

A LESSON ON ENGLISH



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THE AMERICAN CLASS SYSTEM

BY SARA TUSEK

One of the reasons Americans disliked British rule was the rigid social class system in effect in 18th-century England. Those born into the upper classes were there for life, regardless of how low they might fall financially or otherwise.

At the same time, those born into the English lower classes could not move up, even if they were blessed by fortune and fame. A woman might marry upwards, but she would always have a slight tinge of the lower-class on her. Her children might be able to cover up her origins; her grandchildren might be seen as simply upper-class. But the family would be guarding a secret as to her humble origins.

CATHOLICS, EPISCOPALIANS AND PROTESTANTS

In the British colonies in the New World, though, class status was imported in peculiar ways. Rather than being a direct result of your birth, as was traditionally the case in England, social class status was tied to religion. The 16th and 17th-century struggles to make all of England first Catholic, then Protestant, then Catholic again, then a splintered Protestantism, deeply influenced the settlements in North America and created a New World class system.

When Henry VIII separated his island kingdom from the papal authority of Rome and founded his own church (the Church of England, or Anglican Church—usually known as the Episcopal Church in the US), he ignited a two-century religious conflagration that resulted in civil war, political intrigues and a tide of dissatisfied English people who left for the colonies. Some left for political freedom, some for economic gain and some for religious scruples.

The most famous of these emigrants landed on the New England coast, further north than they had expected (they meant to go to Virginia) and immediately seized the providential opportunity to build their own utopian vision—a City on a Hill, a Puritan theocracy where the Bible was the ultimate authority, under the leadership of Governor Winthrop.

The best of the Puritans planted a seed that has never stopped sprouting—the stern, strict brand of Protestantism that, on the one hand, smashed stained glass windows in England for being too “popish” and, on the other hand, established moral standards of honesty, decency and justice that still drive America at its best.

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AMERICAN UPPER CLASS VS. LOWER CLASS

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Self-deprecating and subtle	HUMOR	Ridicule and sarcasm
Save and invest; don't flaunt it	ATTITUDE TOWARD MONEY	Spend, spend, spend
Old, tattered and comfy	CLOTHING	Stylish and attention-getting
Soccer, tennis and golf	SPORTS	Baseball, football and basketball
Formal and courteous	LANGUAGE	Full of slang, very familiar
Respectful and charitable	ATTITUDE TOWARD ANYONE DIFFERENT	Suspicion and pointed humor
Old Volvo station wagon	VEHICLE	Latest yellow HumVee
Old 20" color TV with basic cable	TV	Latest HD mega-screen, surround sound
Positive—they ARE the authority	ATTITUDE TOWARD AUTHORITY	Distrustful

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Sara and Jarde Tusek with Klaus

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students who have learned English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

THE ALPHA COURSE

Created in the Anglican Church, in the spirit of convergence, the ALPHA course is a series of 13 weekly dinners, each followed by a short video on the basics of Christianity. The approach is non-denominational and Bible-based, seeking to extract the essential beliefs of the Christian faith and present them clearly and concisely.

The Rev. Nicky Gumble of Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, in London, leads the ALPHA ministry, which has spread to more than 160 countries world-wide.

ALPHA is in English, providing participants with a useful way to practice English listening skills while learning about Christianity, which is an important component of culture in English-speaking countries.

THE AMERICAN CLASS SYSTEM—FROM P. 1

THE PERIODIC PROTESTANT CLEAN SWEEP

Although Protestantism in the New World produced the famous wealthy upper-class WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant), it has never lost its purifying zeal. From time to time, this urgent need to sweep away corruption in the church and make a better “Bride for Christ” grips Protestants, producing social class divisions.

The pattern is as follows: a Protestant sect becomes well-established and prosperous. The members are respected community leaders and their wealth grows. Sooner or later, it appears that their wealth has corrupted them (this was the Protestant accusation against the Catholic Church in Europe from the 15th century on) and from within their own denomination comes a reforming wing, which either sweeps out the current leadership or breaks off to start its own, more pure church.

These new churches are usually underfunded and weak, relying on the “sweat equity” of their members to get buildings built, pastors paid and the electricity bill covered. Without wealth, the members slip down the social class scale to lower class, and then begin the long trek back up to respectability and influence in religious matters. Along the way, they often pick up some of the lower-class characteristics noted on the front page.

THE CATHOLIC WAY

The colony of Maryland was settled by English Catholics under the leadership of Lord Baltimore. Although only about 20% of Americans now claim to be Catholics, and many of these are descendants of 19th-century poor immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Poland, and 20th-century Hispanic immigrants, the Catholic Church has managed to construct and maintain some of the most beautiful churches in the US.

The social status of Catholics varies with their geographical location. Some are upper class, connected with such prestigious universities as Notre Dame and Loyola, as well

as scores of small Catholic colleges all over the country. Some Catholics fit more easily into the lower classes, in terms of income and education, but rarely fall as far down as a reforming Protestant.

The reforming movements within the Catholic Church, such as the charismatic Cursillo courses beginning in Spain in the 1960’s, often originate among lower-class Catholics, whose piety and devotion make a deep impression on their upper-class brothers and sisters in Christ.

EPISCOPAL UPPER CLASS

Although only about 2% of Americans call themselves Episcopalians, they constitute one of the wealthiest churches in the US. The spiritual descendants of Henry VII, the Episcopal Church (from a cynical perspective) bends with the prevailing winds of theological dominance. First to support King Henry VIII, the Church of England was also first in England to accept divorce and reject the authority of the Pope.

Yet the Episcopal church services are among the most moving and inclusive to be found in American Christendom. The Book of Common Prayer has been a model for other denominations, and seems timeless in its elegant simplicity. There is something ineffably “classy” about an Episcopal church, be it low (plain and Protestant) or high (gorgeous and Catholic).

CONVERGENCE

A convergence church, which attempts to blend all Christian denominations, will also have to deal with blending social classes. What seems perfectly normal doctrine to a strict Protestant may seem legalistic and suffocating to an Episcopalian. The serene beauty of a Catholic-style chapel may offend the Church of God member. And the pastor’s humor may offend everyone!

Americans can move up and down the class system, in their religious affiliation as in their economic status. These class distinctions are woven into American Christianity, giving it color, diversity and resilience.