CHAPTER SIX

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES ABOUT BUSINESS, ECONOMICS, AND SOCIAL WELFARE AMONG INDIANAPOLIS CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS

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Scenerio 1: On an ordinary Sunday morning in Indianapolis, a visitor attends a United Methodist Church with an upper middle class congregation. Following the service, the visitor is invited to join the congregation’s fellowship time where they encounter a silver tea service, cakes, and buns, and a schizophrenic “welcome” and “but only if you know how to behave” atmosphere.

Scenerio 2: Elsewhere in the city, an Episcopalian congregation wants to be more practically helpful to its poor African American neighbors. So, on a September Sunday afternoon, they open the church’s castle gates (literally) for a neighborhood cookout—at the back of the church grounds, in a parking lot, far removed from the church sanctuary or even the hall of the church where members would more typically enjoy all of their own such functions in comfort.

Scenerio 3: Middle class congregations value order, familiarity, and respectability without any signs of being “showy” or “too educated” or “too anything.” For them, just being good old Middle American is the order of the day. While among the city’s working class and poor congregations, one finds familiar white evangelical congregations, those often highlighted by the media for their support conservative stances on abortion, gay rights, etc. and African American congregations whose religious life alternates between defending members against the ravages of poverty, crime and discrimination and keeping themselves firmly rooted to Biblical teachings, revivals, and joy-filled, “get on your feet and dance” styles of worship.

1 Portions of this essay were presented at the 2007 International Society for the Sociology of Religion meetings in Leipzig, Germany.
Visit any number of the other 1200 congregations in Indianapolis and you will see parallel examples of class segregation that makes itself felt in the most subtle aspects of congregational life. What is significant about these scenarios is that while U.S. sociologists of religion study church-neighborhood relations, worship styles, and support and opposition for various political agendas in terms of politics, race, ethnicity, gender, and from many other demographic positions, class analysis of these organizational and individual religious realities continues to be largely ignored. Yet, in attending many churches in small towns and small to medium-sized cities, one cannot help but feel that class still matters in many of the ways it did one hundred years ago. Even within those larger urban contexts, persistent segregation of residents by race, ethnicity, and also socio-economic indicators means that class still matters in them too. However the difficulty in “seeing” class effects has more to do with the level of analysis (city-wide and denominational-levels versus local congregational ones for instance) often employed by researchers and problems of data availability than by its non-existence. As noted by other contributors to this volume, congregations tend to be more or less homogeneously populated by wealthy upper and upper middle class members, others by middle class people, and still others that populated by working class and poor members. When class diversity does exist, it still tends to represent classes that are relatively close to one another. So, for instance, one may find middle class individuals and skilled blue collar workers and independent craftsmen in the same pews but rarely will one find a CEO and an unskilled laborer or chronically unemployed person in the same congregation. While the association of entire denominations may no longer be as exclusively connected to particular classes as was the case in the nineteenth century, class patterns continue persist at neighborhood and congregational levels.

In re-establishing a class-congregation link, the ways that class dynamics shape what people of faith do and how they approach issues facing their communities becomes significant. This is especially true when the issues in question involve economic development and social welfare policy. Many believers place the needs of the poor and disadvantaged at the core of their outreach activities. In the U.S., the government’s shift away from funding social welfare programs through federal programs to funding local faith-based organizations to meet these needs has further pushed congregations to think about, discuss, and create programs aimed at the needs of low income groups. Such