An Expansion of the Rational Choice Approach: Social Control in the Children of God during the 1970s and 1980s

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Abstract

Using primary documents from the Children of God and interviews with current and former members, we argue that commitment to this high-demand Christian group during the 1970s and 1980s involved a complex system of immediate and compensatory rewards and punishments, working in relation with a system of costs that provide opportunities to avoid punishments and obtain rewards. By arguing in this manner, we critically expand upon the Stark/Bainbridge theory of religion, which underemphasizes or ignores the crucial control functions played by punishment systems. The Children of God's punishment system involved purposive, affective, material, and sensual or bodily restraints, which operated both on immediate and postponed (i.e., otherworldly) levels.

Introduction

Economic exchange analyses of religion have approached religious behaviour as rational action involving cost/benefit calculations. Critics of the new paradigm point out major problems with the definition of costs and rewards (Bruce 1993, 1999; Jerolmack and Porpora 2004; Lavric and Flere 2010), but these criticisms fail to identify the role that punishments play in motivating religious behaviour, especially in relation to expenditures or costs. This article revisits Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge's theory of reli-

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gion and its most important incarnations, presenting a critical expansion of rational choice perspectives as they apply to social control dynamics within high-demand religious organizations. In a case study of the Children of God, we argue that high-demand religious groups impose a punishment system in relation to costs in an attempt to maintain the conformity of its members. Consequently, rational choice theory requires conceptual adjustments if it is to provide an accurate interpretation of high-demand religions like the Children of God was throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In late 1967, the Children of God began as a Christian (or Jesus People) mission to hippies and surfers south of Los Angeles, its early days emphasizing intense Bible study among its members. It held millennialist beliefs and an exalted view of its leader, David Berg, whom members believed was God's unique prophet. Gradually, Berg's writings took on equal, then (arguably) superior status to the Bible, and Berg initiated policies involving "free sex" among members and religious prostitution toward outsiders (using the latter tactic as a recruitment strategy, a fundraising vehicle, and in some locations, a shield of protection [see Chancellor 2000, 120–128]). Berg justified these sexual activities as being among many ways that the group demonstrated God's love, and they were "motivated by love for others and for God" (what he called "The Law of Love" [Chancellor 2000, 100; cf. Bulwer 2007, 120–124]). In 1978, an internal source indicated that it had 4,759 members, of whom 1505 were children and the rest adults (Family of Love 1978a, 1–3; Pritchett 1985; Van Zandt 1991, 4–6, 30–55). Also in that year, Berg initiated a significant leadership overhaul, and changed the group's name to The Family (Chancellor 2000, 10), and since then sometimes it also calls itself The Family International or The Family of Love.

One of our informants and a former member described the Children of God as having a powerful formula for maintaining group loyalty: a combination of strong social bonds among members and each member's intense feelings of commitment to God. Living and working in proximity with one another and committed to a stringent program of communal work, missionizing, and proselytizing, the Children of God members were motivated by a complex interaction between socio-emotional bonds and religiously grounded social control techniques. Their deep commitment was to both the group's espoused religious ideals and the people whom they believed were practicing them. Guarding over the members' continued commitment was a comprehensive system of social control that was intimately related to the group's ideology and imposed by the members themselves on one another, often through the direction of the Children of God leadership.

Social control within the Children of God pervaded all aspects of its members lives, even shaping the very social bonds and interpersonal relationships about which members felt so strongly. Dress and personal grooming habits, emotions, sexual behaviour, family arrangements, occupations, national residence, and life's goals all received scrutinizing examination and direction by the Children of God's leader, David Berg (usually called Moses or Mo during the 1970s), with the assistance of a hierarchical leadership structure that remained his to abolish or reorganize (see Melton 1994; Van Zandt 1991, 30–53; Wallis 1982, 89–93).

An examination of the social control dynamics within the Children of God provides an excellent opportunity to develop theory concerning the primary role that punishment plays in shaping and constraining members' activities in high-demand religious organizations. Although several valuable studies of Children of God during the 1970s discuss aspects of the relationship between the Children of God's religious ideology and its social control techniques (Boeri 2002, 2005; Bulwer 2007; Freckelton 1998; Hopkins 1977a, 1977b, 1980; Kent 1994a, 1994b; Melton 1986; Pritchett 1985; Richardson and Davis 1983; Wallis 1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1983, 1987), and at least one specifically examines the group's creation of women's gendered identities (Boeri, 2002), none of them place this relationship in the embracing theoretical framework of rational choice theory. David Van Zandt (1991, 24), for example, mentions the importance of "obedience to [the Children of God] leaders" that was an aspect of "total discipleship or total commitment" that was especially characteristic of the early years, but he did not include a discussion of punishment techniques that leadership used in attempting to maintain such devotion. Ruth Wangerin (1993, 136–137) mentions adults' use of corporal punishments (especially spanking or "'lashes of love'") on children, and she also admits "[t]he element of control by fear was there" among ordinary members toward Berg and his shifting teachings (Wangerin, 1993, 153). She did not locate these observations, however, in a theoretical framework. David Millikan's discussion (1994, 229) of teen discipline, which in "some areas went overboard" on its harshness, focuses on a later period than we wish to examine here.

Indications of harsh punishments and high costs appear in James D. Chancellor's book on the Children of God/The Family International, but his overall positive and forgiving attitude toward the group prevented him from focusing on it to the degree that it deserved. For example, Chancellor noted, "Living out the Law of Love was not without cost. It is not difficult to imagine the stress on marriages and family relationships. Most adult disciples

are no longer together with their original mates. Even in those marriages that did survive, living out the Law of Love brought wounds that were hard to heal (Chancellor 2000, 107). Mentions of costs and punishments appear throughout his study (for example, Chancellor 2000, 117, 140, 164. ch. 6), although not usually through exchange terminology.

In reaction to Chancellor's relatively favorable view of the Children of God/ The Family, former member and now a Canadian attorney, Perry Bulwer, wrote a scathing critique of Chancellor's study in particular and life in the group in general. He did not use the concepts of rewards, punishments and costs that are central to this article, but he discussed numerous concepts related to the group that would support our interpretive framework here. For example, Bulwer discussed the group leaders' newer claims that they received heavenly messages from Jesus and Berg. He concluded, "Members are required to accept those revelations as God's will for themselves, and they must not question, doubt, or criticize any aspect of The Family's dogma" (Bulwer 2007, 114). He devoted the rest of his article detailing what the costs and punishments were to those who stayed, even though he used different terms than we do here. Many more examples of costs and punishments appear in a book written by three former member sisters, but they, too, did not use the language of exchange theory to express themselves (Jones, Jones and Buhrig 2007).

Data and method

We use primary documents from the Children of God during the 1970s and interviews with members and former members from the same period (along with two interviews of active members in the late 1980s) to both illustrate specific examples of social control and advance a theoretical framework of control within this group. The enormous amount, however, of primary material (easily numbering in the thousands of pages) required that we develop strategies for identifying and examining the most relevant publications.

We had greatest access to Berg's early *MO Letters*, upon which we rely heavily and which give the best indications of the group's activities from 1968 to about 1976. Even within these boundaries the amount of material is vast, and a traditional method of randomly selected content analysis is inappropriate for locating the directives that Berg placed in his tracts regarding members' behaviour. Indexes to the early volumes were helpful in locating relevant themes for our analysis, and we took systematic notes on various social control topics as they appeared in three volumes.

One of the co-authors conducted nearly fifty in-depth interviews with former and current Children of God members between 1987 and 1997, and for

this article, we drew upon the typed transcripts of thirty-two of them. This study's participants, of whom sixteen were men and sixteen women, were mainly in their mid-to-late thirties with the exception of two adolescents. Participants had been in the Children of God anywhere from twenty-one months to twelve years. All of them had been members during the early 1970s. Of the eight acting members interviewed at the time of this study, all but one had been in the Children of God for at least four-and-a-half years, and two of the participants had been members for sixteen years. All former members left the Children of God voluntarily, and all but one participant had (often extensive) contact with conservative Christian churches critical of the Children of God.

The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to ninety minutes, with open-ended questions usually beginning with brief pre-conversation auto-biographies that led to participants' conversion stories. The author recruited participants through purposive and snowball sampling. Former members gave us indications about the *MO Letters* that, based upon their experiences, contained important behavioural directives, and we were careful to select only those textual examples that we could support with interview statements. Since we are attempting to show how this religious group established the cognitive and emotional boundaries for operating within a reward/punishment system, we have provided numerous textual quotes.

Stark and Bainbridge's theory of religion: Compensators and rewards

A critical expansion of the theory of religion developed by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1980, 1985, 1987) and more recent contributions to the rational choice theory of religion allow us to demonstrate the crucial role of religious ideology in the Children of God's social control of its members. Stark and Bainbridge's initial theory of religion provides a significant, although incomplete, basis for interpreting social control within high-demand religious organizations like the Children of God. The most important rational choice theory insight is that exchange relations play a fundamental role in religious commitment, and these exchange relations form the basis of our contribution. Almost completely absent from rational choice theory is the role of punishment[1] as a powerful motivator for conformist

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1. Although not the main focus of his article, Kumar posits that the nature of supernatural justice within religion is that individuals believe that their material well-being is influenced by "god(s) who punishes (rewards) the irreverent (reverent) and involve in religious activities to propitiate the god(s) depending on their belief about the magnitude of supernatural punishment/reward" (2009, 6).

behaviour in religious groups. Even in Bainbridge's most recent presentations of his exchange system of religion, he does not identify the crucial role that punishments play in motivating religious belief and behavior (Bainbridge 1997, 9–13; Bainbridge 2012; Iannaccone and Bainbridge 2010). This omission is especially unfortunate because his sociology of religious movements contains an extended discussion of the Children of God/The Family International (Bainbridge 1997, 208–240). In the context, therefore, of expanding rational choice approaches to religion, we show that the Children of God imposed a punishment system in an attempt to maintain the conformity of its members.

Rational choice theory specifies that religion is an exchange system of social and purportedly spiritual rewards that explain both the commitment of members and the techniques of group control. The pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of costs governs human action (Bainbridge and Stark 1979, 284). The authors define *rewards* as "anything humans will incur costs to obtain" while *costs* are "whatever humans attempt to avoid" (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980, 115; 1987, 27). (We shall return to their definition of costs shortly.) In the original version of the theory, some rewards are either scarce or unavailable and people instead accept *compensators*, which are "postulations of reward according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation" (Bainbridge and Stark 1979, 284; Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 36). Thus, "compensators posit the attainment of the desired reward in the distant future or some other unverifiable context" (Stark and Bainbridge 1980, 121). Stark and Bainbridge maintained "humans treat compensators as if they were rewards." They are, however, only "intangible substitutes–IOUs, the value of which must be taken on faith" (1980, 121). Religion remains attractive precisely because it offers wondrous compensatory promises that are not easily disproved (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 73), and the Children of God's promises were no exception.

The concept of a compensator has gone through some revision, since initially it was central to Stark and Bainbridge's accounts, but has disappeared from Stark's work with Finke (Stark and Finke 2000).[2] In his critique of rational choice approaches to the sociology of religion, Lehmann claims that the compensator was set aside "for presentational rather than substantive reasons" (Lehmann 2010, 5), which may indeed be the case, given that Stark and Finke claim they always disliked using the term as it "implies unmeant nega-

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2. Stark currently defines religion as the utilization and manipulation of the supernatural, but only if a cheaper or more efficient alternative is unavailable (Stark and Finke 2000, 120).

tive connotations about the validity of religious promises." Consequently, they reworked the theory because it "became evident that there is no need to distinguish these kinds of explanations by use of a special term. It suffices to analyze aspects of the religious means of fulfillment of such explanations and the issues of risk and plausibility entailed therein" (Stark and Finke 2000, 289). An alternative interpretation is that the theory has been responsive to criticisms (Jerolmack and Porpora 2004). We are aware, for example, of Wallis and Bruce's early criticisms that compensators are a form of rewards (Wallis and Bruce 1984, 13–14; Bruce 1999), but despite rational choice theory's abandonment of this auxiliary proposition, we argue that it still has some analytic utility. Distinguishing himself from recent rational choice theory approaches, Bainbridge seems to agree, arguing that religion itself "serves as a socially supported compensator that compensates people psychologically for the lack of desired rewards" (Bainbridge 2013, 15). "Cults," therefore, "can be analyzed in terms of the new supernatural compensators they create through intense social implosions, or through the methods they use to absorb new members" (Bainbridge 2013, 23).

We prefer to speak about immediate rewards and punishments versus compensatory [i.e., supernatural] rewards and punishments. While people who are following religious edicts that promise otherworldly benefits may feel like they are giving their lives a sense of immediate, higher purpose (i.e., a purposive reward), it nonetheless remains true that they expect a payoff or reward in the afterlife which (if it occurs) will be qualitatively different from anything worldly. Consequently, we, like Stark and Bainbridge's early work, and more recent contributions from Iannaccone and Bainbridge (Bainbridge 2013; Iannaccone and Bainbridge 2010) maintain a conceptual and theoretical distinction between immediate and compensatory rewards and punishments even if our terminology slightly modifies their initial terms and/or meanings. Both immediate rewards and compensatory rewards are powerful motivators and incentives for human action. Simply put, compensatory rewards provide the soteriological hope, and immediate rewards provide terrestrial returns or benefits for people who believe that they are gaining the promised salvation. As an initial supplement, however, to this general conceptual model, we wish to identify important distinctions between different types of immediate rewards and compensatory rewards. Expanding upon lists of incentives (i.e., positive rewards) that already are well-established in sociological literature on bureaucracies and social movements (Zald and Ash 1966, 329), we suggest that immediate and compensatory rewards appear in purposive, affective, material, and bodily/sensual forms. Purposive and affective rewards (either

immediate or compensatory) are of particular significance when analyzing the Children of God's social control techniques.

Compensatory rewards in the Children of God

Compensatory rewards motivate human action by justifying belief and behaviour according to rewards that individuals will accrue in an unverifiable future (often thought to be a spiritual realm or an afterlife). Members act because they believe the purposes of their actions are good or godly, *and* consequently believe that they will receive spiritual or *heavenly compensators* because of their performance, despite (if not because of) difficulties that such actions cause to their lives. As a former Scandinavian member recalled, "[Y]ou moved around down the street when you were in the Children of God feeling...like...Jesus said,... 'for this I was born.' And you walked around down the street in Stockholm thinking, 'for this I was born. I am making history, and these poor people around me don't know that.'"

Otherworldly rewards are built into rational choice theory's definition of religion: "Religion consists of very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods" (Stark and Finke 2000, 91). Jerolmack and Porpora (2004, 143) are correct to point out that rational choice theory lacks a formal definition of exchange, but the promise of eternal life is perhaps the most important purposive compensatory reward that Christian religion offers, and David Berg claimed to provide this compensator to the Children of God members through the purportedly biblical basis of his organization.

> "THE BIBLE IS GOD'S PLAN FOR ETERNAL LIFE: the solid, genuine foundation of Truth on which we're building, whose Giver is God. It is the Bible that gives genuine and eternal immortality through the resurrection to everlasting heavily bliss with God." (Berg 1974, 20)

After establishing the primacy of the Bible through its compensatory, salvational claims, Berg astutely legitimated the authority of his personal writings by insisting that they were intimately connected to the Bible and its message. "WITH EVERY [MO] LETTER," Berg asserted, "I'M CLEARING AWAY THE CHURCH RUBBLE, to try to uncover for you once again what the Bible really says and means, what Jesus taught" (Berg 1974, 20). Berg offered his followers a Christian-related compensatory message of biblically based eternal life, and ensured the importance of his own message by giving his letters a vital role in revelation and scriptural interpretation.

A practical example of Berg's use of religious compensators (i.e., compensatory rewards) to induce behavioral, cognitive, and emotional conformity

appears in his justifications for the religiously sanctified sexual solicitation that the group practiced, which it called *flirty-fishing* (see Boeri 2002, 329–330). Berg insisted that female members were to trust God to reward them in the future for their efforts in bringing souls to Jesus. Flirting-fishing "CAN BE A VERY DIFFICULT AND TRYING BUSINESS and sometimes very disappointing. It takes a lot of faith to stick to it, trusting that God knows what He's doing that the catch will be made sure later, even if you can't always see immediate results" (Berg 1977, 2). Along similar lines, a member, who had flirty-fished a number of years earlier (as had his wife), insisted that Berg's initiation of the practice as the result of a "revelation…a vision to really try to reach people" where Berg and a group of female followers were living. As he saw it, flirty-fishing was an effort "to kind of pioneer the ministry and see how fruitful and effective it would be to…dance with people and really get involved with them on a real personal level, and show them an amount of love that was necessary to show them God's love." His wife added that the two of them had undertaken flirty-fishing activities "from a giving heart," and that the experience had actually strengthened their marriage. "You know," she offered imprecisely, "Jesus, he went to the prostitutes."

Rewards in the Children of God

The Children of God's immediate, purposive reward system built upon its larger compensatory claims. The immediate purposive rewards that motivated members centered on their twofold shared belief that the group was manifesting Jesus' love into the world while at the same time initiating a revolution in Jesus' name. Insofar as both activities translated into concrete behaviours and actions, they offered members tangible and quick rewards that they could see and feel. In 1971, for example, Berg emphatically stated to his followers that:

> YOU, THE CHILDREN OF GOD ARE GOD'S REVOLUTION FOR THIS HOUR AND THIS DAY! You're it! You're the only ones I know in the world who are living like Jesus and His Disciples, who are not just talking about it, not just preaching it, but living it, living together in peace and in love and in joy and in witnessing and in Bible study and in prayer and in praise and in sharing a genuine, absolute and total change! (Berg 1971, 479)

Berg therefore, portrayed love as both a purposive reward that people experienced as part of the revolution, and a consequential, affective or psychological reward related to the group's revolutionary lifestyle. Either type of immediate reward, however, can serve as an incentive for continued group behavior, and one former member spoke almost ruefully about the love she

had felt as a member but did not have before she joined:

> "The thing that appealed to me about the group [members] was their so-called unconditional love and acceptance. Having never experienced love, any kind of real love, it was like water to a thirsty soul....It gave me a purpose, and some-thing...to do with my life."

She further described the Children of God as having a "united purpose" and an "intensity of companionship." Another former member provided a similar account of the "strong bond and tie" that existed between the people in the group, although others expressed the opinion that affective ties between members developed only when a group collectively went through hardship together (such as missionizing a new country). Love, therefore, provided at least some members with a sense of immediate purpose and a cluster of affective feelings toward other members.

From a related perspective, love as flirty-fishing directed toward non-members provided various colonies and their inhabitants with immediate material rewards. One former member, for example, "completely supported the [Children of God] house just for the weekends" that she spent with a wealthy man. Berg himself realized the financial importance of flirty-fishing for his group's financial income and prescribed it as one of seven ways "brave pioneers" were to raise money (Berg 1978). Moreover, persons who performed important organizational services benefitted indirectly from this religiously sanctified sexual solicitation, since local colonies tithed their income to the central office, which in turn paid stipends or comparatively generous living allowances to members in the higher echelons.

Immediate and compensatory punishments

Of equal and sometimes greater importance than immediate and compensatory rewards for the Children of God's ability to sustain the commitment of its members was its use of various types of punishments. Its punishment system was the mirror-image of its immediate and compensatory reward systems, which means that some penalties involved immediate reprisals, while others threatened retributions in the purportedly spiritual realm (especially the afterlife). The Children of God, and many other religious organizations, enforced doctrinal commitment by punishing persons whose attitudes or behaviors deviated from the norms of the immediate reward and compensatory systems.

Despite the vital aspect that forms of punishment play regarding group maintenance in religious settings, rational choice theory almost completely neglects to discuss them, and this omission limits the economic the economic model's

comprehensiveness and heuristic ability. Stark and Bainbridge's two mentions of punishment come in discussions about societal responses to high-demand religions (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 125, 205), but in those discussions they reveal the conceptual problem that arises from their definition of costs. Researchers who follow George Homans often use punishments and costs as equivalents (see Chadwick-Jones 1976, 177). Other theorists apparently view punishments as a type of cost (see Chadwick-Jones 1976, 179). Still others view rewards and punishments (or positive and negative reinforcers) as the central exchange concepts). We follow the latter terminology, believing it to be the clearest of the three approaches. Furthermore, we see costs as forms of expenditure that serve either as purchases/investments for rewards or as the alleviation/prevention of punishments (much like fines). Our exchange model, therefore, assumes actions that are based partly upon judicial assumptions–assumption that seem appropriate when discussing religious groups that have their own punitive procedures.

Although punishments and costs are related, too many rational choice theorists see them as interchangeable. For example, in his analysis of how sanctions work for religious groups, Darren Sherkat illustrates the conflation of punishments and costs: "If a person fails to participate and gains individual benefit from defection (she prefers to sleep rather than go to church), she will be ridiculed and excluded from the group in the future (and thus suffer costs as a consequence of defection)" (Sherkat 1997, 75). Subjectively, at least, costs are not the same as punishments, and neither are they the opposite of rewards: *punishments* are. Subjective motives are relevant to any discussion of rewards and costs, or we risk disconnecting the model from the means-ends calculations of individuals (Spickard 1998). In the absence of a single objective cost or reward, conceptual refinement is necessary, particularly regarding the subjective harm imposed on members of a high-demand group.

Responding to the proposal that torture (formerly a type of punishment) is, conceptually a cost, Dustin Ells Howes argues that torture is distinct from a cost or even coercion. Punishments are analogous to torture in their impact on the individual; that is, like torture, punishment does not qualify as a strategic interaction in the same manner as costs. Following Howes, we argue that punishments impose costs that are qualitatively different from other kinds of costs because "they inflict unimaginable pain" (Howes 2012, 21). Whereas people discover costs in a process of negotiation, punishments exist outside of the strategic framework under discussion.

Although most punishments are not as direct or as horrific as torture, they nevertheless impede reasoned choice. Costs, however, are people's expenditures of time, resources, and/or effort in attempts to gain immediate or com-

pensatory rewards and avoid punishments. Although religion is costly, and religious entrepreneurs demand sacrifices from members, these sacrifices promote member commitment for the entire community, effectively screening out those who are less committed. In contrast, punishment, imposes its own costs. Groups risk losing members if they begin to question something to be an actual immediate or compensatory punishment that leadership insists is a cost to a reward or compensator.

   Time costs indicate the length of people's attempts at not only seeking immediate or compensatory rewards but also avoiding punishments (Heiss 1981, 114). Resource costs indicate the depth of such attempts (especially when viewed in the context of people's overall resources pool). As we soon shall see, one of the most personal resource costs can be one's own health, sacrificed for a higher cause. Finally, effort costs indicate the intensity of one's attempts to meet the group's expenditure demands. Stark and Bainbridge even give unintentional support to our definition when they argue "[s]ometimes, punishment may seek to change the behavior of the deviants by rendering their current patterns of behaviour more costly than conformity would be" (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 125). People may be willing to expend great costs if they expect a great reward, just as they may be willing to expend great costs to avoid intense punishments. Large and costly expenditures often occur in religious systems because of the supernatural compensatory rewards and punishments that groups propound. In the face of promises about heaven or threats about hell, secular costs may seem insignificant to religious believers. Nevertheless, high-demand religious groups like the Children of God do not rely exclusively upon supernatural sanctions, since they do use secular costs to "support and strengthen material punishments and reputational mechanisms" (Sosis 2005, 19). After remedying Stark and Bainbridge's almost complete omission of punishments and adjusting their definition of costs, we are able to identify various punishment systems that the Children of God used during the 1970s to maintain doctrinal adherence and behavioural conformity to Berg's teachings.

   Operating in a parallel manner to immediate and compensatory rewards, both immediate and compensatory punishments include purposive, affective, material, and bodily dimensions. Broadly speaking, *immediate purposive punishments*, which take place in the present, include such things as charges that people are not living up to the group's religious standards. (Often, these charges mean that the person is accused of selfishness.) *Immediate affective punishments* involve the removal of emotional contacts with other members (through various forms of shunning, isolation, or forced separation from

loved ones) or the reduction of social status, while *immediate material punishments* involve the removal of money or other forms of wealth or value (including the commodity of time). *Immediate bodily or sensual punishments* include the infliction of physical pain (through beating or strenuous tasks), and women often suffer distinct types of punishments that are related to gender and gynecology (including pregnancy). *Compensatory purposive punishments* are reprisals that are to occur in the unverifiable future, including such intimidating charges that persons will be separated from God or spiritual revelation for eternity. *Compensatory affective punishments* include threats that persons will be separated from their loved ones in the afterlife, while *compensatory material punishments* involve threats of future financial ruin passed along to future generations. Finally, *compensatory bodily or sensual punishments* involve threats about forthcoming pain and misery, either later in this life or in the next one (e.g., hell, low rebirth, etc.).

Ongoing membership in the Children of God meant that individuals operated under the shadow of an elaborate and extensive social control system, part of which depended upon punishments for alleged deviations from Berg or lesser persons in leadership. Each of the punishment impositions took practical form in the daily lives of the Children of God members. Many of these practical forms of punishment were set forth in a *MO Letter* about literature distribution entitled "Shiners"–Or Shamers!" in which Berg praised persons who distributed large amounts of literature (shiners) and criticized persons whose distribution outputs were low (shamers). He required colonies to keep literature distribution records for each person, and ordered that:

> [t]he two lowest scorers every week will be given their bed rolls and back packs with a bunch of literature and will have to make it on their own and go any where they want. If you don't reach the people in your area, we're going to send you out to reach the people on the other parts of the world! SEND THEM OUT BY FAITH FOR A WEEK OR WEEKEND, and they'll have tales to tell! (Berg 1973, 1848)

Being "shipped out on the road" (Berg 1973, 1848) was a punishment that contained obvious immediate affective, material, and bodily components, and Berg reinforced it with vague, compensatory purposive threats of Godly punishments. Furthermore, he blamed the individuals themselves for their poor performances (rather than, for example, the quality or the appeal of what they had to distribute), thereby placing the responsibility for the punishments squarely on the shoulders of the victims:

> The world puts their salesmen on quota systems. Why can't we do it with God's work? Put the pressure on! If they'd been doing the job like they should have

been, we wouldn't have to put the pressure on. What did the Lord of the Harvest do when He came back and found they weren't doing the job?—He put the screws on! The man with the talents [does] the same.

13. DOES GOD PUT THE PRESSURE ON? We're His salesmen, and if we don't deliver, He'll put the pressure on! (Berg 1973, 1848)

Punishing shamers, therefore, was necessary (or so Berg claimed), not only because they were failing to do God's work, but also because God would retaliate against them (in an unspecified manner) if the group itself did not do so.

One former member (whom we call Georgina Mohlson) recounted her story about the punishments that her colony's leadership inflicted upon her when pregnancy and illness prevented her from meeting literature distribution quotas. Her story demonstrates how the Children of God leadership in her particular Scandinavian colony translated Berg's directives about shamers into a practical punishments system that contained purposive justifications related to the costs of bodily illness. Although previously Mohlson had been a valued *litnesser* (literature distributor and witnesser), leaders forced her into isolation until she could get her "act together." The leaders of Mohlson's colony placed a mattress for her and her husband in a foul-smelling basement room "and told me I could stay [t]here till I decided I was well enough to go on the streets."

Soon afterward Mohlson claims to have experienced an even harsher example of social control when a leader dressed her one day and sent her out to distribute *MO Letters*, even though she could barely stand:

I don't remember how I got back that day. But there was no good in me trying, and I told them so–I just couldn't. Well, that was lack of faith and I was given scriptures like 'Though he slay me, yet I will trust him' [see Job 13.15]. I was told how [Mo's daughter, now known as] Deborah Davi[s] had nine children. She had the same problems I had with her pregnancy, and when the vomit would get to her throat she'd bite her teeth and swallow it down again. And because I couldn't do that, I was in rebellion.... My husband at the time was not allowed to see me very much because I was a bad influence and he always had trouble litnessing.

Mohlson's story is an extreme illustration of control maintained through immediate, affective and bodily or sensual punishments, justified on purposive grounds. When she was unable to pay the impossibly high health cost of overcoming her sick body, a group leader punished her with the purposive compensatory charge of rebellion against God (as represented through the

Children of God's edicts).

This account provides an important lesson about the importance of distinguishing rewards, punishments, and costs. Two conditions under which people leave groups is when either the costs are too high *despite* the promised rewards and/or punishments, or if the rewards and/or punishments are too low in relation to the high costs. In Mohlson's case she never stopped believing in the group's avowed purpose of saving souls, but she reached a place where, medically, the costs were too high for her to attempt to live up to it.

An equally dramatic example of the Children of God using the cost of health as a necessary expenditure for the acquisition of immediate and compensatory rewards involved (particularly) women's acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases through flirty-fishing. Flirty fishing provided members with the immediate reward of seeing men having conversion experiences, which were immediate purposive rewards for the members with allegedly long-term, compensatory consequences for the men's eternal salvation. Additionally, and more practically as immediate rewards, flirty fishing brought in a lot of income and other forms of wealth (through donations of property, food, free services, etc.) to the Children of God community. Consequently, as it became apparent that women were getting sexually transmitted diseases from flirty-fishing, Berg had to interpret their medical conditions as a necessary cost for the acquisition of rewards and compensators rather than as an immediate bodily-sensual punishment for deviant sexual activity.

As Susan Raine discussed in her article about the Children of God's use of "the sexual body as a site of proselytization and salvation" (Raine, 2007), Berg disregarded "the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases [STDs]" in relation to "women's bodily and psychological well-being" (Raine 2007, 7). As Berg "pondered their problem" of his followers receiving STDs through flirty fishing:

> He concluded that Jesus likely had contracted a venereal disease at some point, too, and that this is no shame in anyone now having done so. Thus, just as Jesus suffered disease, and more importantly, crucifixion, the women of the group should continue to surrender their bodies, 'Even at the risk of afflictions!' (Berg 1976a, 4219; quoted in Raine 2007, 7–8).

Raine does not indicate how many women accepted Berg's explanation about STDs and continued flirty-fishing versus how many women stopped the practice, refused to engage in it, or left the movement entirely. Almost certainly neither she nor any researchers know definitively what the impact of Berg's letter was, but members' reactions to it must have shown whether

and how they continued to accept what arguably was a high cost for the immediate and compensatory reward of a possible conversion. Chancellor, at least, stated that "many people left the movement" simply because of the flirty fishing. He also quoted one woman, however, who seemed to have accepted Berg's interpretation of costs and compensatory rewards concerning STDs: "'Sure, we caught things. In fact it seemed like we got it all. I sure did. Gonorrhoea, herpes, all kinds of things. It was tough. But we understood it as part of the sacrifice'" (Ruth, quoted in Chancellor 2000, 117). With the onset of AIDS, however, Berg realized that the potential cost of the practice (i.e., death of loyal members) was too high, so he discontinued it (except if leadership gave special approval for the relationship [Van Zandt 1991, 170]).

Although among the costs from Mohlson's pregnancy and illness were immediate affective punishments that involved separations from most other Children of God members (including her husband), she witnessed in her colony an even more dramatic example of such reprisals. She recalled a time when the Children of God archbishop for her area dissolved marriages because of the partners' low involvement in the Children of God projects. Over dinner one night:

> [The archbishop] then announced that unfortunately there were some couples that had been seen to take more interest in one another than in the revolution. And she felt that God wanted to teach us a lesson. And she then announced the names of two of these couples, and she split them up.... She split actually three marriages, and married them off, some ... with another person's partner, some ... to someone who was single in the group.

As with other inflictions of immediate affective punishments, this striking example illustrates how the Children of God leadership used claims about costs to the group from emotional dyadic bonds to justify immediate socio-emotional and bodily punishments against allegedly deviant members.

Conclusion

In this article, we have critically expanded Bainbridge and Stark's theory of religion by identifying systems of immediate and compensatory punishments within the Children of God during the 1970s that complemented systems of immediate and compensatory rewards. We then demonstrated how the reward and punishment systems operated as vehicles of social control through purposive, affective, material, and bodily or sensual forms of incentives and disincentives. The Children of God's reward system operated to reinforce members' conformist beliefs and behaviour in conjunction with its ideology—an ideology that Berg himself constructed. Consequently, the

Children of God's punishments system functioned largely to deter attitudinal and behavioural deviance among the group's members. Members' attempts to acquire immediate and compensatory rewards, conjointly with their attempts to avoid either immediate or compensatory punishments, cost them expenditures of time, resources, and efforts, and highlighted the extreme effort costs that the Children of God leaders in one Scandinavian colony unrealistically placed upon a pregnant female member.

The conceptual division of members' motivation according to costs that they outlay to acquire immediate and compensatory rewards and to avoid immediate and compensatory punishments allows us to explain some perplexing issues about apparently voluntary departure from religiously ideological groups. Among other reasons, some people leave groups because they no longer can maintain the costs of continued participation. Consequently, they depart the group physically but not necessarily psychologically or emotionally.

Mohlson herself is an example of what we mean. After finally returning to her parents' home, seeking medical attention, and nearly dying from her weakened condition, she and her husband tried to accept the Children of God's invitation to rejoin the movement. An inexperienced Children of God leader, however, refused them entry into his Bergen colony, and after that refusal the couple never tried to join the group again despite repeated the Children of God overtures to do so. They moved to Canada late in Mohlson's pregnancy and accepted an invitation to visit a colony in the Toronto area:

> Although we had never been there before, we were back in the revolution. It was the same sense of oneness wherever you went.... And I know when we left, we were both feeling really down, feeling we really left a good thing. I'm sure we both were thinking separately to ourselves whether we ought to return. But I wouldn't. I wouldn't.

Presumably Mohlson had realized that the costs of membership were unacceptably high for her, even though she still believed in the doctrines and teachings of the group and missed the companionship and purposefulness that the group provided. Remarkably, she and her husband "missed the cult so much that we took a bunch of *MO Letters* and we went to a mall in Mississauga [near Toronto] distributing them on our own, without any accountability to any[one]—no litnessing reports, no colony. The structure was gone, and we still continued the behavior." One interpretation of the couple's actions is that they needed to continue receiving immediate purposive rewards from believing themselves to be part of God's revolutionary army, but they could not maintain the high costs of membership.

Adding concepts of costs and punishments into the Stark and Bainbridge theory of religion increases its heuristic utility with all faiths, but the greatest conceptual advances may come in analysis of high-demand religious groups. These high-demand groups, which nonmembers and critics often call cults, are especially likely to place demands involving considerable costs and intense punishments on their flock. The Children of God during the 1970s paralleled other newer religions it placed upon members, nor were its punishments unique in their severity. When pushed, however, even mainstream religions impose costly punishments against perceived deviants, often involving purposive and affective restrictions (including expulsion from social and spiritual communities).

Viewing these punishments within the overall contexts of groups' theologies and practices facilitates understanding of membership maintenance and personal commitment. Effectively designed and implemented punishment systems usually attempt to realign perceived deviants with group requirements (Strauss, 1986), and often they succeed. One unintended consequence, however, of costly punishments systems is that they often evoke harsh reactions among critics and many former members. Consequently, an appreciation of punishment systems not only enhances understanding of religious organizations, but also it enhances understanding of religion's opponents.

Similarly, an awareness of costs that members extract for various rewards, compensators, and punishments also helps clarify the bases of criticisms that opponents construct against high-demand groups such as the Children of God. These and other groups can become what Coser (1974) called "greedy institutions." For some of their members, these groups require costly levels of involvement approaching total investments of time, resources, and effort. High participation costs in greedy religious institutions contrast dramatically with the relatively low costs for most members of mainstream religions.

Social science is committed to the development of secular interpretations of religious phenomena, and among these phenomena are processes involving members' commitment to particular faiths. Stark and Bainbridge have moved us closer to a comprehensive understanding of religious commitment, but our analysis of the Children of God during the 1970s and 1980s shows how adjustments to their basic conceptual scheme facilitates an even more exacting analysis of at least this one controversial group. While other groups hold very different doctrines, the social exchange systems that operate among members and their groups will reveal, we are confident, striking similarities to one another (see Kent and Hobart 1994c, 325–326).

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