

## *Introduction*

*James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis*

Three decades ago, James Lewis was a student at a regional university in the mountains of western North Carolina. As part of his financial aid package, he worked for an oral history project housed on the university campus. His interest in religion prompted him to seek interviews with local ministers – mostly elderly Baptist ministers who rejected affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention because the SBC was too “liberal.”

One of the more amusing stories he heard during those years was about a small Baptist church that began holding ice cream socials on Sunday afternoons following services. It was apparently a popular innovation. As long as the weather was mild, it was possible to hold the gatherings outside on the church lawn. However, as winter approached, these picnic-like social events became progressively problematic. Lacking other facilities, part of the congregation favored holding the gatherings inside the sanctuary. This proposal was opposed by another segment of the congregation who felt the sanctuary should be reserved for worship services. The dispute escalated until the congregation finally split over the issue.

We might humorously refer to the two churches emerging from this schism as the Ice-Cream-in-the-Sanctuary Baptists and the Anti-Ice-Cream-in-the-Sanctuary Baptists, as if the ice cream issue was a quasi-theological dispute causing the breakup. In actuality, however, it is unlikely that a disagreement over where to hold Sunday afternoon socials was the sole factor – or even the primary factor – behind the split. Rather, it is more probable that there were preexisting tensions within the congregation, and the ice cream issue was merely a flashpoint leading to an eruption of latent hostilities.

Lacking more detailed information about this schism, we can only speculate about other factors: perhaps there were non-ice-cream-related theological disputes feeding the conflict. Or maybe people within the church had previously disagreed over the manner in which worship services should be conducted, and the ice cream dispute merely reignited old

tensions. It could also have been the case that an assistant pastor felt inclined to lead a breakaway group so he could occupy the top position in a new congregation, and the ice cream issue provided an opportunity to bring his inclinations into reality. To generalize from this example, we can say that the overt phase of a conflict can sometimes obscure other – often more important – factors paving the way for a schism.

The present collection brings together various treatments of schisms. Some chapters examine specific conflicts. Others provide surveys of the history of schisms within larger religious traditions. And a few are theoretically focused. In addition to this diversity of approaches, examples are drawn from different traditions.

#### SOURCES OF SCHISMS

*Schism* ('to split') refers to a group that breaks away from a (typically, but not invariably) larger organization and forms a new organization. Though the term is usually confined to religious contexts, it can be extended to other kinds of breakaway groups. Schisms arise out of conflict; a group that splits from its parent organization amicably would not normally be labelled a "schism." Because schisms emerge out of controversies, the term has a negative connotation – though less so than related terms like "heresy." Because of this connotation, breakaway groups do not typically refer to themselves as *schisms*.

In the pluralistic context of the contemporary world (as opposed to the comparatively monolithic religious environment of medieval Europe, for example) an individual who leaves one church and starts another church is not schismatic in the proper sense. Rather, a schism involves a *group* of people who leave a parent body and form a new organization. Thus, for instance, Eckankar is not a schism of Ruhani Satsang because only Paul Twitchell and his spouse left Ruhani Satsang to found Eckankar. Ruhani Satsang, on the other hand, *is* a schism of Sawan Singh's Radhasoami organization because Kirpal Singh left that movement along with a group of former members to found Ruhani Satsang.

Though they are an important component of many analyses (e.g., Neibuhr's *Social Sources of Denominationalism*), schisms in general have not been subjected to systematic analysis in recent years (a series of articles by Roger Finke, a contributor to the present collection, being a notable exception). Given the general poverty of current "schism theory," it will be useful to lay out a preliminary typology of schisms delineating the various factors that prompt splits.

The literature has identified a number of different factors contributing to schisms. These factors – which are not mutually exclusive – can be roughly classified into five groups:

- Membership subgroupings.* Splits can take place along economic, ethnic, racial, national, or other fault lines.
- Personal ambition; personality conflicts.* Schisms can be set in motion by individuals with leadership ambitions, or arise as a result of personality conflicts among the leadership.
- Doctrinal/liturgical/behavioral norm disagreements.* Though schismatic disagreements can take place at any point in a group's organizational life, they often occur in response to changes in a group's doctrines, liturgy and/or degree of strictness (e.g. the sectarian schisms resulting from the liberalization of mainstream denominations that are the focus of Neibuhr's work).
- Death of a charismatic founder.* A juncture at which schism frequently occurs is upon the death of the charismatic founder. Analyses of this category of institutional crisis go back at least as far as Max Weber's discussion of the "institutionalization of charisma."
- Availability of alternative means of legitimation.* Roy Wallis noted organizations that were "pluralistically legitimate" (e.g. the revelational authority available to multiple mediums in a Spiritualist church) were more likely to experience schisms than groups that were "uniquely legitimate." Wallis's more general point was that schismatics must find ways of legitimating their schisms.

Though an analysis of the various factors that play into schisms is useful, it is also static. In addition to referring to a group that has splintered off from another body, "schism" is a verb referring to the *process* of splitting. The actual dividing of an organization is usually only the final stage in a conflict that has been taking place for some time. It should be possible to analyze specific schisms in terms of the various stages leading to a split, such as identifying the stage at which the "point of no return" had been reached. Additionally, it should be possible to apply the same sort of analysis to similar organizational conflicts that do not result in schisms.

The factors that feed into a schism can also develop in dynamic ways. For example, a relatively minor doctrinal disagreement can lead to personal animosities that in turn exacerbate previously minor tensions between a regional association and a national denomination. Perhaps there had been festering tensions over the allocation of resources, such as a regional association of mostly rural churches upset over denominational

funds being spent disproportionately in urban areas. An ambitious individual or individuals on the losing end of a doctrinal disagreement who also happened to belong to this hypothetical rural association could be offended enough by the doctrinal dispute to exploit prior tensions over funding and lead a schism of regional churches from the denomination.

Analysts should also be sensitive to differences among religious traditions, though these may be differences of emphasis rather than of substance. In the South Asian context, for example, schisms often arise out of disputed successorships – as in the earlier example of Kirpal Singh, whose claim to guruship following Sawan Singh's death was rejected by the Radhasoami organization. Though splits over successorship can be found in some Western religious organizations, more often the issues that divide Christian groups are (at least at the overt level) disagreement over proper doctrine and practice (which is not to say that these types of disagreements are confined to Christianity). As another example, Muslims of every persuasion go on the Hajj and otherwise cooperate in ways that have no exact parallel among, for instance, Christian sects.

Roger Finke is one of the few contemporary scholars writing on schisms. His and Christopher Scheitle's chapter "Understanding schisms: theoretical explanations for their origins" builds on organizational and religious economy theories to explain the social context and organizational dynamics involved in schisms. Their chapter begins by examining religious markets that promote or deter schisms. The authors then analyze how relationships between denominations, congregations, and clergy contribute to schisms. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the consequences of schism.

Chapters 2–4 present overviews of schisms in different major religious traditions. In "Charismatic authority in Islam: an analysis of the cause of schisms in the *ummah*," Ron Geaves puts forward an analytical framework for understanding schisms within Islam, focusing on types of authority and legitimacy. In the first section, Geaves places the initial schisms following Muhammad's death in the context of contemporary charismatic leadership debates and the need to remain authentic to the primal message. He then explores Shi'a and Sunni Islam, seeking to understand alternative patterns of schism in each main branch. Later schisms within each branch are related back to the initial causes of division and the competing theologies that developed out of these schisms.

In similar mode, Alan Cole's "Schisms in Buddhism" presents a sweeping overview of schisms within another major world religious

tradition. In sharp contrast to Western stereotypes of Buddhism as static and unchanging, Buddhism has been characterized by dynamic change and innovation. As Cole points out, it would not be an exaggeration to characterize the entire twenty-five-century history of Buddhism as a series of schismatic developments – and he proceeds to do just this, starting from Gautama’s original split with the Indian religious tradition of his day to contemporary forms of Buddhism that emerged out of Asia’s confrontation with Western colonialism.

‘New Religion’ is a direct translation of *Shin Shukyo*, the expression coined by Japanese sociologists to describe the explosion of innovative religious movements that emerged in the wake of the Second World War. However, instead of dissipating after the initial cycle of innovation, the impulse to create new religions remained strong beyond the post-war period, leading to newer organizations that emerged from schisms with the original new religions. In “Schisms in Japanese new religion movements,” Robert Kisala surveys this line of development, focusing on the history of three of the older new religions – Tenrikyo, Omotokyo, and Reiyukai – and the newer schismatic groups that have emerged from them.

One ordinarily thinks of schismatic groups as introducing doctrinal and organizational innovations following their secession from parent religious bodies, while the parent group remains relatively unchanged. In “Finishing the *Mystery* – the Watch Tower and ‘The 1917 Schism,’” George D. Chryssides examines the transition from Charles Taze Russell, founder of the original Watch Tower Society, to the new leader, Joseph Franklin Rutherford. In this case, one of the principal factors prompting schism was the doctrinal and organizational innovations introduced by Rutherford – innovations that reshaped the Watch Tower into what would become a very different kind of movement.

David G. Bromley has written extensively on the dynamics of contemporary religious movements and the social conflicts in which they have been involved. In “Challenges to charismatic authority in the Unificationist Movement,” he and Rachel S. Bobbitt argue that emergent segments of a developing movement – the inner circle, administrative and mission-oriented organizations, and the grassroots membership base – can each become a power base from which challenges to movement leadership potentially originate (i.e. each component is a source of potential schisms). The authors utilize examples from the Unificationist Movement to illustrate the points of their analysis.

We also usually think of schisms as weakening the parent body. This is not, however, invariably the case, as discussed by Joseph M. Bryant in his

chapter, “Persecution and schismogenesis: how a penitential crisis over mass apostasy facilitated the triumph of Catholic Christianity in the Roman Empire.” Following a persecution during which numerous Christians had renounced the faith rather than suffer martyrdom, a debate over whether or not such apostasy could be forgiven led what became the Church of the Katharoi (Novationists) to a split from the Catholic Church. Following the exodus of hardliners, the Catholic leadership was free to pursue a less severe approach better suited to attracting new converts.

The example of the Katharoi schism should not, however, blind us to the fact that schisms often do lead to a weakening of the parent body. Susan J. Palmer and Michael Abravanel’s “Church Universal and Triumphant: shelter, succession and schism” presents an almost textbook case of how not to treat potential schismatics in the wake of the death (in this case, the “social death”) of the charismatic leader. Though the Board of Directors was not solely responsible for defections from the Church Universal and Triumphant, their moves to assert total control over the organization managed to alienate the majority of Teaching Centres outside of Montana, resulting in the exodus of numerous centers and individuals, and a subsequent weakening of the church.

In his chapter on “Schism and consolidation: the case of the theosophical movement,” Olav Hammer examines a particularly schism-prone tradition, the Theosophical Society and its numerous splinter groups. Drawing on the plentiful history of organizational splits within the theosophical movement for illustrations, the analysis focuses on the identity politics that take place as new schisms seek to distinguish themselves from their parent body while maintaining enough of a family resemblance with the original organization to seem familiar – and, more importantly, legitimate – in the eyes of potential converts. Hammer discusses the forging of new groups in terms of the *branding* of distinctive new religious products. He also brings up Colin Campbell’s notion of the “cultic milieu,” and mentions how the theosophical movement functions as its own distinct milieu, sharing certain critical characteristics with the larger cultic milieu. This notion is further developed in Petersen’s chapter.

Jesper Aagaard Petersen’s “Satanists and nuts: the role of schisms in modern Satanism” is a rich piece that is much more than a discussion of contemporary Satanism and the construction of Satanic identity. Among Petersen’s insights is his extension of Campbell’s cultic milieu to encompass certain sub-milieus, such as the phenomenon he dubs the

*Introduction*

7

“Satanic milieu.” Though he does not explicitly discuss this point, one issue developed in subsequent chapters is that, though schisms may weaken specific organizations, they can contribute to the expansion of a particular subculture – in this case, to the expansion of the Satanic milieu. This milieu initially came into existence as a consequence of schisms from the original Church of Satan. Similar observations apply to sub-milieus arising from other kinds of schisms, such as those that have arisen in the wake of schisms within the Pagan movement and the Hare Krishna movement.

Though she does not refer to Campbell, Murphy Pizza’s “Schism as midwife: how conflict aided the birth of a contemporary Pagan community” discusses the larger Neopagan community in terms that resonate with Campbell’s characterization of the cultic milieu. Like the Satanic milieu, contemporary Paganism is a sub-milieu within the larger cultic milieu that could be termed – extending Petersen’s terminology – the Pagan milieu. In terms of this theme, Pizza’s chapter on the Twin Cities Pagan milieu is important for its highlighting of what was implicit in Petersen’s chapter, namely that, instead of viewing a schism as a failure, a schism can instead be “a catalyst for growth and for the rethinking of community.” But, assuming this observation is correct, can it be extended to other milieus?

In “Succession, religious switching, and schism in the Hare Krishna movement,” E. Burke Rochford recounts the many institutional woes and attendant dramas of schisms within this movement. He also points out that Hare Krishna schisms tend to be expressed in terms of the quest for doctrinal purity, but the underlying conflicts are often matters of contested religious authority. One consequence of these frequent conflicts is that many people who have defected from the warring organizations continue to participate in a larger Hare Krishna milieu. As with Pizza’s discussion of the Pagan milieu, Rochford argues that institutional failures are not the same as movement failure. Instead, it seems that the emergence of a de-institutionalized movement has actually served to spread the original teachings into new settings.

Cynthia Ann Humes’s chapter, “Schisms within Hindu Guru groups: the Transcendental Meditation movement in North America,” presents a somewhat different case study. Humes examines three distinct splinters from TM: Robin Carlsen’s World Teach Movement; Ravi Shankar’s quasi-independent following, which remained nominally within the TM fold; and Deepak Chopra, who was ejected from TM as a potential threat to the Maharishi’s authority. Though it could be said that a TM milieu

constituted in part by non-affiliated TMers emerged in the vicinity of the Maharishi International University, the TM situation differs from the Hare Krishna movement. Instead of staying within the TM milieu, the majority of defectors from the TM organization subsequently became involved in other neo-Hindu groups – groups that share certain basic beliefs with TM.

Christopher Partridge's "Schism in Babylon: colonialism, Afro-Christianity and Rastafari" shifts the discussion of schisms into a significantly different cultural context. This chapter provides a concise overview of the history and ideology of the Rastafarian movement. Like a number of other contributors to this volume, Partridge explicitly invokes Campbell's idea of "cultic milieu" (the basis for his notion of "occulture") to describe the emergent spiritual subculture in Jamaica. He also argues that within what we might term the Rastafarian milieu schisms are less of a specific event and more of a process in which "schism and syncretism sometimes overlap and problematise easy definition." In this sense, the Rastafarian milieu is more similar to the Pagan milieu than it is to some of the other sub-milieus we have mentioned.

The milieu discussion which began with the overview of Hammer's chapter should serve to make us attentive to the possibility of other, comparable milieus or sub-milieus beyond the ones mentioned above. In Western countries – and particularly in the US – there is a Christian milieu that extends well beyond the boundaries of organized Christianity (not to mention certain sub-milieus, such as the Mormon milieu). Christian denominations can splinter and new denominations arise. Alternatively, organizationally alienated Christians can pray at home or form their own home churches. But, as Philip Jenkins forcefully demonstrates in *The Next Christendom*, Christianity continues to grow, demonstrating once again that organizational failure does not equate to the failure of a religious movement.



PART I

*Theoretical overview*

## CHAPTER I

*Understanding schisms: theoretical  
explanations for their origins**Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle*

Since the dawn of the social sciences, scholars have written at length on the topic of schisms. The rich descriptions of Weber and Troeltsch, in particular, offered contrasts between the established churches and the sects they spawned. Each scholar pointed out stark differences in charismatic leadership, social class, asceticism, and soteriology. H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), though, was the first to inject theoretical life to the process of schism formation, explaining that sects arise to meet the religious needs of the “masses.” Niebuhr went on to explain that over time the more successful sects tend to be taken over by the privileged and are transformed into churches that no longer adequately serve the needs and tastes of the proletariat. Consequently, dissidents break away and yet another schism occurs. This gives rise to an endless cycle of transformations and schisms.

But a serious limitation of Niebuhr’s model was that it relied almost entirely on class interests to explain schisms. There is no doubt that social class dynamics have contributed to many schisms, but an abundance of recent research has shown that social class differences are often not a motivating factor behind them. In fact, many of the most historically significant schisms, such as those producing the Essenes (Baumgarten 1997), the Christians (Stark 1996), and the Waldensians (Lambert 1977), were not based on the proletariat. A second limitation is that Niebuhr’s model offers little explanation of the organizational dynamics underlying schisms or the larger context in which this process occurs. Because attention is focused so narrowly on social class, all other factors fade away.

Building on organizational and religious economy theories, this chapter will explain the social context and organizational dynamics involved in schisms. We begin by looking at the religious markets and ecological spaces that promote or deter schisms. How does the state’s regulation of religion and the existing supply of religion open the door for schisms? Next we look within religious organizations. How do the

relationships between denominations, congregations, and clergy contribute to schisms? Finally, we briefly discuss the consequences of schisms. How do they change the organizations involved and how do they contribute to larger religious change?

#### CLARIFYING THE CAUSES

The drama and turmoil of a marital divorce is often interpreted as the source of the relationship's demise. The fighting between the couple becomes seen as the reason for their inevitable failure and is used to explain larger trends in divorce. Such an interpretation may be accurate in some cases, but for most it is an error in attribution. As most sociologists would argue, relationships often end for reasons that have little to do with the personality dynamics between partners. It is unlikely that the rise in the twentieth-century divorce rate is simply because couples disliked each other more than they did in the nineteenth century. The real causes are to be found in larger structural and historical forces. Increases in life expectancy, social expectations of gender roles, economic downturns, changes in the legal system, and many other forces can be the hidden source of the drama that surrounds separations.

Similar descriptions can be given for divorces within religious groups. The same heightened emotions and drama can be found in schisms. Arguments about theology, leadership, and actions can often find parallels in arguments between two individuals about neglect, infidelity, and abuse. As with separations of individuals, we must be careful not to let the manifest drama of a schism distract us from its latent causes (Blasi 1989: 311). Instead of looking to the surface phenomena that occur during schisms, we must examine the deeper social and organizational contexts that give rise to schisms. We begin by examining the role of national context in creating an environment that spawns or suppresses schisms.

#### *Country context and schisms*

When Swiss-born, German-educated Philip Schaff wrote one of the first surveys of American religion, he explained to his European audience that the religious freedoms of the new voluntary system in America resulted in increased levels of religious zeal and commitment. But he also cautioned that the new sect system had a "shady side" that "changes the peaceful kingdom of God into a battle-field" (Schaff 1855: 99, 102). What Schaff and a host of other nineteenth-century European visitors were observing

*Understanding schisms: theoretical explanations for their origins* 13

was that schisms occurred with increasing regularity when sects could compete on equal footing with the established churches. A starting point for identifying the origins of schisms is understanding the freedom, or lack thereof, that sects have in splitting from existing churches. In other words, what are the start-up costs for a new group?

When considering a schism, the potential costs for new religious groups are many and they vary widely across countries. In nineteenth-century America new sects flourished because they could. Once a new religion split from the parent group it could immediately compete for adherents without any limitations or sanctions. Unlike the churches so familiar to Europeans, schism did not result in a loss of subsidy. To the contrary, no religion was favored by the state. This lack of state interference also allowed schisms to form without facing state penalties. Religions were not required to register and young sects held the same freedoms as the groups from which they split (Finke 1990). As Schaff noted, this resulted in a highly competitive battlefield, with new legions (i.e. sects resulting from schisms) entering the field each year.

But the effects of regulation are not confined to one nation or time period. Japan serves as one of many examples. Before the end of World War II, the government strictly controlled religious activity in Japan. The state subsidized Shinto shrines and participation in ceremonies was a matter of civic duty. Alternative religions required government recognition legally to exist and, once recognized, they faced interference, suppression, and persecution from the state (McFarland 1967; Hardacre 1989). But the Japanese defeat and the Allied Occupation in 1945 led to the immediate repeal of all laws controlling religion, disestablished the Shinto religion, and granted unprecedented religious freedom (Nakano 1987).

The response was overwhelming. The period immediately following 1945 is called *kamigami no rasshu awa*, the “rush hour of the gods.” It was said that “New Religions rose like mushrooms after a rainfall” (quoted in McFarland 1967: 4). By 1949, 403 new religious groups had been founded, and 1,546 other groups had established independence through secession from the shrines, temples, or churches to which they had previously belonged. In contrast, only thirty-one religious groups had received official recognition in the decades before 1945 – thirteen Shinto sects, twenty-eight Buddhist denominations, and two Christian groups (Nakano 1987: 131). Like nineteenth-century America, schisms flourished once the start-up costs were reduced.

Moving into the contemporary period, we see the same trend around the globe. Anthony Gill (1994), Andrew Chesnut (2003), and others have