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Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models

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Abstract

This paper draws upon numerous ethnographies to outline three fundamental models of how novel religious ideas are generated and made social. The *psychopathology model* describes cult innovation as the result of individual psychopathology that finds successful social expression by

providing apparent solutions to common intractable human problems. The entrepreneur model states that cultfounders consciously develop new systems of religious belief and practice to obtain the rewards that followers may shower upon them. The *subculture-evolution model* explains that cults are the expression of novel social systems, composed of intimately interacting individuals who achieve radical cultural developments through a series of many small steps. The models are shown to be compatible because each uses two basic concepts: *compensators* and *social exchange*.

Compensators are somewhat satisfying articles of faith, postulations that strongly desired rewards will be obtained in the distant future or in some other unverifiable context. Magical and religious cults exist through the social exchange of compensators. The models explain how novel packages of compensators are invented and assembled to form new cults.

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