Religious Behaviors as Strategies for Organizing Groups of People: A Social Contingency Analysis

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A social contingency analysis of religion is presented, arguing that individual religious behaviors are principally maintained by the many powerful benefits of participating in social groups rather than by any immediate or obvious consequences of the religious behaviors. Six common strategies are outlined that can shape the behaviors of large groups of people. More specifically, religious behavior is shaped and maintained by making already-existing contingencies contingent upon low-probability, but socially beneficial, group behaviors. Many specific examples of religious themes are then analyzed in terms of these common strategies for social shaping, including taboos, rituals, totems, personal religious crises, and symbolic expression. For example, a common view is that people are anxious about life, death, and the unknown, and that the direct function of religious behaviors is to provide escape from such anxiety. Such an explanation is instead reversed—that any such anxiety is utilized or created by groups through having escape contingent upon members performing less probable behaviors that nonetheless provide important benefits to most individual group members. These generalized beneficial outcomes, rather than escape from anxiety, maintain the religious behaviors and this fits with observations that religions typically act to increase anxiety rather than to reduce it. An implication of this theory is that there is no difference in principle between religious and nonreligious social control, and it is demonstrated that the same social strategies are utilized in both contexts, although religion has been the more historically important form of social control.

Key words: religious contingencies, social contingencies, verbal contingencies, low-probability behaviors, cultural survival

Religion is either universal or extremely widespread, and religious people claim that it is one of the most important activities in their lives. Depending upon the particular variety of religion, religious activities can take up much time, money, and effort in hu-

man life. For these reasons alone, religion is a key feature of human behavior to analyze.

Definitions of religion are very broad. Consider a recent definition of religion: “Religion is a human phenomenon that unites cultural, social, and personality systems into a meaningful whole” (Hargrove, 1989, p. 29). As this definition suggests, religion has many contexts that are difficult to distinguish conceptually, and no single condition defines religion. There are also many behaviors that have variously been called religious: church membership, church attendance, rituals, taboos, totem behaviors, praying, devotion, spiritual experiences, magic, and reading scriptures. Some psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have tried to distinguish among these different behaviors. For example, sociologists and anthropologists (Malinowski, 1925/1948) have at times tried to distinguish between religion and

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magic, but this distinction is shown to be unclear elsewhere (Homans, 1941; Nadel, 1957). I will include all religious behaviors because, as will become clear, I argue that religious and nonreligious behaviors are indistinguishable, thus making any of these finer categories irrelevant (Whaling, 1995).

Rather than defining the behaviors involved or the contexts for those behaviors, another approach has been to describe the functional consequences of religious behavior. Child and Child (1993) list the major functions as being therapeutic value for personal, interpersonal, and disease problems; increases in power, prestige, and admiration; confidence and greater chance of success; food taboos for helping childbirth; initiation rituals that model acceptance of mature behaviors; grief processes in mortuary rituals to help recovery; and conformity with food sharing to help in starvation conditions. Freud (1927/1961) included many of the same functions, but particularly emphasized that people are insecure about the universe and life, and that religion reduces their anxiety so that they are "feeling comfortable morally" (Riches, 1994, p. 386). This theme of religious behaviors functioning to reduce anxiety or uncertainty about the world is probably the most common theme in discussions about the functions of religion (e.g., Firth, 1964). It is also perhaps the most unexamined theme. Hamilton (1995) presents a thorough and typical presentation:

The need to understand stems from emotional sources and may in certain circumstances reach a high degree of intensity. Not to understand is to be bewildered, confused and threatened. The human psyche is such that uncertainty, feelings of unfamiliarity and a sense of the alien are deeply disquieting and discomfiting. We do not just seek to understand our world and our place in it out of mere interest; we need to know who and what we are and what place we occupy within the world. Religions seek answers to existential questions that go to the heart of our sense of identity, worth and purpose (pp. 216–217).

The implication, then, is that religion provides experiences and verbal answers to this uncertainty and thus reinforces escape from the distress and anxiety of uncertainty.

There are many contingencies related to religion, involving behaviors, consequences of those behaviors, and the social contexts in which the behaviors lead to those consequences. What I wish to do is to argue and give evidence that most of the above is wrong: that religious behaviors are primarily social behaviors shaped through groups or communities; that religious behaviors are not in principle different from nonreligious behaviors; and that the major theories that have been put forward to explain religious behaviors can be reversed so that social contingencies can better be seen as the determinants rather than an inner religious determination (Wulff, 1995). In particular, I want to present an alternative interpretation of religious functioning to the one that is so common—that of escape from anxiety and uncertainty.

SOCIAL CONTINGENCIES OF RELIGION

In this section I wish to show briefly how religious behaviors are primarily social, and what appear to be nonsocial determinants can be viewed as part of the social contingencies between what people do and the social consequences of those acts (Guerin, 1992a, 1994a, 1995a, 1997b).

The Social Basis of Religion

There are many arguments and much evidence for the social basis of religion (Firth, 1996; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Tawney, 1938). First, there is historical evidence that religions originally had a primary function of providing a community within which the advantages of community living could be gained (Asad, 1983; Bitel, 1990; Durkheim, 1912/1915; Troeltsch, 1931). Bitel (1990), for example, provides detailed evidence that the early Christian

monastic settlements in Ireland engaged in many essential exchanges with the local populations involving land, food, organizing, help with work, scholarship, and protection.

There is also evidence that major religions have been involved in all types of societal processes including, at the extreme, war and murder (a few examples: Green, 1858; Gunnison, 1857; Haught, 1990). The major religions have either organized large groups of people directly or else have been extremely influential in secular governing (Asad, 1983; Bitel, 1990; Gellner, 1992; Kolig, 1984; Troeltsch, 1931).

On a smaller scale, illustrating the social basis of religious behavior, psychologists and anthropologists have studied how rituals and religious activities in tribes around the world change, sometimes in subtle ways, according to local social and political changes (Barth, 1987; Bloch, 1992; Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Firth, 1960; Geertz, 1973, p. 170; S. Harrison, 1992; Kolig, 1984; Leach, 1954; Strecker, 1988; Wilson, 1969, p. 371). The earlier idea that rituals were static forms of behavior with identically repeated patterns has been readdressed in the anthropological literature. Detailed anthropological evidence shows that rituals track the current social vicissitudes and are actively used for changing and organizing social groups (Barth, 1987; Bloch, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Leach, 1954; Strecker, 1988; Wilson, 1969).

The theory predicts that when we find elaborate forms of symbolic action there will exist some underlying motive of persuasion. Some people must be trying to use subtle means to influence others and realize their interests in such a way that they shield themselves and others from the social dangers associated with the pursuit of their interests. Our central question is therefore: "Who is trying to influence whom through the Hamar rite of transition?" (Strecker, 1988, p. 208)

The real question of religion, when seen in this light, becomes one of how social groups are organized for the many beneficial functions of group participation (Guerin, 1994a). Reli-

gious methods of group control seem to differ from secular methods, but we will see later that there is a great deal of overlap between the two, or rather, that any group of people being shaped into a system of reciprocal consequences is usually shaped into using similar strategies because of contingency constraints when dealing with large numbers of people.

The Functions of Social Groups

Through the history of human evolution, whatever requirements individuals might have had in the way of food and other needs, these have almost always been organized through small, though sometimes large, groups, and not by individuals alone (Clark & Piggott, 1965; Gellner, 1988; Harris, 1977; Johnson & Earle, 1987; Mann, 1986). Single individuals and even single families find it difficult to survive alone. The problem has therefore been to organize and maintain groups of people so that they perform low-probability behaviors that are beneficial to the whole group but that might be of only marginal value to any individual in the short term and would not occur without an organized group.

When organized, groups of people can even accomplish activities that a single person cannot, such as lifting and moving large objects or constructing large-scale irrigation systems. Groups can divide labor among the members and achieve astonishing gains with this small amount of organizing (Durkheim, 1893/1933; Weber, 1947). Even a small coalition of people can have an influence over many others, which could not be achieved by any one member of that coalition alone (McNeill, 1982; Moscovici, Mugny, & Van Avermaet, 1985; Mugny & Pérez, 1991). McNeill (1982, p. 125), for example, shows how a small amount of organization in army drill totally transformed how wars were fought in Europe.

Similar evidence abounds that even in recent times members of religious

communities help each other out and provide exchanges, economic and otherwise, beyond what family or neighbors can provide (Child & Child, 1993; Ellison & George, 1994; Hargrove, 1989; Kolig, 1984; Shapiro, 1987; Wilson, 1988; Zucker, 1986). Religious communities are a good source of social network "weak ties," which are useful for many occasions when neighbors or kin cannot be asked for help (Ellison & George, 1994; Granovetter, 1982; Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969; Maton, 1987, 1989; Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Wellman & Wortley, 1989), although in many religions kin are also part of the same religious community. Social support through a church can be powerful in highly organized churches like the Mormon, with the extreme being religious groups such as the Amish or Mennonites for whom life is lived completely within the church and contact with outsiders is limited. With such social control, groups such as the Amish can provide free housing built very quickly by group members (Hostettler, 1993).

Some of these group functions escape notice because social scientists, and psychologists in particular, underestimate the influence of social groups (Guerin, 1992a, 1994a; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987). For example, complaints have been made that social scientists have concentrated too much on how individuals blindly follow societal rules and rituals without showing how those rules are formed and how they change (Bloch, 1977). Similarly, there are complaints that psychology has become overly individualist and has left out the social determinants of behavior. These complaints have been directed at both social psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Moscovici, 1990; Turner et al., 1987) and behavior analysis (Guerin, 1994a, 1995a).

There are at least two reasons why the ubiquity of social contingencies is underestimated in the social sciences. First, although individuals contact the

contingencies between actions and consequences and appear to have individual experiences, groups of people make most of the human contingencies possible in the first place; individuals are therefore acting as part of those groups even when they are having "individual experiences." Social groups heavily constrain the contingencies that individuals can possibly contact, and groups of people determine most of the consequences in any event. For example, in experiments looking at the individual determinants of competition, a major determinant is whether the social group verbally defines or instructs that the situation is competitive (Buskist, Barry, Morgan, & Rossi, 1984; Dougherty & Cherek, 1994; Lindskold, Betz, & Walters, 1986).

The second reason for underestimating the extent of social contingencies is that the consequences involved in human social contingencies are typically highly generalized across people, situations, time, and behaviors, and so they are not obvious (Guerin, 1995a, 1997b). Many problems of the social sciences arise only because researchers ignore these generalized social consequences that are ubiquitous in maintaining human behavior but that are not obvious, and in psychology these consequences are brought into theories as hidden surrogates, such as desires, personalities, needs, or a motivationless propensity to process information. In other social sciences, the ill-defined notion of power is one surrogate for generalized social consequences (Guerin, 1997b). For example, a problem in recent social theory is how to talk about the power to do things in society (Arens & Karp, 1989; Asad, 1983; Bloch, 1977; Foucault, 1982, 1985; Guerin, 1997a, 1997b; Ladegaard, 1995; Lukes, 1974). It is now acknowledged that power to do things, or have them done, cannot always be assumed to be in the hands of the most conspicuously wealthy and powerful, as if individuals had or possessed power. Rather, the power to shape behavior and social events is not obvious and is

difficult to determine, given the complex social arrangements in which we live. Authors such as Foucault (1982) argue that we need to move towards theories in which power is just things getting done, not a source or a possession that originates inside individuals.

Everyday social shaping therefore is ubiquitous. Individual behavior can be seen as socially controlled in large part, and the supposedly fixed societal rules are utilized and changed as they are used. The anthropological literature cited earlier, on how rituals are changed for the functioning of social groups, supports these notions (e.g., Barth, 1987). Infrastructures and superstructures are also not fixed but change with social vicissitudes (Bloch, 1977), and the same applies to the cultural system of language (Sankoff, 1980).

Similarly, for religious theory, although it is sometimes claimed that religious principles and dogma are fixed and can therefore uniquely control behavior, the evidence goes against this:

Thus, British Baptists, who once upon a time believed—necessarily to be called Baptists—in adult baptism, began between the wars to amalgamate locally with Congregationalists, who did not. Congregationalists, so-called by virtue of their congregational polity, have united with Presbyterians, and have accepted their system of synodical government. The Primitive Methodists, who wanted in the nineteenth century to get back to early revivalist tactics, rejoined in the twentieth century the Wesleyans whom they had earlier abandoned. . . . Thus ecclesiastical principles, once thought to be virtually indispensable for the true church and for obedience to God's will, are abandoned, and their legitimations forgotten. (Wilson, 1990, p. 120)

To pinpoint what controls individual behavior, then, one cannot just appeal to social rules or dogma: It is whatever controls the changing of those rules and dogma that controls the behavior, and my argument is that this comes down to social consequences shaped to organize groups of people. This is why the study of power, mentioned earlier, is following a similar theme, that the social control of the rules or words is what is most important to study rather

than the rules or words themselves (Foucault, 1985; Guerin, 1997b; Ladegaard, 1995). Rules, instructions, rituals, and religious dogma as determinants of behavior are, at best, short-term predictors, but only if there is a stable system of social consequences; at worst, they are completely misleading.

Religious and Nonreligious Behaviors

The position so far is that religion is one very common form of organizing or shaping the behavior of groups of people to perform low-probability but socially functional behaviors, and has itself culturally developed because of many and varied (generalized) outcomes. These outcomes might be beneficial to the whole group or to just a few members of that group. The problem, then, is one of showing that the functions and explanations of religious behavior can be redefined as social control by groups. Before doing that, one other implication needs to be pointed out.

That religious behaviors are one way of dealing with conflict and resource exchange means that the same social shaping could be carried out using secular solutions (Gluckman, 1972; Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). This implies that there is no clear division between religious and secular methods of shaping the behavior of people in groups. In being opportunistic (not in the crass sense of this word), many variations become available and there is no firm divide between the strategies used in religious and nonreligious forms of control.

Similar views have been advanced before. First, overlap between the religious and secular is reflected in Evans-Pritchard's (1965) conclusions about theories of religion. Most theories, he argued, merely attempt to explain the origins of religious behaviors, for which we have no data but only centuries of speculation. He found no clear division between religious and nonreligious activities, suggesting that

both are cultural activities. We can research the changes or dynamics of such social organizations, as Evans-Pritchard recommended (Evans-Pritchard, 1956), or we can investigate the conditions for religious solutions and their relative properties compared to nonreligious solutions. In either case we must research the entire social situation and place religious behaviors within that social context.

As an example of this, Geertz (1973) reported on a funeral held in central Java that was protracted and "failed to work with its accustomed effectiveness" (p. 146). Parts of the rituals were changed and other parts were not followed by everyone. Geertz nicely traced this to both religious differences and to secular social unrest in the town, which had been developing for some time. If he had not known about the secular social conflicts in the groups he was studying, he would not have had an explanation for the changes made to the religious rituals he was observing.

The mixing of religious and secular social control can also be seen in Wilson's (1990) discussion of why religious movements fail. The reasons he gives for failure mostly reflect nonreligious components in the religions. For example, in some cases new religious movements have brought in too many nonreligious elements, and because there was little institutionalization to keep the movement going, they failed. As an example of this with a much older religion, the Catholic Church condemned birth control in 1968, relying upon the papal infallibility that had likewise been proclaimed in July 1870. This brought a then-nonreligious practice under religious control, and many Catholics left the church at that point. The strong institutionalization of this particular church, however, and its embeddedness in the everyday lives of its adherents, kept most members faithful, although papal infallibility had to be reaffirmed in July 1973, presumably to strengthen church control.

STRATEGIES FOR THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF GROUPS

Religion can therefore be seen as one form of cultural control to organize groups of people. Once there is a community history of religion, it is usually easier to solve social conflicts religiously than with secular means, if the majority of the group follows those religious practices. If there is no history of religion, then appealing to religious strategies will usually fail. For example, R. Kaplan (1996, p. 109) reports that when a large earthquake struck Egypt in 1992, the small religious groups, rather than the state, responded and helped people with food, clothing, and shelter. Despite a bureaucracy of one million persons, state control was ineffectual, but with a long history of control, religious communities were able to work immediately.

This way of viewing the shaping of religious community behavior reverses most theories that have been put forward to explain religious behavior (Evans-Pritchard, 1965). In each case, the earlier explanations are both essentialistic—that this is just what people do, people are religious or ritualistic by nature—and also individualistic—the explanations do not show the socialness of the contingencies, so the situation seems to be one of purely individual functioning. I turn these explanations instead into social strategies, although these are not rule-governed or "consciously intended" strategies, but rather, what Bourdieu (1990) would call *practices*. That is, the patterns used have culturally evolved, or have been mutually shaped within groups over time, without the group members working to a predetermined rule or verbal formula.

Generic Strategies for Social Control

To begin this outline I propose six general principles for social control in large groups, summarized in Table 1. These do not rely on properties of individuals but on properties of groups,

TABLE 1

Six general principles for shaping the behavior of groups of people

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1. Use contingencies that are common across people.
 2. Monitoring outcomes becomes more difficult with more people.
 3. Consequences are usually diffused when applied to a whole group.
 4. Verbal behavior has the useful property of not being diffused when shaping large groups of people, but only if social contingencies have already been established.
 5. Forming coalitions is a useful way of shaping groups of people.
 6. It is probably easier to use positive punishment and negative reinforcement with large groups of people because they do not require a long history and require less checking and organization than positive reinforcement, even if it is ineffective in the long run.
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that is, on the properties arising from having a number of persons mutually interacting and reciprocating exchanges. The first general principle is that group contingencies are usually ones that are common to many people. If the behavior of only a few individuals could be shaped by the presentation of a specific object, such an object would not be useful in controlling the whole group. Although those who are shaping the group (because their behaviors are also being shaped) could theoretically use individualized or personalized consequences, the time and effort required would not make shaping a large group feasible. Some individual attention to contingencies is more realistically possible if there are many people involved in shaping the group (such as priests, ministers, or clerks), but that requires some social organization already in place. Such "pastoral" help (Foucault, 1978) requires a prior community.

The use of common consequences means that social systems will often appear similar and will develop properties in similar ways. This is not because religious or bureaucratic behaviors are universal or innate but because they rely upon heavily constrained systems of social consequences to control large groups of people.

A second general principle is that the size of the group influences how the contingencies are applied, both in checking whether the behaviors have occurred and in applying contingent consequences. Population is a major variable (Johnson & Earle, 1987), and

with more people, the monitoring and application of contingencies become more difficult. Strategies that can overcome this problem include keeping the group small, developing a network of ancillary clerks or clergy to help monitor, and having the people congregate regularly or live in close proximity. Another strategy has been to rely heavily upon verbal rules that in some ways are easier to monitor. Further, most social systems, not just religious ones, require members to check on the behavior of other members, and some social systems have even developed with people reporting the "truth" about themselves (Foucault, 1988), like the Catholic confessional.

A third general principle is that most of the consequences that can be applied to larger groups of people become weaker or diffused (Latané & Darley, 1970) when applied to groups of people (Glaser & Klaus, 1966; Goltz, Citera, Jensen, Favero, & Komaki, 1989; Newby & Robinson, 1983; Shepperd, 1993; Stoneman & Dickinson, 1989). Group rewards are unlikely to control the behavior of many individuals, unless a lot of control is already present or there are large rewards to spread around (Stoneman & Dickinson, 1989). This means that the second general principle becomes even more important, and monitoring and accountability systems are needed for control to work in such social contexts (Guerin, 1994a, chap. 12.7).

In some contexts, verbal behavior has the useful property of not being

diffused, and can be used to shape the behavior of people in large groups. It has been argued, for instance, that this applies to verbal, logical arguments but not to emotional or assertive verbal influence (Guerin, 1995b). If a logical argument is correct, then it is possible to convince large groups of people if they can be made to attend. Assertive or emotional verbal appeals, however, require social conditions to be in place beforehand, such as mutual interdependence. On the other hand, once a group is compliant to verbal instructions, verbal behavior can be disseminated and can shape large numbers of people more easily than modeling, physical prompting, or the more direct use of tangible consequences. This predicts that gaining verbal control over a population would be a key event for governance. But it needs to be remembered that, like all power and control, this requires the social conditions to be in place beforehand (Arens & Karp, 1989; Bloch, 1977; Foucault, 1982; Guerin, 1997b; Ladegaard, 1995).

Although the whole process of organizing groups, as I have been loosely sketching, can be seen as the formation of a coalition or cooperative group within a larger society, within the organizing group itself the formation of smaller coalitions can be another useful strategy for organizing. A small coalition that is well organized within a group, like a hierarchy of priests and clerks, can control a large group.

The final general principle is that forms of positive punishment and negative reinforcement are usually easier to apply in the short term over groups of people than are positive reinforcement strategies (Sidman, 1989; Skinner, 1953). With these strategies, one does not need to build a history because there are obvious noxious events common across large groups of people. This statement is not entirely true, because food is likewise a common enabling event for most people and controlling the food sources has always been a staple form of social control. But even this requires some effort to

control the food sources, whereas positive punishment and negative reinforcement can almost always be used, even on a stranger (Haught, 1990). The problem, as is well known to behavior analysts, is that such control is short lived and has unwanted side effects (Guerin, 1994a; Sidman, 1989; Skinner, 1953).

These, then, are six proposed principles of social influence over large groups (Guerin, 1995b). They will only apply in a general way, and particular social groups will have a broader history of controls and countercontrols than just these.

Specific Strategies Commonly Used by Religious Social Systems

I will now apply these six principles to several types of religious behaviors and show how those behaviors are used to control the behavior of people in social groups.

Taboos. To first give an example that has been mentioned elsewhere (Guerin, 1992b, 1994a), taboos and taboo rituals about blood, handling corpses, and dangerous foods are usually said to function because they provide escape from the anxiety associated with such activities (Douglas, 1966; Homans, 1941; Steiner, 1956). It can be argued in reverse, however, that if taboo activities have strong aversive properties then they are perfect to use for shaping social control, in the following way. Those who are shaping the social group can incorporate these already-current ("motivated") activities into social contingencies to maintain control of a group by making their escape contingent upon completing other socially relevant, but lower probability, activities. For example, taboo activities are commonly handled exclusively by a shaman or priest contingent upon other members of the group performing socially useful but otherwise low-probability behaviors. Taboo activities are particularly useful in this socially contingent arrangement because they seem to need little regular

maintenance of the aversion. One implication of this is that those shaping the group should *promote* aversion to the taboo events rather than promote reduction of anxiety, because otherwise the "power" (social consequences) of the social control over low-probability behaviors will be lost.

This argument concurs with social anthropologists and sociologists who argue that taboo rituals are primarily for social control, not for personal experiences (Durkheim, 1912/1915; Evans-Pritchard, 1965), and is reflected in Radcliffe-Brown's (1952, p. 134) suggestion to call such behaviors "ritual prohibition" or "avoidance." The argument offered here, however, takes this further. Radcliffe-Brown's theory was that taboos serve to demonstrate the "social value" of those events or objects: "Taboos relating to the animals and plants used for food are means of affixing a definite social value to food, based on its importance" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 151). But food does not need a social value placed upon it. Instead, the obvious importance of food means that providing food can be made contingent upon performing socially useful behaviors. Taboos involving food allow for contingent social functions to be placed on the physical foods, not the placement of a value that is already there.

Rituals. The same reasoning can be applied more generally to other religious rituals; they are shaped so that regular contact with the social contingencies can be maintained (Guerin, 1992b). In this sense, rituals provide an opportunity for monitoring the maintenance of social control, and the more regular the ritual, the more accurate will be the monitoring. Similarly, conducting rituals publicly provides an opportunity for monitoring large groups of people.

So it is being argued that performing rituals does not enhance group solidarity or feelings of community because of the experiences thus obtained, as suggested by Durkheim (1912/1915). Nor is it due to just the presence of

symbols per se, as suggested by Radcliffe-Brown: "The primary basis of ritual . . . is the attribution of ritual value to objects and occasions which are either themselves objects of important common interests linking together the persons of a community or are symbolically representative of such objects" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 151), because it has not been explained why attributing "ritual value" to objects or occasions is important or necessary. Rather, my social contingency analysis suggests that the function of ritual is to shape, influence, or organize the people of the community, and that the already-valuable objects and occasions serve to facilitate the shaping and monitoring of behavior by making them contingent on other behaviors. As we will see for totems, there are also strategic advantages in using objects or occasions that are given some artificial or social value (Guerin, 1992b).

This view accords with the literatures presented earlier in this paper, which show that rituals change with the vicissitudes of social events and are used to influence people (Banks, 1995; Barth, 1987; Bloch, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Leach, 1954; Strecker, 1988; Wilson, 1969). The contexts for performing rituals and for changing rituals will be social contexts. For example, Middleton writes about his research on the Lugbara ghost invocation ritual:

From these cases it is clear that ghost invocation is usually a response to disputes over authority. These may reflect underlying factors such as shortage of land and increases in population. Lugbara quarrel intermittently, but on the whole only those disputes that are structurally important lead to the processes of ghost invocation and ghostly vengeance. (Middleton, 1960, p. 211)

As suggested by the present analysis and others, this example highlights that resource limitations and population size are the major determinants of the social behaviors (Baum, 1994; Glenn, 1989; Guerin, 1994a; Harris, 1977; Johnson & Earle, 1987).

Totems. Totemism refers to a type of religious behavior in which social

groups have an animal or plant as their totem and must carry out various rituals in association with the name of the totem or the presence of the totem (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; Fortes, 1967; Lévi-Strauss, 1963b; Stanner, 1984). For example, someone might be prohibited from killing the animal of the totem, or one must utter a ritual phrase when encountering that totem.

Durkheim (1912/1915) argued that totems function to keep groups together, that a group requires attachment to common objects and ceremonies, and that people develop spiritual affinities and religious sentiment towards the objects around them. He also argued that the reason for having simple animals and plants as the totem was that they could be put onto more permanent emblems and figures, and such emblems were important for totems. But, as Radcliffe-Brown (1952) pointed out, there are tribes that do not draw their totems or make statues of them at all.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) argued that totems are part of ritual behaviors, and everywhere people have a special relationship to the animals and natural events around them. Each moiety or clan then takes on one of these animals or natural events as its totem. The question for him therefore became: Why do people adopt animals into their rituals? He suggested a general law: "Any object or event which has important effects upon the well-being (material or spiritual) of a society, or anything which stands for or represents any such object or event, tends to become an object of the ritual attitude" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 129). This formulation, however, merely begs the question, whether the law is correct or not. It does not explain the cause or function of having animals as either totems or as part of a larger ritual attitude, nor why they tend to become an object of the ritual attitude.

These arguments have all assumed that spiritual totem reflects a special relation directly between the person and his or her totem. Alternatively, from a social contingency analysis, totems can

be viewed as arbitrary discriminative stimuli, used in social control contingencies because they are commonly encountered, accessible, and easy to remember, and therefore are more useful for long-term social control. As pointed out elsewhere (Guerin, 1994a), a rarely sighted totem would allow only very limited application of the social contingency (cf. Fortes, 1967, p. 17; Riches, 1994, p. 395), little monitoring of social compliance, and few chances for reshaping social control. Or, as put by Evans-Pritchard when criticizing common theories of totems,

It is a plain fact that primitive peoples show remarkably little interest in what we may regard as the most impressive phenomena of nature—sun, moon, sky, mountains, sea, and so forth—whose monotonous regularities they take very much for granted. . . . [Durkheim] claimed, in what he regarded as the most elementary religion of all, namely totemism, that what are divinized are for the most part not at all imposing, just humble little creatures like ducks, rabbits, frogs, and worms, whose intrinsic qualities could scarcely have been the origin of the religious sentiment they inspired (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 54).

It is suggested that shaping and monitoring of behavior are easier if objects and events with arbitrarily applied social consequences are used. Such symbols can set the occasion for compliance to a ritual behavior, for monitoring whether the ritual was performed, and for the reshaping of social organization during rituals (Barth, 1987). In some cases, the symbols become widely utilized as discriminative stimuli for different social behaviors, and these are labeled as totems by social scientists.

Mystification about the universe. The most frequent claim for explaining religious behavior is that humans are mystified by the universe and that religion helps them come to terms with, or to understand, the universe (Freud, 1927/1961; Schoenfeld, 1993). Some doubt about this reasoning has already been given in the quote just above by Evans-Pritchard, reporting that "primitive" people are not, in fact, mystified

by the universe and the meaning of life.

Looked at as the shaping of groups of people, however, it can be argued that if puzzlement about the great questions of life is consequential, or is socially constructed to be consequential, then that anxiety can be utilized for gaining or maintaining social control in a group. Puzzlement about the universe can be used in social contingencies as a source of power if answers and anxiety reduction are made contingent upon other, lower probability, group behaviors. As in the discussion of taboos above, if escape from such existential angst can be made contingent upon performing other religious behaviors, then social control of a group can be maintained.

An implication of this view is that religions should promote such mystification about the universe and life itself, rather than attempt to reduce it. If the members of a church were no longer puzzled and mystified about life, the universe, and much else, then this could not be utilized for social control. It is interesting, then, that holy books promote this tendency and raise questions about life and the universe that might not otherwise arise. Indeed, this is a puzzling problem for the view that religions reduce anxiety about such mysteries: Why would churches preach fire and brimstone, and raise questions of life and the universe, if their major function was to reduce anxiety? The reversed argument I have given suggests that such anxiety, whatever its source, is utilized for organizing the social group and that rather than being reduced, the induction of more anxiety, if it can be created, follows a clear social contingency logic.

Personal crises and religious behavior. It is often claimed that religious experiences occur when people are unhappy, depressed, or in dire straits (James, 1902/1958) when in unfocused personal crises. Seen as social shaping, however, two alternative interpretations of such religious experiences are possible. First, like taboos and rituals,

if someone is in a personal crisis, then this is also the best condition for shaping his or her behavior by making socially constructed escape contingent upon performing lower probability social behaviors. This same strategy can unfortunately tempt those in control to promote or induce personal crises in others and thereby shape their low-probability behavior by making escape contingent. Some cult groups and psychotherapies follow this social contingency logic.

A second social contingency interpretation is that unfocused personal crises can be seen as arising in the first place from highly generalized social consequences and from socially incompatible repertoires. "Having" a personal crisis usually means being socially punished for acting in ways that have been previously reinforced or have been reinforced by a different audience. Because the social consequences are generalized and are not easy for individuals to observe, they are verbally attributed as some property about themselves. If true, then the use of such crises as a strategy for initiating or maintaining religious behaviors becomes more plausible because the conditions for the crises are socially (verbally) constructed in the first place (Gluckman, 1972).

Religious activity and symbolic expression. It is often claimed that religion is more than the physical activities, that symbolic expression is another major feature of religion.

The very common tendency to look for the explanation of ritual actions in their purpose is the result of a false assimilation of them to what may be called technical acts. In any technical activity an adequate statement of the purpose of any particular act or series of acts constitutes by itself a sufficient explanation. But ritual acts differ from technical acts in having in all instances some expressive or symbolic element in them. (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 143)

However, as Asad (1983, p. 251) points out, "For far too long the well-known but increasingly unsatisfactory distinction between technical (or instrumental) action and expressive (or

symbolic) action has determined the major orientation of anthropological studies of religion."

For a social contingency analysis, both views can make sense once the generalized social contingency basis of "symbolic expression" is analyzed. Symbols have direct consequences, but those consequences are part of the social environment: Their effects happen only through other people (Guerin, 1992b, 1995c). Thus the seemingly obvious, immediate purpose of the symbolic ritual act is not an adequate explanation, but the implicit social control does constitute an adequate explanation. Calling rituals "symbolic," then, emphasizes that the physical act itself is a social discriminative stimulus for social compliance to the group (Guerin, 1992b) and that the immediate consequences of the act itself are not maintaining the symbolic behavior. Again, the use or function of symbolic expressions and rituals is to organize a group of people, not to express something or to have a cathartic experience.

This distinction between immediate consequences that maintain verbal behavior and the behavior that acts as a social discriminative stimulus for group compliance arises in many places (other examples are in Guerin, 1997b). Bloch (1991), for example, argued that there are two cognitive systems, one for ordinary life and one for ritualized life. What this means is that there are two (or more) ways of socially shaping behavior, and immediate social control looks different from generalized social control. Epstein and others (Epstein, 1994; Guthrie, 1980) have suggested that religion is another way of thinking that is different from ordinary thinking. In the present argument, this just means that it is a result of different sources of contingencies, like the social shaping of making belief statements (Guerin, 1994b).

A similar social explanation also applies to the many behaviors that are explained in psychology as "catharsis," the expression of "pent up emotion," the "working through of grief," or as

emotional "release" (e.g., Kertzer, 1988, p. 131). Although people who engage in such activities are almost certainly angry or emotional beforehand and are less so after such cathartic rituals and activities, all of which gives the impression that a catharsis of something has indeed taken place, the real questions are how and why the ritual was organized in the first place. From a social control point of view, the social contingency logic is that the people are required to perform other low-probability social behaviors before their "emotion" is allowed to be expressed, pent, released, or catharized. Once again, because of the generalized nature of the social contingencies involved, they are difficult to observe in the settings and there appears to be a real catharsis of something or another.

Secrecy in religion. In terms of the social shaping of groups of people, secrecy behaviors function in several ways to escape the social consequences of other behaviors (Guerin, 1991, 1997b). For the leaders of social groups, putting the responsibility for decisions onto an impersonal, nonmaterial religious force provides a useful escape when things go wrong. Avoidance of consequences for leaders can also be arranged through the use of secrecy: preventing the members of the group from knowing what was done exactly. Secrecy also allows traditions to be invented without people knowing (Barth, 1987, p. 27).

Secrecy is, of course, a tactic used in both religious and secular social organization and is prevalent in shaping everyday social relations (Cohen, 1971; Erickson, 1981; Fine & Holyfield, 1996; Keen, 1994; Reeves & Bylund, 1992; Richardson, 1988; Simmel, 1950). In the form of anonymity manipulations, it has been widely studied in social psychology (Guerin, 1991, 1997b).

Ambiguity in religion. Like secrecy, ambiguity also allows escape from social consequences (Middleton, 1977). If a God is ineffable, then priests and elders cannot be wrong about any in-

terpretations of ambiguous scriptures or traditions.

Keen (1994) highlights another useful social function of ambiguity, that religious ambiguity allows variation and change in religious rituals and traditions so that they can adapt to local social contingencies to benefit individuals in the group. Such ambiguities allow continual social shaping in line with new social and resource exigencies. If rituals and religious behaviors were totally fixed (which probably never actually occurs), tight social control would be necessary to cover changes in the social and physical conditions. Most religions, therefore, are ambiguous with regards to authority and interpretation of scriptures (e.g., P. Harrison, 1959).

We also find an argument from Lévi-Strauss (1966) that myths and totems are formed from opposites or from some relation that produces many variations to "think with" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a). So for each myth (just like proverbs), there are others with the opposite relations (Sperber, 1979). From the present perspective, this is socially functional because, like ambiguity, it allows multiple controls over someone else's behavior, especially when the social contexts change.

In addition to the localized rituals I have outlined from anthropology, the variation and change in religions can be seen in large-scale religions. Islam has shown a continuing pattern of change between polytheism and monotheism that reflects continued social shaping and adaptation to local social situations (Geertz, 1968; Gellner, 1960, 1992; Wright, 1985). For societal-level institutions, monotheism is easier to regulate and control, but polytheism keeps more people happy and in control of their own smaller groups and clans. Which one is most prevalent probably depends on the resources available over the entire community (Johnson & Earle, 1987).

Witchcraft. The anthropological literature has made it clear for many

years that witchcraft and sorcery are part of the social control and keeping groups working together (Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976). Witchcraft is not a primitive form of science but a complex and sophisticated system of socially organizing groups of people (Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976). Like shamanism, witchcraft focuses attention on some individuals in a group who can mediate and organize the whole group, even when those persons do not control the group in a leadership role (Driver, 1991; Riches, 1994). Both shamanism and witchcraft are social phenomena for shaping the group to cooperate and reciprocate, and therefore to survive. Like the priests and ministers of larger organized religions, these smaller social systems rely on social shapers such as witches and shamans to instigate and monitor the social contingencies.

Verbal behavior strategies. Verbal constructions are another strategy used in religions to "motivate" groups of people, and, as mentioned earlier, the contingency properties of verbal behavior make it useful for organizing very large groups of people (Brenton, 1993; Brown, 1992; Glenn, 1989; Guerin, 1994c). For example, there has recently been an increase in the number of "millennium" claims, and this is likely to increase as the year 2000 A.D. approaches (a frightening recent example is Lamy, 1992). Specific dates have many times been used in this way (Festinger et al., 1956; Numbers & Butler, 1987; Wilson, 1973, 1990).

The strategy of socially utilizing millennium predictions can be seen in the italicized portion of the following:

I define millennarian movements as movements in which the imminence of a radical and supernatural change in the social order is prophesied or expected, *so as to lead to organization and activity, carried out in preparation for this event*, on the part of the movements' adherents. There are minor variations: in some cases, the millennium is expected to occur soon, on this earth; in others, the people are expected to enter an abode of heavenly

bliss in the future; in yet others, there is only an expectation of relatively minor improvements of life on earth, though these usually develop quickly into one of the more radical forms. (Worsley, 1957/1967, p. 338, italics added)

The italicized part shows the low-probability behaviors that have been verbally assigned the contingent consequences of surviving the massive changes that will occur in the next millennium or after the appropriate date.

Finally, verbally specified contingencies are widespread in controlling groups of people. As one example, Nunn (1964) found that in 67% of their sample of 367 families, one or both parents answered "yes" to the question, "Do you tell your child that God will punish him if he is bad?" Nunn found that such parents were generally ineffectual in controlling their children otherwise, but had opportunistically used a social control strategy shared by most religious groups.

Naturally occurring events. Many other events can be utilized, in the way I have been describing, to shape and maintain social control of a group (Titiev, 1960). Special and unusual events such as eclipses or natural disasters have been used to maintain group interactions (Wilson, 1973; Worsley, 1957/1967). Natural events can be utilized in several of the ways already mentioned. The events can be used as salient stimuli for better remembering of religious practices or as contingent escape through removal, or verbal familiarity (being given verbal explanations for the events) can be made contingent upon performing other low-probability religious behaviors.

Although they are perhaps not natural events from our perspectives, cargo cults, in which tribes appear to worship technically more advanced people when contact is first made, might be considered another example (from the tribes' perspective) of using an unusual event to organize a group

of people. There is more recent evidence, however, that cargo cults were actually utilized or invented by colonialists rather than by tribes (Ferguson, 1992; M. Kaplan, 1995). For example, once a tribe was labeled as a "cult" (M. Kaplan, 1995) or as "cannibals" (Ferguson, 1992), special powers could be used by the colonialists to subdue them—strong coercive powers that had the approval of both church and state, as long as the label could be proved. The use of the verbal category *cargo cult* was therefore a colonial strategy to control a native population.

Superstitious behaviors. One other example needs to be discussed. It has often been claimed that religion has superstitious or adventitious contingencies for either its origin or its maintenance, despite such ideas being debunked by social anthropologists as far back as the 1920s (see Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976, 1965). Writers such as Skinner (1953) and Harris (1989) have taken this view uncritically.

Although adventitious contingencies in the technical sense certainly exist for humans (Ono, 1987, 1994), this cannot be generalized to religions and rituals. The social behaviors of religion are not adventitious but have long histories and very careful shaping from social communities. Superficial analyses might suggest an adventitious origin, but thorough observation shows that these behaviors are most carefully shaped through a community (e.g., the details provided by Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1976). All the evidence given through this paper that rituals and other religious behaviors are regularly changed to help groups survive the vicissitudes of local social and food crises also goes against explaining religious behaviors as a form of adventitious behavior (Barth, 1987; Bloch, 1992; Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Firth, 1960; Geertz, 1973; S. Harrison, 1992; Leach, 1954; Riches, 1994; Strecker, 1988; Wilson, 1969). Further, if a potent adventitious event were to occur

at a critical moment of a crisis or during a ritualized social event, it would be utilized in social contingencies rather than for shaping and maintaining the behaviors in question.

Similar Strategies in the Secular World

In line with the earlier theme of this paper, it can be shown that in each of these cases of explanation reversal, there are secular contexts that exhibit the same general strategies for social organizing (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Religious solutions are not the only way to regulate a group, but historically they have been extremely important and continue to be so. A few brief examples of secular control will be given.

Secular rituals are well-known examples of identical social control strategies being used outside of religious contexts (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Bureaucracies regularly use strategies of secrecy and ambiguity, and sports teams will often take on a mascot as if a totem, although such mascots do not have the full significance (social consequences) that tribal totems usually have (Fortes, 1967), usually being limited to major sport contests. Examples of unusual events and numerical verbalizations being used for social control are also common (Lamy, 1992). The year 1984 was made into a social event of large proportion in many western cultures because of George Orwell's (1949) book, which "predicted" (that it was in any way a prediction was socially constructed later, not by Orwell) a very nasty society by the year 1984. Halley's comet had a similar reaction, as has the year 2000 already, and these have been utilized for many commercial and other (Lamy, 1992) secular social ends. These are all examples of nonreligious social uses of events similar to those utilized in millennarian and millennium religious movements.

It turns out, then, that there is little difference between religious and secular control of social groups, and all the

strategies are shared to some extent. Perhaps the only difference between the two might be that religious groups usually, but not always, verbally propose the existence of "higher" or spiritual beings or nonmaterial worlds. But we must be cautious even here, because the strategic use of ineffable higher beings and nonmaterial worlds can also be found in secular form, for example, in the groups organized around the existence of UFOs (Festinger et al., 1956; Wallis, 1975a). Or to take another example, it has been shown how the strategic use of higher beings was increased as Dianetics changed into Scientology, from a type of psychotherapeutic cult to a more religious or spiritual organization (Wallis, 1975b). But in general, secular bureaucracies and secular states do not usually get people to do things by claiming reference to nonmaterial events and beings.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE EXPLANATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BEHAVIORS

It has been shown that the many forms of religious behavior can be parsimoniously, and with detailed evidence, reinterpreted to show that a major function of religions is to organize groups of people so that the many benefits of forming cooperative and reciprocating groups become possible. These benefits, rather than the direct consequences of the religious behaviors themselves (e.g., food when eating holy bread or the physical bending when genuflecting), maintain individual religious behaviors. In order to accomplish this, already-existing contingencies are opportunistically made contingent upon the otherwise low-probability behaviors and are thereby used to motivate group behaviors that are important in the long run for most of the individuals but that might not be performed otherwise.

The analyses presented here suggest that when we find similarities among the religions from all over the world,

it is because of common properties of the social community and the available strategies for shaping behavior, not because of an innate predisposition or a prestructured spiritual environment. For example, the fact that almost all groups in society everywhere have taboos against certain behaviors such as handling dead animals or dead humans does not immediately argue for an innate predisposition for taboos or even for an innate aversion to dead bodies, nor does it give proof of an originating or maintaining benefit of taboos, such as cleanliness from animal diseases (Harris, 1977). I have argued that there would be benefits enough, and indeed evolutionary benefits, if such taboo behaviors functioned *completely and only* to organize a group and keep members cooperating and reciprocating with many behaviors entirely unrelated to the taboos, although in reality most cases will be multifunctional. The taboo itself arises, I have argued, because escape from the taboo event is a high-probability behavior for any number of reasons and can therefore be utilized to make low-probability behaviors that are beneficial to the group more likely to occur.

There are several advantages to this social contingency analysis that will be briefly outlined. Previous theories of religious behaviors have almost always relied on multiple constructs that are not observable. In the present analysis the theoretical weight is placed on potentially observable social behaviors and their material consequences, thus releasing the research methodology from its previous problems (Wulff, 1995). As anthropologists will testify, observing social behaviors and their consequences is not always easy, but it is potentially easier than measuring needs and desires for ritual and symbolic expression, individual piety, catharsis, and the like.

The social contingency analysis also brings together the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology, so that each plays a part in the study of social religious contingencies. So-

cial psychology and behavior analysis can play a theoretical and empirical role alongside anthropology and sociology, as has only rarely occurred in the past (e.g., Festinger et al., 1956). Such a synthesis should be very welcome in such a disunified field of study as religious studies (Whaling, 1995).

By putting the driving forces for religious behavior into social processes, this analysis avoids two major problems with previous theories of religious behavior. First, it avoids arguing that all religious behavior is nonsense and a waste of time; and second, it avoids being an apologist for religions and is neutral about whether religion is the only way for people to survive. These two problems have plagued the study of religion (Wulff, 1995), with some like Freud (1927/1961) reducing religion to an illusion and others such as Fowler (1981) making religious faith a necessary part of researching. With the present analysis, the truth of any religious claims is displaced, because the events to be studied are the social consequences of talking about religious matters or praying, not the existence of what is talked about or prayed to.

Finally, the social contingency analysis made here provides a new way of viewing some fundamental constructs of the social sciences, such as power. With its theoretical twist, the whole gamut of religious explanations can be turned around so that what seem to be motivating forces—*anxiety, catharsis, power, spiritual affinities, and the like*—become means to maintain socially useful behaviors rather than direct causes.

The problem with previous analyses of religion has been a readiness to view the most immediate, direct consequences that arise from religious behaviors as the sole maintaining consequences. Instead, the unobvious generalized social consequences that arise from group members working together can also maintain these behaviors. If there is an evolutionary advantage to religious behaviors, it is through the

successful regulation of groups of people rather than through the direct outcomes of the religious behaviors.

By the same argument, it is not mating to produce babies that has been the evolutionary problem for human survival, it has been having a group work together long enough to keep those babies alive. The evolutionary problem for humans has been about organizing groups of people to keep the young alive. Religion is a very common conglomerate of strategies for achieving these ends that has appeared independently in almost all social groups throughout the world.

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