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Homer Tolstoy Gogol Busch
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**The Evolution of the Country
Community A Study in Religious
Sociology**

Warren H. (Warren Hugh) Wilson

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THE EVOLUTION OF
THE COUNTRY
COMMUNITY

A STUDY IN RELIGIOUS SOCIOLOGY

BY

WARREN H. WILSON

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TO

MISS ANNA B. TAFT

WHO FOUND THE WAY OF

RURAL LEADERSHIP

IN SERVICE ON THE NEGLECTED BORDERS OF

New England Towns

[Pg vii]

PREFACE

The significance of the most significant things is rarely seized at the moment of their appearance. Years or generations afterwards hindsight discovers what foresight could not see.

It is possible, I fear it is even probable, that earnest and intelligent leaders of organized religious activity, like thousands of the rank and file in parish work, will not immediately see the bearings and realize the full importance of the ideas and the purposes that are clearly set forth in this new and original book by my friend and sometime student, Dr. Warren H. Wilson. That fact will in no wise prevent or even delay the work which these ideas and purposes are mapping out and pushing to realization.

The Protestant churches have completed one full and rounded period of their existence. The age of theology in which they played a conspicuous part has passed away, never to return. The world has entered into the full swing of the age of science and practical achievement. What the work, the usefulness, and the destiny of the Protestant churches shall henceforth be will depend entirely upon their own vision, their common sense, and their adaptability to a new order of things. Embodying as [Pg viii] they do resources, organization, the devotion and the energy of earnest minds, they are in a position to achieve results of wellnigh incalculable value if they apply themselves diligently and wisely to the task of holding communities and individuals up to the high standard of that "Good Life" which the most gifted social philosopher of all ages told us, more than two thousand years ago, is the object for which social activities and institutions exist.

In one vast field of our social territory the problem of maintaining the good life has become peculiar in its conditions and difficult in the extreme. The rural community has suffered in nearly every imaginable way from the rapid and rather crude development of our industrial civilization. The emigration of strong, ambitious men to the towns, the substitution of alien labor for the young and sturdy members of the large American families of other days, the declining birth rate and the disintegration of a hearty and cheerful neighborhood life, all have worked together to create a problem of the rural

neighborhood, the country school and the country church unique in its difficulties, sometimes in its discouragements.

To deal with this problem two things are undeniably necessary. There must be a thorough examination of it, a complete analysis and mastery of its factors and conditions. The social survey has become as imperative for the country pastor as the geological survey is for the mining engineer. And [Pg ix] when the facts and conditions are known, the church must resolutely set about the task of dealing with them in the practical spirit of a practical age, without too much attention to the traditions and the handicaps of an age that has gone by.

It would not be possible, I think, to present these two aspects of the problem of the country parish with more of first hand knowledge, or with more of the wisdom that is born of sympathy and reverence for all that is good in both the past and the present than the reader will find in Dr. Wilson's pages. I welcome and commend this book as a fine product of studies and labors at once scientific and practical.

Franklin H. Giddings. [Pg x]

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INTRODUCTION

The church and the school are the eyes of the country community. They serve during the early development of the community as means of intelligence and help to develop the social consciousness, as well as to connect the life within the community with the world outside. They express intelligence and feeling. But when the community has come to middle life, even though it be normally developing, the eyes fail. They are infallible registers of the coming of mature years. At this time they need a special treatment.

Like the eyes, the country church and country school register the health of the whole organism. Whatever affects the community affects the church and the school. The changes which have come over the face of social life in the country record themselves in the church and the school. These institutions register the transformations in social life, they indicate health and they give warning of decay. In a few instances the church or school require the attention of the expert even in the infancy of the community, just as the eyes of a child sometimes need the oculist, but with normal growth the expert [Pg xiv] is called in for problems which have to do with maturity.

In these chapters the center of attention will be the church, regarded as an institution for building and organizing country life. It is not the thought of the writer that the church be treated in ecclesiastical terms. It is rather as a register of the well-being of the community that the church is here studied. The condition of the church is regarded as an index of the social and economic condition of the people. The sources of religion are believed by the writer to be in the vital experiences of the people themselves. In the process of religious experience the church, the Bible, the ministry and other religious methods and organizations are means of disciplining the forces of religion, but they are not the sources of religion.

The church in the country above all other institutions should see what concerns country people as a whole. If vision be not given to the church, country people will suffer. The Christian churches are rich in the experience of country people. The Bible is written about a "Holy Land." The exhortations of Scripture, especially of the Old

Testament, are devoted to constructive sociology, the building and organizing of an agricultural people in an Asiatic country. Many of the problems are oriental, but some of them are precisely the same as are today agitating the American farmer. Religion is the highest valuation set upon life, and the country [Pg xv] church should have a vision of the present meaning as well as the future development of country life in America.

The country church ought to inspire. It is the business of other agencies, and particularly of the schools and colleges, to impart practical and economic aims. But these will not satisfy country people. No section of modern life is so dependent upon idealism as are the people who live in the country. Mere cash prosperity puts an end to residence in most country communities. Commercial success leads toward the city. The religious leaders alone have the duty of inspiring country people with ideals higher than the commercial. It remains for the church in particular to inspire with social idealism. Education seems hopelessly individualistic. The schoolmaster can see only personalities to be developed. It remains for the preacher to develop a kingdom and a commonwealth. His ideals have been those of an organized society. The tradition which he inherits from the past is saturated with family, tribal and national remembrances. His exhortations for the future look to organized social life in the world to come. He should know how to construct ideals out of modern life, which are organic and social.

Beyond these two duties I am not sure that the churches in the country have exceptional function. The writer is not a teacher, and what is said in this book about the country school is said solely because [Pg xvi] of the dependence of all else upon this institution. The patient, detailed and extensively constructive work in the country must be done by the educator. It is well for the church to recognize its limits, and to magnify its own function within them. Vision and inspiration are the duty of religious leaders. The application of these in a variety of ways to the generations of young people in the country is an educational task which the church can do only in part.

But the great necessity of arousing the church at the present time to its duty as a builder of communities in the country is this. In all parts of the United States country life is furnished with churches.

Perhaps not in sufficient degree in some localities, but in general the task of religious organization is done. These religious societies hold the key to the problem of country life. If they oppose modern socialized ideals in the country, these ideals cannot penetrate the country. If the church undertake constructive social service in the country, the task will be done. The church can oppose effectively; it can support efficiently. This situation lays a vast responsibility upon all Christian churches, especially upon those that have an educated ministry; for the future development of the country community as a good place in which to live depends upon the country church.

This is not the place to discuss whether a population can be improved and whether a community can [Pg xvii] be saved. The pages that are to follow will discuss these questions. It is the writer's belief that a population can be improved by social service, that the community is the unit in which such service should be rendered in the country, and that by the vision and inspiration of the church in the country, this service is conditioned. He believes with those who are leading in the service among the poor in the great cities that the time has come when we have sufficient intelligence to understand the life of country people, in order to deal with the causes of human action; we have sufficient resources wherewith to endow the needed agencies for the reconstruction of country life; and we have a sufficient devotion among men of intelligence and of means to direct this constructive social service toward the entire well-being of country people and of the whole commonwealth.

The writer is indebted for help in the preparation of this book to Miss Florence M. Lane, Miss Martha Wilson and to Miss Anna B. Taft, without whose assistance and criticism the chapters could not have been prepared and without whose encouragement they would not have been undertaken; also to his teachers in Columbia University, especially Professors Franklin H. Giddings and John Bates Clark whose teachings in the Social Sciences furnish the beginning of a new method in investigating religious experiences.

New York, July, 1912.

[Pg 1]

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNITY

I

THE PIONEER

The earliest settlers of the American wilderness had a struggle very different from our own, who live in the twentieth century. Their economic experience determined their character. They appear to us at this distance to have common characteristics, habits and reactions upon life; in which they differ from all who in easier times follow them. They have more in common with one another than they have in common with us. They differ less from one another than they differ from the modern countryman. The pioneer life produced the pioneer type.

To this type all their ways of life correspond. They hunted, fought, dressed, traded, worshipped in their own way. Their houses, churches, stores and schools were built, not as they would prefer, but as the necessities of their life required. Their communities were pioneer communities: their religious habits were suitable to frontier experience. [Pg 2] Modern men would find much to condemn in their ways: and they would find our typical reactions surprising, even wicked. But each conforms to type, and obeys economic necessity.

There have been four economic types in American agriculture. These have succeeded one another as the rural economy has gone through successive transformations. They have been the pioneer, the land farmer, the exploiter and the husbandman. Prof. J. B. Ross of Lafayette, Ind., has clearly stated [1] the periods by which these types are separated from one another. It remains for us to consider the communities and the churches which have taken form in accordance with these successive types.

Prof. Ross has spoken only of the Middle West. With a slight modification, the same might be said of the Eastern States, because the rural economy of the Middle West is inherited from the East. His statement made of this succession of economic types should be quoted in full:

"The agrarian occupation of the Middle West divides itself into three periods. The first, which extends from the beginnings of im-

migration to about the year 1835, is of significance chiefly because of the type of immigrants who preempted the soil and the nature of their occupancy. The second period, extending from 1835 to 1890, had as its chief objective the enrichment of the group life. It was the [Pg 3] period in which large houses and commodious barns were erected, and in which the church and the school were the centers of social activity. The third period, which began about the year 1890, and which is not yet complete, is marked by a transition from the era of resident proprietors of the land to that of non-resident proprietors, and by the fact that the chief attention of the land owners is paid to the improvement of the soil by fertilization and drainage and to the increasing of facilities for communication and for the marketing of farm products."

Each of these types created by the habits of the people in getting their living, had its own kind of a community, so that we have had pioneer, land farmer, exploiter and husbandman communities. Indeed all these types are now found contemporaneous with one another. We have also had successive churches built by the pioneer, by the land farmer, by the exploiter and by the husbandman. The present state of the country church and community is explained best by saying that it is an effect of transition from the pioneer and the land farmer types of church and community to the exploiter and husbandman types.

The pioneer lived alone. He placed his cabin without regard to social experience. In the woods his axe alone was heard and on the prairie the smoke from his sod house was sometimes answered by no other smoke in the whole horizon. He worked and fought and pondered alone. Self-preservation was [Pg 4] the struggle of his life, and personal salvation was his aspiration in prayer. His relations with his fellows were purely democratic and highly independent. The individual man with his family lived alone in the face of man and God. The following is a description by an eye witness of such a community which preserves in a mountain country the conditions of pioneer life [2].

"It is pitiful to see the lack of co-operation among them. It is most evident in business but makes itself known in the children, too. I regard it as one reason why they do not play; they have been so

isolated that they do not allow the social instinct of their natures to express itself. This, of course, is all unconsciously done on their part. However, one cannot live long among them without finding out that they are characterized by an intense individualism. It applies to all that they do, and to it may be attached the blame for all the things which they lack or do wrongfully. If a man has been wronged, he must personally right the wrong. If a man runs for office, people support him as a man and no questions are asked as to his platform. If a man conducts a store, people buy from him because he sells the goods, not because the goods commend themselves to them. And so by common consent and practise, the individual interests are first. Naturally this leads to many cases of lawlessness. [Pg 5] The game of some of our people is to evade the law; of others, to ignore the law entirely."

The pioneer had in his religion but one essential doctrine,—the salvation of the soul. His church had no other concern than to save individuals from the wrath to come. It had just one method, an annual revival of religion.

The loneliness of the pioneer's soul is an effect of his bodily loneliness. The vast outdoors of nature forest or prairie or mountain, made him silent and introspective even when in company. The variety of impacts of nature upon his bodily life made him resourceful and self-reliant; and upon his soul resulted in a reflective, melancholy egotism. His religion must therefore begin and end in personal salvation. It was a message, an emotion, a struggle, and a peace.

The second great characteristic of the pioneer was his emotional tension. His impulses were strong and changeable. The emotional instability of the pioneer grew out of his mixture of occupations. It was necessary for him to practise all the trades. In the original pioneer settlement this was literally true. In later periods of the settlement of the land the pioneer still had many occupations and representative sections of the country even until the present time exhibit a mixture of occupations among country people most unlike the ordered life of the Eastern States. Adam Smith in "Wealth of Nations" makes clear that the practise of many occupations [Pg 6] induces emotional conditions. Between each two economic processes

there is generated for the worker at varied trades a languor, which burdens and confuses the work of the man who practises many trades. This languor is the source of the emotional instability of the pioneer.

The pioneer's method of bridging the gap between his many occupations was simple. When he had been hunting he found it hard to go to plowing; and if plowing, on the same day to turn to tanning or to mending a roof. When the pioneer had spent an hour in bartering with a neighbor he found it difficult to turn himself to the shoeing of a horse or the clearing of land. For this new effort his expedient was alcohol. He took a drink of rum as a means of forcing himself to the new occupation. The result is that alcoholic liquors occupy a large place in the economy of every such pioneer people.

In the mountain regions of the South, where the pioneer remains as an arrested type, the rum jug occupies the same place in the economy of the countryman as it occupied in the early settlements of the United States generally. These "contemporary ancestors" of ours in the Appalachian region have all the marks of the pioneer. Their simple life, their varied occupations, and the relative independence of the community and household, sufficient unto themselves, present a picture of the earlier American conditions. It is obvious among them that [Pg 7] the emotional condition of the pioneer grew out of his economy and extended itself into his church.

This emotional instability of the pioneer shows itself in his social life. The well known feuds of the mountain people exhibit this condition. Feeling is at once violent and impulsive. The very reserve of these unsmiling and serious people is an emotional state, for the meager diet and heavy continued strains of their economic life poorly supply and easily exhaust vitality.

The frontier church exhibited emotional variability. It expressed itself in the pioneer's one method; namely, an annual revival of religion. In the pioneer churches there were few or no Sunday schools or other societies. In those regions in which the pioneer has remained the type of economic life Sunday schools do not thrive. Societies for young people, for men, women and children do not there exist. The church is a place only for preaching. Religion consists of a message whose use is to excite emotion. Preaching is had

as often as possible, but not necessarily once a week. Essential, however, to the pioneer's organization of his churches is a periodical if possible an annual, revival of religion. The means used at this time are the announcement of a gospel message and the arousing of emotion in response to this message. There is little application of religious imperative to the details of life. There is no recognition of social life, because the pioneer economy is lonely and individual. The whole pro [Pg 8] cess of religion consists in "coming through": in other words, the procuring of an individual and highly personal experience of emotion.

"Beneath the surface of life in these people so conservative, and so indifferent to change as it is, there runs a strain of intense emotionalism. When storms disturb the calm exterior, the mad waves lash and beat and roar. And in religion this is most apparent. With them emotionalism and religion are almost interchangeable quantities,— if they are not identical. [3]

"It is in the revival service that you see the heart of the stolid mountain man unmasked. The local mountain preachers know this fact well and use it with great effect. A word must be said about these men who work all through the week alongside of their fellows and preach to them on Sunday. In some places there is a custom of holding service on Saturday and Sunday. These men have generally 'come through'— a term used to describe the process beginning with 'mourning' and continuing through repenting and being saved. And generally they are men of personality. They have a certain power with men, anyway, and they are keen to see the effect of things on their audiences. Some of them have learned to read the Bible after they have been converted. It is not so much what they say that counts. If people looked for that they would go away unfilled. But they have another thing in mind. [Pg 9] They want to feel right. They go to church occasionally during revival drought, but always during revival plenty. They go to get 'revived up.' The preacher who has the best voice is the best preacher. He sways his audience. The more ignorant he is, the better, for then the Spirit of God is not hindered by the wisdom of man. The spirit comes upon him when he enters the pulpit. He speaks through him to the waiting congregation. Of course they do not know what he is saying for the man makes too much noise. But they begin to feel that this is indeed the

place where religion can be found and where it is being distributed among the people.

"Generally revivals occur as they have always done, about three times a year. At these services the method requires that exhorters should be present and perform. Several do so at the same time. The confusion is great but the people breathe an atmosphere that begins to infect them. Sooner or later weeping women are in the arms of some others' husbands begging them to come to the mourning bench. Young girls single out the boys that they like best and affectionately implore them to begin the Christian life. All the time the choir is singing a swinging revival hymn; the preacher is standing over his audience shouting 'Get busy, sinners,' and two or three boys are scurrying back and forth carrying water to the thirsty ones, while little groups of the faithful are hovering over a penitent, smothering sinner, trying to 'pull her through.' During this [Pg 10] kind of a meeting which I attended at one time a woman 'got happy' and went around slapping everyone she could get her hand on, and skipping like a schoolgirl."

The pioneer church has not fully passed away. Its one doctrine and its one method have still a place in the more elaborate life of the modern church. Like the rum jug which is preserved for medicinal purposes, the revival has a use in the pathology of modern church life. The doctrine of personal salvation which is of chief concern, in the ministry to the adolescent population [4] of the modern church, is just as vital as ever; though it is not the only doctrine of the church of the husbandman, which has come in the country.

A relic of the pioneer days is the custom known as the "Group System." By this a preacher comes to a church once a month, or twice, and preaches a sermon, returning promptly to his distant place of residence. The early settlers of this country who originated this system were lonely and individualized. They believed that religion consisted in a mere message of salvation, so that all they required was to hear from a preacher once in a while.

But the districts in which the "Group System" is used have grown beyond this religious satisfaction and the "Group System" no longer renders adequate religious service. Religion has become a greater

[Pg 11] ministry than can be rendered in the form of a message, however well preached.

Like all outworn customs, this one breeds abuses as it grows older. Its value having passed away, it has forms of offensiveness. In sections of Missouri where the farmers are rich they say with contempt, "None of the ministers lives in the country." The "Group System," in a territory of Missouri comprising forty-one churches, organizes its forces as follows: these forty-one churches have nine ministers who live in five communities and go out two miles, ten miles, sometimes thirty miles, in various directions, for a fractional service to other communities than those in which they live. Each of the two big towns has more than one minister and none of the country churches has a pastor. Thus the value of the family life of the preacher is cancelled. After all this organization and division of the men into small fractions among the churches, there are sixteen of these churches which have neither pastor nor preacher.

This "Group System" can be improved, as is done in Tennessee, by the shortening of the journeys which must be made by the minister from his home to his preaching point. Nevertheless, it gives to the country community only a fraction of a man's time. He can interpret religion in only three ways; in the sermon, the funeral service and the wedding. Unfortunately mankind has to do many other things besides getting married, buried or preached at. [Pg 12]

The country community needs a pastor. It is better for the minister who preaches to the country to live in the country. There are some parts which cannot support a pastor, but the minister to country churches should know the daily round of country life. Religion can never be embodied in a sermon; and when religion comes to be limited to a formal act it is tinged with suspicion in the eyes of most men. Sermons and funerals and weddings become to country people the windows by which religion flies out of the community. Especially among farmers, religion is a matter of every-day life. What religion the farmer has grows out of his yearly struggle with the soil and with the elements. His belief in God is a belief in Providence. His God is the creator of the sun and the seasons, the wind and the rain. The man who does not with him share these experiences cannot long interpret them for him in terms of scripture or of church.

The policy of the newer territories of the church must be to translate the "Group System" into pastorates. The long range group service should be transformed into short and compact group ministry; the pastor should live in the country community and the length of his journey should never be longer than his horse can drive. A group of churches which are not more than ten miles apart constitute a country parish. Some few active ministers are able to make thirty to forty miles on horseback on a Sunday, among a scattered people. This is [Pg 13] well, but as soon as the railroad becomes an essential factor in the monthly visit of ministers to the country, religion passes out of that community.

The service of the country preacher, in other words, is essentially confined to the country community, and the bounds of the country community are determined by the length of the team haul or horseback ride to which that population is accustomed. Within these bounds religious life and expression are possible. Immersed in his own community, the life of the minister and of his family attain immediate religious value. The whole influence of the minister's home, the service of his wife to the people, which is often greater than his own, and the development of his children's life, these are all of religious use to his people.

A recent speaker upon this matter said, "I doubt if even the Lord Jesus Christ could have saved this world if he had come down to it only once in two weeks on Saturday and gone back on Monday morning."

The pastor, then, is the type of community builder needed in the country. The pastor works with a maximum of sincerity, while sincerity may in preaching be reduced to the lowest terms. He is in constant, intimate, personal contact. The preacher is dealing with theories and ideals not always rooted in local experiences. The pastor lives the life of the people. He is known to them and their lives are known to him. The preacher may perform his oratorical [Pg 14] ministry through knowledge of populations long since dead and by description of foreign and alien countries. It is possible to preach acceptably about kingdoms that have not yet existed. But the work of a pastor is the development of ideals out of situations. It is his business to inspire the daily life of his people with high idealism