Stark and Finke's Church-Sect Theory Reconsidered in Light of Christensen's Disruption Model

Finke and Stark's *The Churching of America 1776-2005* explains how evangelical churches rapidly grew from 1800 to 1850. The authors also explain that growth with the theory of religion they formulated in their book *Acts of Faith*. More recently Clayton Christensen has written a series of business books (*The Innovator's Dilemma* and *The Innovator's Solution*) which explains why companies such as Southwest Airlines have been able to overcome the immense advantage of larger competitors.

This paper intends to advance Stark and Finke's analysis with what we can learn from Christensen. In a nutshell, camp meetings were a "no frills" form of religion in the same way that flying Southwest is a no-frills form of air travel. Both appeal to consumers who are unable to fully use and unable to pay for the full service. In short, the growth of evangelical religion from 1800 to 1850 was what has come to be known in the business world as "disruption."

What emerges from applying the Christensen model of disruption to Second Great Awakening is a new understanding of church-sect theory. A sect is a movement that is able to provide a simpler delivery of religious benefits, and therefore makes them available to those who have been previously unserved by incumbent providers. This new understanding challenges sects as having certain characteristics, such as being non-institutional or resistant to social norms. The secret of sects is the simplicity of their service, much like the no-frills service offered by discount airlines and the attractiveness of technology with fewer buttons.

Following "The Five Qualities of Catalytic Innovators" in *Disruptive Innovation for Social Change* by Christiansen et all, there are five conditions in which sects will emerge and flourish. They are:

1. A social group exists with identifiable religious needs that are unserved by incumbent providers (churches and their ministers).
2. An opportunity exists to simplify the delivery of religious benefits and thereby make them available to those

with limited money, education or time.

3. Viral organizations emerge that replicate and scale, delivering religious benefits without being immediately noticed or challenged.
4. The movement is able to provide significant religious benefits without the requiring substantial secular costs, organizational control or social status.
5. Because the simplified opportunity does not provide social or secular benefits, incumbent providers react with disdain, withdrawal and even greater complexity, which then broadens the opportunity for the movement to grow.

This paper will elaborate on each of these five conditions, applying them to the historical record contained in *The Churching of America 1776-2005* and contrasting what they say to what Stark and Finke conclude in *Acts of Faith*. More specifically, this proposal intends to answer the following questions:

1. Can the winners and losers in America's religious economy from 1776 to 2005 be identified by the theory of market disruption developed by Christiansen to explain the winners and losers in America's recent business economy?
2. Can the theory developed by Christiansen to identify business innovation extend the theory developed by Stark and Finke for describing sect and cult formation and their evolution?
3. Finally, what might be some fundamental elements of "rational choice theory of disruption" in our religious economy?

A social group exists with identifiable religious needs that are unserved by incumbent providers (churches and their ministers)

What are religious needs? Stark and Finke are correct in their claims in the *Micro Foundations of Religion* that religion exists because: (a) "Rewards are always in limited supply, including some that simply do not exist in the observable world." (88), (b) "When available natural means are of no avail [to acquire their desired rewards], humans search for other means to achieve their goals. The supernatural, as conceived of by human beings, holds the potential for gaining rewards unobtainable from any other source" (90) and (c) "In pursuit of rewards, humans will seek to exchange with a god or gods" (91).

Why are they unserved by incumbent providers? The disruption model says that they are unserved because they do not have the time, money or education to utilize the religious

product offered by incumbent providers. In *The Churching of America 1776-2005*, Stark and Finke support this model with their analysis of the difficulty of obtaining religious benefits in frontier regions. They write,

> By definition, a frontier is an area of new settlement and rapid population growth. As a result, frontiers are populated with newcomers and strangers ... in areas where people are constantly passing through and where most people are strangers and newcomers, it is very difficult to sustain organizations of any kind, be they churches, fraternal lodges, or political clubs... frontiers will be short on churches, and long on crime and vice, simply because they are frontiers (pp. 35).

But Stark and Finke also conclude that the reason those who form sects are unserved is because of the "worldliness" of incumbent providers. They claim that secular concerns lead to bureaucratic organizations, lazy clergy and "complex theological writing that required extensive instruction or teaching" (p. 85). They characterize the message of incumbent providers as being "unable to to explain such things as God's origin or His purposes... by creating a God incapable of having purposes or of doing anything, all mysteries are solved by exclusion and all miracles are dismissed as illusions" (p.47).

So why are religious needs unserved by incumbent providers? Is it due to limited time, money and education or is it due to "worldly" churches and their ministers? Here are five additional examples of groups who could not benefit from existing religious and who subsequently became sects:

a) The New Light Separatist Baptists in Virginia (1760s - 1770s) who could not benefit from the "gentry-oriented social world" ... [to help them deal with] "the harsh realities of the disease, debt, overindulgence and deprivation, violence and fear of sudden death, that were the common lot of small farmers (Isaac, 164-5).

b) The Christian Movement (1790-1815) which "wrestled self-consciously with the loss of traditional sources of authority" [after the American Revolution and the adoption of democratic government] and therefore "rejected the traditions of learned theology altogether." (Hatch, pp. 71-73)

c) The Holiness Movement in America (1850-1890) which formulated strict personal codes because "such codes were and are tied to the frustrations of people left behind by urbanization, mechanization, and population growth. Without status in mass society, people reject it [existing religion] and find virtue in the necessity of their condition. Holiness was

and is to be found in asceticism and rejection of worldliness" (Gordon, pp.79-80).

d) New Thought (1890-1930) who found it necessary to turn from orthodox teachings in order to pursue spiritual healing.

e) The African American Faith Movement (1970-present) where "Metaphysical gospels spread in the urban North, as leaders like Sweet Daddy Grace, Prophet James Jones, Father Divine, and, later, Reverend Ike promised to smooth the rough edges of capitalism and industrialism with theologies that countered poverty, disease, and despair" (Bowler 84-85). "Pastor John Walton, the senior pastor of the Victorious Faith Center, relished the memory of his realization that 'traditional' Christianity was dead... Reared in a black Baptist church in Durham, North Carolina, he had known nothing of miracles and spiritual gifts... Traditional Christianity, for all its Bible reading, praising, and community support, had failed. (Bowler, p.87)

It may be that some or most of these groups formulated "otherworldly" messages of hope, but not all. The Christian Movement was established on new political understanding and New Thought was established on new understandings of psychology, medicine and the mind. What limited their ability to benefit from the benefits offered by incumbent providers were primarily social, political, economic and health issues. In each case, they were willing to "exchange with the gods" but were unable to do so, not because the message was liberal, but because the social, political, cultural and economic conditions prevented them from doing so. They were limited, not by secularized religion, but by time, money and education.

An opportunity exists to simplify the delivery of religious benefits and thereby make them available to those with limited money, education or time.

What are opportunities that simplify the delivery of religious benefits? Finke and Stark focus on three opportunities that emerged during the First and Second Great Awakenings:

> *Itinerant preaching pioneered by George Whitefield.* Whitefield demonstrated the immense market opportunity for more robust, less secularized religion In doing so he provided the model for itinerancy. If you have no pulpit, what does it matter? Preach anywhere people will gather. Soon scores, then hundreds, and eventually thousands followed in his footsteps, ministering to the nation (53).
>
> *Revival meetings pioneered by Charles Finney.* Finney well knew that to remain healthy, all organizations, be they churches, fraternal lodges, or corporations, must have some means for periodically renewing commitment and that the key to such renewal lies in a sudden intensification of

> the perceived benefits of belonging ... However, although all organizations need renewals or revivals of member commitment, it also is true that these must be episodic. People can't stay excited indefinitely. Here too the itinerant revivalist offers the perfect solution. When he or she leaves, the revival is concluded, leaving the local pastors to consolidate the gains made during the revival (92).
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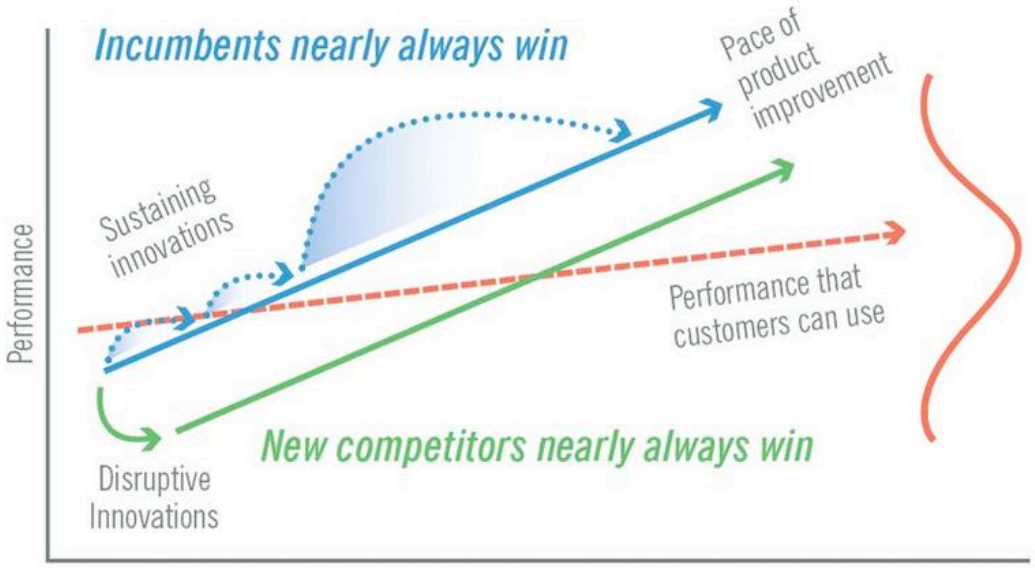
> *Camp meetings pioneered by Methodist Circuit Riders.* Those who came knew what to expect (many had been to camp meetings before) and if they responded with unusual enthusiasm this could be explained by their lack of regular access to worship services and by the duration of the event... American farmers lived on their individual farmsteads. Even in the more densely settled areas, the next farm was a goodly distance away. It was hard to sustain rural churches because so few families lived within reasonable travel distance of one another. Similarly, many farm families suffered greatly from loneliness. Wives often went months without seeing another adult woman and their husbands seldom saw other adult men. (96).

What is the opportunity that gives rise to the formation of sects? *It's the simplicity of delivery.* Here is what disruption theory has to say.

In the model shown below, the normal curve to the right (which is turned on it's side) depicts the desire of people for simplicity in the religious explanations they receive. Those who wish simpler explanations are at the right end of this curve (lower performance) and those who wish more complex explanations are located at the left end of the curve (higher performance).

Incumbent providers (churches and their ministers) tend to become more sophisticated over time and the explanations they offer (especially if they are seminary trained) will become more complex. That shift is characterized in the rise of the blue line (to higher performance). Eventually their explanations they offer become too complex for the average religious consumer, which leads to a loss of enthusiasm for the message.

This process is the equivalent of competing manufacturers of electronic devices adding more and more buttons and controls into their offering until a point is reached where the average consumer is unable to understand or use the device at all.



Source: Clayton Christensen, *The Innovators Solution*

A "disruptive" innovation occurs when an opportunity exists to simplify the delivery in some way that satisfies the consumer with a less sophisticated, but easier to use product or service. That innovation is depicted in the graph by the downward shift to the green line and the leveling of the dotted-red line, which is directed at the average needs of the consumer.

Stark and Finke support this disruptive theory assertion that the opportunity rests in a more simple delivery of religious benefits. Speaking to the nature of those benefits, they write in *Acts of Faith* that religious benefits have to do with superior explanations of how one exchanges with the gods to satisfy unmet needs: "Religion consists of very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods" (91). "Religion is first and foremost an intellectual product, and ideas are its truly fundamental aspect" (92). "It follows from our definition of religion that the primary religious question is: What do the gods want?" (96). They describe in *The Churching of America* that the opportunity from 1800-1850 for the Baptists and Methodists was a simpler explanation of what the gods want:

> The education and background of the ministers influenced the message they brought and how they delivered it. Perhaps the contrast between faith and theology best conveys the vivid differences between 'called' and educated clergy. Does the religious message address matters of faith that are directly relevant to the experience and concerns of the laity, or is it a discourse on abstruse theological matters? Put another way, is it a message of conversion or a message of erudition? … Neither the Baptists nor the Methodists set forth their confessions in complex theological writing that required extensive

> instruction or teaching... It is not only content that is involved here, but the style of delivery – Marshall McLuhan might have suggested that in some ways the minister was the message (84-86).

However in the *Religious Choices* chapter in *Acts of Faith* Stark and Finke seem to discount somewhat the importance of religious explanation, at least as it contributes to the likelihood of religious conversion. They write, "most people, most of the time, have accumulated a network of relationships that they regard as valuable. When people base their religious choices on the preferences of those to whom they are attached, they conserve (maximize) their social capital" (118-119). Stark and Finke acknowledge the role of belief, however they assert that belief is dependent on social attachments in the process of religious choices and conversion. They write,

> Thus far we have minimized the importance of religious factors in religious choices in order to emphasize the importance of social capital. But, in fact, selecting a religion is not exactly like joining a secular club. Belief is the central aspect of religion, and therefore one's beliefs do matter, but in a more subtle fashion than has been assumed by those who attribute religious choices to doctrinal appeal (120).

So what is the real foundation of the opportunity for religious sects? Is it an opportunity to simplify the message or is it primarily social relationships and strong social attachments? Here are the "opportunities" that were used by various movements in their development as sects:

a) The "popular style and appeal" of the New Light Separatist Baptists in Virginia who's "celebration of the Lord's Supper frequently followed baptism and was a further open enactment of closed community" (Isaac167).

b) The call for "the abolition of organizational restraints of any kind" by the Christian movement so that people could "discover the self-evident message of the Bible without any mediation from creeds, theologians, or clergymen not of their own choosing (Hatch 77, 81).

c) The advocacy by evangelist Phoebe Palmer of the Holiness movement that sanctification is available and obtainable immediately, that it does not require a lifetime of holy living, but is rather available is "an immediate possibility of any believer ... no matter how new in the faith, to seek it as the instantaneous gift of the Holy Spirit" (Gordon 79).

d) The emergence of the publishing industry which was used by the New Thought movement to penetrate the American market by use of tracts, magazines and books with a simple message of health, prosperity and peace of mind; eschewing difficult issues of evil and the social difficulties of maintaining a church.

e) "The drama of health and healing" used by the African American Faith Movement which encouraged believers to "use their bodies, alongside their finances, as the testing ground for their faith (Bowler 84).

f) The simple, four-square prosperity gospel delivered in the Sunday "celebrations" of Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church for "casting a wide net" for potential followers and for minimizing the complexity of maintaining small group interaction.

g) The simple message of concern for the spiritual seeker offered by Oprah in her Sacred Sunday broadcasts.

We may assume that the mass gathering of people drawn by George Whitefield had little or no social attachments and that the same would be true of those who came to revival meetings in urban areas. While Methodist camp meetings and the "closed community" of New Light Separatist Baptists certainly had a quality of social adhesiveness, as do the Mormons and members of the Unification church (described in the chapter by Stark and Finke), it remains to be established that the primary opportunity for sects is the formation of social attachments. It may be that one's social attachments functions to support or diminish one's receptivity to a religious explanation (and Stark and Finke would likely agree) rather than being the primary opportunity itself.

Viral organizations emerge that replicate and scale, delivering religious benefits without being immediately noticed or challenged

The lifespan of a sect begins at a time when they are not noticed by incumbent providers, followed by a period in which they are noticed but considered harmless, followed then by the recognition of their harmful potential, which then leads to a challenge by incumbent providers. As an example, Finke and Stark highlight the early Methodists in England:

> Having begun as a society within the Church of England, the Methodists' rigorous behavioral standards, their itinerant preachers, and even their use of uneducated lay leadership and female exhorters were initially tolerated by the established Church. By the 1790s, however, the Methodists were denied the right to call themselves the 'Church of England at prayer.' They were now classified as religious dissenters who faced increasing scrutiny from the state (67).

But, by the time they are recognized as harmful, successful sects have replicated to a scale where the incumbent providers can not mount an effective challenge. Finke and Stark write,

> Even in new England the mainline denominations had crumbled badly in the face of aggressive Methodist and Baptist activity. Only in Connecticut did the old mainline still outnumber the upstarts. Outside New England, it wasn't even close... The Methodists could function everywhere – on the

> frontier or in the city. The Congregationalists could function only in “civilized” areas, but even there they could not hold their own against the upstarts. In fact they could not even withstand Methodist and Baptist competition on their home ground of New England (72).

Once the incumbent providers recognize sects as having penetrated the existing religious marketplace, they are often unable to respond. Finke and Stark provide an example of this in their discussion of the American Home Missionary Society, an association of Congregational, Presbyterian and other mainline protestant churches, which had the mission to "convert the godless frontier." The mainline protestant leaders, aware that no one would contribute funds if they were aware of the prevalence of Methodists and Baptists in the frontier, had to "deceive the public about why funds were needed and who received them."

Why is it so difficult for incumbent providers to recognize the harmful effects of upstart sects? The answer is is found in Finke and Stark's quotation by Lyman Beecher, a prominent Congregational minister: "Illiterate men have never been the chosen instruments of God to build up his cause" (59). Not being instruments of God meant, for Beecher, that they weren't true ministers and therefore could not seriously challenge the ministry of the Congregational church. Christensen's disruption theory postulates that incumbent providers regard the upstart sects as competing in a different market. They may be recognized as a nuisance, but not as a direct competitor. Refer back to the preceding section which said "Incumbent providers (churches and their ministers) tend to become more sophisticated over time and the explanations they offer (especially if they are seminary trained) will become more complex." Beecher, who later became the president of Lane Theological Seminary, could not recognize that "ignorant and unlettered" men who were "utterly unacquainted with theology" were in fact ministers who provided religious benefits and who would directly challenge the Congregationalists.

Let us compare this "lifespan of a sect" to the sect-to-church process as Finke and Stark. They write,

> [Churches and sects] are best conceptualized as the end points of a continuum made of of the *degree of tension* between religious organizations and their sociocultural environments. To the degree that a religious body sustains beliefs and practices at variance with the surrounding environment, tension will exist between its members and outsiders.... *Churches* are religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environments. *Sects* are religious bodies in a relatively high state of tension with their environments.... The sect-church process concerns the fact that new religious bodies nearly always begin as sects and that, if they are successful in attracting a substantial following, they will, over time, almost inevitably be gradually transformed

> into churches... As this occurs a religious body will become increasingly less able to satisfy members who desire a high-tension version of faith... The result is an endless cycle of sect formation, transformation, schism, and rebirth. The many workings of this cycle account for the countless varieties of each of the major faiths (43-45).

At least in terms of sect formation, the Christensen model directly challenges the Stark-Finke model in how a sect is conceived. A sect, according to the disruption model developed by Christensen, is able to scale and replicate as long as it is not noticed or, if it is noticed, it is perceived as being harmless. But a sect, according to sect-to-church process developed buy Stark and Finke, is able to attract members precisely because it is not only noticed, but it is also perceived as being in a state of high tension with the sociocultural environment.

So what is a sect? Is it an unnoticed novel religious movement, able to surreptitiously penetrate and replicate before it is challenged? Or is it a religious movement that grows by virtue of it's recognizable tension with the incumbent leaders? Let us look at the nature and visibility of several significant new religious movements.

a) The New Light Separatist Baptists in Virginia (1760s - 1770s) which operated where "the intrusive movement of radical religious dissent did not initially take hold in places [southern and Piedmont Virginia] where it would have had to oppose a mature establishment in full strength [the Tidewater]" (Isaac 164).

b) The Christian Movement (1790-1815) which were "a motley crew with few common characteristics" that chose innocent sounding names such as "Christian" or "Disciples of Christ" and who operated as a "loose network" and who "all moved independently within a 15-year span" (Hatch 69).

c) The Holiness Movement in America (1850-1890) which had been greatly influenced by the sanctification of Charles Finney, a non-Methodist. "Because of his non-Methodist background, Finney had a great effect on other soon-to-be Holiness greats ... but Finney had raised the issue for the whole Methodist Episcopal church, and Methodists could no longer ignore their heritage" (Gordon 80).

d) The Unity Church of Practical Christianity which, despite having several dozens of churches and centers throughout the United States and millions of subscribers to its periodicals, was able to avoid detection by the United States Census of American Religious Bodies from 1906 through 1936. They also avoided detection by Finke and Stark, who defend the accuracy of the census data (16) and who seem to dismiss any "new age" religious movements (239).

e) The African American Faith Movement (1970-present), also known as "new blade charismatics," which "flourished inside as well as outside of denominational structures" because the "autonomy imbedded in Baptist and Pentecostal ecclesiology" allowed them to preach their "controversial prosperity gospel from denominational pulpits" (Bowler 86.)

These five examples, along with the previous quotation from Lyman Beecher, indicate that sects are successful to the extent that they can infiltrate and replicate inside the existing sociocultural environment. This requires being unnoticed or unchallenged. After becoming successful, they may encounter significant challenge and find themselves in a state of high tension with society, but tension seems to be a byproduct of sect formation, not a fundamental characteristic of sects. Furthermore, Finke and Stark offer no compelling explanation as to why the "high tension" nature of certain sects leads to their success, other than that there may be people in a pluralistic society who desire such religion (45).

Finke and Stark challenge Martin Marty and others for focusing their research on the history of religious ideas, which they say, "always turns into an historical account of the march toward liberalism" (7). Be that as it may, the focus of Finke and Stark on the organizational aspects of religious history leads them to a similar mistaken understanding of sects. The Christiansen theory, as applied to sect formation, indicates that sects are most effective before they become noticed, that is, before they become well organized at all. Finke and Stark, who have limited their research to organizations, have missed the significance of Unity School of Practical Christianity (as discussed above), but also Unity's role in the development of the Pentecostal movement, the ministry of Joel Osteen and the influence of Oprah Winfrey in todays religious marketplace.

To illustrate how easily sects can be unnoticed and dismissed, note the similar tone of disdain and smugness, found in the quotation by Lyman Beecher regarding Methodists and Baptists, and the following assessment by Finke and Stark regarding the the New Age movement,

> We believe that most people who can in any way be said to have responded to the New Age movement regard it as more of an amusement than a religion. Most are no more than casual dabblers in the various pesudoscientifc activities and techniques promoted as New Age. Indeed, we suspect that for all but a handful of committed participants, the New Age movement is an audience cult and reflect interest levels on par with reading astrology columns (239).

The movement is able to provide significant religious benefits without the requiring substantial secular costs,

organizational control or social status

Sects are able to "live off the land" by procuring and utilizing resources that are unusable or unappreciated by churches. Incumbent providers (churches) are unable to recognize the value of these resources because they are free – free from organizational control, either by pay, by bureaucracy or social norms and expectations. Hence, the religious benefits they provide are also not recognized (and often disparaged, as will be discussed in the next section). Finke and Stark elaborate on these characteristics in their section entitled "Why the Upstarts Won":

> *Little organizational control.* In this era the actual pastoral functions were performed in most Methodist churches by unpaid, local 'amateurs' just like those serving the Baptist congregations up the road. A professional clergy had not yet centralized control of the Methodist organization (73).
>
> *Disregard for social status.* Unlike the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian ministers who typically were of genteel origin and were highly trained and well educated, the Baptist and Methodist clergy were of the people. They had little education, received little if any pay, spoke in the vernacular, and preached from the heart (76).
>
> *Low secular costs.* The Baptist typically paid their preachers nothing at all; most earned their living with a plow just like other members of the congregation. Local Methodist church leaders also received little, if any, pay. Even the circuit riders, who faced constant danger from the elements and spent most of their days in the saddle, received only the most meager wages (82).

But Finke and Stark extend their analysis in a section entitled "Why the Upstarts Win, *Again*." They argue that it is high levels of religious commitment that produce the resources that are necessary for sects to flourish. They find these high levels of commitment in conservative denominations that impose high membership costs and who maintain exclusive membership criteria. Finke and Stark maintain that these characteristics discourage "free riders" who would draw down confidence in the beliefs and practices of the sect and therefore serve to raise the group's "collective goods." They write, "Our own work and the work of Laurence Iannoccone has provoked heated reactions when we suggest that the high demands and distinctive boundaries of sect groups serve to generate the resources needed for growth." (249-250).

It may be accurate that high levels of religious commitment actually do produce sufficient resources that are necessary for sects to flourish. But in *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke state that religious commitment is not just a function of high membership costs and exclusive membership criteria. Religious commitment, which they define as "the degree to which humans promptly meet their terms of exchange with a god or gods as specified by the explanations of a given religious

organization" (103) is also affected by seven factors that affect religious confidence (107-113) and by social and religious attachments (118-121).

None of these additional factors are tied to conservative denominations by Stark and Finke in *Acts of Faith* and they are not explicitly mentioned in *The Churching of America*. The seven additional factors sited in Acts of Faith are the extent to which others in the group express their own confidence, the extent to which one participates in religious rituals, the experience one has in prayer, the degree that miracles are attributed to the religious practice taught by the group, the degree that people have mystical experiences, the extent that ministers themselves display levels of commitment and the stability of the group (107-113). The social and religious attachments that affect religious commitment are based on studies which show that, as people continue to associate with a religious group, they make social investments in the form of personal attachments and religious investments in the form of learning the group's religious culture. These investments, once made, wind up committing the individual to the process of learning how to interact with God in accordance with the group's teachings and practices (121).

Notwithstanding the logical appeal of the importance of eliminating free riders in producing religious commitment, what about these other factors? Do conservative religious groups have exclusive claim to ritual, prayer, miracles, mystical experiences, committed clergy and stable social groups? Are strong social attachments only found in conservative denominations? Is it true that religious zeal and intimate fellowship are dependent on a costly faith? What other factors may contribute to high levels of commitment that produce resources? Here are examples from the several religious sects we have been discussing.

The appeal of the New Light Separatist Baptists in Virginia that was

> an impulse toward a tighter, more effective system of values to be established and maintained within the ranks of the common folk ... as a popular response to a mounting sense of social disorder (Isaac 168).

The Christian Movement, which produced several powerful women preachers:

> Several women became powerful preachers within the Christian Connection. Nancy Gove Cram, who died in 1815 after less than four years of active preaching, created a remarkable stir in frontier New York. ... An equally bold itinerant was Nancy Towle, a young New Hampshire schoolteacher. ... Like Elias Smith and Lorenzo Dow, Towle was a relentless preacher on the move. She estimated she had traveled fifteen thousand miles in a decade of preaching. Her three hundred-page memoir, published in 1833, chronicled her encounters with a score of women preachers among Christians, Freewill Baptists, Universalists, and Methodists and called for more female laborers in the "Gospel harvestfield." ... In the first edition of his autobiography, published in 1812, [Joseph] Thomas recounted the 'uncontrollable power' of popular religion in the West. In Monroe County, Kentucky, he was amazed by the preaching exploits of a woman: "I was no little astonished at her flow of speech and consistency of ideas." The woman was probably Nancy Mulkey, the daughter of Christian preacher John Mulkey. Another account described her as 'a shouter': "She would arise with zeal on her countenance and fire in her eyes, and with a pathos that showed the depth of her soul, and would pour forth an exhortation lasting from five to fifteen minutes, which neither father nor brother could equal, and which brought tears from every feeling eye. She was remarkable in this respect." (Hatch 78-80)

The leadership of Phoebe Palmer in The Holiness Movement in America, who

> toured the country, establishing centers of the sanctified wherever [she] preached. It was not long until ministers rallied to the cause ... A new generation of preachers came along ready to make their mark as ministers of the Holiness gospel... The movement grew and developed, and, like the Finney revival, there was little or no fear of schism (Gordon 80).

The feminist teaching of Emma Curtis Hopkins, regarded by many as the founder of New Thought, who believed that "the divine Mother was conjoined to both the Spirit and ministry of God in a mystical statement that was also a declaration about service and about Hopkins' conviction that any adequate idea of God required the feminine" (Albanese 319).

The Reverend Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter (1935-2009), known to the world as Reverend Ike, who

> gave the African American prosperity gospel its first national platform. A southerner who migrated to the black urban North and who blended pentecostal and spiritualist traditions, Reverend Ike's ministry echoed many of the metaphysical prosperity theologies of the first half of the twentieth century" (Bowler 85).

Stark and Finke are certainly correct that, in terms of organization growth, "the upstarts won" in the American religious economy between 1776 and 1850. But their analysis may be challenged by a feminist perspective on a number of points. First, we must distinguish between sect formation and the ultimate ability of a sect to emerge as an established church denomination. The several examples given above may lead to question whether any movement led by women or non-whites could ever succeed in a social-cultural environment dominated by white males. Second, a feminist perspective

might conclude that disempowered people, such as women and non-whites, form sects precisely because they have no secular resources, no organizational control and no significant social status. Finally, in light of the current growth of the "spiritual but not religious" segment, a feminist scholar might question whether "significant religious benefits" are not being provided by the sacred feminine of New Age, the soft pitch, wide-net and comforting evangelism of Joel Osteen or the "everyday epiphanies of being Oprah and being in Oprah's world" (Lofton, back cover).

Because the simplified opportunity does not provide social or secular benefits, incumbent providers react with disdain, withdrawal and even greater complexity, which then broadens the opportunity for the movement to grow

Finke and Stark confirm this statement on a number of points. First, they confirm that sects are disparaged by their mainstream competitors,

> The leaders of the colonial mainline deemed the upstarts' lack of education to be appalling. At the opening of Andover Seminary, Timothy Dwight squared off against anyone who would support such clergy: “While they insist, equally with others, that their property shall be managed by skillful agents, their judicial causes directed by learned advocates, and their children, when sick, attended by able physicians; they were satisfied to place their Religion, their souls, and their salvation, under the guidance of quackery” (78).

Second, they provide substantial evidence that the disparagement was largely rooted in social differences between clergy and their congregants and the desire:

> Genteel social origins, combined with advanced levels of education, often increased the social distance between the minister and many of his congregants, to say nothing of the barriers raised between clergy and the vast unchurched population. As democratic convictions grew, many Americans began to detect objectionable attitudes among the highly educated, often regarding them as snobs who thought they were better than ordinary folks. This was particularly true in the growing frontier areas and in the South, where many people retained bitter memories of having been looked down upon by the educated and salaried clergy of the established churches of the past (79).

Third, Finke and Stark confirm that even though incumbent providers recognize the success of the new sects, they are unable to adopt their methods,

> It was abundantly clear to all parties that enthusiastic preaching, revival campaigns, and camp meetings were potent methods for mobilizing religious participation. This it was well known, ever among professors at Harvard and Yale, that the Baptists had benefited greatly from Whitefield's crusade, and even the popular press recognized the rapid growth of Methodism following the Revolution. Moreover, because 94 percent of Americans lived on farms in 1800, the camp meeting was even more important for church growth than were urban revivals. None of this, however, prompted the colonial mainline denominations to adopt similar 'marketing' tactics. To the contrary, their leading lights condemned all such methods while ridiculing Methodist and Baptist preachers as ignorant, and even dangerous, fools

(106-7).

Fourth, Finke and Stark confirm that incumbent providers will actually distance themselves from the new sects and their methods, which provides a greater opportunity for the new sect to grow,

> Quoting Peter Cartwright regarding a Presbyterian minister who opposed Cartwright's plan to form a church within the "bounds of his congregation", "[The Presbyterian minister] said that ... if we raised a society it would diminish his membership, and cut off his support." The local minister preached against Cartwright for three Sundays, but, Cartwright said, "Public opinion was in my favor and many more of this preacher's members came and joined us, and the minister sold out and moved to Missouri, and before the year was out I had peaceable possession of his brick church" (64).

> Quoting Baron Stone regarding the Presbyterian response to camp meetings, "At first they were pleased to see the Methodists and Baptists so cordially uniting with us in worship, no doubt hoping that they would become Presbyterians. But as soon as they saw these sects drawing away disciples after them, they raised the tocsin of alarm -- the Confession is in danger! -- the church is in danger! ... Thus did the old mainline cease participating in the camp meetings, thereby surrendering all of the pulpit time to the Baptists and the Methodists" (108, 112).

At this point, we must consider how Finke and Stark characterize the withdrawal of incumbent providers. Finke and Stark's analysis begins with their observation that it is liberalized theology that leads to the decline in denominational membership:

> We will argue that the primary market weakness that has caused the failure of many denominations, and the impending failure of many more, is precisely a matter of doctrinal content, or the lack of it. That is, we will repeatedly suggest that as denominations have modernized their doctrines and embraced temporal values, they have gone into decline (9).

The authors state that "modernized" doctrines and "temporal" values are the result of increased affluence and educated clergy. They explain that it is affluence and the related desire for social status that drives the desire for an educated clergy,

> "Why had this occurred? In part because of the expansion of higher education in the nation as a whole. But, in our judgment, in greater part because the larger, more affluent Methodist congregations desired educated clergy on a social par with the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, and the clergy themselves desired the social status and increased pay that a well-educated clergy could obtain (165).

Once affluence has driven the demand for an educated clergy, a number of problems emerge, according to Finke and Stark:

> *Modernized doctrines.* It may be that secularization ensues whenever religion is placed within a formal academic setting, for scholars seem unable to resist attempting to explain mysteries and miracles and, failing that, to exclude them ... That is, by creating a God incapable of having purposes or of doing

> anything, all mysteries are solved by exclusion and all miracles are dismissed as illusions (47).
>
> *Lazy clergy.* One Connecticut dissenter provided this succinct critique: 'Preachers that will not preach without a salary found for them by law are hirelings who seek the fleece and not the flock.' The highly educated minister might have enhanced he 'respectability' of religion, but he did little to gather the flock (80).
>
> *Unavailable clergy.* The uneducated and often unpaid clergy of the Baptists and Methodists made it possible to sustain congregations anywhere a few people could gather, for it was the pursuit of souls, not material comfort, that drove their clergy forth (84).
>
> *Ineffective preaching.* In 1872 [a Methodist itinerant] argued that with the “old circuit system ... we could repeat the discourse till we had perfected it; but now, preaching to the same congregation every time, we must have a new subject, which requires a stock of knowledge to be laid in beforehand or extraordinary genius" (165-6).

Of these four items listed, it is the first, modernized doctrines, that Finke and Stark have identified as the "primary market weakness that has caused the failure of many denominations." Their argument is that clergy who are educated and highly paid are motivated by the desire to grow their congregations. Such clergy believe that liberalized religious messages will appeal to a broader segment of the population. However it inevitably leads to a diminished following because it drives out those who are more highly motivated by religious concerns. The authors write,

> To the extent that tendencies toward greater tension are suppressed, the average level of commitment of a religious group will be reduced by the departure or expulsion of the most highly committed members (167).

This explanation, that the departure of more highly committed members leads to a decline in congregational membership is a bit convoluted, for a number of reasons.

First, the disruption model from Christensen would indicate that the fundamental problem is one of *complexity* of the message, not *worldliness* of the message. They write,

> Does the religious message address matters of faith that are directly relevant to the experience and concerns of the laity, or is it a discourse on abstruse theological matters? Put another way, is it a message of conversion or a message of erudition? (85)

If, as Stark and Finke assert, that the religion concerns itself with how to "exchange with the gods" then a successful religion is one that provides for that exchange in the most straight-forward way. In an increasingly post-modernist era, it may be that the most straight-forward way to engage the gods is a less doctrinal, more scientific (even if pseudo-scientific) way.

Second, as the authors note, many sects are so much in tension with society that they inhibit their own growth. In *Acts of Faith* they explain that personal attachments and social capital can inhibit people to convert or affiliate with other faiths (118-125). In such cases, a liberalized message may serve to broaden the sect's appeal while still maintaining the integrity of its religious explanation.

Third, Stark and Finke, in "Religious Group Dynamics" in *Acts of Faith*, associate religious commitment to the strength of social attachments, which, they claim, is related to congregational vitality. But, as explained in the above section on viral organizations, the authors have chosen to focus on organizational aspects of religious movements, rather than their impact on culture and ideas. Many sects however, like New Thought and New Age, and new media evangelical organizations, such as Joel Osteen's Lakeway Church and Oprah Winfrey's Sacred Sunday programming, operate with minimal organization, low levels of religious commitment and few social attachments. They are, however, highly impactful without being recognized or challenged. Such groups, which the authors characterize as "audience cults" are sects, as defined by this paper.

Conclusion

Why do sects often become churches? "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you" is a common anecdote about how challengers are often perceived by incumbents. Sects, like business start-ups, often seem to be harmless until they "move up the food chain" and begin to challenge incumbents. This is depicted in Christensen's Disruptive Innovation model as the green line. The fact that it also has an upward slope indicates that a sect will, over time, tend to provide more sophisticated products and services and will eventually become a church.

This process, which Stark and Finke describe in "A Theoretical Model of Religious Economies," is based on the concept of market niches. They write that "Niches are market segments of potential adherents sharing particular religious preferences (needs, tastes, and expectations)" (195). They place these niches on a normally distributed curve according to the degree of tension with the socio-cultural environment. In the center of this curve are moderate and conservative niches, which are flanked by liberal and strict niches and they are then flanked by ultra-liberal and ultra-strict niches at the low and high end tails (197).

Having segmented and sorted the players in the religious marketplace, the authors then describe what they call the "supply-side movement: the sect-to-church process." Quoting H. Richard Niebuhr, they observe that "over time, the more successful sects tend to be transformed into churches" which is a shift from right to left on the curve, depicting a shift from strictness to liberalness in socio-cultural tension. According to Stark and Finke, Niebuhr believed that this shift is caused by a shift in the social class composition of the sect. In other words, Niebuhr believed that as the membership of the sect moves from lower to higher class there is a shift in demand (for more worldly religious explanations) that is followed by a shift in supply (by more sophisticated and worldly theologies). Stark and Finke challenge Niebuhr's view in stating that the shift does not occur in the social class of the sect's members, but rather in the leadership of the sect, specifically in the preferences of those who are privileged and of the clergy. Because "the privileged pay a higher cost for strictness" and because they have power, this shift is really a shift in supply (by the privileged and the clergy) which is not matched by any shift in demand (by the membership) (293-4).

This sect-to-church theory is confirmed by Christensen's model of disruption. According to Christiansen, the privileged consumers in any market have the *time, money and education* to utilize more sophisticated products and services. For example, in airline transportation, it is the wealthy who desire first class seating and accommodations. In the electronics industry, it is highly educated consumers who desire additional features, which lead to the proliferation of additional buttons on remote control devices. It follows that, in the religious marketplace, where those with time, money and education have greater access to "natural means" of "gaining rewards" the "exchange with a god or gods" will become more sophisticated and complex. Finke and Stark write,

> In time, however, successful sects come to be dominated by the more successful – those for whom life's pleasures are options. And thus begins the gradual accommodation to the world. Niebuhr explained, “Rarely does a second generation hold the convictions it has inherited with fervor equal to that of its fathers ... As generation succeeds generation, the isolation of the [sect] from the world becomes more difficult” (46).

Stark and Finke claim that it is secular interests and "worldliness" that drive this process. If we may equate “worldliness” with “complexity” then the Stark and Finke theory is confirmed by the Christensen model, which holds that incumbent providers soon become dependent on selling high margin products and services. Given the opportunity to sell either a first-class seat or a coach seat, a typical airline executive will devote resources to supplying first-class seating. Similarly, electronic devices that have the most buttons on their remote control seem to command a higher price in the

electronics marketplace. This dynamic is no different in the marketplace for religious benefits, where ecclesiastics will tend to offer religious explanations more attractive to those who have time, money and education and who rent pews and who provide money for building churches. However, if “worldliness” is equated with “liberalism” then it seems that Stark and Finke have developed a theory that is not supported by the Christiansen model.

So Stark and Finke's claim that the sect-to-church process leads to declining market share is also confirmed by the Christensen model. In churches, as well as airlines and televisions, the incumbents compete for those consumers who provide higher margins, even if those consumers are in a smaller market niche. As incumbent providers withdraw from the large market niches, an opportunity is opened to emerging sects to broaden their following. It is, as they claim, a "rational choice."

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