

Innovation in Religious Traditions

Religion and Society 31

GENERAL EDITORS

Luther Martin, *University of Vermont*

Jacques Waardenburg, *University of Lausanne*

Innovation in Religious Traditions

Essays in the Interpretation
of Religious Change

Edited by
Michael A. Williams
Collett Cox
Martin S. Jaffee

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

The vignette on the cover of this book represents the symbol of the *Agathos Daimon*, the snake of the Good Spirit, known from Greek astrological and magical texts. As its Town God, the *Agathos Daimon* was believed to protect Alexandria, which was famous world-wide for its library with precious manuscripts and books.

- © Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Innovation in religious traditions ; essays in the interpretation of religious change / edited by Michael W. Williams, Collett Cox, Martin S. Jaffee.

p. cm. — (Religion and society ; 31)

Revised papers from a seminar conducted by the Comparative Religion Program, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington in 1988.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 3-11-012780-6 (cloth ; acid-free paper)

1. Religion — Congresses. 2. Religions — Congresses. I. Williams, Michael A. II. Cox, Collett, 1950— III. Jaffee, Martin S. IV. Series: Religion and society (Hague, Netherlands) ; 31.

BL21.I466 1992

291—dc20

92-19167

CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek — Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Innovation in religious traditions: essays in the interpretation of religious change / ed. by Michael A. Williams ... — Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1992

(Religion and society ; 31)

ISBN 3-11-012780-6

NE: Williams, Michael A. [Hrsg.]; GT

© Copyright 1992 by Walter de Gruyter & Co., D-1000 Berlin 30.

All rights reserved, including those of translation into foreign languages. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form — by photoprint, microfilm, or any other means — nor transmitted nor translated into a machine language without written permission from the publisher.

Disk conversion: Satzpunkt Ewert, Braunschweig. — Printing: Gerike GmbH, Berlin. — Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin. — Printed in Germany

Acknowledgements

This volume is a product of a faculty research seminar conducted in Seattle, Washington, by the Comparative Religion Program, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington. The faculty of the Comparative Religion Program has previously published two volumes from its faculty seminar series: *Charisma and Sacred Biography*, ed. Michael A. Williams, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Thematic Studies Series, 48: 3–4 (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982); and *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). The seminar that produced the present volume began during the academic year 1986–87, with a series of exploratory discussions and presentations by invited scholars. Drafts of the papers included here were then presented to the seminar during the spring and autumn of 1988, though most of the papers have subsequently undergone significant revision.

The Jackson School has supported the activity of the Comparative Religion Program's faculty seminar for many years, through the provision of funds for bringing visiting scholars to Seattle. We acknowledge our appreciation for this support, without which the seminar would not have had the benefit of the participation of many of the scholars whose contributions now appear in this collection.

A slightly different version of the article by Charles Keyes was presented to the seminar, though it had already been committed for publication in the *International Political Science Review*. We are very thankful to the editors of that journal for their kind permission to publish a revised version of Keyes' article here.

The volume editors express their deep gratitude to Prof. Luther Martin, for his interest in this project and his aid in having these essays included in Mouton de Gruyter's *Religion and Society* series. We are also thankful for the gracious help of Dr. Marie-Louise Liebe-Harkort, Editor-in-Chief at Mouton de Gruyter, who has been accommodating at every turn. We express

our appreciation also to Ms. Carola Handwerker, assistant to Dr. Liebe-Harkort, and to Ms. Dorothee Ohlmeier, chief copy-editor, for their labors in guiding the volume through the final stages of publication.

Contents

Religious innovation: An introductory essay	1
<i>Rodney Stark</i>	
How sane people talk to the gods: A rational theory of revelations	19
<i>Bernard M. Levinson</i>	
The human voice in divine revelation: The problem of authority in Biblical law	35
<i>Michael A. Williams</i>	
The demonizing of the demiurge: The innovation of Gnostic myth	73
<i>Martin S. Jaffee</i>	
<i>Halakhah</i> in early rabbinic Judaism: Innovation beyond exegesis, tradition before Oral Torah	109
<i>Collett Cox</i>	
The unbroken treatise: Scripture and argument in early Buddhist scholasticism	143
<i>Eugene Webb</i>	
Augustine's new Trinity: The anxious circle of metaphor	191
<i>Helen Hardacre</i>	
Gender and the millennium in Ōmoto Kyōdan: The limits of religious innovation	215
<i>Marilyn Robinson Waldman – Robert M. Baum</i>	
Innovation as renovation: The “prophet” as an agent of change	241

Bardwell Smith

The social contexts of healing: Research on abortion and grieving
in Japan 285

Charles F. Keyes

Buddhist politics and their revolutionary origins in Thailand 319

Afterword..... 351

Selected bibliography on religious innovation 357

List of contributors..... 365

Index 369

Religious innovation: An introductory essay

1. Introduction

The history of religions is the history of an endless birthing of new groups, symbols, practices and institutions – a history of which the modern world is still very much a part. To be sure, the attentive observer cannot fail to notice here and there some recurring patterns, and in that sense, the “new” in religion often means a fresh version of something vaguely – or remarkably – familiar, from another time or place. Yet that hardly makes the change any less a new creation. Though insiders in a religious tradition may not even be conscious of religious change and their involvement in it – indeed, may even be fiercely insistent about their devotion to unchanging continuity with the ways of their ancestors – their tradition is nevertheless always, in some sector, under construction. This volume escorts the reader through the fence at particularly interesting moments on religious “construction sites”.

In naming our topic we have favored the term “innovation” rather than “change”, since the latter term by itself seemed too broad, too inclusive of an infinite host of minute alterations or fluctuations in religious perception that are inevitable not only from generation to generation, but from individual to individual, or even from instant to instant within the same individual. By “innovation” we mean to suggest that our primary attention here is on changes of a relatively larger scale – even though there may be certain instances where awareness of the implications of smaller, subtler, incremental shifts will be of importance in the discussion of what ultimately are larger “innovations”.

But we have also very intentionally avoided limiting our discussion strictly to “new religions”, or “new religious movements”. There is a sizable and ever-expanding bibliography from the ranks of the social sciences on “new religious movements”. At least two general categories of such literature might be identified: (1) There are those works, generated mostly by anthropologists, focusing on new religious phenomena in “tribal” societies during

the past few centuries of encounter with Western culture – movements variously labeled “nativistic”, “millenarian”, or “cargo cults”.¹ (2) On the other hand, it is largely sociologists who have been responsible for the bulk of the research on new religious movements in modern industrial societies.² A glance at the entries in many bibliographies of works in this second category reveals that a significant percentage are studies of individual movements, or studies that are more preoccupied with relatively parochial questions such as what attracts twentieth century American youth to deviant religious movements, or the ethical and legal issues surrounding “deprogramming” and anti-cult efforts. Nevertheless, general theories of new religious movements in Western societies have been constructed (e.g., Stark – Bainbridge 1985), and there have been attempts to test the cross-cultural validity of certain models, as in Bryan Wilson’s application of sociological typologies that he had first developed in the study of Western sects, to new religious movements arising in “encounter” situations in tribal societies (Wilson 1973). The closest thing to comparative studies on religious innovation, rather than simply studies on innovations in this or that single religious tradition, is to be found in the social science literature on new religious movements.

Though recognizing many important insights that have been gained about processes of religious innovation by such research on “new religions”, and particularly in the more explicitly theoretical contributions, we suspect that a full assessment of the significance of such “new religious movements” will require an enlargement of the analytical framework. For an innovation that leads to a new social grouping that is sufficiently deviant from the “norm” to merit the name “new religion” is only one form of religious innovation. Though there is something to be learned from focusing on examples and types of this form, limiting the discussion entirely to these may result in a skewed understanding of innovative processes in religious traditions at large.

The contributions in this volume represent a self-consciously more diverse selection of examples of religious innovation. Together, they illustrate several important points about innovative processes in religious traditions. And though these lessons do have relevance for the understanding of the so-called “new religions”, they might not have been so apparent from a study restricted exclusively to the latter.

2. Religious innovation, context, and point of view

In spite of the spirited discussion and research generated in recent years by the topic of “new religious movements”, Bryan Wilson has aptly observed that the very concept is “too unspecific and too relative” to be defined in terms of any single ideal type (Wilson 1982: 24). A variety of cultural contexts are involved, and the social functions of what are called “new religions” in one culture do not necessarily correspond to the functions of “new religions” in another. Moreover, the “new religions” constitute a phenomenologically disparate assemblage, ranging all the way from the Church of Scientology, to the Unification Church, to Reiyūkai Kyōdan and many other sects in Japan, to various sorts of African independent religious movements, and so on. Not surprising is Wilson’s conclusion that, as a group, these new religions “have in common only their newness at a given point in time” (Wilson 1982: 24).

But what is it about these movements that makes possible their common designation as religious innovations? What constitutes an innovation in a religious tradition? The difficulties with the customary category “new religious movements” has in fact been recognized from time to time by researchers. Thus, the editor of a collection of essays on new religious movements readily acknowledges that “all religions have been new at some time and that not all of those which are today called new are, in fact, new” (Barker 1982: ix). This suggests that more attention should be given precisely to the question of what constitutes a religious innovation in the first place.

One truth that is dramatically underscored by the essays which follow is the crucial difference made by the perspective from which we choose to measure the novelty of a phenomenon. The implications of this fundamental consideration are sufficiently important – yet often enough ignored in practice – to warrant more than perfunctory treatment. Defining something as a religious innovation is essentially to define it as “significant” change – but significant to whom?

For instance, the outsider to a tradition may see innovation in instances where the insider sees continuity, as is illustrated in the essay by Collett Cox. In contrast with frequent portrayals of Buddhist origins as though Buddhism were a purely ethical or philosophical movement, and a dramatic, thorough-

going and self-conscious break with brahmanical tradition and its scripture, Cox places early Buddhism more squarely within the continuum of pan-Indian exegetical tradition. The scholastic period of Buddhism which, with its rich scriptural and commentarial compilations, is so commonly treated as a great deformation of an imagined primitive ethical or philosophical vision, is shown by Cox to have been only a natural progression in earliest Buddhism's actual identity, as a scriptural tradition. These Buddhist scholastics stand within an "unbroken" hermeneutical tradition, which supports them and to which they contribute in their continual reshaping of this scriptural tradition.

But the opposite "mistake" can also be made, so that an outsider fails to notice innovation precisely where insiders happen to be quite self-conscious of it. Martin Jaffee's essay looks to the example of early rabbinic literature, popularly perceived as a classic illustration of unyielding commitment to the conservation of tradition. But Jaffee points out that a well-known rabbinic term that is often treated as though it were virtually synonymous with tradition, *halakhah*, was actually reserved in the oldest layers of the rabbinic discussion precisely for, innovation. That is, the term *halakhah* referred to just those customs that the rabbis recognized to have been steps beyond the frame of explicit Scriptural revelation. The insiders in this case were therefore evidently very aware of significant innovation just at the point where an outsider might have imagined them most concerned with avoiding it.

The fact that the very definition of religious innovation is governed by the interpreter's perspective does not render religious innovation meaningless or frivolous as a category, but it does point to the fact that its usefulness is dependent both on a careful establishment of context, as well as on a determination of what perspective(s) is/are in fact germane to a given analysis.

For example, researchers on new religious movements commonly distinguish between "new religions" and "reform movements", or, in a more recent jargon, between "cults" and "sects". The reference is partly to a genetic distinction: "Sect", for example, is used of a schismatic group that splinters off from a parent religion within the society, whereas "cult" designates a nonschismatic movement, which therefore lacks such prior organizational ties to an existing religious body in the society in question (Stark – Bainbridge 1985: 24f). Yet in the final analysis, the really crucial distinction be-

tween sect and cult would seem to involve the *degree* of deviance or novelty, since researchers recognize that sects can evolve into cults by becoming ever more radical.³ Now an impressive amount of evidence has been marshalled to support the thesis that, at least in the case of modern Western societies, there may be identifiably different chemistries for “cults” and “sects”. For instance, cults, as the more radical cultural innovation, evidently tend to draw a different type of recruit from those normally attracted to sects (Stark – Bainbridge 1985: 394–424).

Such a model obviously depends on some criterion for determining relative degrees of novelty. For example, statistics indicate that a certain selection of religious movements tend to have a disproportionately large number of females among their recruits (Stark – Bainbridge 1985: 413f.). But before we could posit a correlation between *more radically new* religious movements (cults) and this particular tendency, we have to ascertain whether in fact the movements which characteristically overrecruit females all share in common some more radical degree of “novelty”. And that, in turn, means that we have to know *how* we have measured that novelty.

From whose perspective is the measurement of novelty to be made? In the case of the distinction between sects and cults, the model requires that the novelty be judged, not from the perspective of the insider in the cult, but rather the outsider: that is, from the point of view of the recruit, before recruitment. Polling results can provide statistical data on outsiders’ perceptions of social distance (“How comfortable would you be around: Baptists? Mormons? Jehovah’s Witnesses? etc.”), and thus can identify which religious groups are viewed by outsiders as being most deviant (Stark – Bainbridge 1985: 62–65). If one is testing for correlations between novelty and categories of people attracted, the fully socialized insider’s perspective on the question is quite irrelevant. But so is that of the researcher. In other words, for the analysis in question, we would not be interested in the perspective of *all* outsiders to the cult, but only those outsiders who are at the same time insiders as far as the contextual society is concerned. The importance of context for the definition of innovation would require that one take fully into account differing cultural standards of deviance.

On the other hand, outsider perspectives on levels of novelty are not what we need to know when we are asking certain other questions. Helen

Hardacre's contribution to the volume examines the case of a Japanese sect Ōmoto Kyōdan, founded in 1892 by Deguchi Nao, who, in collaboration with her adopted son Deguchi Onisaburō, built a new religious organization that achieved extraordinary influence. Her doctrine was an elaboration of the Buddhist teaching that to attain salvation women must first become males. Nao presented herself as the Transformed Male and Onisaburō as the Transformed Female, and launched a sharp critique of pre-war Japanese political and social structure. What prompted Nao to originate the movement described by Hardacre? Why did she feel the need for this level of deviance, rather than remaining content with some more conformist behavior and ideology? The question itself assumes that Nao viewed her movement as a significant deviance, and thus we can hope to answer it only if we are measuring the novelty from her perspective.

The reason for this may be illustrated by referring to the seminal article on "revitalization movements" by Anthony F. C. Wallace, who defined a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" ([1972]: 504). Wallace contrasted this with what he termed the "classic processes of culture change (evolution, drift, diffusion, historical change, acculturation)" which "do not depend on deliberate intent by members of a society, but rather on a gradual chain reaction effect: introducing A induces change in B; changing B affects C; when C shifts, A is modified; this involves D ... and so on *ad infinitum*" ([1972]: 504). Wallace argued that crucial in the process leading to a revitalization movement is the formation on the part of the innovator of a "new mazeway *Gestalt*", where mazeway was Wallace's term for a person's "mental image of the society and its culture, as well as of his own body and its behavioral regularities" ([1972]: 505). An individual is led, not merely to an adjustment in mazeway, but to an "abrupt and dramatic" mazeway reformulation, and then the individual communicates this experience to others, who eventually experience their own transformations, and a movement emerges ([1972]: 507f).

For the moment, we may leave aside several objections that might be, and have been, raised against certain aspects and details of Wallace's theory. We may instead confine ourselves to the observation that testing a thesis such as Wallace's requires that we measure the novelty or deviance of any "new

mazeway *Gestalt*” from the perspective of the innovator (i.e., insider). For if there were no evidence that the innovator viewed the innovation in question as significantly new, then there would be no basis under Wallace’s model for explaining the innovation, no reason to assume any dissatisfaction with the old.

Thus, while in the case of some categories in the comparative study of religion (e.g., scripture, ritual) it might be possible to construct more absolute working definitions, this is not the case with religious innovation. By its very nature it is a relative category, and its analytical usefulness depends precisely upon the recognition of this, and upon the identification of the interpretive perspectives that are appropriate in different analytical situations. On the one hand, much of the past research on religious innovation has suffered from confusion and imprecision in the very use of the term “innovation”, and future comparative study of religious innovation will make true progress only if greater attention is given to the question of definition. But on the other hand, the solution is not to be found in the construction of a single definition, but rather in the systematic identification of multiple perspectives.

3. Innovation’s motivations

Our results not only suggest the need for some rethinking of the problem of defining religious innovation, they also suggest the need for a fresh approach to explaining it. Whether religious experience and expression involve the personal commitment to notions of eternal meaning, or participation in a fundamental and socially mediated set of values, what is it that accounts for the willingness of innovators to shift to new formulas of commitment and participation?

3.1. *Crisis as an Explanation*

Perhaps the most popular explanation for religious innovation has been to point to the role of some personal and/or social stress or crisis. Religious individuals and communities experience a crisis with which the existing religious tradition does not allow them to cope, and so they innovate. It is

especially in the case of new religious movements that crisis has been invoked as explanation.

Without doubt, crisis is a factor that can account for at least the precipitation of some innovations. One has only to think of situations where religious traditions have experienced externally imposed crises that have essentially left little alternative but innovation. For example, the destruction of Solomon's temple in the sixth century B.C.E., and the social, political and cultural upheavals that followed, forced dramatic innovations in Jewish religious tradition. Had the disaster not occurred, it is hard to imagine that the familiar Masoretic canon of Hebrew Scriptures would even exist. Certainly its core, the Deuteronomic History, would never have been written in the present form so critical for both Jewish and Christian messianic thinking.⁴

Even when there is less unequivocal constraint toward some kind of change, times of crisis may, as Rodney Stark points out in his essay, at least increase the probability of dissatisfaction with elements of the tradition – e.g., in the case of some of the new religious movements among American Indian tribes under pressure from the expanding white frontier. In his contribution to this volume, Bardwell Smith discusses the sudden appearance and astounding proliferation in Japan within the past two decades of new Buddhist memorial rites for aborted fetuses. Smith interprets this as a case of the creation of what Victor Turner (1986: 41) called a “redressive ritual” or “ritual of affliction”, to confront the crisis of (in the terminology of Robert Jay Lifton) “broken connections” with the past: in this case, the grief, anger, guilt and despair experienced by Japanese women in a society where abortion has become the primary method available to them for birth control (cf. B. Smith 1988).

Therefore, we do not intend this collection of essays as a denial that social and personal crisis are ever valid components in the explanation of religious innovation. However, we do mean to suggest that crisis has been much over-used as an explanation. On this point, our results could be compared, for example, with the approach taken in several important studies by H. Byron Earhart (especially, 1980; 1989: 223–243) to the explanation of religious innovation in Japan. Rejecting the prevailing explanation of Japanese “new religions” as having arisen “in response to – or ‘because of’ – social disruption and personal anxiety” (1989: 223), Earhart argues that social crisis is never

in itself an explanation for an innovation. It must be treated, he urges, as only one among three major factors: social environment, the influence of the prior history of development within the religious tradition, and the personal contribution of individual innovators or founders.

Earhart (1974: 180f) has pointed out that crisis theories tend to assume that equilibrium is the permanent condition in religion, and thus treat innovation as only a temporary response to the disruption of equilibrium. Indeed, the contribution to this volume by Marilyn Waldman and Robert Baum begins with a careful critique of the notion that religion is in essence concerned with discerning order within disorder. They feel, to the contrary, that religion can be imagined precisely as a discourse for disclosing the disorder within the apparently stable.

3.2. *Role of genius*

The cases examined in this collection illustrate how much more important other factors may be for explaining religious innovation. One of these is the role of the religious “genius”. The “charisma” to which Weber accorded so much significance in religious innovation has since suffered criticism from many social scientists for being too “ill-defined” as a category. Ill-defined or not, it seems impossible to deny the extraordinary talent possessed by certain individuals for creating and communicating new religious symbols, ideas or forms. Rodney Stark finds the category of religious genius at least as appropriate for inclusion in a hard-nosed, social scientific explanation of religious innovation as other categories that are often appealed to by fellow social scientists. Stark argues that innate creative religious genius, analogous to artistic creativity, is a more convincing explanation of the motive and success of most religious founders than is psychopathology or fraudulent entrepreneurship.

Exploring factors that explain why “prophecy succeeds” when it does, Waldman and Baum include certain characteristic talents that seem predictable in successful prophets: a special sensitivity for “reading” the crucial mechanisms within their culture; an unusual capacity for adaptation, for co-opting existing social roles and developing oppositional roles in such a way as to generate just the level of “attack” necessary for new self-definition.

Several of the essays illustrate particular instances where it seems hard to separate the innovation from the individual genius. Few would want to argue that we can imagine the prodigiousness that is Augustinian theology – with what Eugene Webb describes as its peculiar hold on the imagination of Western Christendom – without the prodigy himself. Helen Hardacre demonstrates why Deguchi Nao, though viewed by many in her day as “probably mad”, must rather be considered “one of the great geniuses of Japanese religious history”. However, as Hardacre’s study of Nao reveals, religious genius does not necessarily guarantee long-term impact, and in certain circumstances may guarantee the opposite. When the motivation for religious innovation is too narrowly rooted in powerful personalities, as was the case with Nao and Onisaburō, the innovation may not long outlive them. The Diola visionary Alinesitoué described by Waldman and Baum is a similar instance.

There are of course other factors that contribute something to our understanding of the causes of religious innovation in such instances. Webb notes how we can better understand the dynamic of Augustine’s new doctrine of the Trinity by keeping in mind the external social structure of the Roman imperium. Hardacre points out that Nao’s mythology is an implicit attack on the Japanese imperial ideology of her day. Yet the ingredient which is crucial, without which these particular new creations cannot be imagined, is the creative genius of the innovators (cf. Shils 1981: 228–230).

3.3. Innovation as a modality of tradition

We would argue that the motivation of religious innovators may often be misunderstood precisely because tradition and innovation are so often wrongly perceived as entirely distinct and opposite religious complexions. Innovation is approached only as a “break” with tradition, and with the religious mindset that is bent on preserving rather than creating. As long as one is guided by this perception of things, it is easy to understand why religious innovation should so often be conceived as always requiring some shattering crisis for its motivation. Why else would people abandon tradition?

Yet the analyses presented in this volume suggest that it may usually be much more helpful to think of religious innovation as something “natural” to

religious tradition, as a modality of religious tradition itself. Jaffee, for example, shows that innovation actually stood “at the very heart of the early Rabbinic tradition”, providing the crucial nourishment on which the tradition fed. Early Mishnaic tradition essentially defined itself through its recognition and interpretation of significant innovative steps beyond the explicit wording of Scripture.

The contributions of both Bernard Levinson and Michael Williams illustrate how religious innovation can be motivated by special problematics that are embedded within a tradition’s own sacred texts. Often the modern discussion about radical religious innovation seems to presuppose that religious tradition is a quiescent, stable mode of experience. In order to account for any radical departure from this mode of supposed resolution, it is assumed that high voltages of social shock or change must have been required. But Levinson discusses an example of an inherent tension present within the legal tradition of Jewish scripture itself. He explores the use, by the tradents who produced biblical text, of a “rhetoric of concealment” intended to disguise human authorship of significant revisions that amounted to subversion of earlier revelation. The subversion in Ezekiel 18: 1–4 and in Deuteronomy 7: 9–10 of the doctrine of transgenerational punishment for sin, from Exodus 20: 4–6, is an example of an innovation spawned by the dynamic of ethical reflection in the context of textual exegesis. Similarly, Williams notes that radical inversions of Jewish religious symbols found in ancient Gnostic mythology may have arisen from the matrix of Jewish tradition itself, as the eventual product of hermeneutical struggles with issues raised by the tradition. In Second Temple Judaism, scripture that had become, or was becoming, normative included certain elements that created problems for succeeding generations of interpreters – in particular, descriptions of God and God’s activities that offended the sensibilities and left questions of theodicy unresolved.

Charles Keyes’ analysis of the history of religious and social transformations in Thailand illustrates revolutionary religious innovations that required no violent socio-political upheaval of traditional political or religious institutions, but rather were engendered by those institutions themselves. Keyes traces the roots of what he sees to be inbuilt innovation-producing tensions within Thai political and religious institutions to critical religious re-

forms reaching back into the 19th century, when King Mongkut (Rama IV) effected a radical reformation of Theravāda Buddhism that Keyes compares in significance to the reforms of Luther or Calvin. The reforms involved a fundamental shift from a past-oriented view of karma, as explanation for present order, to a future-oriented emphasis on karmic consequences of actions, and set the stage for a new consciousness of practical political and social action.

But is the notion of some “internal” problematic, immanent within a tradition’s very structure, actually a mere optical illusion? Do not elements within a tradition take on a problematical aspect only when disturbed or challenged from “outside”? After all, even in some of the instances mentioned above, influences “external” to the tradition can be identified which partially account for the internal tension. Though building in part on earlier reform activity, King Mongkut was particularly inspired by his correspondence with Sinhalese monks, who were engaged at the time in an apologetic defense of Buddhist tradition against Western Christian missionaries. Levinson speaks of the inevitable historical change within Israelite society that would have necessitated innovations in the legal code (although his point is precisely the surprising paucity of examples that we have of such legal adjustments).

Yet there are at least two things wrong with insisting that innovation-producing tension within a tradition be explained only by reference to some disturbance from without. In the first place, it is perhaps to construct too rigid a dichotomy between what is “internal” to and what is “external” to a tradition. This is not to say that there are not instances where such an analytical dichotomy makes good sense: American Indian tribes first encountering European Christianity were encountering something external to their tradition. But was Plato “external” to the tradition of an educated Jew growing up in Hellenistic Antioch or Alexandria? Wilfred Cantwell Smith has spoken of the “dynamic permeability, or permeable dynamism, of the historical processes of humankind’s religious life” (W. C. Smith 1983: 4). Even those who would want to distinguish themselves from Smith’s larger agenda, and insist that each of the world’s religions “has its own distinctive kind of ‘wholeness’ and ‘internal consistency’”, and that the overall task of the historian of religion is to understand each religion from the standpoint of its “distinctive center of meaning”, (Reynolds – Ludwig 1980: 14) would also surely ac-

knowledge that the boundaries between traditions are not always very easy to draw.

Secondly, it is simply naive to think of traditions as unproblematic reservoirs of homeostatic resolution, in which no problem with the tradition would occur to participants were it not called to their attention by interaction with outsiders. Webb argues that the tradition which Augustine's own innovation became is precisely an illustration of how innovations themselves can sometimes perpetuate or even exacerbate unresolved problems or anxieties, rather than resolve them. Webb demonstrates how Augustine's radically innovative doctrine of the Trinity emerged through his reflection on the tradition's officially sanctioned symbols for expressing the human experience of the divine. Augustine's approach was to accept the declared dogma of the creedal statements, and to speculate about the possible meanings of the biblical symbols used in them. Rather than following the Greek Christian practice of trying to find in those symbols a language for what was felt to be the believer's actual experience of the inner life of the Triune God, Augustine treated the biblical images of Father, Son, and Spirit as inescapably remote from experience and related only in an opaquely metaphorical way to the reality to which they are supposed to refer. Webb notes that according to Augustine, one does not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity because its imagery speaks to experience that is personally recognizable, but because one is commanded to do so by the unquestioned authority of the Church. Webb argues that the very structure of Augustine's "solution" thus produced a vicious circle of anxiety and authoritarianism within the tradition of Western Christianity.

But the instinct of traditions to innovate need not always be understood in terms of specific "problem-solving" within the tradition. Innovation may be a natural modality of tradition for even more basic, more broadly human reasons. In discussing what he terms "endogenous factors" contributing to innovation in traditions, Edward Shils notes the role played by the "creative power of the human mind in confrontation with the potentialities resident in traditions" (Shils 1981: 213). "There is something in tradition", Shils observes, "which calls forth a desire to change it by making improvements in it". In other words, the very acceptance of a tradition, no matter what its character, will inevitably stimulate certain minds to a creativity that trans-

forms the very thing that has been accepted (Shils 1981: 214). Though he comes at the topic from a very different angle, Rodney Stark seems to make a remarkably similar point when he argues that there is something quite “normal” about new revelation.

4. Conclusion

“All but the most ardent defenders of religion agree that it is more likely to be a conserver of old values than a creator of new ones.” (Yinger 1970: 513) The studies in this volume challenge several assumptions underlying this fairly typical perception, and we do not think that this is true merely because we have selected for study the topic of innovation as our focus. We would have been forced to raise some of the same objections had we chosen to focus on “religious tradition”.⁵ We would in fact maintain that when the two are not approached in artificial isolation, they are actually better understood – indeed, cannot be adequately understood in any other way.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jarvie 1963; Burrige 1969: 97–104; 1960; H. Turner 1977; 1983; Wilson 1973.
2. See, for example, Beckford – Richardson 1983; Robbins 1983; Barker 1982; Bromley – Hammond 1987; Hexham 1984.
3. For example, the People’s Temple [“Jim Jones”] movement; see Stark – Bainbridge 1985: 187.
4. See Sanders 1972; on the similarly dramatic consequences of the destruction of the Second Temple and its aftermath, see Neusner 1981.
5. Cf. Pelikan (1984: 74), who comments on “a false understanding of the relation between tradition and creativity, the assumption that the second began where the first left off”.

References

- Barker, Eileen (ed.)
 1982 *New religious movements: A perspective for understanding society*. (Studies in Religion and Society 3.) New York and Toronto: Mellen.
- La Barre, Weston
 1971 "Materials for a history of studies of crisis cults: A bibliographical essay", *Cultural Anthropology* 12.1: 3–44.
- Beckford, James A. – James T. Richardson
 1983 "A bibliography of social scientific studies of new religious movements", *Social Compass* 30: 111–135.
- Bromley, David G. – Philip E. Hammond (eds.)
 1987 *The future of new religious movements*. Macon, GA: Mercer.
- Burridge, Kenelm
 1960 *Mambu: A Melanesian millennium*. London: Methuen.
 1969 *New heaven, new earth: A study of millenarian activities*. New York: Schocken.
- Colpe, Carsten
 1975 "Synkretismus, Renaissance, Säkularisation und Neubildung von Religionen in der Gegenwart", in: J. P. Asmussen – J. Laessle (eds.) *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte*. vol. 3. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 441–523.
 1977 "Syncretism and secularization: Complementary and antithetical trends in new religious movements", *History of Religions* 17: 158–176.
- Earhart, H. Byron
 1974 "The interpretation of the 'new religions' of Japan as new religious movements", in: Robert J. Miller (ed.) *Religious ferment in Asia*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas. 169–188.
 1980 "Toward a theory of the formation of the Japanese new religions: A case study of Gedatsu-kai", *History of Religions* 20: 175–197.
 1989 *Gedatsu-kai and religion in contemporary Japan: Returning to the center*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel N.
 1985 "Comparative liminality: Liminality and dynamics of civilization", *Religion* 15: 315–338.
- Hardacre, Helen
 1984 *Lay Buddhism in contemporary Japan: Reiyūkai Kyūdan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
 1986 *Kurozumikyō and the new religions of Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hexham, Irving
 1983 "A bibliographical guide to cults, sects, and new religious movements (Part I)", *Update* 5.7: 40–46.

- 1984 "A bibliographical guide to cults, sects, and new religious movements (Part II)", *Update* 5.8: 36–48.
- Jarvie, Ian C.
1963 "Theories of cargo cults: A critical analysis", *Oceania* 34: 1–31, 108–136.
- Melton, J. Gorton
1987 "How new is new? The flowering of the 'new' religious consciousness since 1965", in: David G. Bromley – Philip E. Hammond (eds.) *The future of new religious movements*. Macon, GA: Mercer. 46–56.
- Neusner, Jacob
1981 *Judaism: The evidence of the Mishnah*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav
1984 *The vindication of tradition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Reynolds, Frank E. – Theodore M. Ludwig (eds.)
1980 *Transitions and transformations in the history of religions: Essays in honor of Joseph M. Kitagawa*. (Studies in the History of Religions [Supplements to *Numen*] 39.) Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Robbins, Thomas
1983 "Sociological studies of new religious movements: A selective review", *Religious Studies Review* 9: 233–239.
- Sanders, James A.
1972 *Torah and canon*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Shils, Edward
1981 *Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Bardwell
1988 "Buddhism and abortion in contemporary Japan: *Mizuko kuyō* and the confrontation with death", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15,1: 3–24.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell
1983 "Traditions in contact and change: Towards a history of religion in the singular", in: Peter Slater – Donald Wiebe (eds.) *Traditions in contact and change: Selected proceedings of the XIVth congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University. 1–23.
- Stark, Rodney – Williams Sims Bainbridge
1985 *The future of religion: Secularization, revival and cult formation*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Turner, Harold W.
1979 "A new field in the history of religions", in: Harold W. Turner *Religious innovation in Africa: Collected essays on new religious movements*. Boston: G. K. Hall. 21–31.
1983 "Tribal religious movements, new", in: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*. Vol. 18. (15th edition.) Chicago: Benton. 697–705.

Turner, Harold W. (ed.)

1977 *Bibliography of new religious movements in primal societies. Vol. 1: Black Africa.* Boston: G. K. Hall.

Turner, Victor

1986 *The anthropology of experience.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Waldman, Marilyn R.

1986 "Tradition as a modality of change: Islamic examples", *History of Religions* 25: 318–340.

Wallace, Anthony F. C.

1956 "Revitalization movements", *American Anthropologist* 58: 264–281.

[1972] [Reprinted in: William A. Lessa – Evon Z. Vogt (eds.) *Reader in comparative religion: An anthropological approach.* (3rd edition.) New York: Harper & Row, 1972, 503–512.]

Werblowsky, Raphael J.

1976 *Beyond tradition and modernity: Changing religions in a changing world.* (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 11.) London: Athlone Press.

1982 "Religions new and not so new: Fragments of an agenda", in: Eileen Barker (ed.), 32–46.

Wilson, Bryan R.

1973 *Magic and the millennium: A sociological study of religious movements of protest among tribal and third-world peoples.* New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row.

1982 "The new religions: preliminary considerations", in: Eileen Barker (ed.), 16–31.

Yinger, J. Milton

1970 *The scientific study of religion.* London: MacMillan.

How sane people talk to the gods: A rational theory of revelations

Rodney Stark

The relative failure of social scientists to anticipate the major trends in religion over the past 150 years stems from a mistaken first question: *How can people possibly believe this religious stuff?* Posed this way, the question almost forces social scientists to blame religious commitment on personal defects such as psychological abnormalities. However, since being religious is normal in the statistical sense (most members of most human societies are religious), and religious people generally fail to display symptoms of psychological impairment, the imputation of psychopathology usually is circular. That is, psychopathology is inferred from religiousness. For social scientists unwilling to accept such circularity, the explanation of preference usually is ignorance – described in terms of backwardness, false consciousness or pre-modernity.

But, whichever explanation they use to explain how people can be religious, social scientists have been virtually unanimous until recently that religion is on its way out. The Law of Secularization reads: as modernity spreads, religion collapses. Unfortunately for the reputation of social science, the mass of evidence shows nothing of the sort. Religion continues to thrive, and indeed it is the more conservative and orthodox brands of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism that display the greater vigor. Clearly, it is past time to recast our entire approach to the social scientific study of religion. Having reached an ignominious dead-end by classifying religion as madness or ignorance, perhaps social scientists might be prepared to see if better results can be gained if we work from the assumption that people choose to be and to remain religious for entirely rational reasons.

To that end, in this essay I attack the “How can they believe that stuff?” approach to social scientific studies of religion at what would appear to be its

strongest point: *revelations*. Indeed, even most social scientists who will not dismiss most Baptists or Buddhists as psychopathological, find it quite impossible to accept that normal people can sincerely believe they have communicated with the divine. Therefore they must account for Jesus, Muhammad, Moses, Joseph Smith and Rev. Sun M. Moon as psychotics, frauds, or both.

When Bainbridge and I (Bainbridge – Stark 1979) surveyed the literature on revelation several years ago we found that although the topic had been little-covered, the psychopathological interpretation was the overwhelming favorite, with conscious fraud treated as the only plausible alternative.

In our essay, Bainbridge and I reworked this literature and systematized our own field observations to state three models of revelation (or what we referred to as cult formation). The first gives systematic statement to the *psychopathology* model. Here revelations are traced not simply to mental illness, but also to abnormal mental states induced by drugs or fasting. Our second model substitutes chicanery for psychopathology and characterizes some religious founders as *entrepreneurs*. Finally, we codified a *subcultural-evolution* model of revelation wherein a small group, interacting intensely over a period of time, assembles a revelation bit by bit, without anyone being aware of the social processes taking place. With this last model, at least, we made room for revelations involving neither craziness nor corruption.

Since this essay appeared (and was republished in Stark – Bainbridge 1985), I have grown increasingly uncomfortable with it. Frankly, there have been precious few cases in which there is any persuasive evidence that the founder of a new religious movement had any symptoms of mental problems.¹ Gordon Shepherd's (1987) sensitive account of a rational, insightful and obviously sincere young man with a quite elaborate revelation is representative of the ethnographic literature (Melton 1986). Of course, lack of visible signs is no impediment for Freudians and others who are entirely willing to infer psychopathology from religious behavior *per se* (Freud [1961]; Schneiderman 1967; La Barre 1969; Carroll 1987; Capps 1988). But, for those of us lacking conviction in Freud's revelations, the apparent normality of scores of well-documented cases ought to stimulate new approaches. Moreover, it seems equally clear that few of the apparently sane recipients of revelations were crooks. Too many made personal sacrifices utterly in-

compatible with such an assessment. Finally, even the subcultural-evolution model will not take up the slack, for the majority of cases seem not to fit it either. Hence, the need for a new approach is patent.

For me, all these strands came together when one day I read an account of how Spencer W. Kimball, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, received the revelation that blacks should be admitted to the Mormon priesthood (Mauss 1981). Kimball reported no voices from beyond, no burning bushes, and no apparitions. He spoke only of the many hours he spent in the “upper room of the temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance”. The actual process by which he received his revelation would seem to involve nothing more (or less) than achieving a state of complete certainty about what God wanted him to do.

My immediate reaction was, *I can have revelations that way.*

Soon I had a similar reaction when reading an account by Rev. Sun M. Moon, founder of the Unification Church, of the method by which *The Divine Principle*, the scriptural basis of his movement, was “revealed” to him. “God will not tell you outright. Therefore you have to search, to find out by yourself” (in Barker 1984). So Moon studied and reflected in search of new religious truths and then used prayer to *test* each answer. If you are wrong, Moon explained, God lets you sense that fact. “You immediately know that is not right. It is something else.”

These episodes led me to a new approach to understanding how revelations occur. In this essay I propose to develop and give formal statement to the thesis that:

Normal people can, through entirely normal means, have revelations, including revelations sufficiently profound to serve as the basis of new religions.

Before proceeding, however, it is appropriate to acknowledge the possibility that revelations actually occur. It is beyond the capacity of science to demonstrate that the divine does not communicate directly with certain individuals – there is no possibility of constructing an appropriate detector. We must, therefore, admit the possibility of an active supernatural realm closed to scientific exploration. To confess these limits to scientific epistemology is *not* to suggest that we reduce our efforts to account for religious phenomena within a scientific framework. It is to suggest that we

avoid the scornful tones of militant skepticism that too often disgrace work in this area.

1. The “mystical” majority

There is an immense body of evidence suggesting that quite ordinary mental phenomena can be experienced as some sort of mystical or religious episode involving contact with the supernatural (Hood 1985). Indeed, it appears that many (perhaps even most) people in most societies have such experiences (Greeley 1975; Gallup International 1984).

For example, more than 40 percent of American respondents to the 1984 General Social Survey said they had at least once felt “very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself”. More than 40 percent also claimed to have “felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died”. And, two-thirds reported ESP and *deja vu* experiences, albeit the items were not ideal. A recent study based on samples of university students in the People’s Republic of China found similar or even higher levels of agreement with precisely these same items measuring mystical or “anomalous” experiences (McClenon 1988). Indeed, David Hay and Ann Morisy (1978) report substantial levels of mental phenomena defined in religious terms even among irreligious students in Britain.

In more conventional terms, The Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company’s major survey on American values (1981) found that 66 percent claimed to have had a religious experience and 25 percent said this was something that happened to them frequently. And Charles Y. Glock and Robert Wuthnow (1979) found that half of their sample of residents of the San Francisco Bay Area reported they had been “in close contact with something holy or sacred”.

More dramatic examples abound as well. Consider the outbreak of New Age organizations and practices: automatic writing, trances, channelling and a revival of the *ouija* board.

Let me state the first step in my model of normal revelations:

(1) Many common, ordinary, even mundane mental phenomena can be experienced as contact with the supernatural.

Most of the time these contacts do not produce revelations, but constitute an experiential validation of faith or what I called a “confirming experience” in an early paper (Stark 1965). Thus, for example, Catholics often report seeing the Madonna, but seldom is she reported to speak.

Moreover, even when the contact does involve a communication, this usually will be interpreted *in support* of the prevailing religious culture. In part this is because religious organizations recognize the risks involved in uncontrolled mystical activity among their adherents. As James S. Coleman (1956) noted:

...one consequence of the ‘communication with God’ is that every[one] who so indulges...can create a new creed. This possibility poses a constant threat of cleavage within a religious group.

Consequently, religious organizations take pains to filter, interpret and otherwise direct such activities so that the communications enhance and even revive conventional faith. Indeed, orthodoxy has been the standard against which Christianity has tested revelations. In the First Epistle of John in the New Testament, the test of all revelations is clearly stated:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now is in the world already (1 John 4: 1–3 Revised Standard Version).

But, institutional control is not the only reason that most people who communicate with the supernatural bring forth orthodox revelations. Another is that most such people are deeply committed to the prevailing orthodoxy and few are possessed of the creativity needed to generate new culture. Let me sum up this discussion in a second proposition:

(2) Most episodes involving contact with the supernatural will merely confirm the conventional religious culture, even when the contact includes a specific communication, or revelation.

Most revelations are utterly boring and therefore clearly uninspired. This is easily established by spending an hour in the nearest occult bookstore pe-

using the many volumes of Seth material or other revelations that failed to generate a new religious movement. In contrast, revelations that inspire movements seem genuine in the sense that the material is so culturally impressive as to be worthy of divine sources. How can this happen?

2. Enter genius

The artistic treasures of civilization were created by talented individuals. Suppose that someone with the talent of Shakespeare or Mozart underwent a series of mental events he or she interpreted as contact with the supernatural. Would it not be likely that the revelations produced in this way would be messages of depth, beauty and originality? The question is, of course, how do such geniuses come to believe that the source of their revelation is the divine? That is, how could they not know that they, not the divine, composed it?

The *psychopathological* model explains their belief as a delusional mistake. The *entrepreneurial* model claims there is no mistake, but merely conscious fraud. Nevertheless, I shall argue that such a belief could easily arise in an entirely rational and honest individual.

Most composers *compose*. That is, they write music slowly, a few notes at a time. For example, Duke Ellington would often get a few bars into a new melody while on tour and then get stuck. So he would call his collaborator Billy Strayhorn long distance and hum what he had and then the pair of them would try to work out the next notes. But this is not the way some composers work. For Mozart as for George Gershwin, melodies simply came to them in completed form—they did not compose tunes, they simply wrote down what they heard. And both of them seemed to regard the sources of their music as somehow “out there”, as external.

Suppose that instead of tunes, one heard prose. In fact, one need not ever hear a voice. If prose seemed to flow spontaneously from one’s lips without any conscious effort to compose the words – note the similarity to such phenomena as automatic writing or channelling – it would be easy enough to conclude that these words came from an external source. Furthermore, suppose that the words were not a mishmash of scattered images, but added up

to splendidly expressed and profound new scriptures. How easily one might be convinced by the quality and content of these revelations that they only could have come from the divine.

It seems instructive here to examine briefly how Muhammad received the Koran. The founder of Islam told his followers that an angel spoke the Koran to him and he, in turn, repeated it so scribes could take it down. Much of this dictation took place in front of audiences. Obviously, then, Muhammad could not have appeared to his listeners to be composing the Koran as he went along. If he was repeating the words spoken to him by an angel, there would have been no false starts, no second attempts, no backing up and starting over as would be the case with normal approaches to prose composition. This does not mean that he did not edit – Muhammad often rearranged material after it had been revealed and he sometimes received an emending revelation at a later time (Watt 1961). But it does mean that when he was receiving a revelation, Muhammad's performance would have been more like someone *reading* than like someone composing scripture. Of course, Muhammad could neither read nor write, and that too would have made him prone to mistake his own creations for external products.

Indeed, in his distinguished study of Muhammad, W. Montgomery Watt (1961) reported that in his first two revelational experiences, Muhammad had seen "the glorious Being", but that "this was not the normal manner in which he received revelations". Watt then noted:

In many cases it is probable that he simply found the words in his heart (that is, his mind) in some mysterious way, without his imagining that he heard anything. This seems to be what originally was meant by 'revelation' (*wahy*) [in the Koran].

Is it not more plausible to cast Muhammad in the role of literary and religious genius who produced the Koran without realizing he was the actual source, than to argue that he was psychopathological or a fraud? It is hard to imagine a man with either defect uniting millions and changing the course of history.

In any event, I suggest that evidence abounds that an absolutely rational person could utter spontaneous prose, just as Muhammad seemed to do, and quite easily assume the source to be external.

A third proposition may now be stated:

(3) *Unusually creative individuals will sometimes create profound revelations and will externalize the source of this new culture.*

Most such episodes will produce orthodox religious culture, in keeping with Proposition 2. My primary interest, of course, lies in novel revelations, the sort that get identified as heresies. Several factors limit the kinds of people apt to produce a novel revelation and define the times and places in which they are likely to do so. Just as people without interest in music probably don't have melodies come to them, people without abiding interests in religion probably do not receive revelations. And people are very unlikely to receive heretical revelations unless they are concerned about shortcomings in the prevailing religion. This can be stated:

(4) *Novel (heretical) revelations will most likely come to persons of deep religious concerns who perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s).*

This proposition allows a linkage between the individual and society, for the fact is that people will be more apt to find fault with conventional religions under certain social conditions than under others. This may be stated:

(5) *The probability that individuals will perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s) increases during periods of social crisis.*

3. Crisis and heresy

Frequently in human history, crises produced by natural or social disasters have been translated into crises of faith. Typically this occurs because the crisis places demands on the prevailing religion that it *appears unable to meet*. This inability can occur at two levels. First, the religion may fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of *why* the disaster occurred. Second, the religion may seem to be *unavailing* against the disaster, which becomes truly critical if or when all secular responses also prove inadequate, for then the supernatural remains the *only plausible* source of help. In response to such failures of their traditional faiths, societies frequently have burst forth with new ones—usually based on the revelations of one individual. A

classic instance is the series of messianic movements that periodically swept through the Indians of North America in response to their failures to withstand encroachments by European settlers (Mooney 1896). An immense number of similar movements in Asia and Africa have been reported by Bryan Wilson (1975).

In a now-famous essay, Anthony F.C. Wallace (1956) argued that *all* successful religious movements arise in response to crises. That seems a needlessly extreme view, but there is abundant evidence that faith seldom is “blind”, in the sense that religions frequently *are discarded* and new ones accepted in troubled times. Keep in mind that such new faiths often are efficacious, which is why Wallace called them *revitalization* movements. This name indicates the positive contributions such movements often make by revitalizing the capacity of the culture to deal with a crisis. How do they revitalize? Primarily by effectively mobilizing people to attempt collective actions. Thus the Ghost Shirt movement initially revitalized Indian societies by greatly reducing drunkenness and despair and then by providing the means to join fragmented bands into a cohesive political unit capable of concerted action.

Of course, a crisis need not afflict a whole society in order to provoke religious innovations. Indeed, this is why the incidence of messianic movements is so high among oppressed minorities—from the Jews of the diaspora (Sharot 1982) to blacks in the New World (Bastide 1978; Simpson 1978). The extreme over-representation of women in such movements probably is pertinent here as well (Stark – Bainbridge 1985).

Another proposition can now be stated:

(6) During periods of social crisis, the number of persons who receive novel revelations and the number willing to accept such revelations is maximized.

Further evidence in favor of a rational model of revelations lies in the fact that people typically are somewhat reluctant to take their new message to the world. Joseph Smith kept his first visions a secret for several years until ordered by the angel to tell his father about them (Bushman 1984). At first Muhammad told only his wife of his visions (Watt 1961). Indeed, Muhammad, like many other religious founders was “assailed by fears and doubts”, and apparently wondered whether he was mad (Watt 1961). It took a lot of initial

encouragement from his wife and her cousin for him to believe fully in his mission.

The reason for such reluctance and worry is obvious. Human beings, at least those not afflicted with mental illness, are immensely influenced by the reactions of those around them. The more extraordinary one's claims, the greater the perceived likelihood of rejection and ridicule. And, as Watt (1961) put it: "For a man in remote seventh-century Mecca thus to believe that he was called by God to be a prophet was something stupendous." Had his family rejected his claims, he may well have remained unknown to history, for a prophet scorned probably is most often a prophet silenced.

Two additional propositions are appropriate here:

(7) *An individual's confidence in the validity of his or her revelations is reinforced to the extent that others accept these revelations.*

(8) *The greater the reinforcement received, the more likely a person is to have further revelations.*

This is, of course, nothing more than elementary exchange theory. Behavior that is rewarded tends to be repeated, while that not rewarded tends to disappear. However, I now wish to develop a rather more subtle and less obvious implication of how reinforcement influences revelations.

4. Heresy amplified

As I examined the available reports on successful religious founders I was struck by a most interesting pattern: *revelations tend to become more novel (heretical) over time*. That is, the earliest revelations reported by a "prophet" tend to be substantially more conventional than do their later ones.

Let us consider Joseph Smith. His early revelations represented at most a very modest shift from conventional Christianity. In fact, the *Book of Mormon* contains none of the religious doctrines that now separate Mormons and conventional Christians. Many of these were received by Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois – a decade after the initial founding of the movement.

The same applies to Muhammad. His earliest teachings tended to be quite general and highly compatible with Arab paganism (Stark 1987). The dis-

tinctive Islamic faith he eventually taught was revealed to him progressively. In similar fashion, Jesus only slowly revealed the full scope of his mission. We do not know, of course, whether this reflected a progression in his awareness of his mission or in his willingness to break the news – a caveat which also applies to Muhammad, Joseph Smith and other revelators.

What can we make of this pattern? I suggest that the interaction between a successful founder and his or her followers tends to amplify heresy. Given that successful founders typically will be confronting a social crisis and the need for a new religion, there will be sufficient motive to move in new doctrinal directions. However, the initial revelations will tend not to be too heretical because there is a selection process by which the initial credibility of founders is established. Had Joseph Smith begun his career with revelations favoring polygamy and teaching that humans become gods, I suggest he would have been rejected. But, once a credible relationship exists between a founder and a set of followers, the stage is set for more daring innovations.

Let me state another proposition:

(9) The greater the amount of reinforcement received and the more revelations a person produces, the more novel (heretical) subsequent revelations will become.

At this point, of course, the model of normal revelations has become linked to the *subcultural-evolution* model. For now, it is not only the inner life of the founder that is involved, but the social interactions between founder and followers. How followers respond may play a major role in shaping revelations, bit by bit, in ways that go absolutely unnoticed. Moreover, this will be especially true when the process of revelation is social. Muhammad is, of course, the classic case but Joseph Smith followed a nearly identical pattern. He too usually had an audience and dictated his revelations. Indeed, I suspect that this social process of revelation is the rule rather than the exception if we limit our attention to the most successful founders of new faiths.

However, the process by which follower reactions amplify the heretical tendencies of the founder does not go on indefinitely. Indeed, as movements grow and develop more ramified organizational structures, pressures build up against further revelations, for organizations are served best by a completed faith. Often the anti-revelational forces do not make substantial headway un-

til the founder is gone.² In any event, a movement cannot long sustain constant doctrinal revision, nor can it permit unrestricted revelation.

(10) As they become successful, religious movements founded on revelations will attempt to curtail revelations or to at least prevent novel (heretical) revelations.

Max Weber's (1947; 1963) work on the routinization of charisma obviously applies here. Weber regarded charismatic authority as suited only for "the process of originating" religious movements and as too unstable to sustain an organized social enterprise. Moreover, upon the death or disappearance of the prophet, a new basis for authority is required in any event. Several options exist. The movement can take the position that the age of revelations is ended, for all necessary truths have been told. Buddha repeatedly assured his followers that "I have held nothing back". This has been the usual Protestant stance. Or the capacity to reveal new truths may be associated with the leadership role—the charisma of the prophet is replaced by charisma of office, in Weber's terms. This has been the Roman Catholic and the Mormon choice. In either case, however, doctrine is stabilized sufficiently to sustain a change-over from prophetic to administrative leadership.

5. Conclusion

In much of my recent work I have been attempting to construct and test rational theories of religion behavior (Stark – Bainbridge 1985; 1987). Among other things, I have been arguing that people seem to get more from religion, the more they give to it and therefore the behavior of sectarians, be they Pentecostal Protestants or Hasidic Jews, "adds up" in terms of standard economic models based on rational choice theories. Since I have limited myself to linguistic theories of the sort presented in this paper, I have been especially pleased to note that Laurence R. Iannaccone (1988a; 1988b; [No date]) has introduced formal economic models into our field. Working with conventional economic theories based explicitly on rational choice premises, he has found strong evidence of such important propositions as: sects can ask more of their members for they are thereby empowered to give more to their members.

This essay continues my efforts to formulate rational theories and attempts to deal with what is, in fact, the most basic question of all: how does religious innovation occur, or how are revelations possible? In trying to formulate an answer I have charged directly at the irrationalist position where it would appear to be strongest. If normal people can talk to the gods, while retaining a firm grip on rational thought, then surely we need not search for symptoms of mental illness in every ardent believer.

Appendix: The model of normal revelations

(1) Many common, ordinary, even mundane mental phenomena can be experienced as contact with the supernatural.

Other things being equal:

(2) Most episodes involving contact with the supernatural will merely confirm the conventional religious culture, even when the contact includes a specific communication, or revelation.

(3) Unusually creative individuals will sometimes create profound revelations and will externalize the source of this new culture.

(4) Novel (heretical) revelations will most likely come to persons of deep religious concerns who perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s).

(5) The probability that individuals will perceive shortcomings in the conventional faith(s) increases during periods of social crisis.

(6) During periods of social crisis the number of persons who receive novel revelations and the number willing to accept such revelations is maximized.

(7) An individual's confidence in the validity of his or her revelations is reinforced to the extent that others accept these revelations.

(8) The greater the reinforcement received, the more likely a person is to have further revelations.

(9) The greater the amount of reinforcement received and the more revelations a person produces, the more novel (heretical, deviant) subsequent revelations will become.