

CHURCH GROWTH AND DECLINE - Part III
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The following information is from:

- Kelley, Dean. (1972) 1986. Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in the Sociology of Religion. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1994. "Why Strict Churches Are Strong." American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 99: 5 (March): 1180-1211.

Strictness makes organizations stronger and more attractive because it reduces free riding. It screens out members who lack commitment and stimulates participation among those who remain.

Since some churches were growing and others declining, the mainline religions misfortune could not be attributed to pervasive secularization. A valid explanation could only be rooted in traits or circumstances that differed from one denomination to the next. So Kelley traced the success of conservative churches to their ability to attract and retain an active and committed membership, characteristics that he in turn attributed to their strict demands for loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle. Twenty years have done nothing to weaken the force of Kelley's argument. For example, small sects such as the Mormons and the Assemblies of God now outnumber "mainline" denominations such as the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ. *Nevertheless, both data and theory imply "optimal" levels of strictness, beyond which strictness discourages most people from joining or remaining with the group.*

How do we define strictness? Kelley cataloged three ideal strict church traits (absolutism, conformity and fanaticism) and contrasted them with three lenient church traits (relativism, diversity, and dialogue). In this summary, we narrow this catalog to a single attribute: the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the cost of nongroup activities, such as socializing with members of other churches or pursuing "secular" pastimes. This also accords with Kelley's belief that church strength depends largely on a single characteristic which he alternately called "strictness," "seriousness," "costliness" and "bindingness."

Basic is the sociological fact that religious commodities, if you will, are collectively produced. This implies that individual members benefit both from their own religious participation and from that of others. But it also implies the converse; when people participate, they provide benefits to others as well as to themselves. So, a church member who attends regularly, sings wholeheartedly, greets others warmly, and testifies enthusiastically enhances not just his own spiritual life but also those of his fellow members.

Strict demands strengthen a church in three ways:

1. they raise overall levels of commitment
2. they increase average rates of participation
3. they enhance the net benefits of membership

These strengths emerge because strictness mitigates free-rider problems that otherwise lead to low levels of member commitment and participation.

Main Problem: Free Riding. There is an indirect solution to the free-rider problem. Instead of subsidizing participation, churches can penalize or prohibit *alternative* activities that compete for members' resources. Restrictions on smoking, drinking, sex, etc. and other private activities are hard to enforce. Even in the absence of internal constraints, however, deception remains costly. A secret sexual liaison is not at all the same as an open relationship; private drinking from a hidden bottle is a poor substitute for social drinking at bars and parties, and a concealed smoking habit may be more trouble than it is worth. Restrictive religions can, and often do, raise the cost of deception by limiting the size of congregations, holding meetings in members' homes, and demanding that members routinely socialize with each other.

Take the example of joining a sect. Simply put, those most likely to join are those with the least to lose. Losses grow in proportion to both the quantity and the quality of one's ties to the outside world. You are therefore less likely to join (or remain active in) an exclusive sect if you have an extensive set of social ties to friends and family outside the sect. You are more likely to join if you lack many such ties and are still more likely to join if you have friends and family in the sect. Stated in terms of cost and benefit, these predictions seem embarrassingly obvious. Yet it took years of research before scholars would accept that a potential member's social ties predict conversion far more accurately than his or her psychological profile.

Economic ties work in much the same manner as social ties. There is little chance, for example, that a successful business executive will forsake all for a strict sect, let alone a wilderness commune. The opportunity costs are simply too great. But for those with limited secular opportunities, the odds of joining are substantially higher - those with low wage rates, limited education, or minimal job experience. Some studies show, for example, that being young, black, female, undereducated, or poor all significantly increase the odds of being a sect member.

Limits to Strictness: Kelley's argument would seem to imply that a church always benefits from increased strictness, no matter how strict it is already. So the Presbyterians would grow faster if they become more like the Southern Baptists, for example. But the model implies that organizational strictness displays diminishing returns and that the optimal amount of strictness will depend on the socioeconomic characteristics of the members. For any target population of potential members, there exists an optimal level of strictness. Closer inspection reveals that there is another class of unsuccessful groups - those that are so strict and sectarian that they simply wither and die. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists notwithstanding, only 6% of all identifiable American sects are growing rapidly. Nearly a third of all sects reached their high-water mark on the day they began, 21% began to decline after their first day. Many have arrived at the conclusion that many sects fail to grow because their initial level of tension with secular society is so high as to cause their early social encapsulation.

The notion of optimal strictness becomes especially important in a changing social environment. To remain strong, a group must maintain a certain distance or tension between itself and society. But maintaining this "optimal gap" means walking a very fine line in adjusting to social change so as not to become too deviant, but not embracing change so fully as to lose all distinctiveness. The Mormon church for example skirted the twin dangers of intransigence and loss of distinctiveness by a combination of initial resistance to social change followed ultimately by long-run accommodation. Many conclude that particularly in dynamic social environments churches must engage in a continuing balancing act, trading off between religious traditions and social norms. A certain amount of tension with secular society is essential to success--the trick is finding, and maintaining, the right amount.

Iannaccone, writing about the *Catholic Church* states on page 1204 the following:

"Climbing out on a speculative limb, I would suggest that, in the last generation, the Catholic church in America has suffered from a failure to abide by this principle. I suspect that Kelley identifies only one-half of the problem when he attributes Catholic membership losses to the Vatican II reforms, whereby the church "'leaped over the wall' to join the liberal, 'relevant,' ecumenical churches" (1986, 00. 33-35). The other half of the problem is found in its hard-line positions on birth control and priestly celibacy. The Catholic church may have managed to arrive at a remarkable, "worst of both worlds" position--discarding cherished distinctiveness in the areas of liturgy, theology, and lifestyle, while at the same time maintaining the very demands that its members and clergy are least willing to accept."