



A Study of the Relationship Between the Economic Status of Certain Youth and Adults and Their Belief in a Benevolent God

Cordelia A. Gobuyan

No one can force a man to believe one way or the other. However, it appears that there are factors that may influence his decision or commitment. Niebuhr aptly describes this paradoxical situation where an individual chooses in freedom but is not independent for he exercises his freedom in the midst of values and powers he has not chosen but to which he is bound.¹

To pursue the inquiry about the factors that may influence the nature of religious belief, one may ask whether there is a particular environment or climate for the formulation and acceptance of certain religious concepts. To be more specific, are there certain conditions which make it conducive for the individual to interiorize the concept of a benevolent God? Does one's economic status, for example, affect his readiness or proneness to

believe in a benevolent God? Does one's economic deprivation or impoverishment influence his acceptance of the concept that God is loving and benevolent? Would wealth that satiates one's desire for improvement affect the nature of his belief in God? Or does a middle state between the deprivation of basic human needs and the satisfaction of such needs affect one's predisposition to believe that God is benevolent? In sum, does belief in a benevolent God vary among the different socioeconomic strata? If so, how?

In response to the above questions, the following problem was investigated

THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to determine the expressed belief of

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¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 247.

certain youth and adults in a benevolent God, and to analyze the relationship between such belief and their economic status.

From the vantage point that economics helps to create a particular culture or way of thought and life, it was hypothesized that there would be homogeneity in the responses of certain youth and adults within each economic group to the concept of a benevolent God. As Niebuhr observes, "economic classes tend to take on a cultural character" ² If this were true then it is likely that members of an economic status group will share, more or less, homogeneous values or beliefs. In contrast, it was hypothesized that there would be heterogeneous responses among the three economic groups. Economic stability will tend to enhance belief in a benevolent God, while economic instability will tend to negate it.

For a statistical approach to the problem, the following null hypotheses were advanced to be tested:

1. That there would be no significant differences in the responses to the concept of a benevolent God among certain youth and adults of low economic status;
2. That there would be no sig-

nificant differences in the responses to the concept of a benevolent God among certain youth and adults of middle economic status;

3. That there would be no significant differences in the responses to the concept of a benevolent God among certain youth and adults of low, middle, and high economic status.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a correlational, analytic survey. The two main variables studied were belief in a benevolent God and economic status. The belief factor was measured by a 25-item questionnaire especially designed for this purpose. The average family annual income was used as an index of economic status. Variables such as age, marital status, education and sex which were found in previous surveys to have potential correlation with belief and behavior, also were used as controlling factors in this study.

The religious belief test was used to ascertain the concept of a benevolent God and its implication for the believer's relationship with his fellowman. It centered around five aspects of the concept: that God is

²H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1929), p. 26.

loving; that His love is unconditional; that He loves all people; that His forgiveness is without limit; that His generosity is boundless; and that one who believes in such a Source of Life would seem to be disposed to express benevolence toward self and other persons.

To measure the saliency or importance of each belief item to the respondent, each item had five possible responses. The responses for each positive item in the questionnaire had the following weights: 1 for "Strongly Disagree," 2 for "Disagree," 3 for "Not Certain," 4 for "Agree," and 5 for "Strongly Agree." For negative items, the weighting was reversed; "Strongly Agree" was weighted 1 and "Strongly Disagree," 5.

A split-half reliability test was applied on the basis of the responses of 574 individuals to the odd and even items of the questionnaire. An uncorrected Pearson correlation coefficient of .84 was obtained. With the use of the special Spearman-Brown formula, the estimated reliability of the total test was computed to be .91.

The Sample

Twenty churches under the District of Columbia Baptist Convention were invited through their

ministers to participate in this study. However, only 18 of them responded in time to be included. It was from these 18 congregations that the sample for this study was drawn.

Eight of the above churches at the time of the study had less than 500 members; five claimed a membership of more than 500 but less than 1,000; and five had more than 1,000 on their membership roll. Membership size ranged from 261 to 3,892. Of the total membership of slightly over 17,000, approximately 23 per cent or close to 4,000 were reported to be involved in the church school and youth groups. The sample of 574 comprised about 15 per cent of this number.

A total of 740 youth and adult members of the 18 churches filled out the questionnaire. However, 166 of these respondents did not complete the questionnaire and had to be excluded from the study. Of these 166 respondents, 143 ignored the question on the average family annual income and the rest omitted either education, age, or marital status.

Of the 574 respondents included in the study, 204 were 35 years of age or under; 370 were over 35. Most of the respondents were fe-

male as indicated by an almost 2 to 1 ratio: 374 female respondents to 200 males.

A breakdown of the sample in terms of marital status showed that there was a predominance of married respondents who made up a total of 292. There were 282 respondents who were unattached: either single, divorced, separated, or widowed.

Three hundred and fifteen or over half of the respondents had at most a high school education. Only 259 of the 574 respondents had at least gone through junior college. Of this group 66 had graduate degrees: master's or doctor's.

Classification by economic status showed a curvilinear profile. Seventy-nine of the respondents reported an average family income of \$5,000; 317 fell within the middle economic range of \$5,000–\$14,999; and 178 were classified in the high economic group with an average family annual income of at least \$15,000.

This preponderance of respondents in the middle economic bracket tallies with the findings of Glock and associates who concluded that "organized religion in America is primarily the domain of the middle class."³

Data Treatment

The analysis of variance was done on the religious belief test scores, for each economic level separately and for the total sample. Edward's formula for multiple classification analysis of variance with unequal *n*'s for the various treatments was used to test all four hypotheses. But for the fourth hypothesis, two other steps were taken: analysis of variance by single classification to study separately the effect of economic status, marital status, education, and sex; and an analysis of the differences between the means of the three economic status groups (two at a time) to find the source of greatest variation.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The first hypothesis, that there was no significant differences in responses to the concept of a benevolent God among certain youth and adults, was sustained. However, the married respondents showed stronger adherence to this concept.

The second hypothesis, that there was no significant differences in responses to the concept of a benevolent God among certain youth and

³Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin Ringer, and Earl R. Babbie, *To Comfort and to Challenge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 75-76.

adults of middle economic status, remained tenable. A trend was slightly evident that married respondents, with at least a junior college education tended to believe in a benevolent God more strongly than those unattached and had not gone beyond high school.

The third hypothesis, that there was no significant differences between certain youth and adults of high economic status in their responses to the concept of a benevolent God, was sustained. As in the

first two economic status groups, the married respondents showed stronger belief in a benevolent God.

The fourth hypothesis, that there was no significant differences among the three economic levels in their responses to the concept of a benevolent God, could be rejected on the basis of the F ratio computed by a one-way analysis of variance. However, on the basis of a more stringent test, utilizing a multiple classification analysis of variance, the fourth hypothesis was sustained.

TABLE
Differences Between the Means of the Three Economic Status Groups

Economic Status	Number of Respondents	Mean Score	F
Low and Middle			10.60*
Low	79	105.90	
Middle	317	110.71	
Low and High			13.44*
Low	79	105.90	
High	178	111.74	
Middle and High			
Middle	317	110.71	
High	178	111.74	

* Significant at the .05 level.

** Significant at the .01 level.

A comparison of the means, however, showed a linear profile. Higher mean scores on the belief test corresponded with higher economic status. The married respondents also scored higher on the belief test than the unattached respondents, and those with at least a junior college education scored higher than those with at most a high school education.

CONCLUSIONS

It is to be stressed that the findings of this study are limited to the sample drawn from the membership of the 18 participating Baptist Churches, and therefore, cannot be assumed to hold for the general population. It is in light of this limitation that the following conclusions are presented:

1. Within each economic level, there was homogeneity in the concept of a benevolent God. This apparent similarity supports the premise that each economic level, more or less, develops a particular way of thinking and believing.

2. A greater homogeneity was noted among the respondents in the low or high economic status groups. The tendency to share similar values and beliefs appears to be more characteristic of the middle class than of economic groups either above or below it.

3. Between the specified economic levels, the concept of a benevolent God did not vary significantly. However, high scores on the belief test tended to correspond with high economic status. In this sample, high economic status tends to be positively correlated with intense belief in a benevolent God; The more economically stable the respondents were the more intensely they expressed belief in a benevolent God.

4. With the preponderance of the respondents of middle economic status, it appears that the sample used in this study came from the same economic stratum. Neither extreme poverty nor extreme wealth was evident in this sample. Whatever slight variations have been detected are then worth pursuing among groups who more distinctly belong to different economic levels.

5. Differentiation in belief that God is benevolent was found also to be associated with such variables as marital status and education. Being married and having more education seem to be associated with stronger belief in a benevolent God. If married status were associated with some degree of social stability, and college education with cultural or intellectual stability, one wonders whether there is some relationship

among these various aspects of human personality. Does economic, social, or cultural deprivation which may be associated with some form of instability make it less likely for individuals to stress the concept of a benevolent God in their belief system?

At best the findings in this study help only to discern trends of belief in a religious concept. They do not provide clear-cut answers to questions originally raised. In fact, they lead to more questions about the nature of the relationship between religious belief and sociocultural factors.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have implications for the educational ministry of the church as well as education in general. They may be relevant to the concerns of individuals and institutions interested in religious development and sociological factors which affect it.

First, it appears that this study has implications for a broad pedagogical approach and understanding of persons. It does not show

that the economic factor has directly influenced the intensity with which the respondents believe in a benevolent God, as the economic determinists and the Marxists would claim. Neither does this study support the Weberian thesis that the degree to which one believes in a benevolent God might have influenced him to aspire for a certain level of economic status. But the findings of this study show some relationship between the state of human need and the intensity of belief in God's benevolence. The pattern of responses shows that the degree of deprivation, be it economic, social or cultural, is associated with a concomitant decrease in intensity of this belief.

It appears that this study gives further support to Maslow's view of the self-actualizing man whose pyramid of needs starts from the base up with the physiological, security, love, and self-esteem needs. As one's needs are adequately met, he also learns to function more adequately at each level of his development, in ways that are satisfying and ennobling both to himself and to society. This self-actualizing person is freed to fulfill his individual nature. He loves spontaneously; the feelings within him and his

whole being tend to harmonize with the very concept of love.⁴

Second, the trends discerned in this study also seem to suggest some implications for an understanding of the processes involved in learning religious concepts. Upon exposure to a concept, the individual may reject or accept it for reasons known or unknown. Whether he will reject or accept it may depend upon the interaction of a number of factors, three of which are discernible in this study.

1. The individual's openness or disposition to believe in a concept may depend upon *physio-psychological forces* within him. These inner forces include his inner stability, the sense of deprivation or fulfillment as far as his needs are concerned, his perception of the world around him, as well as his own self-concept. The individual tends to appropriate a particular concept, probably it harmonizes with the forces, feelings, and perception within him. As the cognitive theorists would stress, the individual is purposive and creative; his learning is affected by how he perceives the environment and what he makes out of his own perceptions.⁵

2. A person's feelings about himself are affected by the environment, consisting of the mediating factors between the learner and the concept to be learned. As identified in this study, the *sociocultural factors* may refer to the individual's economic stability as indicated by income, his social stability as may be implied from marital status, and his cultural stability as may be deduced from his educational attainment. These factors may either foster or hinder the individual's response to a concept. He may learn it but not necessarily believe in it. If he comes to believe in it, the intensity with which he believes may vary.

3. Between the forces within the learner and sociocultural factors without, there seems to be a transactional area where the individual experiences a dynamic interaction with a variety of forces, some observable and others not. At this point of convergence between the individual's physio-psychological state of being and the sociocultural factors surrounding him, it seems appropriate to leave room for the possible influence of other dynamic factors. Although it is not the intention of this study to delve into

⁴Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp. 196-199.

⁵Max Wertheimer, *Productive Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

metaphysics, the recognition of responses that could not be taken into account by statistical averages which only describe the typical or "conservative man,"⁶ leads to a posture of reverence for the Source of power that enables man to transcend the pull of forces within him and without.

Third, for the educational institutions of the church, this study may have some bearing upon the decisions they make for the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual welfare of the individuals they serve. It suggests that religious workers continue to explore innovative ministries which take into account the sociocultural situations in which their parishioners live. That economic status, as well as marital status and education, show some positive correlation with religious belief may suggest that the church must be concerned not only with man's spiritual regeneration, but also must be involved in the alleviation of human deprivation in its various forms. It must be concerned with helping to shape the environment for the blossoming of the human spirit.

The church may express involvement in aggressive participation in the policy-making level of community life as well as in vigorous programs for improving living conditions in the community. It may encourage involvement in politics and in school boards. It may help to provide vocational guidance, counseling services for maximizing individual potential, and workshops for developing skill in creative activities which could enhance family resources.

It may also be pointed out that the church can help individuals who are economically or socially deprived in ways that make them strong, not servile and submissive as Freire described the oppressed.⁷ It can extend its ministering hands to set men free to be themselves and to develop a mature faith not goaded by deprivation or fear but motivated by love and gratitude.

Fourth, the result of this study may have some implications for theological education in emphasizing the value of sociological courses

⁶Charles Hampden-Turner, *Radical Man: The Process of Psycho-social Development*. New York: Anchor Books, Double Day and Co., Inc., 1971).

⁷Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 29.

and other experiences geared to enable seminary graduates to deal more adequately with the economic and social problems of the parish. Continued attention should be given to an increased understanding of the sociocultural factors that impinge upon the lives of individuals. Sociological foundations should be included among the background courses in religious education. Students should be encouraged and supported in conducting sociocultural researches to gain more insights into the factors that correlate with religious belief and behavior.

The outcome of this study seems to lend support to ongoing attempts at finding new approaches to religious work. As L. Schneider reports, there are signs that seminarians are turning away from conventional jobs in the parish. These new ministries are being sought in social work and pastoral services in shopping centers, coffee houses, and vacation spots.⁸ Such forms of ministries give added justification for double-degree programs where seminarians are enrolled in combined

curricula and graduate with two degrees simultaneously; e. g., psychology and theology, agriculture and pastoral theology, education and religious education. These are in line with Westberg's forecast that "more clergymen will be preparing themselves for dual occupations: ministry and law, ministry and social work, ministry and medicine."⁹

Fifth, this study may have suggestions for educators in general such as the need to give more attention to the critical study of economic and social factors which may have some effect on the learner's belief or value system. This posture leans toward what Cole and Cox envision to be the future trend in education.¹⁰

Sixth, this study serves as a reference for those who desire to study further the relationship between economic conditions and religious beliefs. It also points to other factors or variables which may have some influence upon the shaping of religious belief. Recognition of the existence of the potential influence of many sociocultural factors upon

⁸Louis Schneider, *Sociological Approach to Religion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1970), p. 176.

⁹Granger E. Westberg, "Theological Education for Dual Occupations: Medicine and Ministry," *Theological Education*, VII, 3 (1971), 177

¹⁰William E. Cole and Roy L. Cox, *Social Foundations of Education* (New York: American Book Company, 1968), p. 441.

religious belief and behavior makes an interdisciplinary approach to research in this area desirable and commendable.

Proceeding on the conviction that this study might serve as a springboard for further research, this investigator makes a few recommendations for further study.

First, for purposes of comparison and of extending the application of results. It is recommended that this study be replicated in different situations, such as among various denominations and sects, among economic groups in the general population, in different geographical or cultural settings: e.g., agricultural, industrial, and even post-industrial society; rural and urban communities.

Second, it is recommended that more studies be conducted on religious beliefs and sociocultural factors to help remedy the situations described by Faulkner and DeJong, and supported by this investigation, that not much has been done in this area. More work needs to be done towards understanding the development of religious beliefs as well as

the factors that mediate between what the church attempts to teach and what the individual devotee believes.¹¹

Third, it is recommended that the questionnaire used in this study be improved. More items may be added or other items may be placed with more discriminating ones. It is suggested as a variation of this study that the concept of God as Judge, rewarding the saint and punishing the sinner, may be used as a basis for measuring belief in the same way that the concept of a benevolent God was used here. The task of developing more questionnaires and instruments for research is to be considered as one of the priorities in the educational work of the church.

Fourth, it is recommended that other ways of isolating the effects of related factors. Other variables such as race, church affiliation, cultural background be considered for classifying the sample. The procedure will help to define further the nature of the interaction between religious belief and sociocultural factors.

¹¹Joseph E. Faulkner and Gordon F. DeJong, "Religiosity in 5-D: an Empirical Analysis," *Social Forces*, XLV (1966), 246-254.