

The six dilemmas for post-charismatic religious movements

Adapted from Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).

1. The dilemma of mixed motivation

The movement starts with “single-minded and unqualified devotion to the leader and to his or her teachings. The followers are willing to make great sacrifice to further the cause, and they willingly subordinate their own needs and desire for the sake of group goals.

“However, with the development of a stable institutional structure, the desire to occupy the more creative, responsible, and prestigious positions can stimulate jealousies and personality conflicts.” People get more concerned about their personal security within the organization than about achieving the group’s goals.

“Mixed motivation occurs when a secondary concern or motivation comes to overshadow the original goals and teachings of the leader. Conventions of clergy sometimes debate pension plans and insurance programs more heatedly than statements of mission.”

This is a dilemma because the institution must in fact have people in various posts and must provide for their economic security and well-being.

2. The symbolic dilemma

The group needs a common set of symbols to express its world view and ethos. But as the members project their subjective feelings onto those symbols (or symbolic behaviors), things may come to the point where those symbols no longer carry meaning and power for them. Members may then feel apathy or even antagonism toward those symbols. Does a danda, or tilaka, or a dhoti, or a high vyasasana still mean what it did before?

3. The dilemma of administrative order:

Staying flexible versus elaborating policy

As the group grows into an institution, “it may develop national offices and a bureaucratic structure.” It establishes rational policies and regulations to clarify who’s who and what’s what.

But things may become unwieldy and overcomplicated. Too rigid. Too much red tape. Abuse of the system.

And “attempts to modify or reform the structure may run into severe resistance” from “those whose status and security in the hierarchy may be threatened.” Mixed motives again. “Many persons within the hierarchy may view reorganization as a threat to their own security or positions of power and prestige.”

Again, it’s a dilemma because you need effective administrative structures.

4. The dilemma of delimitation:

Defining the point versus substituting the letter for the spirit

As we institutionalize, “the religious message is translated into specific guidelines for everyday life. The general teachings about the unity of the universe or about the love of God must be translated into concrete rules of ethical behavior.”

But again it's a dilemma: "The abstract moods, motivations, and concepts must be made concrete so that common lay people can comprehend their meaning and implication for everyday life." But later generations (or the present one) "may become literalistic and legalistic" about the rules and "miss the central message."

5. The dilemma of power: Conversion versus coercion

To “stay together and sustain its common faith,” the group must ensure conformity to its values and norms. Occasional deviations may not be threatening, but large-scale disregard of them does. So “most of the beliefs, values, and norms of the faith must be adhered to most of the time.”

In the early stages, most members stick to the rules due to their personal loyalty to the charismatic leader, or due to their personal mystical experience, or for some other strongly internalized reason. “But later generations, who have grown up within the religious organization, may never have personally experienced anything that compelled them to accept the absolute authority of the faith in their own lives—or the authority of the religious hierarchy to interpret the faith. They may be inclined to challenge official interpretations.”

To “maintain the integrity of the organization and ensure consensus in their basic world view, religious organizations may resort to coercive methods of social control.” Loss of privileges. Denial of resources. Shunning. Excommunication. And so on.

6. The dilemma of expansion: Communalism versus rational structure

In the beginning, everyone knows everyone else, and there’s a close sense of community. But as the group expands—and develops more formal structures for making decisions—this closeness starts to wane.

So if you want service from those people who at first committed themselves out of strong feelings for a community, now you have to appeal to their commitment to the ideals or to the memory of the founder—or to what they personally stand to gain: “What’s in it for me?” Hello again to mixed motives.

Then again, some people get frustrated with the impersonality of highly bureaucratized religion and what may seem a lack of spontaneity and fellowship.

Developing “congregational groups” may help fulfill the need for that sense of belonging. But even your congregational structure will need a bureaucracy. So what do you do?

When all the people no longer know one another, this “in itself means a change in the group’s character.”

People start focusing on specialized tasks. The common member no longer knows what’s going on in other parts of the organization. “Some individuals or special groups gain almost autonomous control over their own area or department, and they may use that platform to influence the policies, budget allocations, and goals of the entire organization.”

Often, ordinary members don’t even know who’s in charge of what, or what policy decisions their church is making. Yet the members have to shell out to implement those policies, perhaps even policies they’d oppose.

So again you face a dilemma.

“The process of institutionalization is a mixed blessing (or perhaps a necessary curse).”

Though the group needs to institutionalize, as it does so it runs into these various dilemmas.

And “*avoiding these problems by avoiding institutionalization is simply not an option*; rather, renewal movements, revivals, and other processes of regeneration are the means by which religious groups seek to overcome these dysfunctions.” (emphasis supplied)

Further: “the rebellion against routinization is one reason for the development of new sects. Much of the internal conflict and many of the schisms in denominations are due to the need for regeneration and a need to restate the faith in terms that are compelling to a new generation facing different problems of social meaning.”