Towards a Theory of Religion: Religious Commitment

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This paper presents the basic axioms and some initial definitions from which we are constructing a general theory of religion. Here we carry the deductive process only to the point where three testable and non-trivial propositions about religious commitment are obtained. These propositions explain and clarify the available empirical literature. In subsequent papers we shall deduce and test other results from this theoretical system.

We are launched on the immodest task of constructing a general theory of religion. We propose to deduce from a small set of axioms about what humans are like and how they behave, and from a larger number of definitions, a series of propositions explaining why religions exist, how they originate, how religious movements are transformed — indeed, answers to the whole list of classic questions.

In our judgment, this task is both necessary and possible. It is necessary because, while the past several decades have produced an amazing array of new and well-tested facts about religion, we lack theories to organize these facts and tell us which are relevant to what. Current theories are little more than glosses on the work of nineteenth century social theorists. The task seems possible because, while little theorizing has gone on in the social-scientific study of religion (and indeed in much of sociology), important progress has been made in micro-economics, social psychology, and anthropology. We propose to ransack these riches for a theory of religion.

This paper is the pivotal work in a series of papers, published and forthcoming, which present a new exchange paradigm for analyzing and explaining religious phenomena and which subject it to a variety of empirical tests. Eventually, the entire theory will appear in a book, expressed in the most detailed and complete manner, illustrated and supported by the empirical studies. Our object here is to present the basic set of axioms, key definitions, and the first of literally hundreds of propositions we have derived about religion and its social context. We only carry the deductive process to the point where some non-trivial, testable, and perhaps counter-intuitive propositions about *religious commitment* have been obtained.

The form of deductive theories requires selecting some small number of rules (axioms) governing the phenomena to be explained. If these are the correct axioms, then logical permutations will give rise to a number of propositions (derived statements) that will predict or prohibit certain relations within the domain addressed by the theory. Thus, if the axioms are correct and complete, the propositions must hold. The correspondence of such theories to the real world is tested by determining empirically whether or not propositions do hold. In the case of a theory, such as our

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own, that is still evolving and as yet incompletely formalized, empirical research can also be used to uncover faulty logic in the derivation of propositions and to establish appropriate means for operationalizing concepts.

Our primary reason for having some confidence in the theory thus far is that it has successfully confronted data at several points, as we report at length in other papers. Moreover, the deductive process has yielded a number of well-known middle-range propositions. Since our purpose is not to create a new field, but to advance this field, it is extremely encouraging to find that such classics as Malinowski's theory of magic, or Durkheim's argument about why religion produces stable organizations but magic cannot, derive from the deductive chain. Of this, more later.

The theory rests on six axioms (although we include a temporary seventh axiom to facilitate the presentation, since the deductive chain by which it can be deduced from the other six is quite long). *Axioms* are designated by the letter "A." The theory also contains a number of *definitions.* These link the axioms to the empirical world, and are designated by the abbreviation "Def." Finally, statements logically deduced from the axioms and definitions are *propositions,* designated by the letter "P."

We begin with an axiom that is so basic that standard social scientific theories seldom mention it. Yet it is essential before we can understand anything else. The first axiom places human existence in *time.*

A1 Human perception and action take place through time, from the past into the future.

Def. 1 The *past* consists of the universe of conditions which can be known but not influenced.

Def. 2 The *future* consists of the universe of conditions which can be influenced but not known.

The second axiom is a restatement of the first proposition in exchange theory, operant learning theory, and micro-economics (Homans, 1961; 1974).

A2 Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs.

Def. 3 *Rewards* are anything humans will incur costs to obtain.

Def. 4 *Costs* are whatever humans attempt to avoid.

We find it facilitates comprehension and discussion to use the most familiar words in our statements. Therefore we speak of rewards and costs rather than of positive and negative reinforcers.

Our first proposition derives directly from A2, Def. 3 and Def. 4.

P1 Rewards and costs are complementary: a lost or foregone reward equals a cost, and an avoided cost equals a reward.

Proposition 1 extends A2 by expressing in another way the relationship between its terms. *Seeking* and *avoiding* are opposites. To obtain a reward, a person accepts costs. When a person attempts to avoid a cost, he *seeks* the *avoidance* of that cost, and

this avoidance is by Def. 3 a reward. If rewards and costs were not complementary, there could be no human action. But human action is still not possible without a further principle:

A3 Rewards vary in kind, value, and generality.

Def. 5 Reward A is more *valuable* than reward B if a person will usually exchange B for A.

Def. 6 Rewards are *general* to the extent that they include other (less general) rewards.

All our experience supports the truth of this axiom. We know we desire some things more than others. Some desires are biologically conditioned, some by environment, others by culture, and some even depend upon an individual's unique history. Here this variation is not germane. All we assert is that for all individuals there are things they want more or less of. This also implies that for each individual there are rewards which the person does not possess at any given moment, while other rewards may already be in the person's possession.

The second proposition is derived from all the previous statements, and gives the condition under which human action is possible:

P2 Sometimes rewards can be obtained at costs less than the cost equivalent to foregoing the reward.

Stated another way, P2 says that sometimes human action can be profitable. This means that over time an individual may gain some desired rewards through the expenditure (as costs) of less desired rewards. If rewards did not differ in *kind,* then there would only be one reward, and it is difficult to see how one could make a profit through trading in it. If rewards did not differ in *value,* there would be no sense in giving up one to acquire another. The fact that rewards differ in *generality* is implied by the mathematical possibility of addition. When a person seeks a collection of rewards, by Def. 3 this collection constitutes a reward in itself, and yet it includes other lesser rewards. Thus, any collection of rewards is more general than any single reward in the collection. If reward A is more valuable than reward B, then they must differ in kind, generality, or both.

These axioms and propositions give us the context in which human action is possible, but they do not sufficiently specify the necessary characteristics of the human actor. Axiom 4 expresses the human capacity to perceive and act effectively in a complex environment:

A4 Human action is directed by a complex but finite information-processing system that functions to identify problems and attempt solutions to them.

Def. 7 The *mind* is the set of human functions that directs the action of a person.

Def. 8 Human *problems* are recurrent situations that require investments (costs) of specific kinds to obtain rewards.

Def. 9 To *solve* a problem means to imagine possible means of achieving the desired reward, to select the one with the greatest likelihood of success in the light of available information, and to direct action along the chosen line until the reward has been achieved.

Definition 9 is a rather long statement of how the human mind must operate if it is to achieve its task in complex circumstances. This definition reminds us of what our minds actually do, while intentionally being quite nonspecific. We note that the mind performs certain functions, but we do not say very much about how it accomplishes this. To say that the mind is finite means that it is limited in the amount of information it can store and process.

Because rewards differ in many ways, problems also differ, and solutions must differ as well if complex human action is to be possible. Solutions often must be somewhat novel, since humans constantly encounter circumstances they have not previously experienced. Yet solutions are not the result of random experimentation. Efficiency requires that organisms attempt to deal with novel circumstances as variations on circumstances with which they are already familiar. Thus, humans attack new situations as mixtures of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and attempt conceptually to break down novelty into combinations of familiar elements. Conceptual simplifications of reality, models of reality designed to guide action, may be called *explanations.*

P3 In solving problems, the human mind must seek explanations.

Def. 10 *Explanations* are statements about how and why rewards may be obtained and costs are incurred.

Because humans *seek* explanations, and by Def. 3 whatever humans seek is a reward, it follows that:

P4 Explanations are rewards of some level of generality.

Explanations differ along all the dimensions that other rewards do. For example, they differ in generality. An explanation can guide action on more than one occasion, and therefore potentially can provide several lesser rewards. Thus, an explanation is relatively general. Explanations tell us what costs to expend under what circumstances and in what time sequence in order to obtain the desired reward. Given an effective explanation X_1, we can imagine another explanation X_2 identical to X_1 but with the addition of some costly action C which does not alter the value of the reward obtained. Thus we can deduce that:

P5 Explanations vary in the costs and time they require for the desired reward to be obtained.

Explanations should also vary according to the kind, value, and generality of the rewards to be obtained through them, but here we note that they vary even when the

reward achieved is held constant. There is an infinite number of ways of *attempting* to accomplish anything, thus an unlimited number of competing explanations, and usually there are many routes to success, each of a distinctive length.

Often, it is fairly easy to find a successful explanation and solve the problem of obtaining a desired reward. But sometimes this is not the case. Axiom 5 introduces this tragic fact and is the turning point on which the crucial parts of our argument hinge:

A5 Some desired rewards are limited in supply, including some that simply do not exist.

Def. 11 A *limited* supply means that persons cannot have as much of a reward as they desire.

Def. 12 Rewards that do *not exist* cannot be obtained by any person or group.

People always tend to want more rewards than they can have. Put another way, aggregate demand tends always to exceed supply. While this may not be true of a given reward at a given time, it is true of the sum of rewards. Natural resources and human productive capacities tend to limit the supply of many rewards. For example, most societies have never possessed more food than their populations would have consumed. Obviously, the extent to which any given reward is in short supply varies from society to society and from time to time. But unsated appetites always remain and some,like the desire for honor, tend to be insatiable.

How do humans get those rewards that do exist? Much of what we desire can come only from someone else, whether the reward be affection or apples. When we seek a reward from someone else, that person usually must pay a cost for providing us with the reward. Thus, in order to induce another to supply us a reward, we must offer an inducement — some other reward — in return. Proposition 2 tells us that a deal is possible. Sometimes we can offer the other person a reward that he evaluates more highly than what he gives us, while we likewise value what we get over what we give. Thus, through seeking rewards people are forced into exchange relationships (Homans, 1961; 1974).

P6 In pursuit of desired rewards, humans will exchange rewards with other humans.

People will not engage in these exchanges in an aimless way. All our discussion explains that they will tend to act rationally to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Thus, it follows that:

P7 Humans will seek high exchange ratios.

Def. 13 *Exchange ratio* is a person's net rewards over costs in an exchange.

So far in this discussion we have been dealing with abstract "persons" who are equally constrained by our propositions. But we know that real people do not possess

equal rewards, nor are they treated equally by each other. There might be many ways of expressing the fact that some individuals have greater resources than others, but the way we find most convenient for our deductions is stated in Axiom 6.

A6 Individual and social attributes which determine power are unequally distributed among persons and groups in any society.

Def. 14 *Power* is the degree of control over one's exchange ratio.

Power has proved elusive of definition in sociology. Usually it is defined as the capacity to get one's way even against the opposition of others. Such a definition fails to say what it means to get one's way. Obviously, getting one's way has to do with gaining rewards or avoiding costs and is lodged in exchange relationships. It proves fruitful to define power as controlling the exchange ratio with the consequence that the more powerful, the more favorable the exchange ratio.

With power defined thus, attention must turn to capacities or attributes that enable persons or groups *to be powerful*, to control exchange ratios with others. Some of these capacities are biological features of human organisms — height, weight, eyesight, reflexes, endurance, strength, beauty, health, agility, and intelligence, for examples. But it also will be obvious that many achieved and ascribed characteristics serve as power-giving capacities. Achieved skills, training, knowledge, and experience tend to give power. Ascribed statuses such as sex, race, family background, and the like also often serve to give power.

Among the important determinants of power are the outcomes of previous exchanges. That is, power may be used to accumulate resources that confer still more power. This tendency may have limits. For example, some rewards may be difficult to concentrate in great quantities, while any that are unlimited in supply cannot be concentrated at all. But rewards that exist only in limited supply are particularly susceptible to the exercise of power. Scarce rewards will tend to flow through exchanges into the hands of the powerful and away from the weak. In other words:

P8 Exchange ratios will vary among persons and groups in any society.

P9 Rewards that exist in limited supply will tend to be monopolized by powerful persons and groups, thereby becoming relatively unavailable to others.

When persons seek scarce but valuable rewards, they usually do not give up at the first sign of difficulty. Humans are persistent in pursuit of strongly desired rewards. This is another way of stating that they are willing to pay great costs for great rewards, a fact that follows from the definition of value. Some problems can be solved only through extended and costly effort, and among them are the satisfactions of several strong desires. Difficulty in obtaining strongly desired rewards not only produces the emotion we call *frustration*, but also leads to a knotty intellectual and logical quandary. How do people decide if they are on the right track? How do people evaluate the explanations on which they base their action?

P10 Explanations can be evaluated correctly only by reference to their known

ability to facilitate the attainment of the desired reward.

Def. 15 *Evaluation* is the determination of the value of any reward, including explanations; value is equivalent to the maximum cost a person would pay to obtain the reward.

As noted in P5, explanations do vary in the costs and time required before they can give us the desired reward. As A4 pointed out, the human mind has to compare explanations to decide which is the cheapest way of getting what is wanted. If our current situation is very similar to past situations, we can simply repeat what worked for us before. That means that evaluations, in the terms of Axiom 1, are used to influence the *future* but must be based on knowledge of the *past.*

In A5 we noted that some desired rewards are scarce, and others do not even exist. In saying that some rewards do not exist, we are postulating a fact which we cannot prove. Certainly, human observation demonstrates that some rewards are *very scarce.* No one is reliably known to have survived death. Although some religions report evidence on outstanding cases, the other religions do not accept their claims. Logically, some rewards cannot exist because their terms are contradictory. As we usually interpret the words, we cannot have our cake and eat it too. It is a fact of life that some of the most desired, most general rewards have not been shown to exist, and we suspect that they do not in fact exist. If A5 is a little unsettling as it is stated, we could interpret it to say that some desired rewards are so scarce that they do not seem to exist *in this world.*

However, unless the definition of a given desired reward contains a logical contradiction, we cannot be absolutely sure that there is no solution to the problem of obtaining it. This follows from Axiom 1, because until the end of time — until we run out of *future* — we will not have complete information about all possible explanations, that is, we cannot evaluate the success of all possible courses of action. This is true in lesser degree for scarce rewards which can be obtained only through relatively costly action, including rewards that require lengthy sequences of exchange. Suppose we want to compare the values of two competing explanations for obtaining a scarce reward. We cannot honestly end the test until we have expended at least twice the cost required by the explanation that is in fact the cheaper of the two. We must have succeeded with one and have invested slightly more than an equal amount in the other before it is ideally justifiable to abandon the one that has not yet led to success. Until *some* course of action succeeds for us, we cannot completely reject any others that possibly could be followed under the given circumstances. It is not surprising that people often stick with explanations that seem to work, without ever testing others. Because explanations can only be evaluated through a process that actually invests the minimum cost required to obtain the desired reward, the following propositions hold:

P11 It is impossible to know for certain that a given reward does not exist.

P12 When a desired reward is relatively unavailable, explanations that promise to provide it are costly and difficult to evaluate correctly.

P13 The more valued or general a reward, the more difficult will be evaluation of explanations about how to obtain it.

Taken together, these three propositions explain why people will often persist in following an incorrect explanation or one that has at least not proved fruitful, especially when strong desires are concerned.Some explanations will be invalidated, because they set specific terms for themselves. If they state the exact interval of time required for the reward to appear, then they will be discredited if the time passes and nothing happens. If people are determined to invest in seeking a reward, false explanations that *can* be discredited easily will drop by the wayside, leaving explanations (whether correct or not) which are not as vulnerable. Therefore:

P14 In the absence of a desired reward, explanations often will be accepted which posit attainment of the reward in the distant future or in some other nonverifiable context.

Def. 16 *Compensators* are postulations of reward according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation.

The concept of *compensators* is the key to the theory of religion which follows. When humans cannot quickly and easily obtain strongly desired rewards they persist in their efforts and often may accept explanations that provide only compensators — empirically unsubstantiated faith that the rewards *will be* obtained — not the rewards themselves. Such faith is quite distinct from actually obtaining the reward.

P15 Compensators are treated by humans as if they were rewards; compensators are intangible substitutes for a desired reward, having the character of I.O.U.s, the value of which must be taken on faith.

P16 For any reward or cluster of rewards, one or more compensators may be invented.

P17 Compensators vary according to the generality, value, and kind of the rewards for which they substitute.

Def. 17 Compensators which substitute for single, specific rewards are called *specific* compensators.

Def. 18 Compensators which substitute for a cluster of many rewards and for rewards of great scope and value are called *general* compensators.

These propositions hint at a major orphan generalization in social science analysis of the functions of religion. Malinowski's (1948) celebrated theory of magic — as an attempt to provide people with a compensatory sense of control over dangerous or vital events they cannot control — is pertinent here. So are Marx's ruminations about false consciousness and opium of the people, Durkheim's analysis of primitive religions, Freud's conjectures about religion as illusion, and much of church-sect theory. As it stands, however, these propositions *do not equate* compensators with religion. Many compensators have no connection with religion.

All societies utilize compensators. Perhaps the most universal is some promise of a triumph over death. If means were provided to evade death here and now, that would

be a reward. But at present immortality is to be achieved somewhere (somewhen?) else, and the validity of the promise cannot be determined. Thus the desire for immortality is not satisfied with a reward, but with an intangible promise, a compensator. The validity of this promise cannot be determined empirically, but must be accepted or rejected on faith alone. If the promise turns out true, then at that point compensators are redeemed as rewards. If not, not.

It must be seen that some desired rewards are so general as to require explanations that also are so general that they can best be described as philosophies of life, theologies, or solutions to questions of ultimate meaning. As discussed more fully later in this paper, humans have a habit of asking why — a habit captured in our axioms. When human "whys" are repeated along certain logical chains they lead eventually to questions about the fundamental meaning and purpose of the existence of humans and of the natural world. It will be evident that some of these desired explanations are not susceptible to unambiguous evaluation. That is, we cannot surely discover whether these explanations are correct. According to our definition, such untestable and extremely general explanations are compensators. This is not to suggest that they are untrue. But we cannot find out anytime soon. It is this, and *only* this, aspect of such explanations that leads us to identify them as compensators. Surely there is nothing controversial about distinguishing between statements that can be tested and those that must be taken on faith.

It will be evident that, insofar as the empirical world is concerned, at any given moment a more favorable exchange ratio is possible if one can obtain a reward in trade for a compensator. Unlike bonds and other financial I.O.U.s, compensators do not pay interest to the holder. On the contrary, they are often costly to keep and maintain. Any compensator entails the risk that it cannot be redeemed for the promised reward, and therefore must be judged less valuable than that reward.

P18 Humans will prefer rewards to compensators and will attempt to exchange compensators for rewards.

This is merely to recognize that intangible I.O.U.s represent a low cost to the giver. If you demand a better deal, and I can keep things as they are by issuing promises, I can continue to enjoy a more favorable exchange ratio. Drawing together many pieces of the argument to this point, we can specify when people will succeed in obtaining rewards, and when they will be forced to accept compensators instead:

P19 It will be impossible to obtain rewards rather than compensators when: (1) a reward does not exist; (2) a compensator is mistaken for a reward; (3) one lacks the power to obtain the desired reward.

Obviously, one can at best accept a compensator if the desired reward does not exist. Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders undoubtedly would have preferred ocean liners to outrigger canoes. But in their world liners did not exist. The best they could do was use magical compensators for the risk of sailing on the open sea. By the same token, humans would prefer not to die. Lacking scientific means to achieve

immortality, they can at best settle for compensators in the form of hopes for the life to come.

It is equally obvious that people often will fail to obtain a reward and will accept a compensator instead if they cannot distinguish the one from the other. One capacity influencing power — control over one's exchange ratio — is the ability or knowledge to make discriminations. This also reminds us of how compensators sometimes have been used to con the unsuspecting out of their treasure.

Finally, awareness is not enough if we are unable to control our exchange ratios. As Proposition 9 states, scarce rewards will tend to be monopolized by powerful persons and groups, leaving the powerless to content themselves with compensators. Here one thinks of the transvaluational character of religions of the poor and dispossessed. For example, folks who belong to fundamentalist sects in Apalachia know perfectly well that jewels, fancy clothes, and other material luxuries exist. They also know perfectly well they have little chance to get any. So they define these things as sinful and accept the compensatory belief that by doing without now, they will triumph in heaven, where the first shall be last, and the last, first. However, in keeping with Proposition 18, when the economic circumstances of such groups change, they tend quite rapidly to become worldly and materialistic — which is, of course, what church/sect theory partly is about.

We have now reached the point at which we can introduce the concept of *religion* itself. We do so in a *definition* appended to a proposition about compensators. Thus we show that religion must emerge in human society, and we derive its existence entirely from axioms and propositions in which religion is not an original term. In another paper delineating the concepts *church, sect,* and *cult* we show that the term religion is best reserved for systems of the most general compensators, while less general compensators may be found in many contexts (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979). But the proposition itself is about the sources of faith in general compensators. It follows most immediately from Proposition 13, Proposition 14, Proposition 17, and Definition 18.

P20 The most general compensators can be supported only by supernatural explanations.

Def. 19 *Supernatural* refers to forces beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces.

Def. 20 *Religion* refers to systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions.

Earlier in this paper we mentioned very general compensators that offer explanations for questions of ultimate meaning. It is evident that many humans often desire answers to such questions: Does life have purpose? Why are we here? What can we hope? Is death the end? Why do we suffer? Does justice exist? Why did *my* child die? Why am *I* a slave? Humans are bound to raise questions about how great rewards can be obtained and why great costs are sometimes incurred. Indeed, evidence that our rude Neanderthal ancestors performed burial rites indicates that the tendency to ask such questions and to fashion answers to them reaches far back into human evolution.

When we consider such questions it is self-evident that some of them *require* a

supernatural answer. To seek the purpose of life is to demand that it have one. The word *purpose* is not compatible with blind chance, but assumes the existence of intentions or motives. These assume a consciousness. For the universe to have a purpose it must be directed by a conscious agent or agents — the capacity to form plans or have intentions is to be conscious.

Conscious agents on this scale are beyond the natural world. Their existence is not subject to empirical inspection. Thus, to answer certain common questions about ultimate meaning it is necessary to assume the existence of the supernatural.

Our decision to restrict the definition of religion to very general compensator systems that rest on *supernatural assumptions* is in keeping with a very long and fruitful tradition in social science (Tylor, 1871; Parsons, 1957; Swanson, 1960; Goody, 1961; Spiro, 1966; Wallace, 1966). A few scholars have dissented in order to apply the definition of religion to systems of thought that inspire devotion even when these are explicitly opposed to supernatural assumptions (Luckman, 1967; Bellah, 1970; Yinger, 1970). In so doing, however, as Swanson (1960) pointed out, they blur a vital theoretical question. If, for example, scientific rationalism, Roman Catholicism and Russian Communism are all declared to be religions we lose the conceptual tools to explore the constant and profound conflicts among them. Berger (1967: 177) has demonstrated the futility of this too-inclusive definition of religion. If we define all systems of very general compensators (Berger calls them self-transcendent symbolic universes) as religion then we are forced to define in what way science, for example, is "*different* from what has been called religion by everyone else . . which poses the definitional problem all over again." For if we then adopt new terms to identify these differences we merely make superfluous the original definition of religion which classified all of them as the same. We prefer to honor the commonly understood meaning of the term religion, especially when we can anticipate increased theoretical utility from so doing.

The insistence on limiting the definition of religion to systems of *very general* compensators also permits us to distinguish between religion and magic, and, in turn, between magic and science. In accord with Durkheim (1915: 42), we identify magic as a set of relatively specific compensators. And, with Weber (1963: 2) we distinguish between magic and science on the basis of empirical verification. Thus *magic* is a set of *specific compensators* offered for quite specific rewards, which are offered as correct explanations *without regard* for empirical evaluations, and which, when evaluated, are *found wanting.* Note that we have not included a supernatural assumption in magic. Hence the definition applies to present-day pseudosciences (e.g., certain psychotherapies in the human potential tradition) which do not explicitly posit a supernatural. This permits us to recognize the potential for such groups to evolve into religious movements (cf. Bainbridge, 1978).

In later papers we will examine the nature and sources of different forms of religion. But before we can discuss the contrasts between churches and other kinds of religious organization, we must show that such organizations can exist. Through a lengthy analysis of exchanges between persons in populous and economically developed societies it is possible to derive the statement which we present below as provisional Axiom 7. We offer it as an axiom here only because such a derivation lies beyond the scope of our current analysis. Observation of complex societies exhibiting

advanced division of labor supports the following statement:

A7 (Provisional) Social organizations tend to emerge in human society as social enterprises which specialize in providing some particular kinds of gratifications.

General compensators supported by supernatural explanations are very special merchandise. Even a fairly rudimentary division of labor leads to the establishment of independent enterprises primarily dedicated to providing this product. Competition with organizations dedicated to selling secular products will tend to limit the tendency of religious enterprises to expand very far beyond the scope of their primary business. Because the demand for general compensators is universal, we can conclude:

P21 Religious organizations will tend to emerge in society.

Def. 21 *Religious organizations* are social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally-based general compensators.

The role of religious organizations in producing and promulgating compensators will be obvious. A major emphasis in religious proselytization is that relgion will provide a cure for pain and trouble. Indeed, because religions have recourse to a supernatural realm they have an unmatached capacity to create and sponsor compensators. But it also should be emphasized that religious organizations, like other organizations, also have the *capacity to provide rewards.*

Because compensators function *as if* they were rewards, humans are prepared to expend costs to obtain them. Religious organizations provide compensators through exchanges in which at least some measure of real rewards is collected. Proposition 18 should not be misinterpreted to mean that persons will *never* give up a reward to obtain a compensator. Just as they will exchange a lesser reward for a more valuable one, so they will readily exchange a reward of lower value for a compensator that promises to provide a reward of great value. Upon reflection it is obvious that, although religions usually cannot match the reward-generating capacity of some other societal institutions, they do in fact provide rewards. For example, through religious organizations one can gain leadership positions (with attendant status and power), human companionship, leisure and recreational activity, and the like. Any organization that provides a stage for human action and interaction will produce scenes in which all manner of rewards are created and exchanged.

P22 As social enterprises, religious organizations will tend to provide some rewards as well as compensators.

This proposition permits us to introduce our derivations concerning *power* into the religious realm, in the three propositions that follow.

P23 The power of an individual or group will be *positively* associated with control of religious organizations and with gaining the rewards available

from religious organizations.

P24 The power of an individual or group will be *negatively* associated with accepting religious compensators, when the desired reward exists.

Power means control of one's exchange ratio. Control of religious organizations facilitates control of one's exchange ratio by increasing one's ability to exchange compensators for rewards. Furthermore, those most able to gain rewards will tend to gain a bigger share of religious rewards too. Because the powerful are more able to gain rewards, they will find less need for compensators. But this does not mean that powerful persons and groups will have absolutely no use for compensators. Some rewards are so scarce — or nonexistent — that even the powerful will not be able to obtain them. Therefore:

P25 Regardless of power, persons and groups will tend to accept religious compensators when desired rewards do not exist.

Some will interpret Propositions 23 and 24 in Marxist fashion — that the powerful will profit while the poor pray. If so, then by the same token the twenty-fifth proposition is unMarxist, and reflects basic functionalist assumptions: that all members of a society can have significant common interests, that they will tend to pursue these interests in a cooperative fashion, and that there will be considerable consensus on such matters (to say nothing of the integrative functions of such common interests). Of course, in a pluralist society competing religious organizations may exist, and there is always the competition offered by secular organizations in those areas where demonstrable rewards and less general compensators are offered.

P26 If multiple suppliers of general compensators exist, then the ability to exchange general compensators will depend upon their relative availability and perceived exchange ratios.

Religious organizations vary in terms of how well-developed and credible a set of compensators they offer. Furthermore, they vary in terms of their degree of formal organization, and the extent to which they are differentiated from other social institutions. Such variations are likely to matter.

Furthermore, in some societies other institutions and organizations offer serious competition to religion in offering both rewards and compensators. The quasi-religious character of some political movements has long been recognized. While there are substantial differences between, for example, the location and character of socialist and Christian utopias, the two nevertheless compete. By the same token, a scientific perspective may compete with religion in offering very general explanations concerning the most important human rewards and costs. Proposition 26 is crucial for understanding the great complexity found in the real world, but in present form it is so general as to be a truism. We must plead that we can neither break it down into the needed subset of propositions nor derive all of them in a short space. This task we postpone to a later opportunity. Our final proposition is another truism, but a vital one.

P27 All patterns of human perception and action are conditioned by socialization.

Def. 22 *Socialization* is the accumulation of explanations over time through exchanges with other persons.

Clearly it matters, for example, whether an American is raised by Baptists or Unitarians. Furthermore, regardless of the content of socialization, the effectiveness of socialization varies. Variations in socialization probably will account for much variation in religious behavior across individuals — and probably across groups as well. This is an area that deserves extensive exploration. But for present purposes it is best to end the exposition of our theory here.

CONCLUSION

Limiting ourselves for the moment to the topic of variations in religious commitment, what does this theory tell us that was not already well know? First of all, it shows that the long tradition of deprivational theories of religious commitment was very incomplete. In Proposition 24 we do derive such a theory. However, Proposition 23 permits us to see that religious organizations are not merely "otherworldly" purveyors of compensators. They also serve as a source of direct rewards. This permits us to explain forms of religious commitment not prompted by deprivation, but which are, instead, a *religious expression of privilege.* Finally, Proposition 25 allows us to take into account the fact that, vis-a-vis certain kinds of desired rewards, *everyone is potentially deprived.* Thus if Proposition 24 points towards a *sectlike* mode of religious commitment, and Proposition 23 points towards a *churchlike* mode, Proposition 25 points towards a *universal* dimension of commitment, variation in which is not the result of power differences, but of socialization and competition with competing sources of compensators (science and politics, for example).

The question is: do these predicted patterns of relationships hold? Briefly, yes. If we consider socio-economic status as a measure of power-giving attributes then studies ought to show SES is *positively* related to those aspects of religious commitment that can serve as direct rewards: church membership, church attendance, holding office in religious organizations and the like. Conversely, SES ought to be *negatively* related to aspects of commitment that can serve as compensators: belief, prayer, mystical experiences, and the like. However, SES ought *not be* related to accepting compensators when no reward is known to exist, such as life after death. This is the pattern found in the data (cf. Stark, 1972). Moreover, when IQ replaces SES as the power-giving attribute, the same differential patterns are found empirically (Stark & Welch, forthcoming). Thus the theory clarifies and explains why different aspects of religious commitment have long been known to be differentially related to power characteristics such as SES.

However, these explanations of differential religious commitment are but the first small step in following out the implications of the theory. From these three propositions it can be deduced that an *internal contradiction* will exist within religious organizations. That is, within religious groups there will always be subgroups having a conflict of interest over whom the religious organization is to serve. Some will wish to

maximize rewards. Some will wish to maximize compensators. It can be shown that these two goals tend to be contradictory. Therefore, the seeds of schism can be deduced to exist within religious organizations. From there it requires but a few additional steps to discover a fully-developed church/sect theory: the conditions under which schisms erupt as sect movements or church movements and the conditions under which religious bodies are transformed in a churchlike direction, or remain sects. Indeed, at the end of our long chain of deductions we will examine propositions that predict that the process of secularization is self-limiting — that it generates revivals and the formation of new religious groups. Laying out these conclusions and testing them will occupy us for the next several years. Here we have merely tried to make explicit some basic elements of the deductive system on which our work is based.

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