Emergence, Persistence and the Secular Utility of Religion

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Rational Choice theory and functionalism differ to whom, or what, they give agency. To explain religious phenomena, Rational Choice theory focuses on the goal-directed actions of the individual, while functionalism identifies groups as the fundamental unit of collective action. Their choice distributes explanatory power differentially; despite their attempts, neither theory can explain both emergence and persistence of religious phenomena. To describe emergence, Rational Choice theory’s methodological individualism succeeds. To depict persistence, functionalism’s methodological holism succeeds. With their strengths thus divided, they contribute separate aspects to the multifaceted explanation necessary to account for religious phenomena. While Rational Choice theory explains emergence through individual choices and functionalism explains persistence through group cooperation, they still integrate smoothly within the same, overarching narrative: the secular utility of religion.

Focusing first on the explanation of emergence, the following examples illustrate Rational Choice theory’s power and evolutionary functionalism’s ineffectiveness. Specifically, functionalism’s weakness is the “trait-group” account of emergence that stems from its methodological holism. In Darwin’s Cathedral, David Sloan Wilson claims that many societal traits have origins that can only be understood under the assumption of group selection. He defines the group “in terms of the individuals who interact with respect to a certain activity” (Wilson 15). This “trait-group” theory thus identifies a trait within society (e.g. predator warning calls, resource sharing, religious activity, etc.) and simultaneously identifies the range of individuals both responsible for the emergence and persistence of the trait by having engaged in, and enforced, the trait together.

However, this explanatory method fails to characterize emergence. Take, for example, modern hunter-gatherer societies. These communities exhibit remarkable egalitarianism,
regardless of division of labor: meat is shared equally among all members, with no bias toward the procurers of meat. Likewise, no single member dominates others as their leader. According to Wilson, “Hunter-gatherers are egalitarian, not because they lack selfish impulses but because selfish impulses are effectively controlled by other members of the group” (Wilson 21). This introduces a paradox. In assuming that some members of a group are naturally more fit than others and must be socially controlled for the benefit of the whole, there can be no doubt that without social controls, the hunter-gatherer society would have failed to emerge. Thus, to explain the emergence of a society with the implicit assumption of already established norms governing individual behavior is a circular, non-explanatory argument. Functionalism’s methodological holism is therefore unequipped to describe the emergence of such a society. What is more interesting is how thoroughly Rational Choice theory’s methodological individualism can explain the emergence of the classically functionalist example of hunter-gatherers.

Rational Choice theory characterizes individuals as natural pursuers of positive utility. When a desired reward does not exist or is difficult to obtain, individuals accept explanations as compensatory rewards. Religion is therefore defined as a system of general compensators that individuals accept in the absence of desired goods. The idea that many individuals pursue general compensators explains religion’s emergence; it is the byproduct of aggregate individual choices and actions. This is the basis of Rational Choice theory’s methodological individualism (Stark and Bainbridge 27-77). In this sense, one can understand hunter-gatherer egalitarianism as having emerged through the consequence of differential individual needs.

To make this argument, Rational Choice theory identifies three criteria through which individual action leads to a greater, unintended effect: 1) the circumstances of choice that constitute the environment of action, 2) the strategies that rational, prudent persons would pursue in those circumstances, 3) the aggregate effect of those strategies (Little 44). Naturally,
individuals assign different levels of positive utility to the same things. If one’s basic needs are met, it is very unlikely that one would assign great utility to those basic needs. Instead, one’s attention will be directed toward satisfying “higher” needs: belonging, companionship, power, etc. Given the natural variation in physical strength among individuals, it should seem obvious that the minority of physically capable early hunter (or gatherer) individuals would assign less positive utility toward satisfying material needs than would the majority of individuals in the same spatial and temporal proximity. As a result, their natural inclination to form relationships with others would take precedence. Given the value of utility they assign to such higher-level rewards, it follows that they would be willing to incur some loss – i.e., forfeiture of power – in order to assimilate within a group of individuals. It follows, therefore, that the majority – whose physical power is not enough to satisfy their basic needs – would welcome the companionship of those who could help satisfy those needs. Thus, the group itself could not describe the emergence of the egalitarian properties of the group. Instead, the aggregate effect of the strategies taken by these rational individuals leads to such an egalitarian byproduct. Note, however, that these actions need not be formed by conscious decisions. In practice, Rational Choice theory solely deals with the actions of individuals, without regard to the processes underlying those actions. As stated in Axiom 4: “Human action is directed by a complex but finite information-processing system that functions to identify problems and attempt solutions to them” (Stark and Bainbridge 29). Nowhere within this axiom does consciousness appear. Both conscious and unconscious processes are capable of identifying problems and attempting solutions to those problems, regardless of whether the processing – or its outcome – is accessible to human consciousness.¹

Having solved functionalism’s teleological problem by accounting for both potential conscious and unconscious causes of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism emergence, one final note must be made regarding the byproduct and trait-group theories. So far, the analysis has centered
on explaining the emergence of a non-religious social phenomenon. Of more interest would be to test the two theories with regard to the emergence of religion. Suppose it is assumed that religion provides the driving force necessary to achieve certain ends, as functionalism claims. Certainly, it cannot simply be assumed that early, powerful hunter-gatherers viewed companionship with enough positive utility to forgo their power, leading to the byproduct of an egalitarian hunter-gatherer community, as Rational Choice theory might suggest. What, then, could have facilitated their decision to join a group? Could a system of beliefs have emerged in parallel to the emergence of the community to function as a powerful assimilative force, as it did in the Water Temple System of Bali? The answer is no. Aside from the problem of teleology that this functionalism argument again runs into (it is invalid to argue for something’s emergence by its future result), the very nature of early hunter-gatherer religious beliefs did not function as an early moralistic system. For example, the hunter-gatherer aboriginals of Japan – the Ainu – did not worship their gods and often treated them very poorly, or like any another human (Wright 22). Unlike the Water Temple System of Bali where “Religious belief gives an authority to the system that it would not have as a purely secular institution” (Wilson 30), the Ainu’s system of beliefs did not function to invoke the typical sense of reverence, fear or power that could potentially direct Ainu actions toward sacrifice, altruism or cooperation. Their beliefs simply lacked the authoritative nature seen in the Water Temple System of Bali, where water thievery was never an issue since their gods demanded compliance (Melowsky 59). So how can one, a) understand the emergence of the hunter-gatherer society if the absolute value of positive utility assigned to companionship can not be known for cost-benefit analysis, and b) understand the emergence of the hunter-gatherer religion as seen in Ainu society?

Both answers come directly from Rational Choice theory. First, the theory presents Axiom 2, “Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be
costs” and Proposition 6, “In pursuit of desired rewards, humans will exchange rewards with other humans” (Stark and Bainbridge 27, 32). Coupled with the central ideas comprising Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, one can see that powerful individuals capable of meeting their basic needs will necessarily find it rewarding to engage in companionship to fulfill their need for love and belonging (Huitt, W). In this pursuit, they will exchange their services (physical ability to hunt and protect) for this reward, incurring some cost (sharing food and space) as they do. Therefore, there is enough positive utility in such higher-order needs as to facilitate powerful individuals to forgo their own power over others, and vice versa. This concludes the discussion of egalitarianism emergence in hunter-gatherer societies.

Next, to explain the origin of hunter-gatherer religion, Rational Choice theory states that humans seek explanations, which can also function as rewards (Stark and Bainbridge 30). This statement is of sound logic since the premise of human advancement relies on curiosity as its driving force. It also serves to explain why the Ainu created a system of beliefs that otherwise seemed to serve little functional purpose; the only reward they sought through belief was an explanation of the world, regardless of the use of that explanation in daily life. Even today, humans seem to be constantly in pursuit of, or distracted by, explanations of phenomena that are unnecessary for functioning in daily life. This perpetual curiosity is the result of a trait called neoteny. From an evolutionary perspective, it means that humans retain juvenile characteristics, like their child-like curiosity, into adulthood (Safford, “Why are we so curious?”). In accordance with these facts, most examples of early hunter-gatherers show that they were also particularly interested in explanations just for the explanation’s sake (Wright 18-20). Religion’s function, therefore, cannot explain its emergence. Rational Choice theory therefore clearly establishes itself as the predominant method for explaining emergence.
Having finalized the discussion on emergence, attention can now be directed toward persistence. Here, functionalism’s methodological holism lends itself to an explanation of persistence through group cohesion. First, however, it is necessary to understand why Rational Choice theory’s model of relocation and growth is ineffective at explaining persistence. Rational Choice theory begins with a discussion of tension: individuals with strong, unmet desires will join deviant groups (cults or sects) to meet their needs (Stark and Bainbridge 204). Such deviant religious movements are typically at odds with the national or cultural majority. This high degree of tension makes them a target of external pressures such as sanctions. According to Stark and Bainbridge, “…most sects and cult movements move into too high a state of early tension and become isolated. In consequence, they fail to grow and become merely another footnote in the history of religious movements” (Stark and Bainbridge 253). Sects that do manage to persist are those that either escape their local environment to minimize outsider interactions, or manage to grow through recruitment. Of the two solutions, Stark and Bainbridge present an example of the former: early Mormons. To combat the high tension of their sect in society, “the Mormons successfully withdrew from contact with non-Mormons by settling in the desert of Utah where they created a separate society within which they are the religious institution” (Stark and Bainbridge 251). This, however, is in an incorrect explanation; relocation does not constitute an effective, long-term solution for sect survival. Once this option is exhausted, outsiders will again begin to colonize the sect’s new location. Thus, the idea of relocation is a circular, non-explanatory explanation of persistence that a) pushes the original problems to a later point in time and b) provides no real mechanism for observed religious persistence. However, it is also necessary to define persistence. Though nowhere in these texts is persistence defined, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as the “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action despite difficulty or opposition” (“Persistence” def. 1). Continuance is then formally defined as “The
state of remaining in existence or operation” (“Continuance” def. 1). Remaining in existence would mean to exist until this day, for which the explanation of relocation as a means of long-term perseverance does not apply. However, Rational Choice theory follows its initial explanation of relocation with a second explanation of Mormon persistence through growth. According to Rational Choice theory, sects that are isolated tend to lack the ability to grow through recruitment. Hence, they fall into obscurity or become “living fossils” by persisting in small, static groups (Stark and Bainbridge 253). This, again, is incorrect. What Stark and Bainbridge fail to integrate into their explanation is their own research on how such groups integrate into society. Though a more plausible explanation than the initial of explanation of persistence through relocation, growth is neither required nor necessary for persistence, as will be demonstrated below. Instead, the idea of evolving to maintain secular benefits for members in a changing environment is what drives the sects into long-lasting stability.

Such an idea is based in evolutionary functionalism. The Functionalist approach to persistence is that of group cooperation. The functionalist paradigm identifies the changes and adaptations that sects make in order to continue providing evolutionary advantages for their members. It thereby explains persistence through a cooperation-mediated evolution of religion. Specifically, a sect’s provisions (food, shelter, socialization, etc.) create an environment of incentives for its members to treat the group and its members with more positive regard than they do outsiders. This leads to within-group cooperation and between-group competition. From this point on, the group becomes the fundamental unit of action and adaptation. Fundamental to this idea of within-group cooperation is that of isolation. Although Rational Choice theory also identifies isolation as a key step in sect development, the two differ in at least one way. Functionalists believe isolation is a design feature of religions, not an external constraint, and is extremely beneficial in facilitating group cooperation (Wilson 136). On the other hand, Rational
Choice theorists find isolation to be a byproduct of the unique needs of deviant, powerless individuals and is ultimately a negative phenomenon that works to destroy the group. Ultimately however, within-group cooperation as the mechanism of sect adaption is a more useful explanation. For example, neither growth, nor relocation can explain the persistence of the highly isolated Jewish communities. Although their beginnings were sect-like in that they were considered deviant within the population at large, Jews eventually grew with tremendous force into a world religion. How did this occur? Using the point of convergence between Rational Choice theory and functionalism, Wilson identifies that Jews are extremely isolationist. The next step of this explanation, however, marks the explanatory divergence of these two theories:

Wilson notes that Jews neither recruit nor give equal rights to converts, making conversion an unattractive option for outsiders. Given these barriers to assimilation, Jews could not have relied on recruited growth to persist, as Rational Choice theory might suggest. Instead, their internal mechanisms for maintaining strict group boundaries allowed for: a) their genetic similarity to facilitate altruistic-like behavior and cooperation and b) their status as “outsiders” to make them an attractive group to forge alliances with the ruling elite. As a result of “a”, the Jews created strong within-group cooperation. This cooperation allowed them to make within-group quality of life the priority. Within-group quality of life now the goal, their beliefs adapted to incorporate an “economic double standard” that resulted in “b”: forging alliances to make a living at the expense of outsider livelihood. This, in turn, allowed their group to persist.

Clearly, Rational Choice theory is unfit to characterize the adaptive nature of religions that allow them to persist. To make this even clearer, Mormon persistence can be re-evaluated from a functionalist perspective. According to the methods used by evolutionary functionalists, Mormons should have had internal isolating mechanisms that led to within-group cooperation. The sect should then have adapted to outsider pressures – economic, or otherwise – in such a
way that would be most useful to its members. To evaluate the legitimacy of these functionalist statements applied to an example used by Rational Choice theorists, one can simply look up the evidence in Stark and Bainbridge’s text. According to them, the Mormons “…negotiated peace terms with outsiders as Utah became a state progressively more integrated into the nation’s economy and culture” (Stark and Bainbridge 253). Apparently, they did adapt to their environment as functionalism predicted. Likewise, recent characterization of Mormon practices shows evidence for within-group-mediated isolation. For example, they strictly enforce temple admissions procedures for their members, which includes “worthiness” tests (Givens 55).

However, recent literature has emerged citing the higher-than-predicted rates of Mormon growth through recruitment (Stark R.; Shepherd G. and Shepherd G.). Given the validity of these findings, could these facts potentially account for Mormon persistence, instead of the functionalist approach? The answer is no: Rome grew, but collapsed. Growth is not causally related to persistence. What is causally related to persistence is a religion’s ability to continually evolve alongside its members in order to continuously provide group-specific benefits. Through within-group cooperation, sects can adapt to meet their members’ needs. This is crucial, since the livelihood, existence and persistence of a sect’s members necessarily determines the fate of the sect itself. If a religion’s doctrines promote reproduction and survival through materialistic pursuits, the religion will persist. If a cult promotes mass suicide, it will cease to exist. Mormons fall into the former category of promoting evolutionary fitness: couples who marry in the Temple have, on average 0.6 more children than those who do not and weekly church attenders have 1.2 kids more than non-attenders (Grava 32). Socializing practices also increase religious adherence to Mormon principles (Grava 31-34). Mormon practices thus function as evolutionary advantages by ensuring Mormon persistence. Therefore, it is the underlying group cooperation
that mediates sect adaptation to meet the evolving needs of its member – and not growth – that explains persistence.

At a glance, Rational Choice theory and functionalism seem to be incompatible. Even if one can explain emergence and the other, persistence, scholars seem to think they must ultimately choose one over the other, depending on the nature of their study. This is an error. Within the explanations they provide, Rational Choice theory and functionalism argue for the secular utility of religion. Therefore, they are not only reconcilable, but they “see” the same underlying patterns within the social phenomena they seek to explain. Though it is easy to argue for the secular utility of religion from an evolutionary functionalist perspective, it is also obvious within the Rational Choice paradigm. For example, individuals seek rewards. Whether that reward is metaphysical, physical, psychological, conscious or unconscious does not matter, for a reward in this world – on this Earth – is material. It is secularly materialistic by nature of its existence, or by pursuit of it. For even a reward pursued by (or within) the human mind is itself a proximate mechanism toward the ultimate mechanism of survival. Anything that poses as a proximate mechanism is, by definition, secular in that it works toward survival, which is a secular, organic enterprise (Wilson 170). In these few sentences, Rational Choice theory led itself toward the functionalist definition of secular utility. Therefore, they are the same in philosophy. In explanation, however, their different methodology grants them separate powers that are both necessary to give a full account of religious phenomena.

It is useful to end with a final example that integrates the Rational Choice explanation of emergence with the functionalist explanation of persistence under the umbrella of secular utility. To do this, a religious movement that neither Darwin’s Cathedral nor A Theory of Religion have analyzed will be used: the People’s Temple. The People’s Temple of the Disciples of Christ was a religious cult founded by Jim Jones in 1955. In one location, it turned into a commune whose
members committed mass suicide in 1978 (Reiterman 445-521). How can anyone make sense of these bizarre, historical facts? First, it is fruitful to take the Rational Choice approach to understand the cult’s emergence. A next-generation victim of the Great Depression and a social outcast, Jim Jones empathized with minorities and communism (Hall 5; Kilduff and Javers 10). Motivated by the human need to “belong,” Jones acted rationally to achieve this end. He sought to provide basic, material resources to social minorities who, in turn, accepted Jones and welcomed his offers. Jones’ pursuit of fellowship and ideological rewards coupled with the minorities’ actions to accept Jones’ ideas in order to survive, led to the byproduct of a communistic, religious cult. Essentially, the People’s Temple emerged from the aggregate actions of individuals whose rational decisions within the framework of their environmental and social background led them to pursue certain secular rewards. Next, to explain the mass suicide and eventual extinction of the movement, a functionalist approach is ideal. This cult deviated from cultural and religious norms in leadership, ideas, and requirements. It isolated itself from the rest of society, and for the short time it persisted, it did so by adapting to its members needs by providing social services to socially-deviant and low-income adherents (Reiterman, T).³ Over time, the People’s Temple become so isolated and internally integrated that they created powerful within-group cooperation and between-group competition (Reiterman 221). It was for this reason that they initially persisted at the Jonestown commune (one of the Temple’s locations) despite increasing outsider criticism. Because of extreme within-group cooperation and internally-mediated isolating mechanisms, in 1978 members of the Jonestown commune open fired on defectors who were trying to leave with a visiting Congressman.³ Knowing this action would limit the cult’s days, Jones decided to use the cult’s extreme within-group cooperation to make one final, maladapted move: mass, revolutionary suicide. This move, devoid of all secular utility, caused the cult’s extinction. Here, functionalism takes the lead to describe
just how isolation, group cohesion and adaptation can explain the persistence (or extinction) of a
religious movement. Coupled with Rational Choice Theory’s explanation of emergence, the two
comprise a comprehensive theoretical framework informed by secular utility that functions when
each plays its respective, explanatory role.
Notes

1 As a side note, this illustrates the logical fallacy of Rational Choice Theory’s Proposition 9, since solving problems does not – nor will it ever – necessarily require “imagining” solutions to them.

2 Even the Water Temple System of Bali, when analyzed closely, does not account for the temple system’s origins. It assumes an in-parallel emergence of both the temple system and agriculture units in order to maintain group cooperation.

3 Most facts from the preceding few sentences are taken from the entirety of Tim Reiterman’s work. As a side note, plenty more examples of the People’s Temple mechanisms of isolation, as well as their mistrust of others, exist throughout Reiterman’s book. He even mentions other cases in which within-group cooperation functioned to target members inside the group so that they comply with group standards and expectations.


