

Doing Field Studies of Religious Movements: An Agenda

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Although the social scientific study of religion has seen the accumulation of numerous case studies, comparative work involving substantial numbers of cases is rare. In the absence of an accepted agenda for field research, field studies contain information relevant to the study at hand, but do not add systematically to a cumulative database. By contrast, field studies in anthropology may contain idiosyncratic information relevant to the author's interests, but an existing research agenda defines information researchers are expected to include, which has produced an expanding cross-cultural database. In this paper, we propose elements of a research agenda for the study of religious movements, including information related to movements' organizational history and context, mobilization, organization, governance, and outcomes. While this preliminary agenda is subject to refinement by others, it provides a starting point for the accumulation of comparable cases, and a basis for the comparative study of religious movements.

Although the social scientific study of religion abounds in case studies, it is notably deficient in comparisons involving a significant number of cases. Why? Because incomparability is intrinsic to a discipline without an agenda, where field researchers go forth to observe and report whatever interests them, making no effort to add to a cumulative database. Although anthropology is also based primarily on field studies of single cases, it has long benefited from comparative analyses of the hundreds of comparable cases coded from these field studies—such superb databases as the Human Relations Area Files and the many forms and editions of the Standard Cross Cultural Sample and the Atlas of World Cultures. In contrast, students of religion can point only to two substantial comparative data sets, one of sects, the other of cults, each limited to American groups, and each of which suffers from having been able to code only a few, quite gross, features (Stark, Bainbridge, and Doyle 1979; Stark and Bainbridge 1981).

The key to anthropology's capacity to create databases from ethnographic accounts is its possession of a research agenda. For far more than a century, each anthropologist going forth to study some premodern society has been provided with clear guidelines about what information he or she is *expected* to obtain (e.g., Freilich 1970; Levine and Campbell 1973; Malinowski 1935, ch. 11, [1922] 1951, Introduction; Murdock [1938] 1950, 1981; Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland [1874] 1951). Granted, each field researcher is free to pursue idiosyncratic topics, but each also is expected to make the standard contribution to the expanding cross-cultural database. It is this that has made the results of field work cumulative and worth far more than the sum of the individual findings. Consider this example. Anthropologist Peter Lawrence (1964) found there was no connection between religion and morality among the Garia of New Guinea; J. P. Mills (1922) reported a similar lack of connection among the Lhotas, but Reo Fortune (1935) found that among the Manus of New Guinea religion was the primary

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basis for morality. To many sociologists of religion, that might seem like a comparative “finding.” However, having a research agenda specifying interest in this aspect of cultures, it is possible for anthropologists to create a database that reveals that in 244 premodern societies that acknowledge the existence of a “High God,” 58 percent do not link religion and morality (Stark forthcoming). *That* is a comparative finding worthy of the name. And powerful generalization is possible *only* because 244 anthropologists reported that “their” culture had a High God and noted whether or not religion and morality were linked.

We propose that it is time for students of religious groups and movements to emulate anthropology; thus we have drafted an initial research agenda to guide future field studies (see summary in the Appendix). Obviously, our intention is not to limit the scope of these studies, but to greatly expand the comparative contributions of each. As is true in anthropology, we propose to establish minimal responsibilities for ethnographers—to suggest that these are the basic facts one must attempt to discover and report *if* one’s case is to become a useful one.

We anticipate that the existence of this agenda will stimulate rather than stifle ethnographic research on sects and cults. It is not liberating to go into the field with little sense of what is to be done as we can attest from experience. For example, when Stark set out with John Lofland to explain conversions to the Unification Church (Lofland and Stark 1965), they relied entirely on narrative field notes rather than setting up systematic databases. As a result, they ended up with far too little information on nonconverts—people who had a significant period of contact with the Moonies but never joined. Explaining why some did join required data on negative cases, so their explanation could not be tested nearly so thoroughly as they would have liked. We do not propose that the types of data we mention here are all that an ethnographer should study about a given group. What we have done is combine our own experience in field research with the requirements for comparative coding. Presumably this initial version will be enhanced and revised by others. But what is vital now is that *some* agenda, even a somewhat deficient one, exist. Many of the points included below are obvious. But anyone who has struggled to code the existing case studies knows that nothing about religious groups is so obvious that it is not missing or inadequately reported in the available literature on most groups.

I. ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY AND CONTEXT

1. Identity

Pseudonyms should not be used for groups or locations if this can be avoided, although it may be appropriate to shield the identity of individual members. The name of the founder(s), as well as relevant biographical information, should be included. When real names of groups are given, it is possible for several people to study the same group, perhaps sequentially. At the very least, provision ought to be made to make the real name of a group available to other legitimate scholars—perhaps a registry could be established by one of the learned societies.

2. Descent

Most religious movements arise within ideological and/or social families. They split off from another group or they are “copied” or “prompted” by another group. Leaders of a new religious group were often trained in a parent group (see section 13 below). While the popular press is inclined to refer to any group outside of the largest denominations as a “cult,” the sociology of religion distinguishes between cults, sects, and churches. Unfortunately, research into cults, sects, and churches has been confused by a multitude of conflicting definitions. For example, researchers have distinguished sects from churches based on the manner the group was founded, the size of the group, the average income level of its members, the characteristics of the group’s leader, and the content of the group’s doctrines (Stark and Bainbridge 1979).

Church-sect theory may well be the “cornerstone of the sociology of religion” (Bainbridge 1997:38), but even cornerstones must be clearly defined. We suggest the following definitions (Stark and Bainbridge 1979, 1981). A *church* is a conventional religious organization, i.e., an organization that supports the norms of its surrounding society. A *sect movement* is a deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices. A *cult movement* is a deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices. Thus, sects are movements that split off from churches because of a dispute over beliefs and practices. Should members of a church disagree about how members should behave or what they should believe, those who lose the argument may form a sect. Cults, on the other hand, are new religious movements in that their religious culture is too novel to be classified as belonging within the conventional religious traditions of the society in which they are being observed. Cults may appear via two means: innovation and importation. Innovation occurs when an individual starts a new cult within a society, often because of having had what he or she believes to be a revelation. Importation occurs when a group that is well established in one society is brought into another society. Thus, Catholicism is a cult when missionaries bring it to a non-Christian society and ISKCON is a sect in India, but a cult in France. Cults, too, can split; many cults have broken away from Scientology. It seems needlessly confusing to refer to them as cult-sects, but it has proved very useful to be able to assemble such schismatic groups into families (cf. Bainbridge 1985; Wallis 1985).

Given the large body of theory that has grown around the cult/sect/church distinction, it is vital for researchers to gather information on the group’s descent. If the group split off from another group, we should know the group from which it split. We should know what issues led to the split, when it occurred, and, if possible, the names of the key figures on both sides of the schism, as well as the demographic characteristics of both the members who formed the sect and the members who remained with the larger group. Furthermore, we should know how the schism occurred. Did the group split off from a larger group because that larger group was too strict (a church movement) or was the larger group not strict enough (a sect movement)? Or were ambitions of those leading the schismatic group the main motive? Interesting research on the effects of network ties would be possible if researchers would gather relationship information. How were the members of the schism related to one another? Were they friends or acquaintances? Relatives by marriage or by birth? If the object of study is not the result of a schism, then we need information on how it appeared. Was the group imported from another country? Did the group appear via personal revelation or innovation? Researchers should gather as many details and narratives about the group’s appearance as possible.

3. Time Line

Many interpretations hinge on knowing what came when. For example, groups often shift their orientation as to growth, usually beginning with the intention to become very large and later shifting to an exclusive orientation—a “saving remnant” claim. Did this shift cause a decline in the growth rate of the movement, or was it a rationalization adopted in response to a dismal conversion curve? To the greatest extent possible, researchers should construct a time-line chart arranging important events and developments in sequence. These developments would include the founding of the group, significant changes in doctrine or strategies, leadership shakeups, schisms, dates of prophecies, and the like.

4. Membership Statistics

Along with a group time line, a parallel record of the group’s growth rate would make it possible to assess the effects of critical events on membership levels. While the collection of these data will prove challenging in many cases, researchers should at least make a serious effort to obtain them. Additionally, membership figures are needed because a group’s size is one indicator

of its success, affecting both its longevity and its impact (see section 14 below). Many case studies should and probably would have been ignored had the reports made it evident that a religious “group” amounted to little more than one person and his or her set of writings. Michael Williams (1996) suggests that this was true of some of the heretical “groups” in early Christian history, especially some identified as gnostics. Current examples can be found in many entries in Gordon Melton’s (1999) *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. But even when groups do attract a significant following, we need to know how many and when. Ideally, we should have a curve of membership statistics, from the start to the present.

5. Demography

Most movements have a substantial oversupply of women (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Stark 2000). To ask why the sex ratio is more equal among the Mormons or followers of the Unification Church may be to isolate a vital difference. It would be informative if we could compare “male” and “female” religious movements, especially if the comparisons could be rendered reliable by being based on several hundred cases.

At present, a majority of American Jehovah’s Witnesses are nonwhite and Hispanic (Stark and Iannaccone 1997). The majority of Seventh-Day Adventists in New York are Hispanic immigrants (Lawson 1998). In contrast, many movements, such as recent ones founded by gurus from India, greatly over-recruit highly educated whites, especially from irreligious families or from secular Jewish backgrounds (Goldman 2000; Stark and Finke 2000). Why?

The average convert to most new religious movements is *young*; the average convert to Christian Science was elderly (Stark 1998). This information makes it likely that groups differ substantially in terms of *fertility*. And that, of course, raises issues concerning socialization into the faith and rates of retention of the “born” members.

Resolving these and other issues requires that researchers collect data providing a demographic profile of the group’s membership. These data should, at a minimum, include the sex, race, ethnicity, and age distributions of group members. Where possible, changes in these distributions occurring over time should be included. As with the overall membership figures, it would undoubtedly prove instructive to chart major demographic changes against the group’s time line.

6. Locations and Ecologies

Unlike most cultures studied by anthropologists, religious movements may move around and may also maintain several locations. It is important to identify and date these, and relate other developments to the relevant locale. Where did the group start? Where did they go? When and why? Of course, these are obvious matters. But that did not prevent Michael Barkun (1986) from associating the Shakers with the various “social calamities” that beset New York’s “Burned Over” district in the 1840s, despite the fact that the group not only did not originate there, but of its 21 colonies (in the 1840s), only the very short-lived Groveland colony was located in the area in question. This fault is shared by the literature, in most of which the Shakers could as well have lived anywhere.

Additionally, tracking the location of a movement is important because as a group moves from one location to another it may encounter very different ecologies, some of which may be favorable while others are not. Several ecological variables affect the likelihood that a religious movement will prosper in a given setting. First, to what extent does the state regulate the religious economy? Where the coercive power of the state is used to support a religious monopoly and suppress competitors, alternative groups will encounter obstacles ranging from petty inconveniences to violent persecution. Second, even where state regulation is weak and the religious economy is pluralistic, a new group’s ability to secure a market share will depend on the nature of the competition. If, for example, available organizations offer mainly conventional and fairly undemanding

religion, an opportunity exists for an innovative and relatively strict group to gain adherents from that segment of the population whose needs are not being met. This implies that, third, where rates of participation in conventional religious bodies are low, conditions are favorable for the appearance of new religious movements (Stark and Finke 2000).

Yet the relationships of these ecological variables to movement success may not be linear. As Bainbridge (1997) has suggested, a completely unregulated religious economy may be too chaotic for any religious group to make much headway. Further, very low participation rates may reflect extreme levels of geographic mobility that prevent both conventional and new religious groups from building substantial memberships. A better understanding of these relationships will be possible when researchers gather more complete data about the ecological settings in which the movements they study are situated. Additionally, as we noted earlier, religious movements are geographically mobile and may be located in more than one area. A group that establishes itself in a pluralistic, unregulated religious economy, and then opens a branch in a monopolistic and highly regulated setting, will experience profound challenges that may require substantial innovation if the movement is to survive in the new context. To trace the effects of ecological variables, we need to track movements' locations and collect information about the range of religious economies in which they operate.

II. MOBILIZATION

7. Recruitment Techniques

Religious movements add to their membership both through fertility, mentioned earlier, and by recruiting outsiders. Social networks play a central role in recruitment: groups tend to grow most rapidly when members maintain or form attachments to outsiders (Bainbridge 1997; Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). The extensive ties of early Christians to pagans, including high rates of exogamous marriage, were critical to the spread of Christianity through the pagan world (Stark 1996). Similarly, the Mormons have maintained open networks and are currently one of the most rapidly expanding major religious groups.

Yet some groups restrict or require renunciation of external ties. How do these groups attract new members? The Amish have grown through high levels of fertility, but many groups seek converts through "cold" proselytizing—going door-to-door, approaching strangers on the street, or staging public events. How successful are these methods? When the groups that use them grow, are these strategies responsible? The Mormons do extensive door-to-door work, but this accounts for a very small proportion of their growth compared to network connections (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). It may be that even groups that formally require abandonment of outside ties actually gain many of their members through networks, as when several friends join at once, and then sever all ties to those who remain behind. Or group members may renounce old ties and then try to form new ones for recruiting purposes. The Family (formerly the Children of God) for years had a "forsake all" policy that included both worldly goods and relationships. Converts were sought primarily through street witnessing until a new strategy was devised in which members formed sexual relationships with prospective recruits—a kind of "hot-and-cold" proselytizing that paradoxically targets strangers *and* relies on close attachments (Bainbridge 1997).

To distinguish between the importance groups place on different recruitment techniques and the actual importance of these techniques to the growth of the movement, we need to collect several types of information. First, what strategies do members claim are most important? Second, to which strategies do they commit the most resources? Third, what were the critical factors in current members' own conversions? Here researchers must bear in mind that, once a conversion has taken place, the member's account of it is likely to stress factors that are consistent with the group's doctrine. That is, a member's "testimonial" may emphasize the person's search for truth or a divine revelation and overlook the role of networks and other factors of interest to social

scientists. But it should be fairly easy to ask informants where and how they first encountered the group, whether they knew anyone in the group before they joined, how close the relationships were, and so on.

8. Defection

While numerous field studies in the sociology of religion have provided us with data on the factors encouraging affiliation, we have much less data on the reasons people defect from religious groups (Bromley 1988). Despite a voluminous literature in psychiatry arguing that new religious groups “brainwash” members to force affiliation and prevent defection, the high attrition rates experienced by new religious movements suggest that members frequently decide to exit religious groups (Wright 1991). Of course, research on affiliation also suggests reasons people may defect. As noted, people join a religious group because they have formed affective ties to group members that overbalance their attachments to outsiders. It follows that members will leave a group if their bonds to group members weaken. Members may also defect if they develop strong, extra-group attachments or repair previously broken attachments (Wright and Piper 1986).

Members may leave their group for other reasons besides attachment, however. As religious movements develop they will experience increasing friction between members with high levels of power (in terms of occupation, income, and education) and those with low levels of power. Powerful members will tend to have the most control over the movement and tend to prefer earthly rewards to promises of rewards in the afterlife. Therefore, the powerful will attempt to change the movement’s doctrine to allow earthly rewards. In other words, a person who can afford an expensive house will want a religion that allows him or her that house. Therefore, members may defect if their personal status changes or if the group itself changes in strictness. Members who increase in wealth or status and find that their religion does not accommodate those changes may leave the group. Conversely, a member who suffers a decrease in wealth or status may become disenchanted with the group’s focus.

A group may also suffer from high defection rates if it offers empirically testable beliefs. In some cases, empirical tests will support the group’s claims, as when treatment by Christian Science practitioners at the turn of the 20th century compared favorably with that of conventional medicine (Stark 1998). But a failed prophecy is likely to produce disappointment and/or anger among the ranks (Bader 1999; Bainbridge 1997; Singelenberg 1989; Stark and Iannaccone 1997). In fact, some groups never recover from the decreased morale that follows disconfirmation.

While many factors may create a desire to defect, it may be more costly to leave a group than to remain a member. For example, despite numerous failed prophecies, the Morrisites, an offshoot of the Mormons, lost only a few dissenters. The costs of leaving the Morrisites were quite high (Halford, Anderson, and Clark 1981). Many members had recently immigrated from Europe and had no extra-group contacts. Furthermore, the group did not allow departing members to take any property with them and often threatened those members with violent death (Halford, Anderson, and Clark 1981). Groups such as the Amish also impose high costs on defection—a member who leaves is “shunned” by the community and forbidden contact with family members and friends left behind.

Clearly, the field researcher will experience difficulties gathering information on defectors. Religious groups are often unwilling to discuss members who have left the fold. If possible, the researcher should attempt to answer several questions. What is the group’s defection rate? Has the group made any changes to doctrine or recruitment methods in an attempt to decrease rates of defection? Has the group experienced high rates of defection following a change in direction or doctrines? Does the group offer empirically testable beliefs that may lead to defection? Researchers should also gather information on the potential costs of defection. Are group members allowed to take their property with them upon leaving the group? Are defectors “shunned” or threatened by existing members upon leaving?

If the researcher studies a religious group over time, it may be possible to interview members who defect during the period of study. Researchers should try to gather as much information from individual defectors as possible. Did the defector have a falling out with group members? Did the member form ties outside the group that led to the defection? Did the member have some sort of change in wealth or status that led to a disagreement with group doctrine? Does the member's defection appear to be related to failed prophecies or other empirically testable beliefs? What were the costs and benefits of his or her defection, i.e., what did the member have to leave behind in order to defect?

III. ORGANIZATION

9. Rites and Rituals

Second only to beliefs, rites and rituals are the aspects of religious movements that are most fully reported in most field studies. The primary shortcoming here is that in telling what rites and rituals members perform, too often little or nothing is said about *how* they perform them. What proportion take an active part? How highly scripted is the activity? What is the level of emotional intensity? Are there some present who display distance or lack of commitment? When they were trying to assess who were authentic converts to the Unification Church, Lofland and Stark noticed that during group prayers, two men of questionable commitment looked around and exchanged grins while everyone else kept their eyes tightly closed. The frequency and character of rites and rituals is closely related to levels of group solidarity.

10. Group Solidarity and Dynamics

Congregations benefit greatly from an enthusiastic membership. Everyone always attends church and people often participate in activities outside of the weekly service. There are more volunteers than needed to clean the church, construct new buildings, provide aid to sick members, and donate money. When not participating in church activities, members try to spread the group's message. Given these benefits, how do religious groups foster an enthusiastic membership? Some factors that increase the commitment of members, such as increasing costs and levels of tension, are discussed elsewhere in this paper. But another important factor influencing how passionately members feel about their faith is group solidarity—how attached do members feel to one another? Do members feel strongly connected to the group and have a sense of group identity?

While most religious groups hope to grow, membership increases in a congregation can actually reduce the commitment and enthusiasm of all members if not managed correctly. Members of a congregation gain confidence in their religion to the extent that they are close to and spend time with others who express confidence in it. In a 10-person sect, every person in the group will know the others. In such a tight-knit social network, members tend to form close relationships with one another, increasing overall levels of confidence in the group's beliefs (Wilson 1978). As groups increase in size, the number of potential two-person relationships increases exponentially. A congregation of 50 members has 1,225 possible two-person relationships. In a congregation of 400 members the number of possible relationships increases to 79,800. Thus, as groups become larger, it rapidly becomes impossible for all members to know one another. In other words, the social networks within the group decrease in their density.

As the density of a social network decreases, so does group solidarity. Stark and Glock's (1968) survey asked church members in northern California how many of their five closest friends belong to their congregation. As group size increased, members became much less likely to have all of their friends within the group. Approximately 50 percent of those in churches with less than 50 members said that four or five of their closest friends belonged to their group. By comparison, only 15 percent of respondents in groups larger than 400 counted four to five of their closest

friends as group members. Thus, in less dense social networks, people do not gain reinforcement from their friends because most of them do not even belong to the group. Outsiders are not only unable to provide support for the member's beliefs, they will often display skepticism. Therefore, we can expect larger groups, with less dense social networks, to display relatively low levels of solidarity and enthusiasm.

Researchers should attempt to gather information on group solidarity. They should include a detailed description of a typical service. Are members active or passive participants? Is the service carefully scripted or spontaneous, emotionally expressive or subdued? What is the extent of volunteerism? The research should attempt to gauge the density of the social network within the group. It would be especially helpful if researchers asked members how many of their five closest friends and how many of their family members belong to their group.

Some groups, such as the Mormons, are aware of the problems caused by membership growth and often split wards when they exceed 300 members. Many of the "megachurches" also attempt to maintain group solidarity by creating study groups or "cells." Thus, a congregation that appears to an outsider to be 1,000 individuals, may actually consist of 100 tightly-knit study groups. Therefore, researchers should find out if the group enacts policies to try and stem the perils of growth. Are members of the congregation split into small study groups or cells? If so, how often do these cells meet and what is their typical size? Do members typically regard a subgroup as their primary membership? Does the group have a policy in place allowing or requiring that a congregation split upon reaching a certain size? If so, describe the policy and how it is enacted.

11. Doctrines, Costs, and Commitment

A large body of theory in the sociology of religion argues that doctrines have social consequences—whether the "Protestant Ethic" or Bible literalism. And the core of all religious doctrines is a conception of God. Whether a group conceives of "God" as some sort of supernatural but impersonal essence, or as a conscious being, has profound social implications (Stark 2000, forthcoming). Field studies of religious groups, therefore, should return with a full and clear picture of what the group believes. We should know about the group's image of God(s), including their scope and their moral reliability and outlook. We should also know how the group views the prospect of life after death. What do members expect to experience after death—reincarnation, "nirvana," an afterlife in paradise? Further, we should know the group's conception of sin. What behaviors does the group consider to be sins, if any? How are sins dealt with by the group and how do one's sins affect the chances of life after death? If the group is an initiation cult or gnostic group, then the researcher should differentiate between what is believed by "insiders" and initiates and what is presented to outsiders or novices.

In addition to describing group doctrines, researchers need to gauge the "costs" of those doctrines. Some religions are more costly than others, requiring a greater outlay of time, effort, and resources to remain a member in good standing. Costs of membership also increase with the degree of "tension" between the group and the larger society: How distinctive is the movement's culture and how strict are its requirements? Building upon the work of Johnson (1963), religious groups can be located along an axis of tension between the group and its sociocultural environment. The higher a group's tension, the more costly its membership. For example, life as a Hare Krishna requires that one actively proselytize, give up one's possessions, and set oneself apart from mainstream society by adopting a unique style of appearance and dress. The doctrines of some religious groups place them in such high levels of tension with their surrounding culture that they clash with authorities.

Other groups make relatively few requirements of members. For example, a typical New Age group does not require its members to dress a particular way, work at a particular occupation, try to convert new members, or even accept any specific beliefs beyond a general acceptance

of supernatural phenomena. Most groups fall in between these two extremes at a medium level of strictness. The Mormons forbid the use of alcohol and caffeine and require members to tithe and to participate in a two-year mission. But Mormons are not required to live apart from non-Mormons, are not forbidden to marry outside the faith, and do not have any prohibitions on their occupation or income level.

Field studies should return with detailed information about the costs of participation in the religious group. How strict are the group's requirements? What are participants required to do to remain members in good standing? What are members forbidden to do? Further, we need to know the amount of tension with the surrounding society caused by the group's beliefs. Does the group engage in activities or have beliefs that the majority would label deviant? Do outsiders tend to view the group negatively?

In addition to data on the costs of participation, field researchers should gather information on members' commitment. As in any other collectivity, religious groups are forced to deal with the "free-rider" problem. Some members would prefer to reap the benefits of belonging to a religious organization without having to pay anything in return. Naturally, groups plagued with free-riders will have difficulty growing, as "opportunistic behavior leads to . . . suboptimal participation" (Iannaccone 1995:287). One way religious groups can reduce the number of free-riders is to make costly demands upon members (Iannaccone 1992, 1995). Requiring members to dress or act in a "deviant" manner or prohibiting them from engaging in valued behaviors, such as sexual relations or employment, makes the cost of minimal participation outweigh the benefits. This interesting line of research suggests that groups with high costs also gain a valuable reward: a highly committed membership. Once the high costs of a group have weeded out free-riders, what remain are strong members willing to work hard. Following this reasoning, very costly groups should also have the most vigorous membership.

To provide the information necessary to examine this relationship, field researchers should attempt to gather data on the level of member commitment. What is the average frequency of attendance at group services? How much time do members spend in group activities outside of services? What percentage of his or her income does the average member give to the group? Also, what is the level of members' commitment to the group's doctrines? As Bader (1999) notes, the members of the UFO Center varied widely in their commitment to the group's prophecy that the world would end in 1998. In fact, members had difficulty even recalling their predictions at a later date. In contrast, members of The Family who used sex to attract members risked infection with HIV. Groups that require little from members also tend to experience low commitment to their beliefs. Consequently, the field researcher should attempt to gauge the average level of member commitment specifically to the group's doctrines.

12. Funding

All social movements must have some form of funding to survive and religious movements are no exception. The sources of financial support will have consequences for the movement. A group that receives a substantial proportion of its budget from wealthy patrons may be prosperous for a time but is in danger of going broke if patrons withdraw their support. To keep the money coming, such groups may be forced into compromises they would prefer not to make. In contrast, a group that generates its own support may face some degree of financial hardship but is more likely to maintain its independence. Groups may support themselves through donations from members, who contribute a share of their personal incomes from regular employment, as is the case in most conventional churches. Or donations may be solicited from the public, perhaps in exchange for literature, flowers, music, and the like. Groups may engage in communal production and support themselves on the profits. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Unification Church is its capacity to found and manage very profitable business ventures, making it possible for the group to sustain very significant but costly activities such as the *Washington Times* and *Insight Magazine*.

Once the money comes in, what happens to it? Religious movements often are suspected of collecting donations under false pretenses or of spending them in ways donors may not have intended. Donations that are spent on leaders' own comforts may return to haunt them, as Jim Bakker discovered to his immense regret. Yet suspicions of unethical use of funds may be unfounded and merely part of a general antipathy toward unconventional religious groups among the public. Therefore, researchers should report not only the sources of a group's funding, but also how the money is distributed and spent, information about the group's accounting system, and any evidence of deception in the collection, distribution, or spending of funds.

IV. GOVERNANCE

13. Leadership

The leadership of a religious movement is a critical part of its operation, and raises several important issues that field researchers should address. First, what is the basis of leaders' authority? Religious authority requires some form of doctrinal justification, such as the receipt of divine revelation. Yet where personal revelation qualifies an individual for leadership, competing revelations raise the potential for schism unless access to divine inspiration can be controlled. There are several ways of accomplishing this: a group may define the founder and perhaps his or her immediate successors as the only legitimate vehicles of new revelation; the holders of certain positions may be seen as the only rightful recipients of revelation; or revelations may be considered legitimate only if consistent with previously established doctrine.

Alternatively, legitimate authority may be tied to certain procedural rules, as with the apostolic succession. Divine revelations aside, these rules may also concern the more concrete credentials of prospective leaders. Leaders, and especially founders, usually have relevant prior training. Sect leaders usually come from the lower or younger clergy of the parent organization. Cult leaders also often "train" in another group—Scientology has been the source of leadership for many movements. Movement leaders may receive training from parents or other relatives (Bainbridge 1997). Some scholars now think Jesus was once a follower of John the Baptist. The secular backgrounds of leaders are also instructive: Love Israel was a very successful car salesman before founding the Love Family. Leaders' training and relevant prior experience of any kind should be reported.

A related issue concerns the processes by which leaders are elevated and demoted. A group that requires would-be leaders to acquire extensive credentials that are controlled by a strong, well-defined hierarchy will look very different from one in which anyone who hears the call can set up shop as a leader. The question is: Are leaders selected by an existing leadership hierarchy or are they self-appointed? The answer has consequences for the movement's doctrinal consistency, its cohesiveness, and its governance. Further, who has the authority to demote leaders, under what conditions, and by what procedures? A system in which leaders can be replaced only in carefully defined circumstances, using established procedures that involve more than one person in the decision, and that include some right to appeal will clearly be more democratic than one where leaders can be terminated on the whim of the person at the top.

This raises another issue, namely, the powers leaders possess. Is the power structure of the movement centralized or diffuse? Is the leadership style autocratic or democratic? A religious group may establish a system of checks and balances, comparable to the relationship between a parish priest and the vestry. Or decision making may involve extensive participation by rank-and-file members. And what is the scope of leaders' power? In some movements, leaders may intervene in virtually all areas of members' lives, even to the extent of selecting members' marriage partners, as has been the case in the Unification Church. In other movements, leaders' prerogatives may be much more limited. What sanctions are leaders able to impose on subordinates and how effective are they?

Some assessment of leaders' mental health is also pertinent, mainly because the field has so long "explained" religious founders as psychotic. There is very little evidence of this (indeed, the thing about psychotics is their *inability* to cope). The only alternative to psychopathology that the literature has tended to allow for founders of religious movements, especially those based on revelations, is fraud. Often this is patently false: the founder did things not to his or her personal advantage but that better served the group or its doctrines. On the other hand, there were the Bakkers busy exploiting their television followers.

To summarize, researchers should report full details on their group's doctrinal and procedural bases of legitimate authority, as well as leaders' backgrounds, both religious and secular. Additionally, the group's internal programs for leadership training, as well as credential requirements, should be described. Procedures for promoting and demoting leaders are essential, as are descriptions of leaders' decision-making and sanctioning powers. Materials pertinent to the mental health and sincerity of founders and leaders should be presented. These would include any evidence of mental illness; past criminal records; covert violations of significant group norms (drugs, sex, etc.); covert religious seeking (frauds sometimes believe in other faiths); and any clear-cut instances of deception (faked photographs, miracles, etc.).

V. OUTCOMES

14. Success and Failure

The success or failure of religious movements, as with social movements generally, is difficult to assess (Gamson 1990). Obviously, a movement that survives seems more successful than one that dies, but just as we can "call no man happy until he is dead," the lifespan of a religious movement cannot be determined until it has ended. Until then, failure is always a possibility and may be just around the corner: in the first century, the success of Christianity was an open question. Even if we could see into the future, decide on a "reasonable movement life expectancy," and consider a group successful if it achieves it, such decisions are necessarily arbitrary. Is a successful movement one that lasts a millennium, a century, or a decade?

As a practical matter, the success of a movement is often gauged by its growth curve, and we have already stressed the importance of collecting membership statistics. Yet groups that fail to achieve high rates of growth may still be able to provide much satisfaction to those they do attract. Groups may maintain high morale in the face of low growth rates by redefining their mission, as with the shift to a "saving remnant" claim mentioned earlier. Moreover, a movement experiencing a significant decline in numbers may contain a highly committed core of members. This core may keep the organization together through a period of abeyance so that it is prepared to act when recruiting conditions become more favorable (Taylor 1989). As is true of group longevity, outcome assessments based on growth curves are necessarily provisional.

An alternative way to measure outcomes is to assess a movement's impact, both on the religious economy (defined locally or more broadly) and on the surrounding culture. The New Age, for example, is a diffuse movement and its actual number of participants is difficult to assess. The amount of media attention generated by the movement would seem to qualify it as "significant." Even so, before we accept that the New Age movement "permeates Western culture" (Bainbridge 1997:363), attention should be paid to easily available "hard" data. It seems significant that in 1990, amid immense journalistic interest in the New Age, the *New Age Journal*—an attractive and well-marketed color magazine—had a circulation of fewer than 150,000 copies (virtually any magazine will supply audited circulation figures). Also, Barry Kosmin's huge national survey of American religious affiliation estimated that no more than 20,000 people regarded New Age as their primary religious identity (Kosmin and Lachman 1993).

Whether the success of a movement is best judged by membership rates, longevity, or impact is open to debate, but until a consensus is reached, researchers should collect data relevant to as many dimensions of movement outcomes as possible.

VII. METHODS IN THE FIELD

It must be emphasized that the field is a *place* where research is done, not an alternative research method. Hence there is no need to depend on informal observations and guesstimates by informants about things that are best determined by standard quantitative methods such as the survey or the census. In her prize-winning study *The Making of a Moonie* (1984), Eileen Barker did not claim that the British members of the Unification Church that she observed during her field work *seemed* well-adjusted and did not seem to have joined for lack of satisfactory career prospects. Had she done so, many reviewers no doubt would have thundered as to how she knew that. However, because Barker was able to administer a questionnaire to 1,017 people when each showed up for their very first Moonie service, she was able to show that those who ended up joining were the “cream of the crop,” often abandoning quite successful careers. Conducting a survey in the field did not interfere with her admirable use of more traditional field techniques such as watching and listening.

In similar fashion, as part of his current study of The Family (Children of God), William Sims Bainbridge has augmented his field work by administering a questionnaire to 1,125 members. This does not reflect Bainbridge’s preference for computer analysis to direct observation. To the contrary, he is the first serious social scientist to do extensive observations of The Family rather than merely interview ex-members. By combining both methods, Bainbridge has been able to gather solid quantitative evidence concerning many conclusions based initially on his informal observations of the group.

CONCLUSION

We must not allow field research to serve as a refuge for those among us who would avoid the systematic discipline of science. In many respects, field work poses a far greater intellectual challenge and a greater need for rigor than do most purely quantitative studies. Field researchers confront people on their own turf where they must attempt to penetrate appearances and detect misrepresentations and falsehoods. To do this requires every available tool. Moreover, field research makes huge demands on our time, energy, and patience. It requires serious dedication to show up when *they* want to do something, rather than when it would suit us. Sadly, much of this dedicated effort goes to waste to the extent that we pursue unique agendas. Worse yet, most people do only one field study in their careers and do so at the very start of their careers. How odd and how irresponsible of us to send forth beginners to invent an agenda. And how frustrating that we have hundreds of competent, but incomparable, studies. It is our hope that in laying out the beginnings of an agenda for field studies of religious movements we have taken a step toward rectifying this situation.

APPENDIX

A Field Researcher’s Checklist

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY AND CONTEXT

1. Identity: of group, founder(s)
2. Descent: sect or cult? Circumstances of founding?
3. Time line: major events
4. Membership statistics: growth curve
5. Demography: sex, race, ethnicity, age of members
6. Locations and ecologies: including changes

MOBILIZATION

7. Recruitment techniques: proselytizing, network ties
8. Defection: in- vs. out-group ties; status changes; empirically testable beliefs; exit costs

ORGANIZATION

9. Rites and rituals: how formal? how emotional? participation?
10. Group solidarity/dynamics: building enthusiasm, commitment; network density; countering excessive growth
11. Doctrines, costs, and commitment: God(s), the afterlife, sin, information availability; degree of tension with surrounding society; free-riding and costs of membership
12. Funding: sources of support; accounts and accountability

GOVERNANCE

13. Leadership: basis of authority; promotion and demotion; training; scope of leaders' powers; leaders' mental health, fraud, criminal involvement

OUTCOMES

14. Success or failure: growth curve; impact on religious economy, surrounding culture

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