

The SAGE Encyclopedia of the SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION



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community by the neighboring Shi'ites, who considered Yazid ibn Mu'awiya their worst enemy.

The religious idiosyncrasies and reputation of devil worshippers and heretics provoked constant persecution of the Yazidis in the wider Muslim (primarily conservative Sunni) environment throughout history. The most recent episode occurred during the present-day Near-Eastern conflict and was accompanied by forced conversion to Islam, mounted by the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," mass killings and captivity, the massacres in Sinjar in August 2014 having been the peak of the drama.

Among the latest trends noticeable in the Yazidi communities of Armenia, Georgia, and Russia is the adoption of Orthodox Christianity or neo-Protestantism.

Victoria Arakelova

See also Church-Sect theory; ISIS; Shi'ite Islam; Sufism; Sunni Islam

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YINGER, J. MILTON

John Milton Yinger (1916–2011) made significant contributions to the sociology of religion, particularly his studies of the unstable role of Christianity

in society, as well as significant contributions to the broader social sciences, including the study of race and ethnicity and social theory and methodology. Born in Michigan in 1916 to parents who were both Methodist ministers, he studied at DePauw University in Indiana, Louisiana State University, and the University of Wisconsin, alongside C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), where he received his PhD in 1943. His dissertation, published in 1946 as *Religion in the Struggle for Power*, touched on many of the foundational historical debates in the still-emerging discipline of the sociology of religion, particularly Christianity's contested relationship to capitalist modernity, including Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis. Yinger taught for 40 years at Oberlin, a progressive liberal arts college in Ohio, where he was enmeshed in the college's culture of politics and public service, introducing Martin Luther King Jr. on the occasion of his receipt of an honorary doctorate in 1965, for example. The author, coauthor, and coeditor of a dozen books and numerous articles, he served as the president of the American Sociological Association in 1976–1977, delivering the society's 1977 Presidential Address, "Counter-cultures and Social Change."

Social Scientific Study of Religion

Two of Yinger's other early books were essentially textbooks. *Racial and Cultural Minorities*, coauthored with George E. Simpson, went through five editions between 1953 and 1985, and now serves as a useful document of changing approaches to the central topics over three tumultuous decades. *Religion, Society, and the Individual* attempts an inclusive summation of work in the social scientific study of religion to that point, 1957, albeit framed by the author's own understanding of religion as a system of beliefs and practices for a community to engage the ultimate questions of human existence. There is consequently a general concern with moving between a broad, definitive theory of religion, and the varieties of concrete social forms which religion, so defined, may take. Yinger differentiates between specific religious traditions and intrinsic religion, quoting, as he was wont to do across the decades, Reinhold Niebuhr's poetic description of religion as a *citadel of hope on the edge of*

despair, so allowing Marxism and other expressions of existential human concern to be comprehensible within the framework of religion. An expanded and expansive textbook, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, was published in 1970 and might be seen in its inclusive breadth, drawing from social psychology and anthropology, as signaling the end of the beginning of the sociology of religion, before specialization and fragmentation over theory and methodology divided the discipline.

An appreciation of the multiple potentialities of social phenomena, including but not limited to religion, is a significant feature of Yinger's major theoretical and methodological statement, *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior: Personality and Social Structure*. Here, Yinger sought to develop a theory of social action that negotiates social structure and individual agency, as many social scientists have. His field theory highlighted social complexity and interaction and the necessity of multilevel social scientific analysis. While broadly functionalist—focused on social behavior, not an individual's inner being—the approach contrasts with functionalist approaches strongly emphasizing social stability, while also rejecting emerging psychological personalism emphasizing individuals' capacity to defy their social context. Yinger's field theory is influenced very broadly by approaches in the natural sciences, particularly from physics, wherein scientists focus on not just the intrinsic attributes of a single object but also its wider environment, and from biology, which recognizes that organisms respond, over time, to environmental factors. In contrast to social scientific fears that appeals to the natural sciences are reductive, Yinger's appeal to the natural sciences is in fact an appeal to take account of the irreducible complexities and possibilities of social life. His treatment of anomie in the book is instructive, recognizing that religious revivalism or radicalism is as logical a behavioral response as despair. While Yinger's field theory of behavior probably lacked the unique selling point necessary to make its mark in the marketplace of social theory, it nevertheless provides the foundation for his approach to the study of religion and offers a sociological *via media* for its own time and place.

Countercultures

Yinger remains perhaps best known for his study of counterculture—even if this was the subject of a session on “avoiding disciplinary amnesia” by the sociology of religion group at the American Academy of Religion conference in 2009—and it offers an ideal example of his field theory approach. Counter cultures necessitate complex multilevel analyses because they are incomprehensible but for their economic, political, and social context, and inexplicable without an understanding of the individual psychology and personal experiences of counterculturalists. Yinger is credited with coining the term *counterculture*, which began as a theory of *contraculture*, in a 1960 article in the *American Sociological Review*. His work in this area prefigured and responded to the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, which included the emergence of the Jesus People, a charismatic and sometimes apocalyptic evangelical faction of the hippie counterculture, which he considered a sincerely radical counter-counterculture. His 1977 ASA Presidential Address, also published in the *American Sociological Review*, and his 1982 book *Countercultures: The Promise and the Peril of a World Turned Upside Down*, argued that countercultures are situationally created inversions of the hegemonic order, in Yinger's definition, which emerge in contexts of social conflict and anomie. Religions and sects are definitive countercultures, in Yinger's view, but they do not always stay countercultural, a dilemma of religious life that Yinger had written about in his PhD dissertation 4 decades earlier, contrasting churches' willingness to sanctify the status quo with their willingness to turn it upside down.

Ibrahim Abraham



See also Christianity; Counterculture; Jesus People; Social Movements; Social Psychology

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