Communicating the Incommunicable: How Aumism Survived

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On September 6, 2001, French police and military forces raided the Mandarom, the Holy See of the Aumist Religion, and destroyed the statue of its founder, Gilbert Bourdin (1923-1998), aka the Cosmoplanetary Messiah, Lord Hamsah Manarah. Swiss historian Jean-François Mayer wrote on a Fribourg daily newspaper about “les Talibans de la République”
The destruction was ordered on the basis of presumed zoning violations, but it was clear that, during the virulent French “cult wars”, the government and the anti-cult movement wanted to “liquidate” the Mandarom (a Stalinist term, which is now becoming fashionable again in Russia). The movement, with its huge statues, was just too visible and had become the very symbol of “destructive cults”
Those hostile to the Mandarom believed that the “liquidation” would easily succeed. The destruction of the statue came after strong media attacks against Bourdin after his coronation as the Cosmoplanetary Messiah (1990), his arrest for alleged sexual abuse (1995), and his death (1998).
How Liquidation Failed

- Yet, the liquidation did not succeed. The Aumist Religion lost members but, to the great surprise of the anti-cultists, did not disappear and in fact in the 21st century started growing again.

- How was this possible? How were the Aumists able to communicate what had become an incommunicable message?
Two Methodological Tools

- I would apply to the Aumist Religion two well-developed theoretical tools in the sociology of religions:
  
a. Theories of the postcharismatic fate of religious movements, “when prophets die”
  
b. Theories of the effect of persecution on the survival and growth of a religious movement
1. When “Cult Founders” Die

- In the 1960s, received sociological wisdom largely followed the categories presented in the influential 1957 textbook of John Milton Yinger (1916-2011, right) Religion, Society and the Individual. Yinger claimed that “cults,” as opposed to “religions,” were “small, short-lived, often local, ... built around a dominant leader.” When the leader died, the “cult” normally died with him.
In 1969, British sociologist Geoffrey Kenneth Nelson, in an important article on the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, challenged Yinger’s categories. Based on his study of Spiritualism, Nelson maintained that “cults” cannot be defined on the basis of their small or ephemeral constituency, but are identified by their doctrines and practices “alternative” to the mainstream.
A New Notion of “Cult”

In the 1970s, both scholars of religion such as Rodney Stark (left) and William Sims Bainbridge, and anti-cultists, agreed that “cults” are not defined by their size or permanence in time, but by other features. The use of the word “cult” by anti-cultists as synonymous of a “bad” or criminal group led social scientists to gradually replace it with “new religious movement” or “new religion”
A Curious Remnant of the Past

- In 1991, American historian of religions J. Gordon Melton (right) noted that curiously, “in spite of the changing understanding of new religions,” the idea that they may face serious problems and even disappear “following the death of the founder (...) has been separated from the ongoing discussion and has survived as an independent remnant of the earlier definition of ‘cult.’ While only rarely mentioned in print, that assumption is frequently dropped in conversations on new religions as an assumed truth”
A False Cliché

As is true for many clichés, the idea that new religions die with their founders is, Melton argued, false. “The death of the founder rarely proves fatal or leads to a drastic alteration in the group’s life.”

Melton was aware of a few groups, including Psychiana, that really died with their founders, but noted that these are rare and “hard to discover.” “When a new religion die, it usually has nothing to do with the demise of the founder; it is from lack of response of the public to the founder’s ideas”
Melton also studied how new religions survive, singling out three key factors, typically at work in the case of Scientology: a corpus of authoritative writings; provisions for the succession made by the founder (which do not prevent, but limit, the unavoidable schisms); and a corporate legal structure that controls the movement’s property (rather than leaving it in the hands of the founder as an individual owner, thus preparing potential legal conflicts between the founder’s family and the movement)
Finally, in his 1991 introduction to *When Prophets Die*, Melton compared the cliché implying that new religions die with their founder with two others commonplace, but false, assumptions: that new religions die when a prophecy, normally about the end of the world, fails, or when sexual scandals involving their founders are revealed.

New religions normally survive failed prophecies, not so much for the psychological reasons (cognitive dissonance) Leon Festinger (1919-1989) and his colleagues described in their classic *When Prophecy Fails* (1956) but because for the believers *the prophecy did not fail* and “something” happened at the due date, perhaps in Heaven.
As for sexual accusations, devotees may stubbornly deny that they are true, as in the case of Swami Muktananda (1908-1982), or, as it is currently happening with Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), maintain that what at first sight appeared as sexual transgression in fact enacted divine commands mysteriously connected with the founder’s mission.
2. Persecution

- Melton’s 1991 text did not consider another potential killer of new religions: persecution. Here, the historical cliché goes in the opposite sense. It is taken for granted that persecution and the example of martyrs actually reinforce a religion. As Tertullian (190-225, left) famously said, *semen est sanguis Christianorum*, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians.
Historians started questioning long ago that the cliché was uniformly valid. French historian Jean de Viguerie noted in 1987 that the anti-Catholic persecution of the French Revolution caused a drastic reduction in the number of active Catholics in France, something that the French Catholic Church was never able to reverse thereafter. Others later noted the same with respect to Communist regimes, in Czechoslovakia, Albania, and elsewhere.
Sociologists Confirm

- Rodney Stark and Roger Finke confirmed in several articles that legal restrictions, even without bloody persecution, severely affect the targeted groups. In 1996, Stark also argued that perhaps even Tertullian was only partially right. Early Christianity grew more rapidly when it was not persecuted. The example of the martyrs was certainly persuasive, but was counterbalanced by other negative factors.
We examine the impact of religious competition on religiosity by looking at state support for religion as a structural factor affecting religious pluralism. Our independent variable consists of a series of six measures that deal with state support for religion from the Religion and State database (RASD) for the 1990 to 2002 period. Our dependent variables include measures of attendance at religious services, religious beliefs, and self-categorization as a religious person. These indicators for 81 countries are based on the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program. Regression analyses controlled for demographic, social, political, and economic indicators, and the nature of the dominant religious denomination. The results indicate that state regulation of religion is significantly and negatively correlated with religiosity in 14 of 72 regressions which include these variables. Twelve of these fourteen regressions are those in which attendance at religious services or individuals classifying themselves as religious are the dependent variables. This is consistent with predictions that religious monopolies will reduce participation but not belief.

While “at first glance the regulation of the religious market seems far removed from the individual” (Finke 1990:614), the impact of the degree of religious pluralism on religious participation has been the subject of considerable debate. Peter Berger (1967) claimed that competition leads to an erosion of belief and consequent religious participation. An “economic” perspective claims that pluralism leads to more participation as it offers a wider choice for a religiously diverse public to meet their religious needs (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; and see Sherkat and Ellison 1999 for a summary of this research). Many of the studies that exam-
The Israeli scholars also confirmed an early intuition by Stark and Finke: discriminations against minority religions have negative effects on religion in general. In the long run, worship attendance decreases also in mainline churches. When the latter applaud, in Russia and elsewhere, state repression of “cults,” they are probably unaware of these data.
3. What about the Mandarom?

I will now apply the above categories to the Aumist religion of the Mandarom. It survived, to start with, accusations of sexual abuses against its founder. Most members regarded them as false (and ultimately French courts concluded they were not supported by any evidence) – although others, when Bourdin went to jail, left. Those who remain in, or join, the religion today explain the accusation as just another tool used by unscrupulous anti-cultists during the “cult wars”
The fact that the Temple Pyramide, whose construction was predicted by the founder and whose importance is capital for the Aumist Religion, is still not built at the Mandarom, due to the persistent opposition of the French authorities, is also not disturbing the faith of the believers. If anything, it motivates them in their struggle to obtain the building license.
The Mandarom also survived the death of the founder. The three elements mentioned by Melton worked in favor of the Aumists. First, the Lord Hamsah Manarrah left an impressive and normative corpus of teachings. In a way, the books symbolically substitute the absent Messiah.
Succession Issues

- Second, interviewed by me, members insisted that the Lord Hamsah Manarah did provide for a collegial leadership of the religion after his death, even if “just as for the Buddhists of the Karma Kagyu School in relationship to His Holiness the Karmapa, Aumists await the next Hierokarantine, who will be the 2nd of the Initiate Lineage”
Schisms

It has been, as usual, impossible to avoid schisms. Some 100 members followed Christophe Crom (Gurudev Hamsah Nandatha), who opened an “alternative Mandarom,” the Adi Vajra Shambhasalem Ashram in Wasa, British Columbia, Canada. Others belong to a “free zone,” offering teachings by both the Lord Hamsah Manarah and other sources independently from the Mandarom. But the majority remains in the parent organization.
A Solid Organization

Third, as Melton predicted, the Mandarom survived because it had incorporated in the form of associations independent from Bourdin as an individual. They were able to manage the properties and also to score an important legal victory against France in 2013 at the European Court of Human Rights.
Surviving Persecution

Sociological theories predict that persecution is a more serious threat than the death of a founder. In 2011, when I served as the Representative of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions, I proposed a model of religious persecution at a conference held in Rome on September 12, 2011.
The Rome Model

- At the Rome conference I introduced what was later called in international publications the “Rome Model,” predicting a slippery slope:

  - Intolerance
  - Discrimination
  - Persecution
The Persecution of Mandarom

As Susan Palmer has demonstrated, the attack against the Mandarom during the “cult wars” started with intolerance, in the forms of media attack and ridicule, but quickly escalated to administrative discrimination and outright persecution – in a country, France, which by the way proves the Stark-Finke theory that discriminating against “cults” did not reverse the mainline churches’ dramatically negative trend in worship attendance.
Effects of the Persecution

- As sociological theories predict, persecution did damage the Mandarom, more than the death of the Lord Hamsah Manarah. Members decreased from 1,300 in 1990 to 300 in 2001. However, this decline proved not to be irreversible. The number of Aumists started increasing again in the 21st century, reaching ca. 500 in 2017.
Growth in Africa

How did Aumism partially overcome persecution? In a globalized world, possibilities of resistance and even of growth always exist by moving to new countries. Aumism, as noted by some media, kept for years a low profile in France, while expanding in Africa. 25% of all centers of the religion are now in the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville).

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In my interviews, members reported that “organization is the basis of our survival.” The founder did establish the doctrine in 22 canonical books, but also created a viable organization, capable of withstanding the persecutions.
Aumists also claimed that it was important for them not to remain entrenched in their monastery in the French Alps, fighting local opponents, but “open to the world,” starting with a dialogue with the local Catholic parish priest but expanding to the World Parliaments of Religion (right) held in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), and Salt Lake City (2015). Indeed, Aumists described these events as crucial for their self-consciousness as members of a religion that wants to expand its outreach and is not happy with survival only
Finally, and quite interestingly, members mentioned as crucial for their communication strategy the openness of their religion to scholars of new religious movements. They are often invited to Aumist conferences. In fact, Aumism has attracted more scholarly attention than larger new religions, and the academic studies have proved useful in resisting attacks by anti-cultists.
Mandarom would probably never become a mainstream movement, due to its very original beliefs and claims about its founder. However, its resistance to discrimination and persecution prove that even small movements may survive, and even grow, in a hostile environment and that new religious movements are less easily destroyed than their opponents would like to believe.
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