CHAPTER TWO

AT EASE WITH OUR OWN KIND: WORSHIP PRACTICES AND CLASS SEGREGATION IN AMERICAN RELIGION

Timothy J. Nelson

Theoretically, no obstacle keeps lower-class people out of the Christian Church, but “they wouldn’t feel comfortable there.”


The religious segregation of mill workers was not due to the desire of fashionable uptown churches or conservative rural churches to exclude them… The lives of the mill operatives were different from other people, leading them to desire churches of their own in which they could feel perfectly at ease.

–Liston Pope, Millhands and Preachers (1942, 72–3)

For most Protestants, theology plays a minor role in selection of a church. They go where they find their own kind of people.

–W. Lloyd Warner et al., Democracy in Jonesville (1964, 166–7)

The relationship between social class and religious behavior is one of the oldest and most well-established areas of inquiry in the field of sociology. Beginning with Marx’s comments on religion, alienation, and class ideology, Weber’s analyses of religious styles among different social strata, and continuing with eighty years’ worth of empirical studies in the United States, it is safe to say that this disciplinary path is a well-trodden one. Although some recent studies have downplayed the role of class in American religion (Roof and McKinney 1987; Park and Reimer 2002), choosing instead to emphasize what they see as an unmooring of organized religion from its traditional social sources, the evidence clearly suggests that class is still a powerful force that continues to shape religious identification and behavior (Smith and Faris 2005; McCloud 2007).

Documenting the correlation between social class and various forms of religious behavior is one thing, however, but explaining them is quite another. In the pages that follow, I briefly summarize the four major
empirical findings concerning class and American religion, narrow the focus of this paper to just one of these, and review the most prominent theory that has been offered to explain it. After critiquing this explanation, I then develop an alternative theoretical approach drawn from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class and cultural consumption, focusing on his concept of *habitus*. Dividing the worship service into three dimensions—aesthetic, linguistic and physical—I review a selection of ethnographic studies of American religion to see how they support and illuminate this alternative approach.

**SOCIAL CLASS AND AMERICAN RELIGION**

Over seventy-five years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) published his hugely influential work *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. With the ethical force of an Old Testament prophet, Niebuhr (1929, 25) denounced Protestant denominations in America as “represent[ing] the moral failure of Christianity” by their conformity in reproducing the social order of classes and castes. While never reducing religion to an epiphenomenon of class, he emphasized that the energies, goals and motives of religious movements are channeled by social factors, particularly race and class, into particular forms that reflect their position in society (Niebuhr 1929, 27). That same year, the Lynds’ seminal study of a “typical” American community was published as *Middletown* and received great public acclaim, including a laudatory front-page review in the Sunday *New York Times* and immediate best-seller status (Lynd and Lynd 1957). Originally intended as a survey of religious life in a “typical” American community, the Lynds took an explicitly anthropological approach to religion by situating it within its broader social context—particularly the two-fold division they found in Muncie, Indiana, between the “business class” and the “working class.” In their analysis, the Lynds repeatedly stressed the influence of this class division in shaping the religious behavior, attitudes, and organizations of Muncie—to the extent that the foundation which had sponsored the study deemed it to be “anti-religious” and ultimately “unpublishable” (Connolly 2005).

These two influential works, one historical and one anthropological, set the agenda for the following decades of research on the link between social class and religious expression. In the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, over a dozen studies of various American communities showed conclusively that local congregations had a distinctive and recognizable