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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the history of two mission projects and associated schools in rural Kentucky and examines how the missionaries' social constructions of reality with regard to Appalachia determined their actions. The two mission projects studied were Red Bird Missionary Conference of the United Methodist Church and Hazel Green Academy of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Data were collected from interviews with project administrators, published autobiographical statements, institutional records archived at Berea College, and interviews with persons living within the Red Bird service area. Hazel Green Academy was established as an elementary and high school in 1880 and was converted into a high school in the 1930s. Other projects developed but were discontinued. In 1982, facing a large deficit, the academy closed. Red Bird Mission started as a school in the 1920s in conjunction with the local board of education. Today it operates an independent elementary and high school, a medical and dental clinic, a used clothing store, a large craft-cottage industry, and an ambulance service, and oversees 27 churches and outreach centers in 7 Kentucky counties. Hazel Green Academy, founded before Appalachia had been named, never adopted the notion of "otherness" that many who have worked in the area still use today. In contrast, the notion of a "peculiar people" and a region apart has been inherent throughout the history of Red Bird. The most suitable explanation for the differences in these two church programs is found in their vastly different constructions of the definition of Appalachia. Hazel Green saw this area as "isolated rural communities," while Red Bird viewed this area as "a unique culture: hillbillies." These definitions predisposed each institution's respective actions throughout its history and influenced its growth or lack of it. (LP)

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: How It Compels Action

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"If men, define situations as real, they are real in their consequences:
- *THE CHILD IN AMERICA (Thomas and Thomas, 1928:572)*

". . . they nevertheless shared [the] conviction that they knew both what was good and what was (therefore) good for mountain people. With apparently complete confidence in their own judgement, they set the standard . . . drew the boundaries that included or excluded . . . Thus a major barrier . . . is precisely its own past and the inertias and pieties that attach to it".
- *ALL THAT IS NATIVE AND FINE (Whisnant, 1983:228,264)*

" . . . the way people view the world determines how they will act in it . . . What is significant about this situation is . . .the relationship it suggests between explanation and social action as responses to the dilemma generated by the perception of Appalachian otherness.
- *APPALACHIA ON OUR MIND (Shapiro, 1978:ix,xvi)*

Whisnant and Shapiro both point out the "power" of the social construction of reality. This is especially noteworthy as one tries to understand the actions of missionary groups who came into the "hills" to work and ultimately construct their institutions. This study is an investigation of two such mission projects: Red Bird Missionary Conference of the United Methodist Church in Bell, Clay and Leslie counties of Kentucky and Hazel Green Academy of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Wolfe county, Kentuckky. Specifically, it will attempt to see how each of the particular social constructions of reality of Appalachia they fostered determined their respective actions and how that reality-definition persists at Red Bird today in spite of much evidence for a contrary definition of reality.

The methodology used in this investigation consists of personal interviews with the "executives" of the respective institutions, as well as their published autobiographical statements, examinations of the records of both institutions archived at Berea College, and personal interviews conducted with local persons

living within the service area of Red Bird Missionary Conference.

HISTORY

Hazel Green Academy was officially established in 1880 and was incorporated into the missionary arm of what is now the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1886. It was founded by 3 local citizens of Hazel Green, a very small mountain town in Wolfe County, Kentucky. The Academy was operated as an elementary and high school for a number of years, was converted into just a high school in the 1930's and finally as an enriched senior high school in the 1960's. During this same period several other "projects" developed, but were discontinued including a demonstration farm during the 1940's (when the diffusion and adoption concept of farm improvement was being formulated by the nation's agricultural schools), a small hospital which provided space for a local physician, and a used clothing store. In 1982, facing a large deficit, the academy closed. Since that time, only the used clothing store has continued and the physcial facilities have been utilized in different ways including a lease agreement with a local community college. The Hazel Green Church continues on the grounds of the former Academy and maintains administrative oversight for all remaining properties.

Red Bird Missionary Conference was begun as Red Bird Mission in 1922 as a home mission work of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (which merged with the Methodist Church in 1968). It started as a school in conjunction with the Bell County Board of Education and expanded to include the establishment of several churches, several elementary schools, a hospital and medical clinic, a used clothing store and much more. Today, it operates an independent elementary and high school, a medical/dental clinic, a used clothing store, a large craft-cottage industry, and an ambulance service and it oversees 27 churches and outreach centers covering the counties of Bell, Clay, Leslie, Harlan, Perry, Lee,

and Owsley. Henderson Settlement, an original effort of the Methodist Church that became part of the Missionary Conference at the 1968 merger, continues as a demonstration farm work, Children's Home, and community center. In 1954, the Red Bird Missionary Conference initiated a Local Pastors School to serve the denomination in much of the Appalachian Region of the church. All together, the Red Bird Conference is the largest home missionary project of the United Methodist Church.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF REALITY

The Sociological theory of Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes that the human environment is a symbolic one, constructed not on "objective realities", but on the basis of ongoing activity, constantly being reinterpretated in which social structure is seen as "something that happens rather than something that is (Stryker, 1980:128)". Interaction produces "constructed" classification schemes which define various situations in the world. When situations are defined as real, they have real consequences (Thomas, 1928). Mead (1956) elaborated by saying that the best approach to the study of human behavior is rooted in the conviction that society is defined as an ongoing social process. Once a meaning (whatever it is) is developed, it is either taken for granted to operate semi-automatically without any further reflection or it is regarded as a "mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behavior (Blummer, 1969:2)." In any case, all future actions are based upon what ever definition of reality is accepted as "objective reality". Whisnant carries the notion of reality construction over into intentional social intervention:

> We must begin to understand the politics of culture - especially the role of formal institutions and forceful individuals in defining and shaping perspectives, values, tastes, and *agendas for social change* (author's emphasis) (1983:13,15).

The two church missions detailed in this study, clearly followed this aproach to their concept of Appalachia. Each constructed a "definition of reality" for the setting in which they choose to work which then became the basis for their respective actions in that setting. Evidence of their construction activities is abundant and the resulting implications are not hard to discern. With great frequency, the subsequent decisions and actions of each mission were clearly patternized by their respective reality constructions.

Hazel Green Academy, founded before "Appalachia" had been named by William Goodell Frost at Berea College in the late 1890's, never rigidly adopted the notion of "otherness" (Shapiro, 1978) that many who have worked in the area still use today. There is evidence, however, that this notion did have a limited place at Hazel Green.

> Boys and girls have learned that beds are more comfortable than pine straw, knives and forks are as serviceable as fingers and more sanitary, that a bath a week is no more injurious to one's health than the old fashion 'annual meeting' (Stovall, 1931).

> My own opinion is that the greatest thing we can do for the mountain people is . . . to teach them . . . all we can teach, thus providing them with wings that will enable them to fly (McGarvey, 1919).

Yet, other evidence conclusively demonstrates that a rigid definition of Appalachia as a place apart never completely dominated Hazel Green's vision of the area. For example, the Academy always payed close attention to changes in the surrounding community in order to modify its program (Buchanan, 1992). In 1899, for instance, the town of Hazel Green purchased the present location and donated it to the mission board (Hamm - no date). A perusal of the centennial yearbook, PATHWAYS, (1980) reveals no effort to link the academics to stereotypic photographic images of the mountains. In fact, an advertisement for the Fall Session, 1888 shows a dignified lady complete with parasol (PATHWAYS, 1980:21).

George Buchanan, executive director of the Academy from 1965-80 makes these points in a recent interview:

> Generally, I tried to talk . . . about the needs of the area, financial, social needs, cultural needs . . . then I would describe to them (the audiences he spoke to in the general church) what we were providing in the way of opportunities . . . and that's where I left it.
>
> They [the mission workers] came with the same attitude of any person who had something to give, but not to poor mountain hillbilly folks . . . often people were accused of that, but I never felt that way as a student. When taking pictures to show . . . sometimes you couldn't help but show some of the poverty, but I never capitalized on [those pictures] . . . because I thought it would be offensive to [local folks].

In a series of papers written for the Spiritual Life Commission of the Council of the Southern Mountains, it had been claimed that the Christian Church works for the development of indigenous leadership and determination (Birkett, No Date) "In recent years there has been an increasing attempt for the Division of Home Missions to work *with* the people in Southern Appalachia and not merely for them (Department of Church in Town and Country, 1963:2 italics in the original). It seems apparent that Hazel Green saw the local area in need of services, but never as a "strange and peculiar people (Weller, 1966)"

In contrast, the notion of a "peculiar people" and a region apart has been inherent throughout the entire history of Red Bird. A report after an initial visit to the area in December 1920 by the founding delegation stated: "'We never saw a more real need anywhere.' By 'need' they were referring to the appalling economic, educational, and religious problems of the region (Schaeffer, 1980:4)." The arrival of the first teachers, appointed by the Bell County School Board, is described in the following fashion:

> They arrived in Pineville in the evening. The next morning they took a train to Heyburn where they were met by a man with a wagon who drove them the remaining 14 miles . . . They arrived shaken up and bruised. This was a strange wild country and a life entirely different from what they had previously known (Schaeffer, 1980:5).

Shapiro (1978:57) writes, "The churches' discovery of Appalachia . . . meant that the Appalachia they discovered would be the Appalachia of the local colorists not merely another region in need of home missionaries." Examples of how Red Bird utilized these "local color writers" views can be found throughout three different authorized institutional biographies:

> You didn't learn to drink mountain coffee in a day. If you had curly hair, it would take the kinks out . . . . The stories of shootings and feudin' we had heard didn't ease our minds any, and I was glad when morning came. I suppose one of the biggest barriers to folks feeling free to come in was that we had no open grate, pot bellied stove or bucket to spit in. . . . this was the raw pioneer way to bury the dead; no soft music, green carpeting, silk-lined casket or bronze vault . . . . another rough mountain man had turned to God and joined the great family of Christians (Plowman, 1982:5,10,13,63).

> Through the efforts of the entire church, we in the mountains have the opportunity to hear about the Christ who loves us even when we are so unlovely (Scott, 1971:98).

> [At the first worship service] I remember some of the men with revolvers in their belts, some of them outside or near the door, and some moving in and out during the service, being careful not to be taken advantage of by some feuding gang. . . . . Shortly after that, four brothers were armed, as usual. In their wild shooting, one of the brothers, riding behind another one on their mule, accidentally shot his brother's foot. . . . Our first was the need of clothing for the winter so we wrote a letter to our friends . . . in a short time several boxes arrived as other churches learned of the need . . . (DeWall, No Date:12,22,38)

On other occassions, Red Bird literature has noted that few women could plan balanced meals (DeWall, No Date), local folks did not know how to live in friendly ways until Red Bird came (Evangelical Junior Quarterly, 1947) and that local churches did not "make men dissatisfied with ugliness, want, sickness and the lack of opportunity (White, 1944:5)." In the same set of papers written for the Spiritual Life Commission quoted above, the staff of Red Bird wrote about Methodism and the theology of the Appalachian Region by saying that there are four major differences:

1. At no point for a Methodist is salvation a finished product . . . this attitude is notably absent.

2. The idea of meeting together for the mutual uplifting of the faithful is not emphasized in many Appalachian churches.
3. We have consistently felt that the kind of God we serve calls us to clean, honest living. This emphasis is distinctly absent in many forms of Appalachian Religion.
4. Social action movement are completely absent from most mountain churches. (Red Bird Mission Staff, No Date:2,3).

These "points" made by the Red Bird Staff, demonstrate a clear commitment to a reality-construction that emphasizes the "otherness" of the Appalachian Region. This commitment is not confined to just the far past. An internal memo dated 1978 and entitled "Proposal For A New Educational Facility at Red Bird Mission" states: "We serve a unique minority: hillbillies . . . . We are dealing with an organized but unique sub-culture." A 1985 interview brought forth the following: "We already have enough churches. . . but they [the mission] felt like we knew nothing about God until they came" (confidential interview, 1985). Other interviews in 1985 brought forth these comments:

> [a former superintendent] would never listen to us. He never seemed to care what we had to say . . . . [local person] I've not said anything because no one ever asked for my opinion . . . . [missionary pastor] I wouldn't lower my standards to have a mountain worship service (interviews, 1985).

A confidential informant stated in 1992 that, "United Methodist is kind of foreign to the way Appalachians do things [referring to informal decision making rather than official, organized meeting]". Yet, Appalachians in the next county were extremely "official" and well "organized" as demonstrated in Cox's study of Knox County Volunteer Fire Departments in the 1970's (Cox, unpublished manuscript). The 1991 Annual Report of the United Methodist Church's mission board uses as its only picture of Red Bird a close-up of a stereotypical "mountain man". No where else in this publication do stereotypical pictures occur. Efforts to obtain an explanation from the mission board revealed that no one saw anything stereotypical or offensive in that photograph They saw, "A man

who had gone through it all and survived." The spokesperson noted that a person from the area had written to voice a strong objection to the photograph, but apparently no one on the editing committee took the letter very seriously.

The review of this material clearly shows the rigidity with which Red Bird maintained and continues to maintain its definition of Appalachia. It is no accident that Weller's book, YESTERDAY'S PEOPLE is widely accepted within Red Bird's organization as a valid description of the people in its service area.

ACTIONS

Looking at how each of these church mission projects "conducted business", one sees a vivid contrast. Hazel Green Academy went out of business in 1982. Some of the rationale for this decision is rooted in the definition of reality that they used for the school. A decision was not made to try and expand the ministry in order to keep going. Attempts were not made to capitalize on the poverty of the area in fund raising efforts. Through out the history of the Academy, there is evidence of cooperative work with local persons and institutions (Buchanan, 1992). Local persons were the decision-makers when the Academy was closed and local persons continue to administer what is left of the Academy through the local church.

On the other hand, Red Bird continues to expand its ministry, including new plans to develop urban "Appalachian centers" (Journal, 1992; Wood, 1992). While the Red Bird hospital has been closed, several new physicians have been recruited to operate the busy medical clinic, the ambulance service has recently purchased several new vehicles, and a new craft school has recently begun. Despite organizational growth, basically all of the decision-makers still come from the outside with continual calls for more (The Cardinal, 1991 and 1992) and apparently the pattern of outside leadership has always been the case (Wood,

1992). Even the new craft school was begun with a volunteer from the outside although its purpose was, "training local people to do production craft work (The Cardinal, 1992)." One is hard pressed to explain this in light of continual appeals for indigenous leadership through the years (Survey of the Beverly Community, 1932; Bishoff, 1969; Lay Pastors' School, 1992; Scott, 1971; Self Study, 1987-88; Verburg, 1985; Wood, 1992).

When Red Bird decided to make its academy fully private in 1988-89, community opinion was not a deciding factor. Rather, it seems that habit and Red Bird's tradition played a more important role.

> If Red Bird did not exist today and we had to start from scratch, we probably wold not build a Red Bird School. I think it's a fair statement and I don't think anyone would really disagree with that, but we were in a new situation, you have a beautiful school facility and new, what do you do with a school facility that's new and fairly well furnished? Well the most logical thing that strikes you is to run a school (Wood, 1992).

CONCLUSION

It is possible that the difference in the actions of the two church missions has its orgins in the theological, organizational and historical differences between the United Methodist Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The United Methodist church is hierarchial in polity; the Disciples are congregational. The United Methodist church has a long history of specially trained ordained ministers for church leadership, a ruling "elite" group; the Disciples have a long history of local elders administering the church. While the United Methodists have recently upgraded the power of the laity, it is still a clergy dominated church. The Disciples emphasize such distinction far less. Historically, The United Methodist Church is a offshoot of the Anglican Church which originated in England and came to this country in colonial days. The Disciples, on the other hand, are the only truly American Frontier church having formed in Western Pennsylvania and Central and Eastern

Kentucky. Thus, the United Methodists "came to" the region while the Disciples "emerged from" the region.

Yet, these differences are not powerful enough to explain the differences in how Red Bird and Hazel Green conducted business. Both projects began in fairly isolated mountain communities under the request of local authorities. Both came into being as the Protestant Church began an immense home missionary program in the late 1880's and early 1920's. Both saw as their primary mission the establishment of a school. Everything that both organizations did came as a result of beginning as a school.

The most suitable explanation for the differences in these two church programs is be found in their vastly different constructions of the definition of Appalachia. Hazel Green saw their area as "isolated rural communities" (Buchanan, 1992). Red Bird saw their area as "a unique culture: hillbillies" (Memo, 1978). These definitions of Appalachia predisposed each institution's respective actions throughout history.

There can be no doubt that Red Bird as opposed to Hazel Green developed a strong attachment to the "otherness" notion of Appalachia and that they continue to hold onto this definition of reality which determines what it will or will not do. Despite attempts to argue the merits of Red Bird's preferred definition of Appalachia by Caudill (1963), Weller (1966), Erikson (1976) and others, Appalachian scholars have argued vigorously against this "culture of poverty" definition (Tice and Billings, 1991; Billings, 1974; Billings, Blee and Swanson, 1986; Foster,1988; Waller, 1988; and Whisnant, 1983). Yet, Red Bird, as opposed to Hazel Green, has made, and continues to make, the assumption of otherness a cornerstone of its ministry.

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