

Cosmos and Taxis in Religious Life: Pattern Regularities and New Challenges

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Abstract: A spontaneous order is defined as an order with abstract rules. The rules structure the actions of individuals and organizations. Decentralized actions may all be in harmony with the order yet reflect mutually incompatible objectives. Most spontaneous order analyses have focused on markets, science and democracy. In some but not all liberal democracies, religious human action is however also structured by a spontaneous order, which is distinct from—although in some ways similar to—markets. Like firms in markets, religious organizations attempt to accumulate systemic resources. But unlike in markets, the religious systemic resource—objective religious commitment—is fuzzier and therefore more difficult to interpret than price signals. A similarity with markets is that religious activity may be suppressed by active government involvement in religious funding and regulations, and that individual choice is influenced by the prevailing system of social values.

Keywords: spontaneous order, religion, systemic resource, social values

Introduction¹

Most studies of spontaneous orders² have focused on markets, with some recent extensions to science, democracy, and legal systems. The religious life of an open society – *the religious cosmos* - is however also an example of such an order. The *systemic feedback* of religious spontaneous orders is distinct; religious organizations do not use money revenue or vote totals in assessing their performance. The systemic resource of the religious cosmos coincides with what Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000: 103) call “objective religious *commitment*.” Commitment consists of factors such as religious service attendance, adherence to prescribed religious norms, as well as in-kind and money contributions.

It is important to remember that religious life preceded the religious cosmos, in the same way that material provisioning and economizing preceded markets. In primitive societies, spirituality was a communal concern rather than the subject of individual choice, other than in terms of the degree of involvement beyond the minimal acceptable standards enforced by the tribe or other such community. As with markets, the feasible complexity of religious life tends to grow with the division of labor and the growth of knowledge. In more complex societies, there is another close parallel with economic organization: it is possible to identify a range of religious structures ranging from centrally planned religion (theocracy) over the hampered religious cosmos of twentieth century Europe to the unhampered spontaneous order of religious options that exists in contemporary American society. A road map of this historical trajectory would include landmarks such as the emergence of religious specialists, the rise of hierarchical organizations, and the gradual dissolution of communal linkages between religious faith and ethnic identity.

A number of empirical studies have corroborated Adam Smith’s ([1776] 1965) insight that government involvement in the religious life of a nation leads to a less religious society. This proposition is at the core of the new “religious economy theory” as developed by Stark and Fiske (2000), which is a forceful rejection of sociological theories of religion that rest on the secularization thesis. A further component of religious economy theory is that there are tensions within organizations; expansion beyond some upper limit induces difficulties in maintaining behavioral rules that reduce free-riding.

Behavioral rules serve the purpose of restricting membership in religious organizations to individuals with “virtuous” behavior *and* organization-specific contributions. Such rules improve the religious experience since worshippers are both producers and consumers. Rules can however be made too costly, since benefits must exceed costs; organizations have therefore adapted their rules in response to aggregate changes in commitment.

Religious economy theory has so far not analyzed the relationship between the religious cosmos and social values; the unstated implication is that the ongoing transformation from a modern into a postmodern society does not affect the competitiveness of the distinct religious organizations that constitute the religious cosmos (Inglehart 1997). Surveys show that individuals with the new value structure (often termed “postmodern values”) are less likely to attend religious services but spend more time thinking about “the meaning of life.” There should thus be ample opportunities for religious entrepreneurship.

Religious entrepreneurs face lessons from the past as well as new challenges. Historical experience shows that the intermingling of politics and religion increases hostility or apathy vis-à-vis organized religion (Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Finke 2000). The second history lesson is that “liberal faiths” have been less successful than their “conservative” rivals in modern (rather than postmodern) liberal democracies. Religious liberals have offered a less intense religious experience since they have tended to be more tolerant of free-riders and—in many cases—professed vague religious beliefs.

Religious entrepreneurs face the challenge of devising costly exclusion rules that reward behavior that desirable recruits are willing to accept while repelling undesirables. Success in systemic resource terms requires that desirable adherents perceive the rewards of commitment to be greater than the perceived costs. As we shall see, both rewards and costs depend to some extent on the prevailing *value system* of the social environment.

In what follows, I first discuss a few of Stark and Finke’s terms and propositions so as to make their relevance to spontaneous order theorizing more apparent. I then attempt to make the theory even more comprehensive by introducing three extensions to the theory: a distinction between long-term and short-term costs; value system effects; and the relation between value systems and the competitiveness of various sorts of *tension*. Tension refers to the cost that religious organizations impose on members for the purpose of reducing free-riding and raising commitment (Stark and Finke 2000). Finally, I discuss

some of the future challenges that a religious organization (i.e. a “taxi”) is likely to face in a postmodern religious cosmos.

Recasting Stark and Finke (2000) as a spontaneous order theory

The once dominant secularization thesis was a reflection of the modernist faith in the perfectibility of both government and science, and was often an unexamined assumption in twentieth-century sociology and anthropology. It also reflected the hostility to religion of nineteenth century thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx.

Over the past 40 years, Rodney Stark, William Sins Bainbridge, Lawrence Iannaccone, and Roger Finke have developed the new religious economy theory, which is opposed to the secularization thesis on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Their most conspicuous difference from earlier sociologists of religion is that they assert that religious choices can – and tend to be – rational. Early attempts at using rational choice theory to formulate a general theory of religion include Stark and Bainbridge (1980, 1986). Gary Becker’s neoclassical rational choice framework exerted a strong influence on these contributions. The most ambitious attempt to date, however, is the comprehensive religious economy theory that is expounded in *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Stark and Finke 2000).

The later version (*ibid.*) of the theory is more comprehensive and much less wedded to conventional neoclassical concepts. It integrates anthropological insights as well as a more evolutionary approach to a process that involves boundedly rational individuals, as is apparent from Proposition 1: “Within the limits of their *information* and *understanding*, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans *attempt* to make rational choices” (Stark and Finke 2000: 85, italics added).

A short paper such as this could never do justice to a theory as rich and subtle as Stark and Finke (*ibid.*). The theory encompasses 36 definitions and 99 propositions, which the authors manage to integrate into a seamless and persuasive whole. *Acts of Faith* also contains a wealth of empirical evidence ranging from summaries of regression results and case studies of individual religious organizations, almost all of which are compatible with the theory but incompatible with the secularization thesis. I shall therefore only highlight a

handful of features that are especially relevant to an understanding of the religious cosmos as a spontaneous order.

Religious commitment as a systemic resource

A problem with religious economy theory is that it does not provide an explicit recognition of the systemic differences between the spontaneous order that coordinates profit-seeking firms and that which coordinates commitment-seeking religious organizations. Frequently, Stark and Finke (*ibid.*) offer propositions that treat religious rewards and costs as perfectly analogous to market revenues and costs.

A separation is desirable since there are systematic differences between the information-disseminating capacity of the systemic resources (money and commitment). Unlike money, religious commitment is a vague construct that may encompass various combinations of measurable variables. A commitment measure could for example be an index that attempts to combine measures of money donations, unpaid labor by members, the number of members, total attendance at services, and adherence to organization-specific behavioral prohibitions. Any attempt to convert different qualities of commitment into a single index of aggregate commitment is not as straightforward as calculating money revenues on the basis of market prices, and the relative weight of a commitment variable could at best emerge as an arbitrary social convention. For a religious organization to accept such a social convention as valid would however depend on its sharing this convention with the wider society, which in itself implies a lower level of tension with the social environment than a deviant convention, other things being equal.

The religious cosmos therefore relies on a fuzzier performance measure than does the market order. But this does not mean that religious organizations must succumb to calculational chaos on a par with a state-owned enterprise in a centrally planned economy. Few would argue against the contention that the Roman Catholic Church has more aggregate religious commitment than the Episcopal Church. But Jehovah's Witnesses may with some justification claim to have more systemic resources in the United States than the Roman Catholic Church, although most disinterested observers would probably disagree.

We should also note that there is a good reason for why money as expressed in market prices should not substitute for seemingly less "efficient" measures of religious commitment. First, the dominant religious faiths consider

the willingness to pay money among adherents as a substandard measure of overall commitment, since it penalizes those with little money. Second, most religious organizations and most believers – regardless of religion – consider the explicit purchase of religious virtue as illegitimate. Like love or trust, but unlike sex or socks, religious virtue is an attribute that is (partly or wholly) devalued by an attempt to buy it. It is also symptomatic that the alleged sale of indulgences – implying purchased virtue - by Pope Leo X was one of the causes of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses.

The religious cosmos

In spite of not differentiating enough between the market order and the religious order, Stark and Finke’s theoretical propositions (*ibid.*) make up a logically consistent and convincing depiction of causal processes, which are in turn reinforced by the empirical evidence³. On the one hand, this is because the market analogy is often close enough to warrant an identical abstract theory. On the other hand, they also note many - if not all - of the circumstances by which the religious cosmos differs from markets that rely on market prices as the coordinating mechanism. The religious cosmos is more similar to the market order than the “marriage market” as theorized by Gary Becker (1973, 1974); therefore some of Israel Kirzner’s (1999) criticisms of Becker do not apply. They also do not apply because of Stark and Finke’s (2000) much more nuanced and realistic treatment of human knowledge and rational behavior.

The starting point of a spontaneous order theory of religion is that the religious cosmos is a process without any goals of its own. This process coordinates religious individuals (consumers and co-producers) and organizations (producers). The systemic resource is objective religious commitment, which also functions as a signal that guides domain-specific action.

From the individual’s point of view, there is both subjective and objective commitment. Subjective commitment refers to “belief in, and knowledge of, the explanations sustained by a religious organization and having the appropriate emotions” (Stark and Fiske 2000: 103). Such commitment reflects an individual’s explicit or implicit relational contract with a religious organization. The individual agrees to the contract in the expectation of a bundle of supernatural and natural benefits. The expectation of at least some

supernatural benefits is the criterion for demarcating religious from non-religious exchange (*ibid.*: 90).

The subjective commitment of the individual gives rise to various observable attributes of individual behavior. It is these observable attributes that constitutes objective religious commitment, which is the systemic resource that guides the religious cosmos.

Religious organizations are commitment-seeking producers of religious services. They therefore monitor commitment such as “religious participation or practice (taking part in rites and services, for example), material offerings (sacrifices, contributions, and offerings), and conformity to rules governing action (not sinning)” (*ibid.*: 103). A religious organization accumulates commitment in a number of ways, for example by achieving higher attendance rates among existing members or by adding new members.

Tension and free-riding

Religious organizations operating in a competitive environment can only achieve (aggregate individual) commitment growth if it undertakes measures to exclude free-riders. The reason for this is twofold. First, a religious service is a territorial public good, which means that some consumers may choose not to contribute toward the cost of providing the service if it is not rationed (cf. Olson 1965). Second, free-riders tend to have lower levels of objective religious commitment. A lower level of commitment matters, since consumers of religious services are not merely passive consumers but also co-producers (Iannaccone 1994). A religious service is similar to other experience goods that depend on enthusiastic participation: a congregation of listless skeptics is akin to a heavy-metal concert in front of deaf octogenarians. Stark and Finke provide an example:

Think of a congregation in which individual levels of religious commitment fluctuate on a scale of one to ten. Suppose that there are the same number of people at each level, which yields an average commitment level of 5. Now suppose that this congregation imposes a rule requiring a commitment level of 5 or above in order to remain a member. The immediate result is an average level of commitment of 7.5. Moreover, people who previously had scored 5 and thus had been average members in terms of commitment, now find themselves at the bottom. Many of

these are likely to respond by increasing their level of commitment in order to once again become average members. As they do so, the average level of commitment also rises, and the returns on their investment increase correspondingly. (Stark and Finke: 148-49).

The required commitment level is not only a measure of the minimal cost that members must pay for inclusion; it is also a measure of the *tension* of the organization vis-à-vis the surrounding society (*ibid.*: 143). Tension refers to how much a religious group differs from a reference group, usually the general population of some geographical area. One key proposition is that higher-tension organizations tend to grow at the expense of lower-tension ones (*ibid.*: 154), since higher tension both reduces opportunistic behavior and increases the perceived value of the supernatural and natural benefits. However, the transaction costs of excluding undesirables increase with the size of both congregations and organizations, which implies that there is a gradual decrease in tension for those that are most successful in recruiting new adherents (other things being equal).

Not every prospective member of a religious organization desires high rewards in exchange for high costs – this is why there is a range of religious offerings from low-tension Episcopalians to ultra-strict Holiness sects. But low-tension organizations face difficult commitment problems. For example, they may have funding problems because of their tolerance for listless members who primarily use their membership for infrequent wedding and funeral services, in exchange for low or non-existent contributions. Funding problems and low attendance rates do not usually inspire confidence in the organizational ability to produce rewards, whether uncertain supernatural rewards or observable natural ones such as inspirational sermons or social networking opportunities.

State suppression of the religious cosmos

The American religious cosmos has generally been successful in providing a variety of “brands” that can meet the demands of a diverse set of consumers. American history tells of a remarkable variety of organizations and entrepreneurs in a free religious cosmos, which in the aggregate manifests itself as a higher level of commitment than in Europe.

What then is the reason for the lower levels of commitment in Europe?

According to Stark and Finke (*ibid.*: 228-39), this is not due to secularization. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, Stark and Finke (*ibid.*) claim that there never was an “Age of Faith” in Europe, since the historical record shows that most European religious activity prior to the twentieth century was both involuntary and reluctant. A political analogy would be the claim that there has never been an “Age of Communism” unless most people at that time voted for communist parties in free and fair elections.

European religious history is the history of how governments suppressed the religious cosmos and imposed religious *taxis*. Before the twentieth century, governments imposed religious monopolies on their subjects, while state-sponsored religious leaders colluded with secular rulers in extracting forced contributions. Later religious toleration did however not end European religious regulations. Instead, each European government subsidized one or two dominant religious organizations, while “unusual” religions were - and in most cases still are - the subject of regulations and taxes that exceed those for other types of non-profits.

Italy offers an interesting counterexample in that the government granted all religious organizations the same rights to state support in 1984. It has subsequently experienced rising levels of objective religious commitment among Catholics and non-Catholics alike (Introvigne and Stark 2005). Introvigne and Stark (*ibid.*) ascribe increased Catholic attendance rates to increased Catholic product innovation and market segmentation. The innovation and segmentation policies have been in response to the emergence of small high-growth competitors such as various Pentecostal churches, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and New Age movements.

The ability to receive tax revenues and other state support has had the consequence of high nominal membership counts and low levels of average commitment among Europe’s established churches. European history has borne out Adam Smith’s assertion that religious teachers “in the same manner as other teachers, may depend altogether for their subsistence upon the voluntary contributions of their hearers; or they may derive it from some other fund to which the law of their country may entitle them ... Their exertion, their zeal and industry, are likely to be much greater in the former situation than in the latter.” (Smith [1776] 1965: 740; quoted in Iannaccone 1991: 156.)

Nowhere is Adam Smith’s assertion more evident than in Sweden, where the Church of Sweden relies on government taxation to generate revenue and

is governed by representatives of secular political parties, who need not have *any* religious faith (Rydenfelt 1985). The Church of Sweden is assured of a large number of nominal members, since newborn babies until recently became members without a parental application – as long as one of the parents is a member of the Church of Sweden.

The commitment outcome is consistent with religious economy theory: while 67 percent⁴ of Swedes claim that they are affiliated with the Church of Sweden, attendance rates at services hover in the low single digits. Indeed, the overall attendance rate in Sweden is only eight percent (World Values Survey 2006), at least half of which is accounted for by Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Pentecostals. This figure is even lower than the 10 percent attendance rate among unaffiliated Americans (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008).

The religious cosmos, the market process, and democracy

A religious monopoly, a centrally planned economy, and an authoritarian state are three different types of taxis without cosmos. In an unregulated system there is both cosmos – the unplanned order that gives rise to denominational expansions and contractions – and taxis – the made order of each religious organization. The knowledge problems inherent in central planning (Hayek 1945) explain why large religious organizations with centralized decision-making face internal feedback problems. Some large organizations, for example Southern Baptists and Unitarian Universalists, have however mitigated these problems through decentralized congregational competition and entrepreneurship.

Within this framework, most of contemporary Europe constitutes a “hampered cosmos,” where certain organizations are penalized and others are subsidized. The result should be unsurprising to those who are familiar with the effects of state intervention on markets: less overall religious commitment and entrepreneurship, even allowing for the long-term lock-in effects of previous monopolization.

There are certain pattern regularities that position the religious cosmos between the market order and democracy. David Emanuel Andersson (2008b: 66) writes that the “market process sorts endowment-weighted, fine-grained, individual priorities. Democracy sorts priorities that are egalitarian, coarse, and aggregated.” Using the same general formulation, we may view the religious

cosmos as being roughly egalitarian, fine-grained, and individual. At first sight, these characteristics would seem to imply a knowledge-disseminating capacity that is superior to both markets and democracy (cf. Andersson 2008b), but this impression would be mistaken. The systemic feedback – the signaling system of commitment gains and losses – is much fuzzier than either the accumulation of money or votes. Table 1 provides a comparison of the systemic performance properties of these three spontaneous orders: the religious cosmos; the market order; and democracy.

Table 1: Systemic properties of three spontaneous orders

	Religious cosmos	Market order	Democracy	Ranking of knowledge dissemination effectiveness
Preferences	Continuous (individual commitment)	Continuous (willingness to pay)	Discrete (one person, one vote)	1 Religion/Market 3 Democracy
Distribution of endowments	Roughly equal	Roughly equal to highly skewed	Equal (for insiders)	1 Democracy 2 Religion 3 Market
Aggregation of priorities	No: Individual choice	No: Individual choice	Yes: Collective choice	1 Religion/Market 3 Democracy
Systemic resource	Commitment	Money	Votes	1 Market 2 Democracy 3 Religion
Typical taxis	Denomination ⁵	Business firm	Political party	-
Effect of abolishing cosmos	Monopolistic religious organization	Centrally planned economy	Autocracy	-

Extension I: Long-term and short-term subjective cost

Stark and Finke (2000: 85-6) use the conventional treatment of

subjective rewards and opportunity costs when analyzing religious choices. But they do not discuss the diversity and ambiguity of subjective cost considerations, which is of more than passing interest. First, a high-cost (i.e. high-tension) religion does not uniformly increase costs by, say, introducing a general requirement that members become vegetarians. Some people may have no individual desire for meat or seafood, and do not face any additional subjective cost. This requirement would only impose costs on individuals with diets that are at odds with the doctrine of the organization.

Second, it is common for individuals to engage in intra-personal bargaining between their *long-term* and *short-term* preferences. A compulsive gambler may have a short-term preference for playing the roulette wheel, but at the same time be convinced that it would be in her long-term interest to abstain. In this case, membership in a religious organization could be a way of enforcing the lexicographic priority of long-term values over short-term preferences⁶. People may purposefully join a religious organization in order to tie their hands in the manner of Odysseus.

In a static theory of individual choice, it is possible to disregard such inner conflicts and only be concerned with a momentary cost that (at least implicitly) is the present value of the expected future flow of combined long-term and short-term costs. For changes in aggregate demand, however, cost heterogeneity and the trade-off between long-term and short-term costs clarify the effects of changes in social values on subjective cost. Heterogeneous costs imply that value shifts may lead to corresponding shifts in the subjective costs associated with a behavioral rule, even if no single individual changes their perceived cost. This is possible because individuals have finite life spans. Continuous cohort replacement may shift the distribution of perceived costs in the population (Inglehart 1997). Value shifts may engender new assessments of virtuous behavior, rewards, and costs.

Aggregate assessments affect the capacity of an organization to accumulate objective religious commitment. If the dominant value system in a society makes people believe that homosexuality is a sin, it may be possible for religious organizations that ban homosexual behavior to gain gay members. Conversely, if the dominant value system is that homosexuality is legitimate and that sexual tolerance is a virtue, the effect may be that the anti-gay denominations will repel not only gays, but also heterosexuals. As it happens,

exactly this value change has gradually emerged in the most economically developed regions of the world over the past 40 years, according to survey results from the World Values Survey.

Extension II: Changing values imply changing subjective costs

Increasing sexual tolerance is only one aspect of a shift in social values that was first noticed in the 1970s (Inglehart 1977). Ronald Inglehart calls this change “postmodernization,” which refers to the process whereby postmodern values gradually replace modern ones. According to Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1997), values reflect childhood experiences and are relatively stable after individuals reach adulthood. A consequence is that changes in social values primarily reflect cohort replacement: as new adults enter the population, they replace the values of the recently deceased.

The cornerstone of Inglehart’s theory is that children who perceive their physical well-being as secure develop a different value system from those who experience subsistence conditions or war. The first cohorts that generally took their survival for granted were those North Americans and Western Europeans who were born in the late 1940s. They came of age in the late 1960s, so that the first measurable changes in social values should have occurred around 1970. The results of various cross-national surveys show that this was indeed the case (Inglehart 1977).

The key indicator of postmodern values is Inglehart’s postmaterialism index, which measures interviewees’ priority ordering of four or 12 societal goals. In the original four-item index, postmaterialism is defined as those whose first and second priority exhausts the set [freedom of speech; greater citizen participation in governmental decisions] while materialists give priority to the set [law and order; fighting rising prices]. The combination of one priority from each set corresponds to a mixed category. This index exhibits positive correlations with other postmodern values that reflect increasing tolerance of various ethnic, cultural or sexual minority groups.

Two tolerance variables measure sexual tolerance: acceptance of homosexual neighbors and degree of justification of homosexuality. These two variables are even more robust than the postmaterialism index during economic downturns.

Analyses of partial correlations (controlling for the postmaterialism

index) reveal that acceptance of gay neighbors exhibits consistently significant correlations with a host of indicators of national socio-economic development, unlike the postmaterialism index (controlling for tolerance) or other types of tolerance (controlling for postmaterialism). The simple correlation between tolerance of homosexuality and development is .727 if development is measured as freedom from corruption (Transparency International 2009), .704 if as political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2009), .667 if as human development (United Nations Development Programme 2009), and .564 if as economic freedom (Fraser Institute 2009)⁷.

On a less aggregated level, Richard Florida (2002) has shown that America's most postindustrial metropolitan regions are also among the most tolerant, with greater than average representation of gays. In Sweden, questionnaire surveys from the 1990s showed that postmodern values were most prevalent among highly educated women in the largest conurbations, while they were least common among elderly men in rural settings (Andersson, Holmberg and Furth 1997).

While postmodern values are especially prevalent in North America and Northwestern Europe, the levels of religious commitment represent opposing poles in the developed world, with the United States and Sweden as extreme cases (Inglehart 1997). As a believer in the secularization thesis, Inglehart dismisses the American results as an aberration, even though Canadian and Australian religious commitment align more closely with the United States than with Sweden. But nowhere does Inglehart mention the historical impact of state regulation in Europe.

Stark and Finke (2000) not only contend that high-tension religious organizations tend to grow, while lower-tension ones are in relative decline. They also contend that higher-tension faiths are more conservative, and thus that conservative faiths are most successful. Pentecostal churches, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses are indeed among the fastest-growing as well as among the most culturally conservative of America's denominations. Table 2 shows attitudes toward homosexuality among American adherents of different religious traditions, along with their respective shares of all adults and all adults with a postgraduate degree. Most Hindus, Muslims, and Orthodox Christians are immigrants, while majorities of all other faiths were born in the United States. The unaffiliated category is made up of atheists (1.6 percent), agnostics

(2.4 percent) and interviewees claiming to belong to “nothing in particular” (12.1 percent).

We should note that one of Stark and Finke’s success stories – the Jehovah’s Witnesses – is the least tolerant of the major American religious organizations. Minimum costs include attendance at two religious services, four hours of missionary work per week, and a ban on all forms of political participation. While these costs may have caused considerable religious rewards and high aggregate growth in the past, it is questionable whether the organization can maintain such growth if the social values of the surrounding society become increasingly contrarian⁸.

Table 2: Percentage agreeing with the statement “homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society”; religious composition of adult population, United States, 2007

Religious affiliation	Percentage ² agreeing with statement	Percenta ge of US adult populatio n ¹	Percentage with postgraduat e degree ²
Other faiths (Unitarian Universalist, Pagan etc.)	84	1.2	21
Buddhist	82	0.7	26
Jewish	79	1.7	35
Unaffiliated	71	16.1	13
Other Christian (Spiritualist, Unity Church etc.)	69	0.3	20
Catholic	58	23.9	10
Mainline Protestant	56	18.1	14
<i>United States adult population</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>11</i>
Orthodox Christian	48	0.6	18
Hindu	48	0.4	48
Historically black churches	39	6.9	5
Muslim	27	0.6	10
Evangelical Protestant	26	26.3	7
Mormon	24	1.7	10

Jehovah's Witness	12	0.7	3
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Source: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: US Religious Landscape Survey, 2008.

¹ The maximum 95% confidence interval is $\pm 0.6\%$; ² Maximum 95% confidence intervals range from $\pm 1.5\%$ (Catholics, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant) to $\pm 10.5\%$ (Muslim).

The evolution of social values over the past 40 years shows an ever-growing⁹ endorsement of postmodern priorities such as freedom of speech, democracy, and acceptance of alternative lifestyles. This evolution has occurred in tandem with a continuous increase in average educational attainment. Will future generations be attracted to a denomination where an unelected leadership imposes a doctrine that is unusually difficult to reconcile with natural science? The Jehovah's Witnesses may be an extreme case, but many other conservative churches have behavioral rules that are quite similar, albeit to a lesser extent.

More liberal religious organizations tend to subscribe to doctrines that are better suited to the emerging postmodern value system. But most of them offer low-energy religion and rarely promise a transformative spiritual experience; they have for many years seen a net loss of members. Can strict behavioral rules (high tension) somehow be reconciled with a tolerant postmodern doctrine? It is to this question that we turn in the next section.

Extension III: High tension need not imply cultural conservatism

Stark and Finke (2000: 195-217) discuss the matching of the supply of religious organizations to a demand that is divided into niches, reflecting population diversity both in religious preferences and in opportunity costs. The assumption is that the population is normally distributed around two large "moderate" and "conservative" niches. Organizations that straddle these two niches are most successful in the long term (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church). One proposition of the theory is that the strict niche (i.e. stricter than conservative) generates the most new organizations, but that these organizations then relax their tension if they become popular. Groups that

exemplify this process include the Methodist and Presbyterian denominations.

While this view of the relationship between niches, tension, and historical evolution is both theoretically and empirically persuasive, a longer time perspective shows that high tension need not necessarily be associated with cultural conservatism in the sense of behavioral rules that corresponds to earlier norms. It is of course true that Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses embody "old-fashioned" values and have experienced rapid commitment growth, while the declining Episcopal Church promotes mainstream values and rules that do not require any deviations from the cultural environment. But the history of the past two millennia shows that there are many instances of organizations that combined high tension, high growth, and what were then *liberal* breaks with past practice.

Examples include the practice of early Roman Christians to care for the elderly and sick; the Jewish promotion of literacy and learning; and the Buddhist principles of non-violence and tolerance. If we look at the "ultra-liberal niche," which supposedly signifies a complete absence of tension with the environment (210), Unitarian Universalists¹⁰ (UU) and New Age groups are mentioned as examples. It is worth noting, however, that 653 out of 1,096 UU Congregations in the United States and Canada are so called "Welcoming Congregations," which represents a promise that the congregation "affirms and celebrates bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender issues and history during the church year (possibly including Gay Pride Week, which is in June)¹¹."

In a society where only about half of the population considers homosexuality a legitimate way of life, and about a quarter of the population would not like to have a gay neighbor (World Values Survey 2006), this signifies a certain degree of *liberal* tension with the surrounding society. Symptomatically, the Unitarian Universalists is the only historically Christian church that has combined positive growth (since 1983) in religious objective commitment and liberal behavioral rules.

Unitarian Universalism is not the only liberal organization that has experienced growth. A recent survey (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008) reveals that 73 percent of all American Buddhists have converted from another religion or were previously unaffiliated, and are predominantly non-Asian. The most popular Buddhist sub-religions in the United States are Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, which are relatively high tension religious schools

that are compatible with tolerant, postmodern values. Participation in Zen is quite costly since Zen teachers often expect adherents to participate regularly in group meditation retreats that last several days.

Future Challenges

In spite of these exceptions, Stark and Finke (2000) are correct when they link high tension, religious commitment, and cultural conservatism in modern twentieth-century societies. I would like to conjecture that this situation arose as influential modernist thinkers promoted faith in the potential perfection of both society and science. The ruling elites of industrializing Europe and North America were mostly technocrats with more faith in omniscient social engineering than in an omniscient God. High tension in modern society thus implies a rejection of a social value system that celebrates supposedly scientific social engineering, while tension in pre-modern societies often implied rejection of systems that celebrated war and conquest. But absolute faith in one's own prescriptions unites the modern technocratic state and modern high-tension Christianity.

Friedrich Hayek's work in economics (1937, 1945) and psychology (1952) set the stage for a reassessment of the ability of planners and scientists to create a perfect society. The gist of his message is that the cognitive powers of humans are never sufficient for a detailed understanding of society. But long before that, Charles Darwin (1859) had shown that a literal reading of the Bible is untenable. With the spread of higher education and the implosion of the Soviet Bloc, Western populations are gradually, albeit slowly, catching up with Darwin and Hayek.

The postmodern value system is associated with declining confidence in all types of authority figure, whether politician, scientist or priest. People with a postmodern value structure tend to spend more time thinking about spiritual concerns such as the meaning of life and morality (Inglehart 1997). These trends offer opportunities for religious innovators, but constitute a challenge for authoritarian creeds.

Individuals do not generally choose religious organizations on doctrinal grounds (Stark and Finke 2000: 116-118). Most potential new adherents are recruited by friends or relatives. Subsequently, recruits will convert if they

expect the rewards to exceed the costs, where the rewards are contingent on “belief in, and knowledge of, the explanations sustained by a religious organization” (Stark and Finke 2000: 103). It seems reasonable to assume that such belief is more likely to be forthcoming if the doctrine harmonizes well with the value system of the individual.

The importance of social networks in religious recruitment implies that Christian organizations have an inherent recruitment advantage in American society. Most Americans are Christians who are for the most part connected to other Christians. People who were raised as Christians also have a greater stake in Christianity, since they have accumulated religious capital that is costly to give up. Christianity thus benefits in proportion to its attained popularity¹². A prediction is therefore that if a large Christian church manages to combine high tension with postmodern values, it should have extraordinarily good prospects for long-term commitment growth. Perhaps the high-tension religion of the future will resemble a doctoral program more than a military academy¹³.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Gus diZerega, Bob Mulligan, Aidan Walsh, Bill Dennis, and Joshua Hall for valuable comments and suggestions.

² In this paper, spontaneous order and cosmos are interchangeable terms, as are the terms planned or made order and taxis. The underlying theory is based on Hayekian theory (Hayek, 1982, Chapter 2). Gus diZerega (2008) coined the term “systemic resource.” My use of the term is the same as his. The religious cosmos, the market order, and democracy are my preferred terms for the religious, economic, and political spontaneous orders.

³ For a discussion of the relationship between the causal and evidential utility of a theory, see Andersson (2008a: Chapter 1), and Nozick (1993).

⁴ This figure is based on the results of the 2005 wave of the World Values Survey. Official statistics from the Church of Sweden show that nominal members accounted for 73 percent of Sweden’s total population in 2008, or 6.8 million members.

⁵ Again, there is a parallel with profit-seeking organizations. A hierarchically organized denomination with top-down planning is undoubtedly an organizational unit, whereas a loose association of self-governing congregations is not. Thus, concepts such as “hybrids” and “weak links” are as relevant in this context as in the analysis of firms.

⁶ At a more general level, Robert Mulligan (2008) draws attention to the general evolutionary fitness of religious organizations that promote low time preferences. For example, a concern with ancestors, rebirth or the afterlife will tend to make savings and future-oriented investments more attractive, which will facilitate the accumulation of capital. Such a tendency would be especially pronounced in

societies with low life expectancies. Moreover, individuals with more material resources will have an advantage in procreation and territorial conflicts, which could therefore be a factor that helps disseminate religious organizations with psychological orientations as well as behavioral rules that promote low time preferences and thus economic growth.

⁷ This is based on my own calculations, using the most recent data from the 83 countries that carried out surveys between 1990 and 2008 and the most recent data from Transparency International (2009), Freedom House (2009), the United Nations Development Programme (2009), and the Fraser Institute (2009).

⁸ While religious organizations are constrained by their chosen doctrines, many doctrines are in fact quite flexible as to which part of the doctrine becomes dominant as a generator of behavioral constraints. This may account for the extraordinary variety of behavioral rules that are associated with Christian churches. The doctrine (the Bible and in some cases church tradition) may be interpreted as the universal literal truth, a universal truth that is applied to the historical conditions of the time in which it was written, or the fallible human interpretation of a truthful core message. Whatever the general theological doctrine, the behavioral rules of a specific church may focus on what it considers to be the most effective rule for excluding undesirable free-riders (e.g. a fundamentalist church may choose to focus on sobriety rather than head coverings, and to interpret sobriety in the strictest possible sense as a total prohibition of the use of mind-altering *and* mood-altering substances, rather than as a less demanding rule that is confined to conspicuous drunkenness). The general implication is that a strict church with rules that reflect a declining value system may choose to refocus their rules by choosing new exclusion rules that are equally strict yet more attractive to desirable new members. An example could be the increasing tolerance (in conservative churches) of fashionable clothes and music at the same time as participation requirements have become more costly for many in opportunity cost terms (given the increasing variety of alternative leisure pursuits that are available to churchgoers).

⁹ This is true of both North America and Western Europe, although the results of the World Values Survey (accessed 2009) indicate that the social values of the American population were slightly less postmodern in 2006 than in 1999.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, the UU does not meet the criterion that a religious organization should promise supernatural rewards. While originally a heterodox Christian church, UU is no longer a Christian organization. Instead, it may be described as a secular facilitator of dialogue between different faith traditions, including three UU groups that organize Buddhists, Christians, and Pagans, respectively.

¹¹ Quotation from www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/welcomingcongregation

¹² Individuals are more likely to be connected to other individuals who belong to a large religion than to a small one, *ceteris paribus*. But the cost of joining a religion, given its level of tension, depends on the *religious capital* of the potential convert (Stark and Finke, 2000: 118-125). Thus, people who have been socialized into a Christian faith will find it less costly to join a Christian organization, since the marginal cost of denomination-specific doctrinal knowledge within Christian faiths is lower than the marginal cost of learning the doctrine of a religion of which they have no prior knowledge. In addition, “distant” religions imply opportunity costs associated with giving up one’s religious capital (which has both human and social capital attributes). Consequently, societies lacking in religious commitment (few religious connections) and religious socialization (low religious capital) should only experience substantial effects of religious deregulation after a long period of time (cf. Ormerod 2002). On the other hand, the lack of specifically Christian socialization in such societies implies

greater opportunities for non-Christian religious organizations than in the United States.

¹³ In my experience, doctoral students tend to have greater faith than members of low-tension religions in their respective hard-core propositions.

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