

PAUL HEELAS and ANNA MARIE HAGLUND-HEELAS

THE INADEQUACY OF 'DEPRIVATION' AS A THEORY OF CONVERSION

MOST accounts of why members of 'traditional' societies turn to Christianity refer to experiences of deprivation. Allegiance or conversion are attributed to people having expectations which are not met by their traditional ways of life. Such unfulfilled expectations are assumed to generate an emotionally disturbing sense of deprivation which calls out for action and satisfaction. Since participants no longer have faith that their traditional institutions will do the job, it follows that they are inclined to respond to the solutions proposed by Christian missionaries. 'Deprivations' thus help to explain the motivation to convert.

Nothing might seem more self-evident. Most generally, Christianity appeals when it offers people what they want. More exactly, Christianity appeals when it promises to diminish or do away with discrepancies between expectation and reality. When expectations, so to speak, run way ahead of what is actually happening in everyday life, and Christianity is available, changes in religious allegiance are likely to be in the air. If missionaries did not then offer appropriate forms of salvation, did not encourage participants to feel that they were justified in turning to Christ to handle what was missing in their lives, one might suspect that they were not doing their job. And if anthropologists were not to make reference to how the promises of religion can work as motivating agencies, one would likewise be perplexed.

We were certainly tempted to use the idea of deprivation to help explain conversion among the Karen of north-west Thailand. Although only about a quarter of the Karen are professed Christians, missionaries have made a much greater impact here than elsewhere in Thailand. Whilst in the field, one of us

collected material indicating the importance of deprivation.¹ Converts frequently spoke of conversion as liberation, as freeing themselves from the inadequacies of their traditional way of life. They talked of what had previously been missing in their lives, whether it be education, medical care, status, or more intangible things such as peace of mind. Missionaries themselves also made frequent reference to what Christianity had to offer in the way of solutions to unfulfilled expectations and indeed often asserted that they would make little progress unless they adopted a welfare role. Finally, our hunch that deprivation is an important factor received additional confirmation when we read what other anthropologists had written. Theodore Stern, for example, draws on the history of the Karen to argue that 'both the envy toward the superior civilisations of their neighbours and the bitterness of their lot when those neighbours became oppressors combined to drive them to seek redress in religion'.²

But our growing faith in what, after all, is a common-sense approach to conversion was soon to be rudely interrupted. We read Peter Hinton's criticism of Stern's explanation:

The appropriateness of the explanatory framework can seriously be questioned on theoretical grounds...for example that the argument rests on untested psychological assumptions about the way people react when they are deprived and oppressed. Further, in practice, the relative deprivation hypothesis [recall that the Karen are deprived relative to other groups] has proved of little predictive value: on the one hand, not all groups that are relatively deprived seek religious compensation, and, on the other, some groups that are well off in relation to other reference groups are galvanised by...ardour.³

We rapidly came to appreciate the extent to which deprivation 'theory' has been criticized. A number of anthropologists and considerably more sociologists have engaged in criticisms which made us wonder whether deprivation has anything to do with conversion. Mary Douglas, for example, writes of 'the emotionally distracting principle of deprivation'.⁴ And from the ranks of the sociologists of religion, Roy Wallis claims that deprivation theorists have engaged in 'speculative psychology', psychology of the variety Evans-Pritchard had in mind when he wrote of the 'If I were a horse fallacy'.⁵

On the one hand, then, it appears foolish to discount the possibility that Christianity appeals when it offers hope, comfort and courses of action for those who are distressed by virtue of not receiving their due. On the other

1. Anna Marie Haglund-Heelas, 'Saving Souls in Thailand', University of Stockholm: B.Sc. Thesis 1987.
2. T. Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect among the Karen', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIV, no. 2 (1968), p. 299.
3. P. Hinton, 'The Karen, Millennialism and the Politics of Accommodation to Lowland States', in C. Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Adaption and Identity*, Philadelphia: ISHI 1979, p. 91.
4. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Barrie & Rockliff 1970, p. 83.
5. Roy Wallis, *Salvation and Protest*, London: Francis Pinter 1979, p. 6.

hand, it would be equally foolish not to take criticisms seriously. In what follows, we tackle this apparent conundrum. We argue that criticisms of deprivation theory are justified. An important reason is that experiences of deprivation do not lend themselves to scientific scrutiny. Precisely because of this, however, research cannot demonstrate the absence of 'deprivation'. Given this situation—of what we might call 'scientific agnosticism'—we want to move towards a more positive conclusion. It might be the case that we cannot make 'strong' (i.e. scientific) claims about the role played by deprivation (if any), but what we can do is provide a common-sense or 'humanist' defence of the significance of such experiences.

First, though, what is it about the study of deprivation that makes it so inaccessible to scientific scrutiny? Those intent on developing empirically demonstrable or testable claims and theories about this question must show that there is a *significant* association between deprivation and conversion. In explaining why this cannot be demonstrated, we show why theories of deprivation are not really theories at all. We show why Wallis is justified in using the term 'speculative'.

In perhaps all societies where Christian missionaries work, it seems likely that the number of those who are deprived exceeds (sometimes greatly) those who convert to Christianity or other religions. Unless we can show that those who convert are deprived in particular ways or to a particular degree, we are left with trying to explain a minority development by reference to a majority state. Such a situation would suggest that other, more specific factors, perhaps of a strategic and political nature, should also be taken into account. It is true that deprivation could still be operative in those who convert, but only as an adjunct to equally if not more significant factors.

To avoid this conclusion, the theorist wanting to emphasise deprivation must show that there is a link between particular forms of deprivation and conversion careers; and it is in this regard that Wallis puts forward a forceful argument to show that deprivation theory is doomed to failure. Expressing his 'suspicion that a plausible "type" of relative deprivation can be invented for any particular movement', Wallis suggests that 'the procedure' adopted by deprivation theorists

seems to take the following form: the observer examines the movement's belief system and concludes that it offers a resolution to frustration of status, to ethical dilemmas, or to physical handicap and concludes that this is what its members seek. Hence, they must have been deprived of that to begin with.

And, as he continues to spell out,

this procedure risks tautology. A movement offers x, hence the recruit is deprived of x. How do we know? By looking at the amount of stress on x in the movement's belief system.⁶

The fact remains, of course, that investigators can try to avoid tautological

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4. See Rodney Needham, *Primordial Characters*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1978, for similar criticisms of 'strain' theories of witchcraft accusations.

reasoning by finding independent evidence of deprivation. They can attempt to establish that those who convert had previously been suffering from particular forms of deprivation. An obvious move here is to look for 'objective' measures of deprivation. Attention is directed to education, income, health and the like, assessed in terms of universally applicable scales. But for reasons which will become apparent in a moment, it should be demonstrated that people actually experience deprivation. This is different from judging that their circumstances alone warrant the designation. What matters, as Wallis puts it, is finding evidence of '*felt or experienced* disparity between aspirations or expectations and reality, i.e. of a subjective experience'.⁷

Wallis then observes, 'Curiously, however, exponents of this view tend to look for the evidence in the objective circumstances affecting groups and strata.' This is unsatisfactory, objective measures providing 'no convincing ground for the belief that the relevant category from which the movement recruited actually did *experience* the circumstances in which they found themselves as depriving'. The reason is simple: 'Human agents are capable of interpreting the same social conditions in different ways.' To illustrate with reference to the Karen, just because they appear to be deprived to us in the West does not entail that they feel as we would if we were in their place. To show that they experience deprivation—which *must* be done if it is to be held that deprivation is of motivational force—means showing that the Karen *understand* their circumstances in this way. It means showing that the Karen know that they are not receiving things to which they feel entitled. It means showing that the Karen are not simply accepting all they know their lot to be.

If objective measures and scales are unreliable guides in demonstrating a significant association between deprivation and conversion, investigators then have to seek for more direct evidence of experiences. But in the great majority of cases, investigators are not around to study and question people prior to conversion. They therefore have to rely on questioning converts. Converts generally have vested interests in emphasizing the salvational benefits of their path. Stressing how deprived they were prior to conversion, they are also likely to emphasize those deprivations which correspond to the salvational promises of their new religion. When these highlight security, for example, the researcher might well be told of the dreadful hold which anxiety once exercised. Though this might be an after-the-event emphasis, perhaps also reflecting diminished anxiety, the researcher comes away convinced that an important motivating factor has been pinpointed.

That the researcher might claim to show that those who are not attracted by Christianity report significantly less anxiety (or whatever) than do those who have then converted is neither here nor there. The problem has to do with penetrating sufficiently the experiences of those who convert. Since we cannot reliably show that deprivation (even classified according to kind or intensity) is what distinguishes those who convert from those who do not, we have to conclude that we cannot satisfactorily identify deprivation as an important

7. Wallis, *Salvation and Protest*, p. 5.

variable in explaining conversion. Deprivation could be a significant factor, but theories which claim to demonstrate this rest on speculative evidence.

There are additional problems. David Aberle helps us see why deprivation theory is self-defeating. Working with the theory, he shows that conversion is too complicated to be explained in terms of what it has to offer. Having discussed the origins, nature and types of relative deprivation, Aberle observes:

We have implied throughout that these deprivations are the seed-bed for social movements. It would seem to follow from this that a knowledge of the severity and type of deprivation, and of the date and place of its occurrence, would make it possible to predict when, and where, and with what ideology a social movement would arise.⁸

He concludes that 'such a claim cannot be sustained'. Using evidence which deprivation theorists would themselves accept—namely, that it is possible to identify cases of 'severe relative deprivation'—Aberle shows that members of such societies do not convert as predicted. In terms of deprivation theory itself, this shows that the link between deprivation and conversion can be disrupted by other factors: for example, because deprivation has resulted in apathy, or because religious responses are not plausible.

The complexity of conversion means that evidence of the variety provided by deprivation theorists can all too easily count against the discernment of recurrent patterns. To account for exceptions, deprivation theory must be qualified in various ways. These qualifications seriously undermine claims that deprivation can work as the basis for a theory of conversion. Nevertheless, we can still discuss deprivation in connection with a wide range of other possible conversion factors. The nature of such factors is suggested by Godfrey Lienhardt's observation that 'I do not doubt that some Dinka were converted by a love of God and drawn into the Church by the attraction of some Christian principle, by prayer, by individual introspective activity of the conscience, or by the example of such priests and other Christians as they had among them.'⁹ More generally, we might want to consider the role played by prior religious affiliation (perhaps influencing the appeal and plausibility of what is being offered), the role played by others who have converted (kin perhaps acting in persuasive fashion), or the role played by conversion experiences (perhaps generated by rituals). These factors cannot be subsumed by deprivation theory. Any attempt to salvage the theory would have to be so qualified by the introduction of other factors as to cease to be a theory of deprivation. At best, it would become a vague probabilistic statement. At worst, the theory would cease to have any general applicability whatsoever.

It is time to take stock. We first argued that evidence for deprivation is too speculative to provide the basis for firm theorizing. In particular, it is not

8. David Aberle, *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho*, London: University of Chicago Press 1982 (2nd edn.), p. 329.

9. R. G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London and New York: Academic Press 1982 (ASA Monographs, no. 21), p. 89.

possible to claim that there is a significant association between deprivation and conversion: this is in the sense of showing that particular forms of deprivation can provide the basis for explaining why some but not all of those who are deprived convert. We then argued that conversion is too complicated a matter to expect deprivation theorists to be able to use their own definitions of deprivation to convince us that there are significant links between deprivation and conversion careers. Hypothesized links get lost in the welter of circumstances which influence conversion.

Deprivation theory does not work. Research cannot assess the importance of deprivation for conversion; a classification of deprivation types cannot be used to explain or predict different incidences and varieties of conversion; nor, for that matter, can research show that conversion need have anything to do with deprivation.¹⁰ We have to conclude that deprivation theorists have laboured to very little avail. Claims of the variety advanced by Stern (envy and bitterness driving the Karen to seek redress in religion) cannot be made to stick. Neither can the anthropologist interested in exploring the response of traditional societies to Christianity turn to the 'home' of deprivation theory—namely, the sociology of religion—for guidance. To give an example, we feel that nothing can be gained by adopting a claim advanced by one of the leading deprivation theorists, Charles Glock:

In the case of economic, social and organismic deprivation—the three characterised by deprivation relative to others—religious resolutions are more likely to occur where the nature of the deprivation is inaccurately perceived or where those experiencing the deprivation are not in a position to work directly at eliminating the causes. The resolution is likely to be *secular* under the opposite conditions—where the nature of the deprivation is correctly assessed by those experiencing it and they have the power, or feel they have the power, to deal with it directly.¹¹

Having been so critical of deprivation theory, are we to conclude that those studying conversion should disregard experiences of deprivation? Paving the way for our 'humanist' defence of deprivation, we now point out that criticisms do not exclude the possibility that deprivation has some bearing on conversion. It is one thing to claim that scientific deprivation theory does not work; it is another to show that deprivation is *not* a factor.

We illustrate with reference to the study of religious affiliation in the USA. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge write:

For a long time, sociologists of religion took it for granted that a primary function of religion was to comfort the poor for their relative deprivations. In doing so, they echoed not only Marx's condemnation of religion as nothing but 'an opium of the people' but also St Paul's belief that religion has greatest appeal to the 'weak things of the world'. Then, with the development of empirical social

10. Charles Glock talks of deprivation as a 'necessary precondition': 'The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups', in R. Lee and M. Marty (eds.), *Religion and Social Conflict*, New York: Oxford University Press 1964, p. 29.

11. *Ibid.*

research in the 1940s, a series of investigators found the lower classes noticeably absent from church. It is the wealthy, not the poor, who are most likely to be found in the pews on Sunday morning.¹²

Our authors write that 'this discovery threatened a major sociological proposition'. But it does not rule out the possibility of deprivation having a role to play. The religious allegiance (perhaps conversion) of the 'wealthy' could owe something to their feeling that religion can offer them legitimate status in the community. Indeed, it is easy to argue that the 'wealthy' are deprived of a great many things. And as Stark and Bainbridge point out, the 'poor' could be seeking religious 'compensation' without going to church.

Or again, it might be true, as Mary Douglas claims, that 'the argument [of deprivation] is unable to deal with the many cases of people who are obviously and consciously deprived, and yet do not react in the predicted way'.¹³ But this is not to say that deprivation need not be significant for those who *do* convert, or indeed for the continuing allegiance of those (such as the 'Bog Irish') who stay with what they have got. Deprivation theories, it seems fair to say, have given deprivation a bad name.

We promised to end on a positive note. Although theories are easy prey, it should be apparent that we do not agree with those writers, such as Mary Douglas, who want to conclude that we therefore 'do not have to look for' deprivation.¹⁴ Although deprivation cannot be a complete theory, there are still good reasons for taking it into account in the study of conversion.

It is only human nature to respond emotionally to deprivation: anxiety or fear when security is taken away, envy when others have what you want, grief on the deprivations of bereavement, and anger when desires are frustrated. A great variety of emotional responses can result when people do not feel that they are receiving what they have a right to or have come to expect. And of course they are motivated to respond. They want to do something about what is missing. They hope or wish for change. However else religion might appeal, whatever else might be involved in conversion, room must surely be made for considering what religion has to offer to those who feel that they cannot get what they deserve.

For reasons which should be apparent, it is rarely possible to explore the motivating force of deprivation in 'scientific' or determinate fashion.¹⁵ We must be content with the kind of analysis presented by those whom some would regard as 'too descriptive'. One can think of Raymond Firth's

12. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, London: University of California Press 1985, p. 10.

13. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 83.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

15. We say 'rarely' because it is sometimes possible to study people prior to conversion and thus acquire a somewhat clearer idea of the nature and significance of deprivation than is normally the case. See Paul Heelas, 'Exegesis: Methods and Aims', in P. Clarke (ed.), *Evangelisation and New Religious Movements*, London: Ethnographica (forthcoming 1988).

exploration of Tikopian conversion.¹⁶ More to the point, given the context of this chapter, is Godfrey Lienhardt's study, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', an account in which Dinka expectations, Dinka understanding of Christianity and what it can provide, are examined as aspects of a situation which goes way beyond anything which can be captured by theories of conversion. Asking 'what kind of translation, as it were, of experience was required for a Dinka to become a nominal or believing Christian?',¹⁷ a frame of reference is introduced which makes it absurd to demand, 'do Dinka convert when deprivation has acquired certain (predicted) characteristics?' What we are calling 'deprivation' might have a role in the 'translation of experience', for it involves experiences which perhaps call for religious transformation. However, it is set in a complex of meanings, a complex interplay between indigenous Dinka comprehension and Christian teaching. This is what it is fruitful to explore: for example, how the alien idea of 'progress' comes to acquire significance for religious allegiance—a far cry from scientific theories of deprivation, yet clearly not without significance for those interested in deprivation as an aspect of experience.

16. Raymond Firth, *Rank and Religion in Tikopia*, London: George Allen and Unwin 1970.

17. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', p. 82.