

The Church as Inkblot

Long familiar to psychologists, the Rorschach inkblot test of personality is deliberately ambiguous: to make sense of it, the one tested has to 'project' some of his own make-up into the results. Here the author, a social psychologist, has used the Church's own ambiguity—its inherent mystery—to find clues to the make-up of today's college-trained Church stayins and dropouts

The Catholic Church is an inkblot *par excellence*, diverse, changing, oriented toward God, the vaguest, most dream-like stimulus of all. Especially ambiguous in recent years has been the Church's border, that tenuous line between membership and ex-membership, between being in the Church and being out of the Church. Twenty years ago one could safely say that those who were members of the Catholic Church believed X, Y and Z, and that those who left the Church rejected X, Y and Z. But the meaning of membership has changed rapidly. Growing numbers of Catholics no longer accept, or simply find irrelevant, the bulk of Catholic dogma, and they practice their religion only sporadically. Yet they feel strong ties to the Church and clearly want to be a part of it. How they are different from those who have abandoned Catholicism is becoming less clear. The line between members and ex-members, "Ins" and "Outs," is like an experimental dot of light, a social inkblot that can be interpreted in any number of ways. How the borderline is interpreted, where people stand with respect to it, ought indeed to relate to their social psychological characteristics.

In a classic experiment in social psychology, three people are seated in a totally darkened room. Somewhere in front of them the barest speck of light appears and, although it remains stationary, it appears to move about erratically, sometimes in short vibrating

jerks, sometimes in long sweeps. Two seconds later, the light disappears, and the experimenter asks for a judgment of the distance it traveled. After each person offers his estimate, the speck of light reappears, seems to move again, and then disappears. Estimates of distance are called for a second time. The procedure is repeated until one hundred presentations of the light have been made.

A group of 100 Catholic college graduates, raised as Catholics and studying in graduate or professional schools, were interviewed individually on changes within Catholicism in the late 1960's. By their own estimate 50 of the group were Ins and 50 were now Outs, that is, in or out of Catholic Church membership. "Like a social inkblot, the line between can be interpreted in any number of ways."

Had you been one of the three in that darkened room, you would have found your group developing a norm about the distance the light traveled each time it was presented. You also would have discovered that your personal estimates of the distance of movement were influenced by this group norm.

Once the experiment was over, you might have been told that the extent and kind of influence you experienced depended both on characteristics of the group and upon psychological characteristics within you. Like the Rorschach inkblot or the TAT card, the pinpoint of light is a completely ambiguous stimulus and interpretations of it reveal more about individual viewers and their social context than about the stimulus itself.

Pinpoints of light or ambiguous stimuli are found not only in the dark rooms of experimental social psychologists. They abound in the social world as well, where judgments of them relate to the psychology and social psychology of the viewer in the same way judgments of ambiguity do in experimental settings. Thus, perceptions of "Russia," "the enemy," "Jews," "blacks" and "America" have all been subjects of systematic studies that have linked these perceptions to social psychological characteristics of the perceivers, often to the kind of relationship they experienced with their parents.

Several years ago, hoping both to document some of the changes taking place within Catholicism in the late 1960's and also to see if perceptions of social ambiguity are associated with characteristics of the perceiver, I made an empirical investigation of the border surrounding the Catholic Church. Concretely, the investigation involved constructing a questionnaire of some four

hundred variables and administering it to one hundred graduates of Catholic colleges who were, for the most part, graduate or professional students at the University of Chicago or Northwestern University. Fifty of the interviewees were Ins (persons raised as Catholics who still considered themselves members of the Church) and fifty were Outs (persons raised as Catholics who no longer considered themselves members of the Church). There were 25 males and 25 females in each category, all between the ages of 21 and 31.

It took me between one-and-a-half and two hours to interview each individual. The interviewing began on April 2, 1968, two days before the assassination of Martin Luther King and a week before President Johnson's announcement of a bombing pause in North Vietnam. Eight months later, on December 4, I located and interviewed my last subject. Much had occurred in the interim: the Democratic convention in Chicago, the Presidential campaign leading to the election of Richard Nixon, and, more directly related to this study, the Pope's encyclical on contraception. When I completed the interviewing, 43 different Catholic colleges across the country were represented in the sample of 100.

In the analysis and interpretation of the mass of data collected, it was essential to keep in mind the many ways in which the 50 Ins and 50 Outs were alike: sex, age, marital status, place of birth, ethnic background, generation in the United States, parents' education, parents' occupation, parents' income and number of siblings. While it happened that fewer female Outs than female Ins attended graduate school, on key variables the female Outs who had not attended graduate school did not differ from female Outs who had. The particular Catholic colleges attended by the two groups were the same, and there was no substantial difference in their fields of graduate study.

Even more important than the extent to which the two groups were matched on background characteristics was their similarity on attitudinal and behavioral indices of the importance of Catholicism earlier in their lives. Equal

numbers of Ins and Outs attended Catholic elementary schools, Catholic secondary schools and Catholic colleges. Most of each group, in fact, had 16 years of Catholic education. When thinking back to eighth grade and to senior year of high school, both groups said that being a Catholic was "one of the three most important things in my life." Ins and Outs showed similar patterns of regular attendance at Sunday Mass and about half of each group reported prolonged periods of attendance at weekday Masses. This data led to the conclusion that the 50 Ins and 50 Outs were once a homogeneous group of 100 Ins.

When these subjects enrolled at 43 different Catholic colleges sometime in the late 1950's and early 1960's, there ensued for most a period of re-evaluation—a "crisis of identity," to rework an often-used phrase. When asked about this period: "How much of a crisis was involved in all this? By 'crisis' I mean the feeling of indecision, anxiety, pressure, and so on," they replied with a variety of descriptions: "A major turbulence over senior year." "Remarkably little." "Very much crisis—traumatic for the first months." "As much as could be—I was completely alone and it involved the commitment of my whole life." "No sleepless nights—more wonder than pressure or upset." "To the point of psychological counseling—intense pressure." "The dominant emotion was rage—trying to kick the Church in the ass to be what it should be—then I said it's not worth it." "Very little—more joy than a crisis." "Was so easy my wife said I was faking it." "Some, but always in the back of my mind was the thought I would never make it out." "Very severe—felt I was losing hope." "Very little conscious pressure, but the conflict lingers on." "Great emotional and psychological turmoil."

Slightly more than half the subjects considered the crisis moderate or severe, "one of the three biggest in my life." In most cases the pressure had subsided by the time I interviewed the subject, but in some instances the re-evaluation was still in process. Whatever the case, 50 of the original 100 were dissociated from the Catholic Church when I talked to them and 50 were still members.

The position of the subjects with regard to the Church at the time of the interview was measured in a number of ways. A series of items inquired about beliefs, values, perceptions of the role of membership in attaining the values, and overall perceptions of the Catholic Church. The resulting data served both to document the views of some of the best and most recent products of Catholic education in the United States and to relate the perception of ambiguity to the social psychology of the perceiver.

There were "many ways in which the 50 Ins and 50 Outs were alike: sex, age, marital status, place of birth, parents' education, parents' income. More important was their similarity on indices of the importance of Catholicism earlier in their lives. Most of the group, in fact, had 16 years of Catholic education. Both groups said that being a Catholic was 'one of the three most important things in my life.'"

1. The *beliefs* that best distinguished Ins and Outs were ones relating to God and the other world (e.g., "There are three persons in one God") and, in particular, two interpretive of Christ ("Christ rose from the dead"; "Christ is really present in the Eucharist"). The Ins were more accepting of traditional Catholic positions. These beliefs are by definition ambiguous ones, as there is no common experiential evidence outside Catholicism that can either confirm or contradict them.

Beliefs about man and this world distinguished the groups less well. Both Ins and Outs, for example, tended to accept "Man has a free will and is responsible for his actions, both good and evil" and to reject "The use of artificial contraceptives is morally wrong." In contrast to otherworldly beliefs, there does exist a pool of experiential evidence outside Catholicism relating to thisworldly beliefs, and this evidence appears to have affected both Ins and Outs. It was the otherworldly belief formulas that proved to be the inkblots

that differentiated the perceptions of the two groups.

2. There were few values that distinguished Ins and Outs, the major discriminants being belief-tied religious values (e.g., "Living for God alone") which were deemed of moderate value by Ins and of no value by Outs. That Ins attached more importance to these religious values did not mean they attached less to humanistic values. Both Ins and Outs, for example, valued highly "having personal, meaningful ties with other human beings." Religious values were only moderately important in the Ins' value structure and did not exclude adherence to humanistic values.

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3. What did distinguish Ins and Outs in the realm of values was largely their perception of the role of Church membership in helping or hindering the attainment of values. Ins saw membership as helpful in the attainment of humanistic values, while Outs saw membership either as a hindrance to it or as irrelevant to it. For example, Ins felt that being a member of the Catholic Church led to "becoming a full human being," while Outs found membership to be an impediment to their full human development.

4. One of the clearest discrepancies between the two groups was in their perception of the Catholic Church. Quantified items about the Church discriminated Ins and Outs well, but the differences between them were expressed most simply in replies to three open-ended questions: a) "Who is the Catholic Church?" b) "Who is at its core?" c) "Who is at its periphery?" Thirty Outs (60 per cent) specifically mentioned the hierarchy or the clergy in their reply to "Who is the Catholic Church?" while only four Ins did (8 per cent). The majority of Ins (74 per

cent) said simply the Church is the people or the members. In distinguishing the core of the Church from its periphery, 37 Outs (74 per cent), as opposed to only 11 Ins (22 per cent), saw the hierarchy/clergy in a position more central than the people or the members. Ins either resisted making a distinction between a core and periphery (36 per cent) or made a distinction on the basis of internal characteristics of people such as commitment or involvement (32 per cent). A few Ins (10 per cent) located the people more centrally than the hierarchy/clergy.

Replies to these and other questions about the Church reinforced my conception of it as a social inkblot. Two different Churches were being described by Ins and Outs, and the Church the Ins said they were in was not the Church the Outs said they were out of.

The data also confirmed an impression I developed as I studied the 100 case histories of change. One's position of being in or out of the Church simply was not arrived at on the basis of what might be called empirical evidence, for the same evidence could be and was acknowledged by both Ins and Outs. In their narratives of change, both groups pointed out unacceptable or irrelevant doctrines; both mentioned racism among Catholics; both regarded with disdain the formalism, pomp and circumstance of the hierarchy. The Outs, identifying these characteristics with the Catholic Church, no longer wished to be part of it. The Ins, however, generally redefined the Catholic Church in a way compatible with their beliefs and considered these undesirable characteristics as only *one aspect* of the Church, one from which they dissociated themselves. The question became: why would the Ins go through the effort of redefining "Catholic Church," and why would not the Outs?

It did not appear to be a question of knowledge of the Church. The Outs were aware of diverse elements in the Church, but still perceived it one particular way. To redefine the Church in order to remain in would be, they felt, dishonest or hypocritical. "I extended the meaning of the Church," said one, "until it could no longer be extended." The Ins, on the other hand, looked at undesirable elements in the Church as

something to be changed. According to them, to leave the Church would be abandoning the ship in its time of need, a cop-out.

The point is that the Church-related "evidence" could be construed in a number of ways. Which way it was construed seemed more a question of wanting than a question of seeing. It appeared from the interviews that one almost *chose* to see the Church and his relation to it in a certain way. There was, in other words, some arational starting point that distinguished Ins and Outs, a point from which all the definitions of the Church, all the positions with regard to doctrine, and all the construing of evidence about the Church's social and political life seemed to follow.

What was the determinant of that arational want? What made one person view an ambiguous, fluid set of beliefs, values and information about the Church and see one structure emerging, while someone else viewed the same set of beliefs, values and information and saw a different structure emerging? The data indicated it was the web of interpersonal relationships in which each person was situated, in the past as well as in the present. Internalized traits associated with sex and ties with one's primary group proved to be important. But the key determinant of starting-points appeared to be the character of the relationship one experienced with his parents.

To begin with, Ins were much more likely than Outs to have come from homes in which both parents practiced Catholicism and in which there was no gross disturbance such as divorce, separation, abandonment or alcoholism. Thirty-one subjects were from homes in which at least one parent did not practice Catholicism or in which there was an indication of gross disturbance. Of these, 24 went through a period of re-evaluation and left the Church; 7 went through a similar period and remained in. The 7 who remained were a unique lot. Two reported conversion experiences while no other subject did. Four were among those Ins closest to being out, i.e., most like the Outs on a number of measures of their position

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with regard to Catholicism; and one subsequently became an Out, the only subject on a mailed follow-up who reported a change in status.

A look at the remaining 69 subjects, both of whose parents practiced Catholicism and whose homes showed no gross disturbance, revealed the following. There was a general tendency on the part of all subjects to say they were closer to the mother while living at home. But Ins felt closer than Outs to the parent of the same sex, and Outs closer than Ins to the parent of the opposite sex. To be more complete about the findings, it is necessary to consider the data for each sex separately, highlighting differences between Ins and Outs.

1. A female who faced the ambiguities of the 1960's and preferred to redefine membership and seek new forms of Church life rather than abandon Catholicism was likely to describe her mother as very warm and flexible. Although she thought of her father as warm and said she felt close to him, when asked to choose between parents on the dimension of closeness, she said she felt much closer to her mother.

2. A female who faced the ambiguities of the 1960's and found it more comfortable to leave the Church than to undergo elaborate cognitive reorganization was less likely to describe her mother as warm and more likely to describe her as rigid. Like the female In, she thought of her father as warm and showed little preference for the mother. When asked to choose between parents on the dimension of closeness, she showed little preference for the mother.

The data on males was not as straight-

forward as that on females, but a similar trend was present.

1. A male who went through the process of redefining membership in the Church instead of abandoning it was likely to describe his mother as warm, but a little on the rigid side. When asked to which parent he felt closer while living at home, he showed less of a tendency than the male Out to choose his mother.

2. A male who left the Church in the face of its ambiguity was also likely to describe his mother as warm, but much more likely to describe her as flexible. When asked to which parent he felt closer, he was more apt than the male In to select his mother.

Since these associations existed among the 69 subjects whose parents appeared to have placed a high value upon Catholicism, an interpretation of them addresses itself to questions for which psychology has only hints of answers. What type of parent-child interaction facilitates the transmission of a value (in this case, a desire to be linked with the Catholic Church) from one generation to the next? What are the dynamics leading a child to internalize that value so profoundly that later in life he prefers painstaking cognitive reorganization to giving it up? This study suggests the answer for females is a high degree of identification with the mother and for males the combination of a fairly rigid (but not cold) mother and a father with whom he can identify. The common element for both sexes is identification with a parental model of the same sex. When this is present, it appears that a value espoused by both parents is adopted more securely by the child.

In sum, two factors contributed to starting-points for In and Out perceptions of the Catholic Church: 1) the extent to which parents valued Catholicism, and 2) the way in which parents transmitted this value to their child. The parents of Ins both valued Catholicism highly and had the kind of relationship with their child which led to the child's secure adoption of this value. The parents of Outs either placed a lesser premium on Catholicism and transmitted this evaluation to their child, or they

valued Catholicism highly but did not relate to their child in a way conducive to the child's internalization of that value.

The patterns of movement undergone by both Ins and Outs were really quite similar, a combination of achieving continuity with the past and divorce from the past. For Ins, continuity meant discovering the importance of what was profoundly internalized: the value of some kind of tie with Catholicism. Divorce meant breaking with the orthodox understanding of parents and seeking new forms. For Outs continuity meant discovering that the importance of Catholicism was not so deeply ingrained, and divorce meant leaving the Church. For Ins and Outs, the whole process might be understood as taking what was received from the parents and carrying it one step further, in one case beyond orthodoxy and in the other beyond Catholicism. Several other studies of the psychology of ideology have phrased their final conclusion in precisely this fashion, e.g., Kenneth Kenniston in his *Young Radicals*, (Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968).

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As I recall, it was not until the thirtieth or fortieth interview that I began to see in my mind the darkened room and the dot of light as a particularly intense subject described the "dark night of the soul" that led to his or her judgment about the Catholic Church and his or her position on one side or the other of its border. The Catholic Church was indeed an ambiguous stimulus, and the direction in which a person saw it moving was related to forces in him and his environment as intimately as judgments

of the direction a speck of light appears to move are related to the psychology and social psychology of the viewer. We know now the source of some of the forces that shape perceptions of the Catholic Church: parents in particular, but also sex and primary group.

To point out the psychological roots of perception as I have done is not to be the psychological reductionist who attempts to "explain away" a person's views by implying they are nothing but the manifestation of deeper psychological realities. If beliefs are empirically associated with parental relationships, for example, the reductionist would have us believe that the "real" reason for beliefs is nothing but the relationship with the parents; hence, the beliefs can be dismissed. The reductionist reaches his conclusion only by ignoring that all of us, himself included, are subject to the same social psychological forces.

We all enter into totally darkened rooms in which we see only the barest dot of light and are asked to take a position on the basis of what we see there. When we leave such a room, the present study concludes, we do so with a greater sense of who we are, of what we carried into the room, and of who was there with us, whether sitting next to us or miles away, whether living or long since departed.

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