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Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models

William Sims Bainbridge
Rodney Stark
University of Washington

This paper draws upon numerous ethnographies to outline three fundamental models of how novel religious ideas are generated and made social. The psychopathology model *describes cult innovation as the result of individual psychopathology that finds successful social expression by providing apparent solutions to common intractable human problems. The* entrepreneur model *states that cult founders consciously develop new systems of religious belief and practice to obtain the rewards that followers may shower upon them. The* subculture-evolution model *explains that cults are the expression of novel social systems, composed of intimately interacting individuals who achieve radical cultural developments through a series of many small steps. The models are shown to be compatible because each uses two basic concepts:* compensators *and* social exchange. *Compensators are somewhat satisfying articles of faith, postulations that strongly desired rewards will be obtained in the distant future or in some other unverifiable context. Magical and religious cults exist through the social exchange of compensators. The models explain how novel packages of compensators are invented and assembled to form new cults.*

The origins of the great world faiths are shrouded by time, but cult formation remains available for close inspection. If we would understand how religions begin, it is the obscure and exotic world of cults that demands our attention. This paper attempts to synthesize the mass of ethnographic materials available on cult formation as the necessary preliminary for a comprehensive theory. While it represents an important step in our continuing work to formulate a general theory of religion, this paper is primarily designed to consolidate and to clarify what is already known about this subject.

The published literature on cults is at present as chaotic as was the material on which cultural anthropology was founded a century ago: an unsystematic collection of traveler's tales, mostly journalistic, often innacurate, and nearly devoid of theory. For all the deficiencies of this mass of writing, three fundamental models of how novel religious ideas are generated and made social can be seen dimly. In this paper we develop and compare these models. The task of integrating them fully into a single, comprehensive theory must be delayed, but in this first exposition we will be able to show that each model is but a different combination of the same theoretical elements.

The three models of cult formation, or religious innovation, are (a) *the psychopathology model,* (b) *the entrepreneur model,* and (c) *the subculture-evolution model.* While the first has been presented in some detail by other social scientists, the second and third have not previously been delineated as formal models.

Cult formation is a two-step process of innovation. First, new religious ideas must be *invented.* Second, *social acceptance* of these ideas must be gained, at least to the extent that a small group of people comes to accept them. Therefore, our first need is to explain how and why individuals invent or discover new religious ideas. It is important to recognize, however, that many (perhaps most) persons who hit upon new religious ideas do not found new religions. So long as only one person holds a religious idea, no true religion exists. Therefore, we also need to understand the process by which religious inventors are able to make their views social—to convince other persons to share their convictions. We conceptualize successful cult innovation as a social process in which innovators both invent new religious ideas and transmit them to other persons in exchange for rewards.

Religions as Exchange Systems

Human action is governed by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of costs. Rewards, those things humans will expend costs to obtain, often can be gained only from other humans, so people are forced into exchange relations. However, many rewards are very scarce and can only be possessed by some, not all. Some rewards appear to be so scarce that they cannot be shown to exist at all. For example, people act as if eternal life were a reward of immense value. But there is no *empirical* evidence that such a reward can be gained at any price. From these basic observations, we are developing a general theory of religion (Stark and Bainbridge, 1979; Forthcoming). Our key concept is that of *compensators.*

Faced with rewards that are very scarce, or not available at all, humans create and exchange compensators—sets of beliefs and prescriptions for action that substitute for the immediate achievement of the desired reward. Compensators postulate the attainment of the desired reward in the distant future or in some other unverifiable context. Compensators are treated by humans as if they were rewards. They have the character of IOUs, the value of which must be taken on faith. Promises that the poor will be rich following the revolution or that the mortal will be immortal in another world are such compensators.

Just as rewards differ in the value accorded them by humans, so do compensators. Furthermore, compensators vary in the extent to which they are specific (substituting for specific, limited rewards of moderate value) or general (substituting for a great number of highly desired rewards). A magical "cure" for headaches is a specific compensator, while Heaven is the most general compensator, promising an unlimited stream of future rewards to those humans fortunate or virtuous enough to be admitted. Relatively specific compensators are offered by many kinds of secular institutions, as well as by religion, while the most general compensators seem to require the supernatural agencies postulated by religious doctrines.

We define religions as social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally-based general compensators (Stark and Bainbridge, 1979). We thus eliminate from the definition many non-supernatural sources of compensators, such as political movements. We also exclude magic, which deals only in quite specific compensators and does not offer compensators on the grand scale of Heaven or of religious doctrines about the meaning of life (Cf. Durkheim, 1915).

We define cults as social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic compensators. Thus not all cults are religions. Some cults offer only magic, for example psychic healing of specific diseases, and do not offer such *general* compensators as eternal life. Magical cults frequently evolve toward more general compensators and become full-fledged religions. They then become true *cult movements:* social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic general compensators based on supernatural assumptions.

Often a cult is exotic and offers compensators that are unfamiliar to most people because it migrated from another, alien society. Here we are not interested in these *imported cults* but in those novel cult movements that are innovative alternatives to the traditional systems of religious compensators that are normal in the environment in which the cult originated.

Having briefly described our theoretical perspective and defined key concepts, we are now ready to understand the three models of cult innovation and to see their common propositions.

The Psychopathology Model of Cult Innovation

The *psychopathology model* has been used by many anthropologists and ethnopsychiatrists, and it is related closely to deprivation theories of revolutions and social movements (Smelser, 1962; Gurr, 1970). It describes cult innovation as the result of individual

psychopathology that finds successful social expression. Because of its popularity among social scientists, this model exists in many variants, but the main ideas are the following.

1. Cults are novel cultural responses to personal and societal crisis.
2. New cults are invented by individuals suffering from certain forms of mental illness.
3. These individuals typically achieve their novel visions during psychotic episodes.
4. During such an episode, the individual invents a new package of compensators to meet his own needs.
5. The individual's illness commits him to his new vision, either because his hallucinations appear to demonstrate its truth, or because his compelling needs demand immediate satisfaction.
6. After the episode, the individual will be most likely to succeed in forming a cult around his vision if the society contains many other persons suffering from problems similar to those originally faced by the cult founder, to whose solution, therefore, they are likely to respond.
7. Therefore, such cults most often succeed during times of societal crisis, when large numbers of persons suffer from similar unresolved problems.
8. If the cult does succeed in attracting many followers, the individual founder may achieve at least a partial cure of his illness, because his self-generated compensators are legitimated by other persons, and because he now receives true rewards from his followers.

The psychopathology model is supported by the traditional psychoanalytic view that magic and religion are mere projections of neurotic wish-fulfillment or psychotic delusions (Freud, 1927, 1930; Roheim, 1955; La Barre, 1969, 1972). However, the model does not assume that cultic ideas are necessarily wrong or insane. Rather, it addresses the question of how individuals can invent deviant perspectives and then have conviction in them, despite the lack of objective, confirmatory evidence.

All societies provide traditional compensator-systems which are familiar to all members of the society and which have considerable plausibility, both because their assumptions are familiar and because of the numbers of people already committed to them. Why, then, would some persons reject the conventional religious tradition, concoct apparently arbitrary substitutes, and put their trust in these novel formulations? The psychopathology model notes that highly neurotic or psychotic persons typically do just this, whether in a religious framework or not. By definition, the mentally ill are mentally deviant. Furthermore, especially in the case of psychotics, they mistake the products of their own minds for external realities. Thus their pathology provides them not only with abnormal ideas, but also with subjective evidence for the correctness of their ideas, whether in the form of hallucinations or in the form of pressing needs which cannot be denied.

A number of authors have identified occult behavior with specific psychiatric syndromes. Hysteria frequently has been blamed. Cult founders often do suffer from apparent physical illness, find a spiritual "cure" for their own ailment, then dramatize that cure as the basis of the cult performance (Messing, 1958; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Lewis, 1971). A well-known American example is Mary Baker Eddy, whose invention of Christian Science apparently was a successful personal response to a classic case of hysteria (Zweig, 1932).

In other cases a manic-depressive pattern is found. John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community, had an obsessive need to be "perfect," and in his more elevated periods was able to convince a few dozen people that he had indeed achieved perfection and that he could help them attain this happy state as well. But the times of elation were followed by "eternal spins," depressive states in which Noyes was immobilized by self-hatred (Carden, 1969).

Classical paranoia and paranoid schizophrenia also have been blamed for producing cults. A person who founds a cult asserts the arrogant claim that he (above all others) has achieved a miraculous cultural breakthrough, a claim that outsiders may perceive as a delusion of grandeur. For example, L. Ron Hubbard announced his invention of Dianetics

(later to become Scientology) by saying that "the creation of dianetics is a milestone for Man comparable to his discovery of fire and superior to his inventions of the wheel and arch" (Hubbard, 1950).

Martin Gardner has shown that the position of the cultist or pseudoscientist in his social environment is nearly identical to that of the clinical paranoid. Neither is accorded the high social status he demands from conventional authorities and is contemptuously ignored by societal leaders or harshly persecuted. Gardner notes that paranoia actually may be an advantage under these circumstances because without it the individual "would lack the stamina to fight a vigorous, single-handed battle against such overwhelming odds" (Gardner, 1957).

Many biographies of cult founders contain information that would support any of these diagnoses, and often the syndrome appears to be a life pattern that antedated the foundation of the cult by a number of years. However, the symptoms of these disorders are so close to the features that *define* cult activity that simplistic psychopathology explanations approach tautology. Lemert (1967) has argued that social exclusion and conflict over social status can *produce* the symptoms of paranoia. It may be that some cult founders display symptoms of mental illness as a *result* of societal rejection of their cults. Another problem faced by the psychopathology model is the fact that the vast majority of mental patients have not founded cults.

The simplest version of the model states that the founder's psychopathology had a physiological cause. Religious visions may appear during psychotic episodes induced by injury, drugs, and high fevers. If an episode takes place outside any medical setting, the individual may find a supernatural explanation of his experience most satisfactory (Sargant, 1959). Innumerable examples exist. Love Israel, founder of a cult called The Love Family, told us that his religious vision was triggered by hallucinogenic drugs which enabled him to experience a state of fusion with another man who subsequently became a prominent follower. The stories of some persons who claim to have been contacted by flying saucers sound very much like brief episides of brain disorder to which the individual has retrospectively given a more favorable interpretation (Greenberg, 1979).

More subtle variants of the psychopathology model present psychodynamic explanations and place the process of cult formation in a social context. Julian Silverman (1967) outlined a five-step model describing the early career of a *shaman* (sorcerer, witch doctor, magical healer) or cult founder. In the first stage, the individual is beset by a serious personal and social problem, typically severely damaged self-esteem, that defies practical solution. In the second stage, the individual becomes preoccupied with his problem and withdraws from active social life. Some cultures even have formalized rituals of withdrawal in which the individual may leave the settlement and dwell temporarily in the wilderness. The Bible abounds in examples of withdrawal to the wilderness to prepare for a career as a prophet. This immediately leads to the third stage in which the individual experiences "self-initiated sensory deprivation," which can produce very extreme psychotic symptoms even in previously normal persons. Thus begins the fourth stage, in which the future cult founder receives his supernatural vision. "What follows then is the eruption into the field of attention of a flood of archaic imagery and attendant lower-order referential processes such as occur in dreams or reverie. . . . Ideas surge through with peculiar vividness as though from an outside source" (Silverman, 1967:28). In the fifth stage, *cognitive reorganization,* the individual attempts to share his vision with other people. If he fails, he lapses into chronic mental illness, but if he finds social support for his supernatural claims, he can become a successful shaman or cult leader. If his followers reward him sufficiently with honor, the originally damaged self-esteem that provoked the entire sequence will be repaired completely, and the cult founder may even become one of the best-adapted members of his social group.

The theory of revitalization movements proposed by Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956) is similar to Silverman's model but adds the important ingredient of social crisis. Wallace suggests that a variety of threats to a society can produce greatly increased stress on members: "climatic, floral and faunal change; military defeat; political subordination; extreme pressure toward acculturation resulting in internal cultural conflict; economic distress; epidemics; and so on" (Wallace, 1956:269). Under stress, some individuals begin to go through the process outlined by Silverman, and under favorable circumstances, they achieve valuable cultural reformulations which they can use as the basis of social action to revitalize their society. While Wallace advocates a pure form of the psychopathology model, he concludes "that the religious vision experience per se is not psychopathological but rather the reverse, being a synthesizing and often therapeutic process performed under extreme stress by individuals already sick" (Wallace, 1956:273).

The importance of the psychopathology model is underscored by Wallace's suggestion that many historically influential social movements, and perhaps *all major religions,* originated according to its principles. This view is held by Weston La Barre (1972) who says that every religion without exception originated as a "crisis cult," using this term for cults that emerge according to the pattern described by Wallace. Among many examples, he specifically describes even Christianity as a typical crisis cult. Writing in an orthodox Freudian tradition, La Barre identifies the source of a cult founder's vision: "A god is only a shaman's dream about his father" (La Barre, 1972:19). He says the shaman is an immature man who desperately needs compensation for his inadequacies, including sexual incapacity, and in finding magical compensations for himself, he generates compensators for use by more normal persons as well (La Barre, 1972:138).

Claude Lévi-Strauss, an exchange theorist as well as a structuralist, emphasizes that the shaman participates in an economy of meaning. Normal persons want many kinds of rewards they cannot obtain and can be convinced to accept compensators generated by fellow citizens less tied to reality than they. "In a universe which it strives to understand but whose dynamics it cannot fully control, normal thought continually seeks the meaning of things which refuse to reveal their significance. So-called pathological thought, on the other hand, overflows with emotional interpretations and overtones, in order to supplement an otherwise deficient reality" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963:175). In shamanism, the neurotic producer of compensators and the suffering normal consumer come together in an exchange beneficial to both, participating in the exchange of compensators for tangible rewards that is the basis of all cults.

The Entrepreneur Model of Cult Innovation

The *entrepreneur model* of cult innovation has not received as much attention from social scientists as the *psychopathology model.* We have known for decades that the psychopathology model could not explain adequately all cultic phenomena (Ackerknecht, 1943), but attempts to construct alternate models have been desultory. Of course, it is difficult to prove that any given cult founder was psychologically normal, but in many cases even rather lengthy biographies fail to reveal significant evidence of pathology. While the psychopathology model focuses on cult founders who invent new compensator-systems initially for their own use, the entrepreneur model notes that cult founders often may *consciously develop new compensator-systems in order to exchange them for great rewards.* Innovation pays off in many other areas of culture, such as technological invention and artistic creativity. If social circumstances provide opportunities for profit in the field of cults, then many perfectly normal individuals will be attracted to the challenge.

Models of entrepreneurship have been proposed to explain many other kinds of human activity, but we have not found adequate social-scientific models specifically designed to explain cult innovation. Journalists have documented that such a model would apply well to

many cases, and our own observations in several cults amply confirm that conclusion. Therefore, we shall sketch the beginnings of an entrepreneur model, with the understanding that much future work will be required before this analytic approach is fully developed. The chief ideas of such a model might be the following.

1. Cults are businesses which provide a product for their customers and receive payment in return.
2. Cults are mainly in the business of selling novel compensators, or at least freshly packaged compensators that appear new.
3. Therefore, a supply of novel compensators must be manufactured.
4. Both manufacture and sales are accomplished by entrepreneurs.
5. These entrepreneurs, like those in other businesses, are motivated by the desire for profit, which they can gain by exchanging compensators for rewards.
6. Motivation to enter the cult business is stimulated by the perception that such business can be profitable, an impression likely to be acquired through prior involvement with a successful cult.
7. Successful entrepreneurs require skills and experience, which are most easily gained through a prior career as the employee of an earlier successful cult.
8. The manufacture of salable new compensators (or compensator-packages) is most easily accomplished by assembling components of pre-existing compensator-systems into new configurations, or by the further development of successful compensator-systems.
9. Therefore, cults tend to cluster in lineages. They are linked by individual entrepreneurs who begin their careers in one cult and then leave to found their own. They bear strong "family resemblances" because they share many cultural features.
10. Ideas for completely new compensators can come from any cultural source or personal experience whatsoever, but the skillful entrepreneur experiments carefully in the development of new products and incorporates them permanently in his cult only if the market response is favorable.

Cults can in fact be very successful businesses. The secrecy that surrounds many of these organizations prevents us from reporting current financial statistics, but a few figures have been revealed. Arthur L. Bell's cult, Mankind United, received contributions totalling four million dollars in the ten years preceeding 1944 (Dohrman, 1958:41). In the four years 1956-1959, the Washington, D.C., branch of Scientology took in $758,982 and gave its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, $100,000 plus the use of a home and car (Cooper, 1971:109). Today Scientology has many flourishing branches, and Hubbard lives on his own 320-foot ship. In 1973 a small cult we have called The Power was grossing $100,000 a month, four thousand of this going directly to the husband and wife team who ran the operation from their comfortable Westchester County estate (Bainbridge, 1978). In addition to obvious material benefits, successful cult founders also receive intangible but valuable rewards, including praise, power, and amusement. Many cult leaders have enjoyed almost unlimited sexual access to attractive followers (Orrmont, 1961; Carden, 1969).

The simplest variant of the entrepreneur model, and the one preferred by journalists, holds that cult innovators are outright frauds who have no faith in their own product and sell it through trickery to fools and desperate persons. We have many examples of cults that were pure confidence games, and we shall mention examples of fraud in three kinds of cult: audience cults, client cults, and cult movements.

Audience cults offer very specific and weak compensators, often no more than a mild, vicarious thrill or entertainment, and they lack both long-term clients and formal membership. *Client cults* offer valued but relatively specific compensators, frequently alleged cures for particular diseases and emotional problems, and they may possess a relatively stable clientele without counting them as full members of the organization. *Cult movements* deal in a much more elaborate package of compensators, including the most general compensators based on supernatural assumptions, and they possess committed

membership. In terms of their compensators, these three levels of cults can be described conveniently in traditional language: Audience cults provide *mythology;* client cults add serious *magic;* cult movements give complete *religion.*

In 1973, Israeli prestidigitator Uri Geller barnstormed the United States presenting himself as a psychic who could read minds and bend spoons by sheer force of will. As James Randi (1975) has shown, Geller's feats were achieved through trickery, and yet untold thousands of people were fascinated by the possibility that Geller might have real psychic powers. The whole affair was a grand but short-lived audience cult.

Medical client cults based on intentional fraud are quite common. A number of con artists not only have discovered that they can use the religious label to appeal to certain kinds of gullible marks, but also have learned that the label provides a measure of protection against legal prosecution (Glick and Newsom, 1974). In many of these cases it may be impossible to prove whether the cult founder was sincere or not, and we can only assume that many undetected frauds lurk behind a variety of client cults. In some cases the trickery is so blatant that we can have little doubt. Among the most recent examples are the Philippine psychic surgeons Terte and Agpaoa, and their Brasilian colleague, Arigo. These men perform fake surgery with their bare hands or brandishing crude jackknives. In some cases they may actually pierce the patient's skin, but often they merely pretend to do so and then spread animal gore about the simultae the results of deep cutting. Through a skillful performance they convince their patients not only that dangerous tumors have been removed from their bodies, but also that the surgeon's psychic powers have instantaneously healed the wound. But their failure actually to perform real operations in this manner must be clear to the psychic surgeons themselves (Flammonde, 1975).

Arthur L. Bell's cult movement was a fraud based on the traditional Rosicrucian idea that a vast benevolent conspiracy prepares to rule the world and invites a few ordinary people to join its elite ranks. Bell claimed only to be the Superintendent of the Pacific Coast Division, in constant communication with his superiors in the (fictitious) organizational hierarchy. In this way he was able to convince his followers that they were members of an immensely powerful secret society, despite the fact that the portion of it they could see was modest in size. Like several similar fraudulent movements, Bell's cult did not originally claim religious status, but only became a "church" after encountering legal difficulty (Dohrman, 1958).

In order to grow, a cult movement must serve real religious functions for its committed followers, regardless of the private intentions of the founder. Many older cults probably were frauds in origin, but have been transformed into genuine religious organizations by followers who deeply believed the founder's deceptions.

But fraud need not be involved in entrepreneurial cult innovation. Many ordinary businessmen are convinced of the value of their products by the fact that customers want to buy them, and cult entrepreneurs may likewise accept their market as the ultimate standard of value. Many cult founders do appear to be convinced by testimonials from satisfied customers that their compensator-packages are valuable. This was probably the case with Franz Anton Mesmer, who saw astonishing transformations in his clients, apparently the beneficial results of his techniques, and who found in them ample evidence of the truth of his theories (Zweig, 1932; Darnton, 1970). Practitioners of all client cults frequently see similar evidence in favor of their own ideas, no matter how illogical, because all such cults provide compensators of at least some strength (Frank, 1963).

Another source of confidence for the cult innovator is his experience with other cults. Early in their careers, innovators typically join one or more successful cults, and honestly may value the cults' products themselves. However, the innovator may be dissatisfied with the older cults and come to the sincere opinion that he can create a more satisfactory product. Despite their often intense competition, cult leaders frequently express respect and admiration for other cults, including the ones with which they themselves were

previously associated. For example, L. Ron Hubbard of Scientology has praised Alfred Korzybski's General Semantics, and Jack Horner of Dianology has praised Hubbard's Scientology.

Once we realize that cult formation often involves entrepreneurial action to establish a profitable new organization based on novel culture, we can see that concepts developed to understand technological innovation should apply here as well. For example, a study of entrepreneurship and technology by Edward B. Roberts (1969) examined the cultural impact of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the preeminent center of new technological culture. Over 200 new high-technology companies had been founded by former M.I.T. employees who concluded they could achieve greater personal rewards by establishing their own businesses based on what they had learned at M.I.T. The current cult equivalent of M.I.T. is Scientology, studied by one of us in 1970. Cultic entrepreneurs have left Scientology to found countless other cults based on modified Scientology ideas, including Jack Horner's Dianology, H. Charles Berner's Abilitism, Harold Thompson's Amprinistics, and the flying saucer cult described in the ethnography *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger *et al.*, 1956). Scientology, like M.I.T., is a vast storehouse of exotic culture derived from many sources. Social scientists studying patterns of cultural development should be aware that an occasional key organization can be an influential nexus of innovation and diffusion.

Future research can determine the most common processes through which entrepreneurial cult founders actually invent their novel ideas. We suspect the main techniques involve the cultural equivalent of recombinant DNA genetic engineering. Essentially, the innovator takes the cultural configuration of an existing cult, removes some components, and replaces them with other components taken from other sources. Often, the innovator may simply splice pieces of two earlier cults together. In some cases, the innovator preserves the supporting skeleton of practices and basic assumptions of a cult he admires, and merely grafts on new symbolic flesh. Rosicrucianism affords a sequence of many connected examples (McIntosh, 1972; King, 1970). In creating the AMORC Rosicrucian order, H. Spencer Lewis took European Rosicrucian principles of the turn of the century, including the hierarchical social structure of an initiatory secret society, and grafted on a veneer of symbolism taken from Ancient Egypt, thus capitalizing on public enthusiasm for Egyptian civilization current at that time. His headquarters in San José, California, is a city block of simulated Egyptian buildings. Later, Rose Dawn imitated Lewis in creating her rival Order of the Ancient Mayans. In great measure, she simply replaced AMORC's symbols with equivalent symbols. Instead of Lewis' green biweekly mail-order lessons emblazoned with Egyptian architecture and Egyptian hieroglyphics, she sold red biweekly mail-order lessons decorated with Mayan architecture and Mayan hieroglyphics.

The highly successful *est* cult is derived partly from Scientology and well illustrates the commercialism of many such organizations in contemporary America. Werner Erhard, founder of *est*, had some experience with Scientology in 1969. Later, he worked for a while in Mind Dynamics, itself an offshoot of José Silva's Mind Control. After Erhard started his own cult in 1971, he decided to emulate Scientology's tremendous success and hired two Scientologists to adapt its practices for his own use. We should note that conventional businesses, such as auto companies and television networks, often imitate each other in pursuit of profit. Erhard's research and development efforts were rewarded, and by the beginning of 1976, an estimated seventy thousand persons had completed his $250 initial seminar (Kornbluth, 1976).

We suggest that cult entrepreneurs will imitate those features of other successful cults which seem to them most responsible for success. They will innovate either in non-essential areas or in areas where they believe they can increase the salability of the product. In establishing their own cult businesses they must innovate at least superficially. They cannot

seize a significant part of the market unless they achieve product differentiation. Otherwise they will be at a great disadvantage in direct competition with the older, more prosperous cult on which theirs is patterned. The apparent novelty of a cult's compensator-package may be a sales advantage when the public has not yet discovered the limitations of the rewards that members actually will receive in the new cult and when older compensator-packages have been discredited to some extent. Much research and theory-building remains to be done, but the insight that cults often are examples of skillful free enterprise immediately explains many of the features of the competitive world of cults.

The Subculture-Evolution Model of Cult Innovation

While the *psychopathology* and *entrepreneur* models stress the role of the individual innovator, the *subculture-evolution model* emphasizes group interaction processes. It suggests that cults can emerge without authoritative leaders, and it points out that even radical cultural developments can be achieved through many small steps. Although much social-psychological literature would be useful in developing this model, we are not aware of a comprehensive statement on cult innovation through subcultural evolution, so again we will attempt to outline the model ourselves.

1. Cults are the expression of novel social systems, usually small in size but composed of at least a few intimately interacting individuals.
2. These cultic social systems are most likely to emerge in populations already deeply involved in the occult milieu, but cult evolution may also begin in entirely secular settings.
3. Cults are the result of sidetracked or failed collective attempts to obtain scarce or nonexistent rewards.
4. The evolution begins when a group of persons commits itself to the attainment of certain rewards.
5. In working together to obtain these rewards, members begin exchanging other rewards as well, such as affect.
6. As they progressively come to experience failure in achieving their original goals, they will gradually generate and exchange compensators as well.
7. If the intragroup exchange of rewards and compensators becomes sufficiently intense, the group will become relatively encapsulated, in the extreme case undergoing complete social implosion.
8. Once separated to some degree from external control, the evolving cult develops and consolidates a novel culture, energized by the need to facilitate the exchange of rewards and compensators, and inspired by essentially accidental factors.
9. The end point of successful cult evolution is a novel religious culture enbodied in a distinct social group which must now cope with the problem of extracting resources (including new members) from the surrounding environment.

In writing about juvenile delinquency, Albert K. Cohen (1955) described the process of *mutual conversion* through which interacting individuals could gradually create a deviant normative structure. This process may result in criminal behavior, but it may also result in the stimulation of unrealizable hopes and of faith in the promise of impossible rewards. Thus, *mutual conversion* can describe the social process through which people progressively commit each other to a package of compensators which they simultaneously assemble. It begins when people with similar needs and desires meet and begin communicating about their mutual problems. It takes place in tiny, even imperceptible exploratory steps, as one individual expresses a hope or a plan and receives positive feedback in the form of similar hopes and plans from his fellows. "The final product . . . is likely to be a compromise formation of all the participants to what we may call a cultural process, a formation perhaps unanticipated by any of them. Each actor may contribute something directly to the growing product, but he may also contribute indirectly by encouraging others to advance, inducing them to retreat, and suggesting new avenues to be explored. The product cannot be

ascribed to any one of the participants; it is a real 'emergent' on a group level" (Cohen, 1955:60).

Cohen says all human action "is an ongoing series of efforts to solve problems" (1955:50). All human beings face the problem of coping with frustration because some highly desired rewards, such as everlasting life, do not exist in this world. Through mutual conversion, individuals band together to solve one or more shared problems, and the outcome presumably depends on a number of factors, including the nature of the problems and the group's initial conceptualization of them. We suspect a cultic solution is most likely if the people begin by attempting to improve themselves (as in psychotherapy) or to improve their relationship to the natural world, and then fail in their efforts. Criminal or political outcomes are more likely if people believe that other persons or social conditions are responsible for their problems.

The quest for unavailable rewards is not reserved for poor and downtrodden folk alone. Many elite social movements have been dedicated to the attainment of goals that ultimately proved unattainable. One well-documented example is The Committee for the Future, an institutionally detached little organization that formed within the network of technological social movements oriented toward spaceflight. Founded in 1970 by a wealthy couple, the CFF was dedicated to the immediate colonization of the moon and planets and to beginning a new age in which the field of man's activity would be the entire universe. The biggest effort of the CFF, Project Harvest Moon, was intended to establish the first demonstration colony on the moon, planted using a surplus Saturn V launch vehicle. Ultimately, high cost and questionable feasibility prevented any practical accomplishments. In struggling to arouse public support, the CFF held a series of open conventions at which participants collectively developed grand schemes for a better world. Blocked from any success in this direction, the CFF evolved toward cultism. The convention seminars became encounter groups. Mysticism and parapsychology replaced spaceflight as the topic of conversation. Rituals of psychic fusion were enacted to religious music, and the previously friendly aerospace companies and agencies broke off with the Committee. Denied success in its original purposes, and unfettered by strong ties to conventional institutions, the CFF turned ever more strongly toward compensators and toward the supernatural (Bainbridge, 1976).

Cults are particularly likely to emerge wherever numbers of people seek help for intractable personal problems. The broad fields of psychotherapy, rehabilitation, and personal development have been especially fertile for cults. A number of psychotherapy services have evolved into cult movements, including those created by some of Freud's immediate followers (Rieff, 1968). Other independent human service organizations may also be susceptible to cultic evolution. The best-known residential program designed to treat drug addiction, Synanon, has recently evolved into an authoritarian cult movement that recruits persons who never suffered from drug problems.

Two important factors render cultic evolution more likely. First, the process will progress most easily if there are no binding external constraints. For example, psychiatrists and psychologists who work in institutional settings (such as hospitals or universities) may be prevented by their conventional commitments from participating in the evolution of a cult, while independent practitioners are more free. Second, the process will be facilitated if the therapist *receives* compensators as well as gives them and thus participates fully in the inflation and proliferation of compensators.

A good example is The Power, founded in London in 1963, which began as an independent psychotherapy service designed to help normal individuals achieve super-normal levels of functioning. The therapy was based on Alfred Adler's theory that each human being is impelled by subconscious *goals,* and it attempted to bring these goals to consciousness so the person could pursue them more effectively and escape inner conflict.

The founders of The Power received the therapy as well as gave it, and frequent group sessions brought all participants together to serve each other's emotional needs. The Power recruited clients through the founders' pre-existing friendship network, and the therapy sessions greatly intensified the strength and intimacy of their social bonds.

As bonds strengthened, the social network became more thoroughly interconnected as previously distant persons were brought together. The rudiments of a group culture evolved, and many individuals contributed ideas about how the therapy might be improved and expanded. Participants came to feel that only other participants understood them completely, and found communication with outsiders progressively more difficult. A *social implosion* took place.

In a social implosion, part of an extended social network collapses as social ties within it strengthen and, reciprocally, those to persons outside it weaken. It is a step-by-step process. Social implosions may be set off by more than one circumstance. In the case of The Power, the implosion was initiated by the introduction of a new element of culture, a "therapy" technique that increased the intimacy of relations around a point in the network. Correlated with the implosion was a mutual conversion as members encouraged each other to express their deepest fantasies and to believe they could be fulfilled. The Adlerian analysis of subconscious goals was ideally designed to arouse longings and hopes for all the unobtained and unobtainable rewards the participants had ever privately wished to receive. The powerful affect and social involvement produced by the implosion were tangible rewards that convinced participants that the other rewards soon would be achieved. Concomitant estrangement from outside attachments led The Power to escape London to the isolation of a ruined seaside Yucatan plantation. Remote from the restraining influence of conventional society, The Power completed its evolution from psychotherapy to religion by inventing supernatural doctrines to explain how its impossible, absolute goals might ultimately be achieved. When the new cult returned to civilization in 1967, it became legally incorporated as a church (Bainbridge, 1978).

Since non-religious groups can evolve into religious cults, it is not surprising that cults also can arise from religious sects—extreme religious groups that accept the standard religious tradition of the society, unlike cults that are revolutionary breaks with the culture of past churches. An infamous example is The People's Temple of Jim Jones that destroyed itself in the jungles of Guyana. This group began as an emotionally extreme but culturally traditional Christian sect, then evolved into a cult as Jones progressively became a prophet with an ever more radical vision. Of course, either the psychopathology or entrepreneur models may apply in this case. But the committed members of the sect probably contributed to the transformation by encouraging Jones step-by-step, and by demanding of him the accomplishment of impossible goals. Even when a single individual dominates a group, the subculture-evolution model will apply to the extent that the followers also participate in pushing the group toward cultism. In this case, the needs of the followers and their social relationships with the leader may have served as a *psychopathology amplifier,* reflecting back to Jones his own narcissism multiplied by the strength of their unreasonable hopes.

Conclusion

Each of the three models identifies a system of production and exchange of compensators. In the *psychopathology model,* a cult founder creates compensators initially for his own use, then gives them followers in return for rewards. In the *entrepreneur model,* the cult founder sets out to gain rewards by manufacturing compensators intended for sale to followers. The *subculture-evolution model* describes the interplay of many individual actions in which various individuals at different times play the roles of producer and consumer of novel compensators.

While the models may appear to compete, in fact they complement each other and can be

combined to explain the emergence of particular cults. After a cult founder has escaped a period of psychopathology, he may act as an entrepreneur in promoting or improving his cult. An entrepreneur threatened with loss of his cult may be driven into an episode of psychopathology that provides new visions that contribute to a new success. The subculture-evolution model may include many little eposides of psychopathology and entrepreneurial enterprise participated in by various members, woven together by a complex network of social exchanges.

Taken together, the psychopathology, entrepreneur and subculture-evolution models foreshadow a general theory of cult innovation that can be constructed using their elements connected logically within the framework of exchange theory. They offer numerous explanatory hypotheses that could be tested using the store of historical information found in any large library or using new data collected in future field research. The models also provide a checklist of important questions to guide the ethnographer in performing the study of a cult. Until now, the social science of cult innovation has lacked a clear body of theory and a research program. The three models developed in this paper provide a solid basis for studying the emergence of new religions.

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