The Power of the Mustard Seed - Why strict churches are strong.
By Judith Shulevitz
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It isn’t easy to explain why some people submit enthusiastically to religious law, especially when you’re talking to people who have never had the slightest desire to do so. Why limit yourself to a “theology of the body,” as the late Pope John Paul II called it, when birth control and stem-cell research promise relief from two of the most painful vicissitudes of bodily existence, unwanted pregnancy and degenerative disease? Why restrict yourself to kosher food, when kashrut relies on zoological classifications that went out of date thousands of years ago?

Among the nondevout, piety of this magnitude is often dismissed as a social pathology. The mildly religious are more respectful but no more helpful; they just shake their heads and say, fine for them, but not for me. Not even the pious have figured out how to communicate to the rest of the world why strict religious observance appeals to them. They just say that they do what they do because God wants them to do it— an argument that simply isn’t going to make sense to a nonbeliever. Or they lay claim to moral superiority, which, if you believe that morality derives from God, is pretty much the same as saying you’re doing what God wants you to do.

You wouldn’t expect an economist to do a better job than the religious in explaining religion. But one has, using the amoral language of rational choice theory, which reduces people to “rational agents” who “maximize utility,” that is, act out of self-interest. (Economists assume that people are rational for methodological reasons, not because they believe it.) In his 1994 essay Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” which has become quite influential in the sociology of religion, economist Laurence Iannacone makes the counterintuitive case that people choose to be strictly religious because of the quantifiable benefits their piety affords them, not just for me. Not even the pious have figured out how to

Iannacone starts by asking why people join strict churches, given that doing so exacts such a high price. Eccentric customs invite ridicule and persecution; membership in a marginal church may limit chances for social and economic advancement; rules of observance bar access to apparently innocent pleasures; the entire undertaking squanders time that could have been spent amusing or
improving oneself.

According to Iannacone, the devout person pays the high social price because it buys a better religious product. The rules discourage free riders, the people who undermine group efforts by taking more than they give back. The strict church is one in which members with weak commitments have been weeded out. Raising fees for membership doesn't work nearly as well as raising the opportunity cost of joining, because fees drive away the poor, who have the least to lose when they volunteer their time, and who also have the most incentive to pray. Fees also encourage the rich to substitute money for piety.

What does the pious person get in return for all of his or her time and effort? A church full of passionate members; a community of people deeply involved in one another's lives and more willing than most to come to one another's aid; a peer group of knowledgeable souls who speak the same language (or languages), are moved by the same texts, and cherish the same dreams. Religion is a "commodity" that people produce collectively," says Iannacone. "My religious satisfaction thus depends both on my 'inputs' and those of others." If a rich and textured spiritual experience is what you seek, then a storefront Holy Roller church or an Orthodox shtiebl is a better fit than a suburban church made up of distracted, ambitious people who can barely manage to find a morning free for Sunday services, let alone several evenings a week for text study and volunteer work.

At some point, of course, the disadvantages of zealotry outweigh the benefits. A church reaches that point when it fails to offer acceptable substitutes for everything it has asked its members to give up. Cults that lure their followers into the wilderness but provide them with no livelihood soon fade into history. All-encompassing codes of behavior that isolate people socially—such as, say, Judaism's—all but disappear unless networks are established to support their adherents. This helps to explain, among other things, why the Jews who moved to small Southern towns to open dry goods stores in the 19th and early 20th centuries and lived for decades as the only Jewish families in their towns wound up becoming some of the most assimilated Jews in the world.

The example Iannacone gives for a church whose strictness may have backfired is the Catholic Church, which has been having a hard time holding on to followers in Europe and attracting men to the priesthood in America. Traditionalists blame the church's difficulties on the reforms of Vatican II, when the Mass began to be said in the vernacular and priests and nuns shed their otherworldly clothes. Would-be reformers blame church officials' refusal to yield to popular opinion on contraception, homosexuality, and priestly celibacy. Iannacone says both are right. "The Catholic church may have managed to arrive at a remarkable, 'worst-of-both-worlds' position," he writes, "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."

Still, if strictness, judiciously enforced, provides an advantage in the spiritual marketplace, then it makes sense that America, one of the few countries with no state religion and a truly open market in religion, should be home to so many varieties of fundamentalism and orthodoxy. The explosive growth of conservative Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and the slow decline of more genteel denominations such as Episcopalianism may well represent not the triumph of reactionary forces, but the natural outcome of religious competition.

Does it follow from Iannacone's theory that America is destined to be dominated by the religious right, at least until its leaders overreach? Not necessarily. His observations have more to do with the way churches work than with what they espouse. The point is that worshippers want enthusiastic commitment from fellow worshippers, not that those who want commitment list to the left or the right.

Admittedly, piety and absolutist ideas tend to go together. It's easier to wrench members away from competing claims on their time when you can assert that your way of life provides exclusive access to the truth. Nonetheless, if the desire for thick connections and strong community accounts for even a small part of the allure of strict piety, Iannacone's solutions to the free-rider problem might provide helpful hints, even for less stringent churches and synagogues. Methodist ministers could allow themselves to demand more prayer and volunteer work from their congregants. Rabbis in
Judaism’s Conservative movement (which is less strict than Jewish Orthodoxy) could push harder for their congregations to keep kosher, study Talmud, and visit the sick. There’s no reason that higher levels of religious involvement couldn’t be tied to liberal, rather than conservative, theologies, to doctrines of skepticism and doubt rather than those of certitude, if that’s what pastors and rabbis believed in and wanted to preach. Higher demands might yield smaller churches and synagogues, but Pope Benedict XVI may have been onto something when, as cardinal, he told a German journalist that the future of the Catholic Church lies in smaller churches made up of more dedicated followers—a Christianity "characterized more by the mustard seed," as he put it.

The biggest obstacle to such reforms by liberal religious leaders is, of course, the liberal imagination, which tends to associate traditional ritual with being backward, ignorant, and right-wing. But the world is full of painstakingly observant sects whose politics defy easy categorization. Think of the pacifism of the Quakers and the anti-death penalty activism of many Catholics. As the greatest religious leaders have understood, ritual is theater. You can use it to send any message you want.

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