

# SACRED SCHISMS

*How Religions Divide*

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*Understanding schisms: theoretical  
explanations for their origins*

*Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle*

Since the dawn of the social sciences, scholars have written at length on the topic of schisms. The rich descriptions of Weber and Troeltsch, in particular, offered contrasts between the established churches and the sects they spawned. Each scholar pointed out stark differences in charismatic leadership, social class, asceticism, and soteriology. H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), though, was the first to inject theoretical life to the process of schism formation, explaining that sects arise to meet the religious needs of the “masses.” Niebuhr went on to explain that over time the more successful sects tend to be taken over by the privileged and are transformed into churches that no longer adequately serve the needs and tastes of the proletariat. Consequently, dissidents break away and yet another schism occurs. This gives rise to an endless cycle of transformations and schisms.

But a serious limitation of Niebuhr’s model was that it relied almost entirely on class interests to explain schisms. There is no doubt that social class dynamics have contributed to many schisms, but an abundance of recent research has shown that social class differences are often not a motivating factor behind them. In fact, many of the most historically significant schisms, such as those producing the Essenes (Baumgarten 1997), the Christians (Stark 1996), and the Waldensians (Lambert 1977), were not based on the proletariat. A second limitation is that Niebuhr’s model offers little explanation of the organizational dynamics underlying schisms or the larger context in which this process occurs. Because attention is focused so narrowly on social class, all other factors fade away.

Building on organizational and religious economy theories, this chapter will explain the social context and organizational dynamics involved in schisms. We begin by looking at the religious markets and ecological spaces that promote or deter schisms. How does the state’s regulation of religion and the existing supply of religion open the door for schisms? Next we look within religious organizations. How do the

relationships between denominations, congregations, and clergy contribute to schisms? Finally, we briefly discuss the consequences of schisms. How do they change the organizations involved and how do they contribute to larger religious change?

#### CLARIFYING THE CAUSES

The drama and turmoil of a marital divorce is often interpreted as the source of the relationship's demise. The fighting between the couple becomes seen as the reason for their inevitable failure and is used to explain larger trends in divorce. Such an interpretation may be accurate in some cases, but for most it is an error in attribution. As most sociologists would argue, relationships often end for reasons that have little to do with the personality dynamics between partners. It is unlikely that the rise in the twentieth-century divorce rate is simply because couples disliked each other more than they did in the nineteenth century. The real causes are to be found in larger structural and historical forces. Increases in life expectancy, social expectations of gender roles, economic downturns, changes in the legal system, and many other forces can be the hidden source of the drama that surrounds separations.

Similar descriptions can be given for divorces within religious groups. The same heightened emotions and drama can be found in schisms. Arguments about theology, leadership, and actions can often find parallels in arguments between two individuals about neglect, infidelity, and abuse. As with separations of individuals, we must be careful not to let the manifest drama of a schism distract us from its latent causes (Blasi 1989: 311). Instead of looking to the surface phenomena that occur during schisms, we must examine the deeper social and organizational contexts that give rise to schisms. We begin by examining the role of national context in creating an environment that spawns or suppresses schisms.

#### *Country context and schisms*

When Swiss-born, German-educated Philip Schaff wrote one of the first surveys of American religion, he explained to his European audience that the religious freedoms of the new voluntary system in America resulted in increased levels of religious zeal and commitment. But he also cautioned that the new sect system had a "shady side" that "changes the peaceful kingdom of God into a battle-field" (Schaff 1855: 99, 102). What Schaff and a host of other nineteenth-century European visitors were observing

was that schisms occurred with increasing regularity when sects could compete on equal footing with the established churches. A starting point for identifying the origins of schisms is understanding the freedom, or lack thereof, that sects have in splitting from existing churches. In other words, what are the start-up costs for a new group?

When considering a schism, the potential costs for new religious groups are many and they vary widely across countries. In nineteenth-century America new sects flourished because they could. Once a new religion split from the parent group it could immediately compete for adherents without any limitations or sanctions. Unlike the churches so familiar to Europeans, schism did not result in a loss of subsidy. To the contrary, no religion was favored by the state. This lack of state interference also allowed schisms to form without facing state penalties. Religions were not required to register and young sects held the same freedoms as the groups from which they split (Finke 1990). As Schaff noted, this resulted in a highly competitive battlefield, with new legions (i.e. sects resulting from schisms) entering the field each year.

But the effects of regulation are not confined to one nation or time period. Japan serves as one of many examples. Before the end of World War II, the government strictly controlled religious activity in Japan. The state subsidized Shinto shrines and participation in ceremonies was a matter of civic duty. Alternative religions required government recognition legally to exist and, once recognized, they faced interference, suppression, and persecution from the state (McFarland 1967; Hardacre 1989). But the Japanese defeat and the Allied Occupation in 1945 led to the immediate repeal of all laws controlling religion, disestablished the Shinto religion, and granted unprecedented religious freedom (Nakano 1987).

The response was overwhelming. The period immediately following 1945 is called *kamigami no rasshu awa*, the “rush hour of the gods.” It was said that “New Religions rose like mushrooms after a rainfall” (quoted in McFarland 1967: 4). By 1949, 403 new religious groups had been founded, and 1,546 other groups had established independence through secession from the shrines, temples, or churches to which they had previously belonged. In contrast, only thirty-one religious groups had received official recognition in the decades before 1945 – thirteen Shinto sects, twenty-eight Buddhist denominations, and two Christian groups (Nakano 1987: 131). Like nineteenth-century America, schisms flourished once the start-up costs were reduced.

Moving into the contemporary period, we see the same trend around the globe. Anthony Gill (1994), Andrew Chesnut (2003), and others have

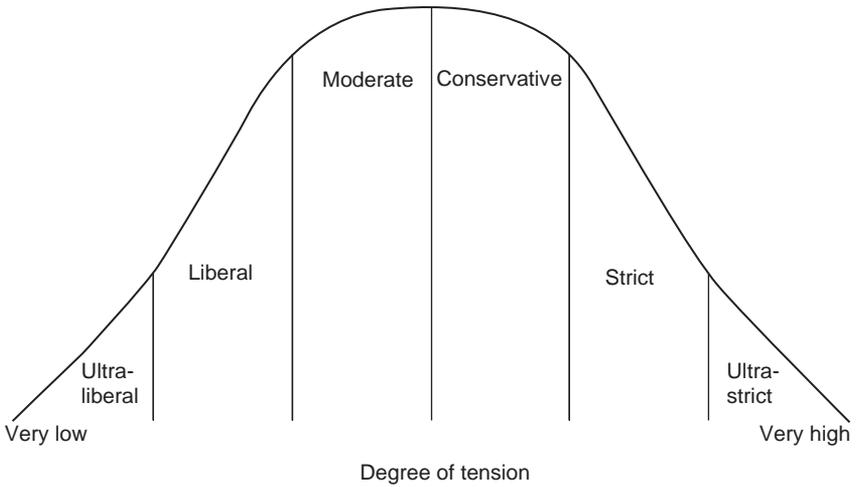
documented the surge in schisms and religious competition in Latin America following a lifting of regulations on the new sects. After four centuries of a monopoly religion, evangelical Christians burst onto the scene as regulations were lifted in the latter half of the twentieth century, with the percentage of evangelicals in the population doubling and tripling since the 1970s. The lifting of regulations in Taiwan has been more recent, but no less dramatic. Yunfeng Lu (2008) reports that after the 1989 Law on Civic Organizations allowed all religions to exist and removed multiple prohibitions there was a twelvefold increase in the number of different religious groups in Taiwan (from 83 in 1990 to 1,062 in 2004) and the total number of temples and churches more than doubled.

To summarize, the first step in identifying the origin of schisms is to understand the barriers potential new groups face. Will they lose subsidies and do they face penalties from the state or larger culture once they are formed? But even when sects can compete on equal footing with the dominant religions, the call for schisms will vary. Our next step is to identify when there is “ecological space” or a “market opening” for new religions to arise from schisms.

### *Ecological space and schisms*

After Niebuhr’s promising work on explaining the process of schism, much of the work that followed returned to the task of specifying the differences between churches and sects. Multiple types and subtypes of sects were soon identified and all were described in detail (see Wilson 1959). In 1963, however, Benton Johnson laid the conceptual groundwork for future theoretical work by explaining that churches and sects were religious organizations located at opposing ends of the same continuum. Churches accepted their social environment while sects rejected it. Rather than placing groups within different categories of a typology, where each group was defined by different qualities, Johnson placed the groups on a conceptual continuum. The abstractness and parsimony of this continuum allowed it to be applied to other world religions and provided a conceptual clarity for explaining sect movement across the continuum to become more church-like. Johnson’s work has served as a theoretical starting point for a large body of theoretical work that followed (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Iannaccone 1988; Finke and Stark 1992).

For understanding schisms, however, we want to identify why religious groups are scattered across this continuum and how movement on the



1.1 A hypothetical distribution of religious niches

continuum increases or decreases the chance of schism. To do so, we focus less on the religious groups for a moment and more on the demand underlying their diversity. Suppose we ranked people according to their preference for intense religion. Previous work has shown that the results approximate a bell-shaped curve where people cluster toward the center of the axis in the area of medium tension, as shown in Figure 1.1 (Stark and Finke 2000). Few want a religion that forces complete submission, requiring a life of isolation from the secular society. Likewise, few want a religion whose god is so distant and powerless as to offer little assistance in daily living and few promises for the life hereafter. To the extent people seek religion, and not all do, the demand is the highest for religions that offer close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership, without isolating individuals from the culture around them. As Weber (1946; 1993) noted and a host of anthropologists have shown, people differ in how much religious intensity they prefer, regardless of the society.

This variation in demand is obvious in an unregulated religious economy where the supply of religions becomes a reflection of religious demand. It is less obvious in highly regulated and monopolized religious economies where the preferences of many niches go unmet. But even in these societies the existence of groups wishing higher- and lower-tension

options shows up as the never-ending line of heretical challengers to the monopoly, some offering higher-tension faith and some proposing more worldly faiths. This ever present diversity of demand has resulted in “religious niches” that are important for understanding the origins of schisms (Stark and Finke 2000).

The idea of niches and the importance of understanding niches is not new in the social sciences. Recent work has shown that there are many similarities between research on religious markets and organizational ecology (Scheitle 2007). As its name might suggest, organizational ecology has its roots in animal and plant ecology. The basic premise is that organizations are much like species of plants or animals in that each species (e.g. a denomination) consists of a population of organizations (e.g. congregations). All individuals within this population are relying on a particular type of resource in the environment. A species of animal relies on a particular food source and/or a particular location to survive, while a species of organization relies on a particular demographic, such as a specific gender, age, race, income, or other niche.

Because an organization’s niche is where it looks to acquire resources, it has important implications for growth. If niche size is stable and a religious group has exhausted the existing resources in the niche by converting all who are willing to join, a group can only grow through expanding its niche outwards. For groups on the tails of the distribution, this can be done either by moving entirely toward the middle, or by stretching its niche toward the middle while attempting to hold its appeal to its current fringe niche. The former strategy can be called niche shifting while the latter can be called niche stretching. A group already in the middle can also attempt to stretch its niche outwards while trying to hold on to its current position.

It is easy to see how the church–sect literature maps on to this framework. Sects tend to have very narrow niches that usually focus on the segment of the population that is interested in a highly demanding religion. When a sect becomes more church-like by stretching its niche to appeal to those wanting a less demanding religion, it increases the size of the niche to which it appeals. This may or may not be an intentional growth strategy, but the consequences are the same regardless.

But if niche expansion offers the potential for growth, it also offers the threat of schism.<sup>1</sup> Attempts to expand a niche result in conflict and

<sup>1</sup> Simply shifting a niche is not necessarily easy to do either, but, for reasons that will be discussed, it is easier than holding on to a niche while simultaneously moving into another.

schisms due to both cultural and material issues. Stretching a niche into new demographic or religious populations means that an organization will try to incorporate individuals who have different social, political, and theological attitudes and expectations. Satisfying such heterogeneous interests is a naturally difficult task and an easy source of conflict. For religious groups it is nearly impossible to claim the exclusive divine authority that appeals to some individuals and simultaneously to appeal to the relativistic and humanistic interests of other individuals. Even if the group were somehow able to create religious services and products that superficially fulfilled the demands of both segments, the attempt to straddle both niches would entirely void the group's authority in each part of the market. The group's legitimacy in each segment of the market would be questioned.

Beyond the issues of legitimacy, expanding a niche so that it includes multiple segments of the population creates the potential for conflicts about the economic and material resources of the group. For example, minority<sup>2</sup> groups within the organization's stretched niche may feel that they are not fully represented in leadership positions or seminaries. At the very least this can lead to conflict within the group, and often it can lead to the minority group deciding they would be better off on their own or by joining a more like-minded group.

The Methodists of the nineteenth century serve as one of many examples. When the lay-led, holiness-seeking, camp-meeting Methodists of the early nineteenth century began to include more middle-class congregations with seminary trained clergy at the end of the nineteenth century, a series of schisms began. One of the first started with an out-spoken group of clergy from the Genesee Conference in the 1850s. Following the lead of the Reverend Benjamin Titus Roberts, they objected to doctrines they described as "liberal to the point of Unitarianism" and to lifestyles that departed from "nonconformity to the world." They were especially critical of the introduction of "pew rentals" as abandoning the poor and of the growing centralization and excess of "executive power and ecclesiastical machinery" (Bureau of the Census 1910: II, 487). Later "read out" of the larger denomination and eventually forming the Free Methodists, their departure was little noticed. Yet, it was an omen for what was to come.

<sup>2</sup> Minority here refers to a racial, economic, theological, or other social minority within a religious group.

By the close of the nineteenth century the “ecclesiastical machinery” attacked by Roberts was struggling to control a rapidly growing holiness movement. Supported by forty-one periodicals, four publishing houses, and a growing number of holiness evangelists, the movement was calling for a return to the holiness emphasis of Methodist founders. In response, the Methodist bishops launched an attack on Methodist clergy participating in the movement and denied holiness evangelists the right to preach in local churches without the permission of the local pastor (Peters 1985). More than ever, the Methodist church was struggling in an attempt to be both sect and church. With the bishops clamping down on the holiness evangelists and clergy, holiness spokesmen began to call “all true holiness Christians to come out of Methodism’s church of mammon” (Melton 1989). And out they came.

Similar struggles with niche stretching can also be observed in local congregations (Christerson and Emerson 2003). In her study of a Korean congregation trying to incorporate other races and ethnicities, Dhingra (2004) observed a variety of problems resulting from the presence of the new members. These problems ranged from the type of food to serve to the congregation, the type of ministries to offer, and the use of the Korean language in the congregation. Because there was still a clear majority in the congregation, it was often easier to serve that “core” membership than it was to change everything the congregation was used to doing. If the congregation does serve the minority members, it might do so at the expense of alienating its current majority. Furthermore, because there are other congregations “specializing” in their own ethnicity, many of those minority members will feel both a push and a pull pressure to leave the congregation.

In empirical studies of schisms (e.g. Liebman, Sutton, and Wuthnow 1988; Sutton and Chaves 2004), one of the more consistent findings is that group size increases the likelihood of schism. This may seem ironic in that size is usually seen as a sign of group success, and therefore one might expect a reduced risk of conflict and schism in such organizations. However, when taking into account the idea of niche stretching, it becomes clear that size is often a proxy for an over-stretched niche.

### *Resource dependence and schisms*

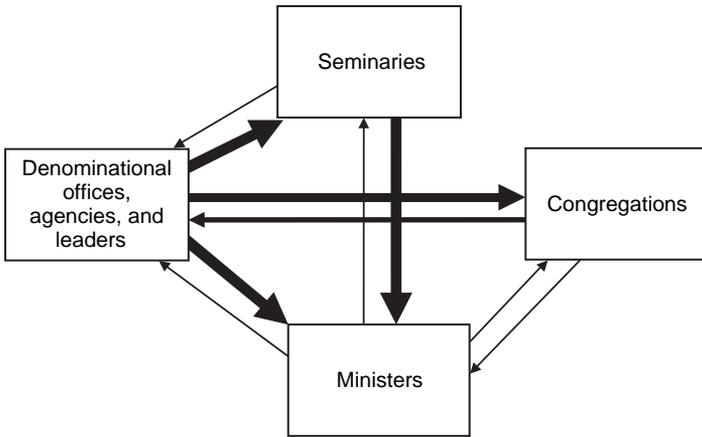
The first two sources of schism emphasized the social context and the larger religious markets of denominations. Now we turn our attention to the religious organization. Rather than looking at market regulation or

niches, we look at the internal operations of the organization and how it contributes to schism. In particular, we will focus on the exchange of resources that occur between congregations and the larger denominational structure. How do these relationships serve to increase or decrease the propensity to schism?

Speaking of “religious groups” or “denominations” has the consequence of projecting a false sense of unity. The reality is that instead of being a single organic being, a religious group or denomination is a heterogeneous collective of different organizations and individuals all connected by various networks of social ties. Congregations, denominational agencies, seminaries, ministers, members, and central authorities are some of the most common, although not all, of the nodes within this web that makes up our perception of a single organization.

Each tie between these units consists of resource exchanges between actors (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Some of these resources may be tangible, such as money, land for buildings, and worship materials. Other resources, such as legitimacy and authority, are less visible but just as important. These ties vary in the balance of their exchanges. Some may be an equal exchange of resources, but many are unequal exchanges where one actor depends on the other more than the reverse. When one party’s dependence does not equal the other’s, then there is a power imbalance where the latter holds power over the former (Emerson 1962).

While all denominations are made up of these ties and their resource exchanges, each denomination varies greatly in the balance and direction of the exchanges that occur within its “web.” Consider the pattern and balance of exchanges within a highly centralized, bureaucratic, or rational–legal denomination, as illustrated in Figure 1.2. In such denominations the central office of the denomination provides resources and/or legitimacy to seminaries. These seminaries in turn provide the professional credentials and create capital for the ministers (Finke and Dougherty 2002). The central office also provides direct resources to ministers through placement, professional development training, and possibly even retirement benefits. Congregations also receive “official” worship materials and other assistance from the central offices, not to mention the “brand name” and religious history of the denomination. Of course, the seminaries, congregations, and ministers provide some resources back to the denomination, including the money from congregations to the denominational offices. However, the overall patterns of direct and indirect exchanges in such a denomination are in the favor of the denominational office. The seminaries would struggle without the



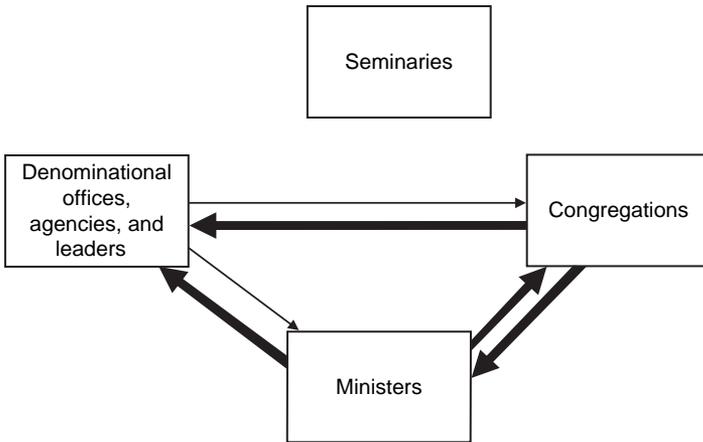
\*\*\*Weight of line represents amount of resources given from actor to recipient. Thicker lines mean the recipient is more dependent on the giver.

### 1.2 Exchange and power dynamics in a centralized denomination

money and legitimacy provided, ministers would struggle if they lost their professional identity and credentials, and congregations define themselves by the religious tradition of the denomination.

We can contrast this to the exchanges that occur in a decentralized or “charismatic” denomination.<sup>3</sup> Denominations such as this often favor lay ministers. This eliminates the influence of seminaries. Similarly, because the independence of congregations is often emphasized, the central office provides few worship resources and little religious capital to congregations. Instead, the denomination is taking more from the congregations and ministers, as it relies on them not only to expand the denomination but to support the denominational offices. There is a heavy but balanced exchange between minister and congregation. The former is at the mercy of the congregation’s favor, while the latter is invested in the personality of the minister. In short, the exchange dynamics in denominations such as this favor ministers and

<sup>3</sup> It is debatable whether the terms rational–legal and charismatic describe the same concepts as centralized and decentralized. However, they are often used to describe the same phenomena, so we simply treat them as equivalents here.



\*\*\*Weight of line represents amount of resources given from actor to recipient. Thicker lines mean the recipient is more dependent on the giver.

1.3 Exchange and power dynamics in a decentralized/charismatic denomination

congregations, and the most important tie is between those two actors (Figure 1.3).

We can easily parallel this to other types of organizations. When an individual purchases a franchise from a recognized national restaurant chain, the individual knows that success depends on the larger brand. Because the customers are coming for the reputation of the larger chain, not the individual owner, the balance of power is in the favor of the organization. The brand has given the owner the training, credentials, and perceived authenticity with customers. If the owner has a dispute with the organization, she cannot simply change the name, symbols, or procedures of her restaurant without losing the benefits of affiliating with the larger organization. The owner may be providing a franchise fee to the central office, but this fee is much less important to it than what it provides to the individual owner.

When there is a grievance with a centralized organization, the actors know that they are not the power holders. Hence, they are more invested in working out the problem, which usually means going through the “system” provided by the central office. This results in a series of committee hearings, resolutions, formal debates, and votes that may or may not actually solve the original grievance, but frequently succeed in delaying the issue until it goes away or at least providing the aggrieved a sense of being heard.

Recent history has seen many denominations going through these steps to prevent a schism. Groups such as the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have been faced with potential schisms over homosexuality that have, as of now, been largely delayed through the mechanisms of their organizational structure<sup>4</sup> (Banerjee 2006; Vegh 2006). Conflicts in decentralized (or “charismatic”) denominations are more likely to end in schism and that result is likely to occur more quickly. The power lies in the hands of the congregations and ministers, so the central office has little ability to delay and/or prevent splits. This helps to explain why over the last two hundred years Catholics have spawned only a few sects and Baptists have generated scores of new groups (Melton 2003).

We should also mention that organizational relationships, like niche positioning, are not static. Like other organizations, religious organizations will tend to become more centralized and support increasingly large administrative staffs as they increase in size (Blau 1970; 1972; Stark and Finke 2000: 162–3). In the Methodist example offered earlier, the Genesee Conference and the holiness movements that followed objected to the increasing administrative authority. Whereas the local congregation once had substantial freedom in selecting local clergy and class leaders, the new bishops were now ruling on who could preach and how clergy would be trained and placed. This resulted in less independence for the local congregations and gave increased powers to the bishops. Southern Baptists have historically been offered as a model for decentralization, with local congregations that were highly independent and only loosely affiliated in their efforts to support missions. But since the middle of the twentieth century local churches have become increasingly dependent on the services of their state associations and the larger denominational structure. Not surprisingly the national organization has also sought to exert more control over the local churches (Finke and Stark 1992). To the extent that denominations can increase congregational dependency on their services, we expect this to reduce schisms.

### *Inimitability and schisms*

To the extent that a denomination holds claim to an exclusive truth, prophet, historical tradition, or ecclesiastical office, the chance of schism

<sup>4</sup> Some individual or small groups of congregations have left their denomination over these issues, but a larger schism has not occurred yet.

will also be reduced. In the parlance of organizational theory, the organization holds a competitive advantage because it provides an inimitable good or service. From the perspective of potential sect movements, the option for schism is reduced because leaving the denomination would result in the loss of both legitimacy and a host of unique resources. Thus, inimitability increases congregations' dependency on the denomination and offers yet another organizational deterrent against schism.

The sources of this inimitability can be many, but one of the most obvious is the unique histories of religious groups that imbue them with ecclesiastical offices, services, and traditions that are unique to their group. Dissidents are forced either to remain or to lose part of their religious heritage. Whereas some Protestant sects feel that a return to the teachings of Christ and the apostles requires them to depart from their existing denomination in protest, Catholic movements seeking such a return are compelled by their very belief structure to remain within the church. For example, conservative Catholic movements seeking to restore previous traditions are compelled by their very beliefs to remain within the church. Splitting from the formal structure of the Roman Catholic Church would mean abandoning the church they define as the "one true church" and nearly two millennia of church tradition. For those calling for a revival of past traditions, any attempts to split from the church would deny them the very traditions they seek to restore (Finke and Stark 1992: 273; Dinges 1995: 252–8; Finke and Wittberg 2000). This is clearly evident in Orthodoxy as well. Bumper stickers such as "Orthodoxy: Proclaiming the Truth since A.D. 33" illustrate the importance of history for claiming legitimacy. Even when movements within these groups fail to win over the church authorities, schism is seldom an attractive option.

Closely related to the unique histories of the religious groups are the unique prophets and ecclesiastical offices that are tied to the group. Once again, the Catholic Church serves as an example with the papacy. Splitting from the formal structure of the Roman Catholic Church would mean losing the institutional source for Apostolic Succession and ignoring the Vicar of Christ. Potential sect movements within the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) face a similar decision. Because the Mormon President is a modern-day prophet, any schisms lose the historical legitimacy of this position and the institutional supports tied to this office.

Along with the unique religious qualities and resources, groups are often interwoven with unique social qualities. None has been more prominent than ethnicity. American religious history is filled with

examples of religious groups offering a unique combination of religion and ethnicity. Whether the groups were Greek Orthodox or Swedish Lutherans, the worship life and institutions were infused with language, rituals, songs, and saints that were specific to a group. For first-generation immigrants schism was seldom attractive because the other local congregations could offer few or none of these options.<sup>5</sup>

The examples just given all illustrate how the inimitable qualities of a group increase the congregations' dependency on the larger denomination for legitimacy. Like the resource dependency discussed earlier, the inimitable qualities of a denomination discourage schism. Unable to find suitable substitutes for the unique histories, prophets, and cultural assets of their current denominations, potential sect movements choose to remain within the fold.

### *Religious professionals and schisms*

The final source of schism moves from the organization to emphasize a group of key actors in the organization: the clergy. Next to the church–sect explanation of schisms, one of the most common is that schisms result from charismatic leaders who are able to garner support from a group sizeable enough to break from the larger group. But this raises questions about why charismatic leaders arise in some denominations and not others. Does this mean that schismless groups have fewer dynamic individuals than schism-prone groups? Furthermore, this suggests that schisms are chaotic and random events driven by the circumstantial presence or non-presence of a personality type, à la Gabriel Tarde. We realize that charismatic leaders can make a difference, but we turn our attention to the larger clergy community and the relationships they hold with their congregations and denominations.

One of the keys to understanding clergy's relationship with the larger denomination is the degree to which they are professionalized (Finke and Dougherty 2002). Perhaps the central debate of nineteenth-century American religion was whether seminary education was either necessary or desirable. For clergy from the colonial mainline, the thought of abandoning such training was absurd. At the opening of Andover Seminary, Timothy Dwight complained the sectarian groups where “under

<sup>5</sup> Although we use American examples, international examples abound on the durability and intensity of the overlap between religion and ethnicity (e.g. the Middle East, Africa, and eastern Europe).

the guidance of quackery” (as quoted in Hatch 1989: 19). Lyman Beecher, another leader of the old colonial mainline, referred to sectarian clergy as “ignorant” and “unlettered” (Beecher and Nettleton 1828: 99). But the sectarian clergy were unrepentant, noting that “God never called an unprepared man to preach.”<sup>6</sup> The upstart sects not only admired their untrained clergy; they also feared the clergyman produced by the seminaries. The Baptists prided themselves on local autonomy, fearing any change suggesting centralized control or a professional priesthood. The Methodists were hierarchical in organizational design, but the first American bishop, Francis Asbury, feared that a seminary-trained clergy would lose touch with the people. He explained: “[w]e must suffer with if we labor for the poor” (as quoted in Coleman 1954: 214–15). In short, both groups feared the trappings of making the ministry a profession.

Organizational theory supports what the nineteenth-century clergy suspected: professionalization changes the loyalties of the clergy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). To the extent that religious organizations rely on professional clergy, clergy will be more restrained by the norms of the larger organization than those of the local congregation. Because the professional clergy and the larger denomination will attempt to standardize educational criteria and provide increased professional support, the clergy’s allegiance will increasingly shift to professional networks and the larger denomination (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Dougherty 2002). Likewise, congregations will become ever more dependent on denominations for setting clergy standards and making clergy appointments.

The Southern Baptist Convention offers a recent example of how quickly this transition can take place. It took nearly a century for the Convention’s seminaries to furnish their first 10,000 graduates (9,946 from 1859 to 1950), but the next 10,000 arrived in less than a decade (11,627 from 1951 to 1960). From 1951 to 1990, enough time to furnish one generation of church professionals, the seminaries produced over 60,000 graduates (Finke 1994). The Southern Baptist Convention underwent a “quiet transformation” in the mid twentieth century as the once loosely affiliated, small fellowships with part-time bi-vocational clergy became large congregations served by seminary-trained professionals closely linked to the larger Convention (Finke 1994). Nancy Ammerman (1990: 158) reports that by the late twentieth century seminary training was the “union card” needed to demonstrate credentials and served to introduce

<sup>6</sup> The 1871 *Baptist Quarterly* provides a survey of Baptist opinion on an educated clergy (see Finke and Stark 1992: 76).

clergy and their congregations “to programs and networks that frame their church lives.” She noted that when controversy emerged in the 1980s and a schism seemed imminent, the running joke was that the “clergy would go with whichever side took the Annuity Board” (1990: 258). Prior to the professionalization of the clergy, the Annuity Board and many other clergy services would have never been a concern for clergy anticipating a schism.

Despite the Baptists’ switch to seminary education, and similar changes by other sects from the nineteenth century (e.g. Methodists and Disciples of Christ), the use of professionalized clergy is still far from a consensus. The most rapidly growing segment of organized Christianity in America, the independent congregations, largely relies on clergy without seminary training or extensive professional networks. With many of the mega-churches falling into this category, these large independents are becoming highly visible. Likewise, two rapidly growing new movements formed in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Calvary Chapel, approach seminary education with caution. Though not prohibiting seminary training, they tend to emphasize classes combined with hands-on training from a pastor at the local church – a program that roughly resembles the apprentice program of early nineteenth-century Methodist itinerants. Sounding remarkably similar to the Baptists of the nineteenth century, the founder of Calvary Chapel, Chuck Smith, states that “God does not call the qualified, but instead qualifies the called” (Miller 1997: 141).<sup>7</sup> Like the upstart sects before them, leaders of the Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship have expressed concerns that when pastors become seminary-trained professionals the “fellow seminarians become the person’s peer group, rather than the congregation, and this creates a distance that is difficult to bridge” (Miller 1997: 166). When clergy are embedded in professional networks and the larger organization, their conformity to the demands of the larger organization will increase. Conforming to these demands also serves to block many forms of organizational change, including schisms.

Once again this illustrates how a congregation’s dependency on the larger denomination deters schism. When clergy rely on the denomination for job placement, seminary training, annuity accounts, and professional

<sup>7</sup> Donald E. Miller (1997: 166) reports that Smith could also be sharply critical of seminary education. When several pastors of expanding mega-churches were pursuing doctorate of ministry degrees, Smith was quoted as saying, “If they get enough education, maybe they’ll bring their congregations down to a manageable size.”

networks, splitting from the denomination becomes increasingly more costly for the clergy and their congregations. Rather than leading a call for schism, they are more likely to call for reforms from within.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF SCHISMS

Throughout American history the marginal minority faiths of one era have become the prominent mainline religions of the next. From the first sects immigrating to America (e.g. the Puritans, Baptists, and Methodists) to those born on American soil (e.g. the Disciples, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah's Witnesses), the upstarts have charted the most dramatic growth throughout American history (Finke and Stark 1992). Thus, the small seemingly powerless sects that result from schisms can have powerful consequences on the larger religious market.

We recognize, of course, that the vast majority of sectarian groups show little potential for growth.<sup>8</sup> Only one of the many Bible student groups that formed in response to the teachings of Charles Taze Russell went on to become the Jehovah's Witnesses, and of the scores of sects spawned by the Baptists and Pentecostals only a handful have been able to support sustained growth. Yet, when start-up costs are low, schisms quickly fill new openings in the religious market and a handful succeed at generating a broad appeal. Without these schisms, large segments of the religious demand would go unmet and overall levels of religious involvement would be far lower.

But schisms do more than fill market openings, they also serve as a source for organizational innovation. Despite Ernst Troeltsch's open disdain for the sects, and his convictions that their "primitive," "naïve," and "non-reflective" religious teachings could only appeal to the lower classes, he acknowledged that it was the sects that "do the really creative work" (Troeltsch 1911: 44–5). He credited sects with serving as the initial foundation for all great religious movements. Sects continue to provide "creative" innovations. Just as the Catholic counter-reformation borrowed innovations from the schismatic movements, mainstream churches continue to borrow from small upstart sects.

The sects spawned by schisms hold a couple of key advantages in generating innovations. First, because their congregations are frequently less dependent on a centralized administrative structure, they face fewer

<sup>8</sup> After collecting data on 417 American-born sects, Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 134) report that "nearly a third of all sects (32 percent) reached their high-water mark on the day they began."

roadblocks when attempting to introduce innovations or start new organizations. For example, how and when new churches can be started is often heavily regulated by the larger organization. Mainline denominations will typically provide financial support for congregations that receive approval from the local district, presbytery, diocese, or conference.<sup>9</sup> Yet this approval relies on congregations meeting a wide range of criteria, typically including: support of surrounding congregations, increasing need due to population growth, the leadership of an ordained pastor, grassroots support, and a financial plan for support after the subsidy has ended. If churches shun the financial support and begin without the approval of surrounding congregations, they can still be denied admission into the denomination. Whereas the Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, and Mormons annually start more than twenty new churches per thousand existing churches, the United Methodists, the United Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America start fewer than five (Stark and Finke 2000: 153). The formal controls that denominations place on the formation of new congregations are only one example of the many internal regulations that restrict organizational innovation.

But the internal regulations that curb innovations are not always formal controls imposed by a central office; they are often informal expectations imposed on the local clergy. To the extent that schisms result in sectarian groups with a decentralized structure and a less professionalized clergy, efforts to mimic and conform to peer institutions are also reduced. This follows directly from a key insight of new institutional theory: organizations' efforts to conform to the norms, traditions, and social influences of peer organizations result in a homogeneity or isomorphism among the organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). This tendency to conform to existing standards and to mimic the actions of peer institutions will curb innovations that depart too far from existing solutions. Whether at the level of the congregation or the larger denomination, the informal controls of fellow professional clergy can serve to curb innovations.

Finally, schisms often serve to mobilize the most committed. Although our attention has been on the organizational structure and vitality of the sects formed, we should also note that, because sects tend to hold higher

<sup>9</sup> This varies from one denomination to the next, but the most typical plan is 100 percent support for the first year, 80 percent for the second, and so on until they are receiving no support at the end of five years.

levels of member commitment and are in tension with the larger culture, they are able to generate substantial social change. In his classic *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, R. Laurence Moore (1986) demonstrates that religious outsiders helped to define a new brand of Americanism and showed the flaws of existing definitions. Despite their small size and marginal status these groups helped to reshape American culture. One obvious example is the Jehovah's Witnesses. They have been described as a small religious group that "has no political power and reaches for none" (Fowler and Hertzke 1995: 196), yet owing to their strong, uncompromising beliefs they have done more to extend religious civil liberties than perhaps any other religious group in the nation (Reichley 1985). Refusing to pledge allegiance to the flag and relentless in their pursuit of new converts, Jehovah's Witnesses have tested and retested the boundaries of religious freedom in most nations around the globe. During the early 1940s alone Jehovah's Witnesses made frequent visits to the US Supreme Court, shaping the contours of religious freedom. Yet most refused to vote.

#### CONCLUSION

Because there are rarely "bloodless" schisms, it is easy to be distracted by the acrimony and drama that occurs. We have attempted to uncover the underlying forces leading to schism rather than focusing on tensions at the surface. We have pointed to forces both internal and external to religious groups that affect a group's susceptibility to schisms.

At the macro level, environmental contexts vary in how they feed or suppress schisms. In particular, state regulation or interference can create an environment that is hostile to new religious groups and therefore lowers the likelihood of schisms. At the meso or organizational level, resource exchanges between denominations, congregations, and other religious organizations create power imbalances that increase the cost of schism for some groups. Groups that offer exclusive or inimitable religious goods are also at a lower risk of schism because potential sects know that they would be giving up irreplaceable resources. Similar dynamics occur between groups with professionalized clergy. Professionalized leaders know that their material and professional interests rest with the larger organization, so they are less likely to break with it.

Schisms have been seen as the primary way religious innovation and groups are introduced into the environment. While this is true, changes in the religious landscape of the United States raise interesting questions

for future studies of schisms. Maybe most significant has been the growth of “independent” or “non-denominational” congregations and identities. At first glance, it may seem that schisms are a non-issue with such congregations since they lack a larger organization from which to split. More likely, though, is that schisms occur but in a less visible manner. It is difficult for a congregation to be an “island,” and many independent congregations form networks with other congregations and parachurch organizations. Grievances between factions could just as easily lead to a schism between these groups, but this may not produce the organizational fireworks and paper-trails that usually serve as a sign of schism. Furthermore, schisms within independent congregations could simply produce a new independent congregation and therefore not look like a split at all. Despite the challenges these new religious forms present for research from a practical standpoint, we believe the theoretical dynamics presented concerning environmental contexts and resource dependencies still apply. While research methods may need to adapt, good theories are flexible.

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