers (2017), for example, compares the religious styles of middle-class Buddhists and Protestants in urban China and finds that both groups exert their moral authority as educated and cultured persons to delimit appropriate forms of religiousness, a process that serves to draw and reinforce class boundaries, as well as religious ones. Such attempts, regardless of whether they are conscious or inadvertent exercises of power, play out not only at the individual level but also, as Longman (2010) shows, at the institutional level as well. These global findings highlight points that McRoberts (2003) and others made in the Western context: just as class and status can foster certain styles of religious practice and bureaucratic organization, religious groups' institutional structures and cultures can condition their expression and the ways in which they impact the poor.

Conclusion

As we have shown in this essay, social science has demonstrated that while religion can and does often aid in producing social and economic changes that benefit those living in poverty, it can also be implicated in shoring up social and economic inequalities that have adverse effects upon the poor. On the positive side, religion often offers structural benefits to those in poverty and can assist people in navigating their everyday lives. These benefits include, for instance, the services that religious institutions provide for the poor, the personal and communal meaning people from all classes derive from religion, and the fact that religious organizations remain a key building block of civil society in countries around the world. At the same time, religion can sustain and even promote class divisions and inequalities that are inimical to the values and ideals of many religious traditions. Religion can, for example, uphold the *status quo* in various ways, be it by legitimating social inequalities, bringing society's power dynamics into the religious field, or reinforcing class-specific behaviors or ideologies. When and how religion either benefits or inhibits those in poverty is not simply a function of theology, though theology can play an important role, but also one of religious leadership, organizational dynamics, cultural contexts, and the broader social structures of local society. However, when religion can be activated to aid the poor, it is often a powerful force for change. Importantly, such findings are, within limits, applicable not only to the Western contexts in which sociology developed but also the world more broadly.

At the same time, it is important to note that despite our focus on social class in this piece, we recognize that for all the influence it has on the relationship between religion and poverty, it is not the only mediating factor at play. Other social inequalities, particularly race, ethnicity, and gender, also intervene in this process, and there remains much room for work on the interplay of these different factors. In a recent *Annual Review of Sociology* article, Melissa Wilde and Lindsay Glassman (2016) introduce the

concept of "complex religion," which involves recognition that religious affiliation is deeply entwined with structural inequalities such as race, class, and gender. They draw the idea of "complex inequality" (McCall, 2001) from intersectionality literature to develop the concept, although unlike most intersectionality research, which tends to remain at the micro level of analysis, Wilde and Glassman are particularly interested in "how these structures [of inequality] profoundly overlap with religious group membership" (408). Their focus is on religion and American politics, but we suspect that complex religion provides a fruitful starting point for research on other topics and in other locals, including religion, class, and poverty in a global context.

To conclude, as sociologists, we have primarily worked within the sociology of religion literature to explore the question of whether religion always helps the poor, with additional input from related works in other social science disciplines such as political science and anthropology. For many who work on religion and poverty, these insights confirm much of what they already know from their own engagement in fields as diverse as theology, religious studies, and development studies: that religion can be a powerful source for social change but that religious congregations have weaknesses when it comes to addressing the needs of the poor and that empowerment takes hard work. However, we hope that this brief review of some of the theoretical and empirical insights that sociology has to offer helps practitioners situate their own knowledge in the global context as they encounter the new challenges that arise in our increasingly globalized world.

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Notes

- 1 We recognize that the definition of social class is highly variable and remains contested in the sociological literature. Providing a definition is beyond the scope of this essay, and we instead work with the concept as broadly conceived by Marx and Weber. See Lareau and Conley (2010) for a recent compilation of sociological thinking on the topic.
- 2 Even in the post-Mao era, China remains a highly atheistic society. Most Chinese do not identify with a religion, so the majority of Christian rural migrants in Wenzhou converted after moving there, often due to the evangelizing efforts of boss Christians.
- 3 Recent literature that dialogs with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* in religious settings complicates this picture, however. Mahmood (2005), Rao (2015), and Winchester (2008) all show how religious actors actively deploy specific religious practices to inculcate desired religious dispositions.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Additional information

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