

# *A Response to "The Social Sources of Denominationalism"*

ALFRED N. BOYER

## INTRODUCTION

Oliver R. Whitley

**T**HE material that follows came to my attention because it was submitted as part of meeting the requirements for the course, Introduction to Sociology of Religion, during the academic year, 1958-59. Students were asked to hand in a report on a book chosen from a list that included H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. In going through some files recently I came across this "Response," and upon re-reading it concluded that it surely merited being read by a public larger than one. Its "authenticity" as a personal document is, in itself, worthy of note. Moreover, the material makes clear how the reading of the right book at the right time can be invaluable in helping a person to understand and appreciate, as well as to be critical of, his own past. The reading of this book of Niebuhr's had, for Mr. Boyer, the character of what these days we call a "happening." It opened intellectual and emotional doors, providing in some ways a context that was paradigmatic for him. This is, of course, what every professor hopes for in making class reading assignments, but it is, perhaps, all too rare when it really happens.

In sociological circles these days it is fashionable to be highly critical of the theoretical model employed in the "sect-to-denomination" theory. There are, of course, cogent and relevant reasons for the criticism. Charles Y. Glock, for example, says that this (sect-denomination-church) typology does provide a means for ordering data which appear

to be essentially similar, but despite its usefulness it may have inhibited further innovating ideas concerning religious organization. Allan W. Eister goes much farther, suggesting that the sect-to-denomination conceptualization is unreliable, that it has actually hindered the articulation of research in sociology of religion with research in general sociology. With attempts to sharpen conceptualizations or to develop a greater precision and rigor in our use of ideas, or even to substitute newer concepts for ones that have outlived their usefulness, it is hardly possible to disagree. Such attempts are crucial to the progress of a discipline. In the case of the document that is before us here, however, it appears to be possible to "make sense" out of it within the sect-to-denomination conceptualization. Perhaps the difficulty is not that this approach cannot help us to understand anything—as the critics charge—but that we have used it carelessly in the attempt to explain too much with too little. In any event, the material presented below is worth reading, if for no reason other than the fact that it is an interesting and very human document.

I record here my appreciation to Mr. Boyer for his kind permission to print this material, and express my sense of gratification that his "response" was elicited in the process of learning something about the sociology of religion. Mr. Boyer was a student at Iliff for only one year, but of that experience he says, "Surely the 'time' was right; doors were opened and a quest was begun. As you can see, however, the feelings of the underdog persist long after the conditions that shaped them.

It is so easy to grasp and cling to anything offered for support—like the sec-

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ALFRED N. BOYER is Minister of the Community Methodist Church in Echo, Oregon.

tarian's comforting sense of being a member of the chosen people."

### I.

H. Richard Niebuhr's book, **The Social Sources of Denominationalism** (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), is very much a sermon. He is outraged by what he finds, in contrast with what his Christian ethics would have dictated.

The world has long since moved into the church and captured not only its form and polity and the servants of these, but also the teachings and purposes—still posing as "Christian." The kingdom of men has been substituted for God's kingdom; the ethics of entrenched powers and classes and castes has been substituted for the plain ethics of the founder of Christianity. The apostasies have been more important in the sphere of conduct than in that of doctrine, though even these have been dictated in large measure by the same defections.

To me the book is a reminder of a student's struggles with the same discoveries that were also disillusioning—for several years past. So powerfully did it bring back memories of early experiences among the "disinherited" and the religious teaching and environment of a sect, that I am inclined to offer for this paper some documentary material supporting certain of Niebuhr's observations on the more general level of observation.

Looking back, it seems a long way from Sunday School beginnings under the tutelage of plymouth brethren (note: the "p" and "b" are lower case). This sect had two groups in Portland, Oregon. One of these, from the Gospel Hall on Twenty-eighth and Stark of the east side of the Willamette, same to Bonita in the early twenties to preach the Gospel and to make it possible for the Lord to save some of the Lost. From a home, at first, where I began to attend, the group moved to the second storey of the grocery store. The latter was the only business except the Oregon Electric Railroad Station which

had previously located and named the place. It was then an hour-and-a-half trip to Portland with a Model-T; it is now a ten minute trip with whatever you have.

Parents of this eldest son, sent off to Sunday School by himself, were a combination of Irish and Dutch, the latter, second generation. My mother's mother never learned English and her father never learned to control his drinking, though he was quite successful as a farmer and sawmill man in Michigan. Consequently, mother did not get enough schooling to brag about. On the other side of the tree, the grandparents had come from Ohio, homesteaded in the Territory of Idaho, and spent their lives chained with their generous family to the stumplands near Pend O'Reille Lake. Again, schooling on the paternal side ended soon after beginning high school. They had "joined" the Sand Point Baptist Church soon after the wedding; but soon after their enlightenment a half dozen years later down in Oregon, south of Portland, they found that the Baptists had not really been careful—they had taken them in without finding out whether they were saved. It was doubtful, they testified, whether the Gospel was even known in that Baptist Church, certainly it had not been preached to them!

Of literature in the Sunday School at Bonita there were only the King James Bible and Redemption Songs and Choruses. We learned the books of both Testaments by singing them to a singsong repetitive melody that detracted in no way from the words. (To this date, I have to sing them in order to locate certain of the minor prophets or shorter epistles.) There were no teacher helps because the Bible itself was adequate—the wayfaring man though a fool need not err therein. One who was guided by the Spirit had little trouble "rightly dividing the word of truth." There was some question at first whether a musical instrument was necessary to the singing—and such singing! It was of some doubt whether

the Scriptures gave clear indication either way. Practically, it proved a mistake to bring in a reed organ first and later a piano, I think. Before the instruments took over, the part singing and harmonies were wonderfully impressive (those Scotsmen could sing!), but gradually people seemed to follow the instruments instead of really learning the words and tunes.

## II.

The Community was made up of farmers from way back, who were never a part of the sect, and workers who commuted to Portland, a part of the time, and who could not afford to live on higher-priced land nearer the big city. The big farms were being sliced up into these semi-suburban acreages; there might be three or four homes within a mile north or south. East and west there were delightful patches of brush and timber lands where a boy could hide out all day and swim in Fanno Creek out of sight of curious girls and shocked mothers who would have disapproved of boyish immodesty. In those same spots today, even a fish would have (modest) difficulties maintaining his privacy. There is hardly a whole acre left in any direction, and the people who can afford lots at present prices must have very steady work, indeed. The boy, of course, did not sense the rivalry between old timers who farmed in the community and the newcomers who had another kind of pride. They were not wealthy people, who attended Bonita Sunday School on a rainy afternoon, but they were happy and hopeful people who knew how to join the kids at an annual picnic where grown men ran gunny sack races with the older boys, and the fat man's race hardly stole the show from the women's free-for-all.

To the brethren (please note the "b") is not only small, but, in keeping with established practice, I must always draw attention to this fact) who came out from Portland and the larger sphere of the sect's center and activi-

ties, we, at Bonita, were new converts. They condescended to us and flattered us most pleasingly with attention and encouragement. They also partook of Sunday dinners with us, though I cannot remember ever entering one of their own homes in Portland—it was such an honor, you see, to have this spiritual learning, scriptural certainty, and the aura of saintly glory spread at out board. Mostly they were Scotch. I still thrill when I hear John 3:16 read (recited, rather) with the Scotch burr and emphasis. Can any other race do it so well? None of these were professionals at preaching or the ministry; the sect tolerated neither organization (in any formal sense) nor clergy—that would have been **unscriptural**!

The program at Bonita included not only afternoon Sunday School (p.m. for convenience of the teachers and leaders who first attended their own communion in the morning at Portland) but often Sunday evening "Gospel" services and periodic two or three-week series of nightly "meetings" in the continuous effort to reach the **unsaved**. Sometimes one or two, often a large group of speakers, singers, and handshakers and buttonholers would come out together to serve us. They were always happy in doing this; I am sure it was good for them and for us, too. Sure of at least two or three—probably as many as five—of these good-hearted people who buttonholed me regularly to inquire if I "knew the Lord" or had "taken Christ as my personal savior." My responses, no doubt, convinced them they were individually to be credited with "leading another to the Lord." Of course, I was honest in this! To this day I cannot point to the moment when "all things became new", but it was then my constant expectation that such an experience would be more—so much so that it was specifically invited with utmost seriousness several times, and during the after-glow of a rousing "message" on the feet of clay in Daniel and of signs of the times forshadowing the "coming of the Lord," when we

who are alive shall meet Him in the air, how else would a boy respond except simply and sincerely to "say yes to the Lord"? Though I must have several "fathers" in the faith, after the manner of Paul to Timothy, I would not be so discourteous as to let any of them know that during the week following the **experience** it had proved questionable—there was so much one could expectantly count on, so much others constantly testified to!

Preaching, as already indicated, centered on getting across a "saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ" and of working with the Holy Spirit in helping individuals to accept God's plan of salvation for them. The Sunday School operated on the simple theory that the word never returns void—of results—because it is by the preaching of the word that men are won to Christ. A selection of enlightening verses and proof-texts memorized during a verse-repeating contest running, perhaps, for several weeks (loser to supply cake and ice-cream to the winners) could thus be planted in young minds as the good seed sown in good soil would bring forth his fruit in his season. The word was communicated, certainly. Rightly dividing the word of truth was the constant aim of both preaching and teaching. The Bible was the "true university." The Book was its own verification and its own authority; all opinions and persons and cults and denominations were tested by it. God had written it: men had been used of the Author to write things even the writers didn't understand (is it any wonder we have difficulty?). It was authored by the Spirit, to be apprehended through the Spirit. It was complete: All would be fulfilled, not excepting the least jot or tittle. No man dare add to or subtract from it, especially higher critics! No man know when Jesus would return to extract his elect from the land of their pilgrimage and ambassadorship, after which, the Paraclete accompanying the universal church into Heaven, "He that letteth" would be out of the

way of the complete manifestation of the AntiChrist when those who had spurned the Gospel and despised the faithful would call out for the rocks to fall on them, such poetic justice would be theirs! Then after the seven years of the great tribulation, after Armageddon, the promises to the Jews would be fulfilled in the Millenium and the Church would rule with Christ in this fulfillment.

### III.

The plymouth brethren (small "b") originated around Plymouth, England in the middle of the 19th century. They were reactionary to the state church, anti-Catholic, anti-clerical. There was no paid ministry, no membership roll, no organization—they were exactly like the early church, they maintained. They had also recovered doctrines that had been lost concerning the parousia, dispensationalism, and its key to understanding the Bible. They were a faithful remnant, often lost to historians amid a welter of false teachings, apostate Christians and Jews in control of "this world" under the "prince of this world." The denominations and cults were contrary to plain scriptures, the latter usually under the domination of Satanic influences—especially **women** leaders like Mary Baker Eddy and even Amie Semple McPherson. Woman's place was clearly defined—in the **assembly**—she was not to usurp authority over the man. The world order was no concern of these pilgrims in a weary land; one was fulfilling his calling only if he had "come out from among them," especially from denominations. Moral controls were plain and forthright and taboos were simple—one did not play cards, dance, see movies, smoke, drink, swear, or let himself be too close to any outside the commonly recognized members of the "assembly." They were anti-holiness. Tongues movements and healing cults were of the devil because miracles had ceased with the close of the Apostolic Age, following the rejection of the

Messiah, during which the church was "called out." (I think the p.b.'s met the needs of bourgeoisie rather than the "disinherited," although their feeling partook of much of the latter in their attitudes toward denominations.)

They observed "The Lord's Supper or Table" each Sunday in the Portland Gospel Hall. It was exclusive. Youngsters like myself were invited to sit at the back of the room but not in the concentric circles of chairs arranged around the elements on the plain table at the center. It took some time and experience to be a part of a service whose routine was nowhere printed (unless to be found in the Bible) and whose leaders denied that they were leaders. Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, passages of scripture, prayers and exhortations supposedly extemporaneously—rather, under the "leading of the Spirit"—made up the content of most of these assemblies. The two observances; baptism by immersion and the Lord's table were symbolic.

They were lower middleclass for the most part. Also, they were very largely immigrants from Canada, Scotland, England. The family rivalries which I came to know only after I had reached my Senior year in a nearby Quaker college, were such a shock to me that I feel them to this day and they drove me from them at the time. Bonita had been far enough from headquarters that I had overly idealized them. Their

discouragement of higher education had already alienated me somewhat, and when I came to revered leaders with what I thought were honest questions, fully prepared to help them unearth the mistakes of evolutionists and "Modernists," they accused me of "the sin of unbelief." The consequent loneliness and bitterness was with me a long time.

I am not sure Niebuhr's ideal is at all practical, the Sect and the Cult springing, as they do, from the needs of people: those needs being so diverse at different levels of economic and social culture, in addition to which there are the temporary needs of migrants and racial groups during the necessary process of social and economic amelioration, the sentimental needs, and so many others, how **can** there be realized the ideal the author suggests by inference from his criticisms? And **was** the ideal ever realized? The early church is out of sight and one can all too easily read into it what was never there. It seems to me that improvement is in order—demanded—, but expectations should not be too lofty when working with people. I do not criticize this ideal, it is needed as an ideal, but the practical ways of working toward it involve much of the kind of compromise that has characterized the history of churches.

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