

Prairie U-U Society, November 19, 2000

“Religions as Rackets”

Chalice: to P. T. Barnum, one of us (and worth a service)

Children’s Song: “That’s a Lot of Applesauce”

(E.g., “Little Miss Muffet/ Sat on a Tuffet/ Eating her curds and whey/
Along came a spider/ And sat down beside her/ and
That’s a lot of applesauce, applesauce, applesauce,
That’s a lot of applesauce, You’re fooling us.”)

Other examples? “Little Jack Horner....” “Jack and Jill....” Or?

Song: “Wizard Oil”

Religions as Rackets:

1. For many years I taught a course in the sociology of work. The major student assignment was to do a sociological analysis of an occupation, and over the years I developed some advice about how to do so. One of the items was, “Think like a crook.” This doesn’t mean to be cynical. For example, I’m quite confident that most lawyers are quite ethical, but one cannot understand the organization of the legal profession or the careers of lawyers without paying attention to the very many ways in which they may betray the interests of their clients or the larger society.

So today I want you to think about how you would make a lot of money out of religion. Many of you may have thought about it already. You will have time later in the service to present them; please save your comments and questions until then, unless you know more than I do about the specific examples I discuss.

[By the way, since you’re here I don’t think you’re likely to be seriously thinking about being a religious crook. It’s very hard to imagine anyone using religion to take money out of the purses of the people here; just ask the Finance Committee.]

2. Religions and religious practitioners clearly produce what people value, and because of this they or their imitators are often in a position to exploit others. Religion is often closely linked with magic, and religious practitioners are sought to help in purely secular activities, especially with illness, but also things like passing exams in college. Shamans in preliterate societies are mostly valued for their magic. But religions produce more specifically religious benefits. Everyone dies, and magic doesn’t prevent it, but religion can help. Religions might provide the conviction of eternal life—much of it is wish-fulfilling fantasies. Or they might provide Salvation from sin. Or, in this world, religions might provide union with the divine, or in a more humdrum way, peace of mind.

The promise is there. If you’re a good religious faker, you can make the promises and get paid, even if you don’t deliver.

3. Shamans in preliterate societies often use clever tricks and sleight of hand, “magic” in the sense of our parlor magic, to impress their clients. They are often fakers, in a way. But—and it’s an important but—when a shaman gets sick, he or she is likely to consult another shaman. They do believe in their techniques.

So I’m not sure that the title of this program is accurate. Not only shamans, but other religious practitioners who practice fakery, can be sincere, in their fashion. The writers of the Gospels put words into the mouths of Jesus and the Apostles 300 years after the fact, but those forgers probably believed they were the words of God.

For those of us who aren’t Mormons, Joseph Smith’s story about finding the golden tablets with their inscriptions is preposterous, and the whole book was made up by Smith. But Smith too might have believed he heard God. It’s just that a little deception might be needed to persuade other people. God needs a little help in getting his message across.

And this might be true of the more recent Televangelists. Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jerry Swaggert, were certainly hypocrites, but they probably still engage in prayer.

And I suppose the bishops of the Roman Catholic church who sold indulgences in the 15th century were likely to buy some for themselves as well.

So it’s not so easy to characterize religions as rackets. When a doctor or a lawyer betrays his clients or the community, it’s fairly easy to tell. But if religions provide illusions, if the givers believe in the illusions, and if the recipients accept them, where’s the fraud?

4. Shamans were not part of a larger formal organization. They were solo operators in a social milieu that understood their work and valued it. Contemporary Televangelists have tried to construct bigger institutions, like colleges; Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson are good examples. But I think most have been like shamans.

I think real rackets require more complex organization. Among other things, one needs: First, hierarchies of rank, and centralized authority; Second, secrets that can be withheld from others; Third, ways of maintaining boundaries around their communities, distinguishing sheep from goats. And fourth, conflict: if you know of enemies in your environment, it’s easier to justify centralized authority and maintaining secrets, and it makes it possible to expel heretics and witches. It may be necessary to invent enemies.

Racketeers need ways of legitimizing fraud, what some sociologists call “techniques of neutralization.” Religion is a superb source of these techniques of neutralization. If you are the children of light, and are threatened by the children of darkness, then anything goes in the struggle. The children of darkness are “fair game,” to use the words of L. Ron Hubbard.

5. The Roman Catholic church provides good examples of religious rackets. It has been a highly centralized and hierarchical organization, it has its secrets, and it has seen itself as threatened by enemies, heretics within and people like the Muslims without.

In the 15th century, conditions made it easy to justify the sale of Indulgences. For a sum of money, one could shorten the period in Purgatory of one’s self or one’s loved ones.

{The sale of Indulgences was one of the major causes of Martin Luther’s Reformation, and the Catholic Church doesn’t sell them anymore. }

Today the Roman Catholic church does seem to me to be selling the dissolution of

marriage. The marriage laws of the Church are bizarre: Nothing that happens after the marriage can dissolve it. Your husband may be unfaithful, may beat you and break your bones, and may desert you, but the marriage is eternal. However, if at the time of marriage certain conditions are met, the marriage may be annulled, the Church will declare it never existed, even if it has existed for decades. There are several ground for annulment.

{If your husband was already married at the time of your marriage, or if he wasn't baptized, you can get your marriage annulled. Or if there is what is called "Lack of due discretion"—if a partner lacked the maturity of judgment necessary to understand and fulfill the responsibilities of marriage—it can be annulled. That's the biggest loophole, the one Ted Kennedy used to split from Joan.}

I have no evidence whatever that the Church sells annulments, and some good sources I've looked at deny the possibility. But the process is highly secretive, and highly centralized. Most appeals for annulment are denied, and many are heard in Rome. But at least three members of the Kennedy clan have received annulments, and there are other celebrated cases among the rich and powerful. Pope John Paul and his subordinates may not feel they sell annulments, but they are experts in the ways of rationalizing this kind of deviance.

6. Now I would like to turn to my major example for this morning, the Church of Scientology. It's a good example, because it went from a kind of pseudo-science, Dianetics, to a religion, or pseudo-religion, Scientology. The example shows that religion is a better base for rackets than pseudo-science.

I read about Scientology because I thought it would be a good example of a religious racket. It turned out to be a rather interesting religion. It's more fun than most kinds of Christianity. It encourages its members to fantasize, and then provides social support for their beliefs that their individual fantasies are reality.

Most of my references are more than 20 years old, and the Church of Scientology might be something different now from how I will describe it. It's partly the fault of the Church. They are experts in using the laws of libel to harass people, and I think publishers are wary of publishing anything about them.

{Evidently it's easier to commit libel on the internet, and there is a recent book titled "Scandals of Scientology" on the net, essentially a long catalog of alleged fraud and mistreatment of persons.}

7. L. Ron Hubbard, a science fiction writer, announced Dianetics in a 1949 article in *Astounding Science Fiction*, of all places. Dianetics is a curious mishmash of Freud's psychoanalysis and other ideas, including ideas about brainwashing that were widespread in the period of the Korean War.

The basic theory is that lots of our problems are caused by repressed memories, "engrams" Hubbard called them; the repression is due to trauma. The collection of engrams is the "bank," and to cure our problem we need to clear the bank. The goal of Dianetics is to be cleared.

The means to clearing is to be audited. In religious terms, this is the central ritual of Scientology. Auditing usually occurs in a one-on-one setting. The technique is non-directive. The Auditor asks questions, perhaps leading questions. The Auditor is helped with a device called the E-meter, which measures the resistance to electricity in the skin, something akin to a lie detector. The idea is to find those engrams. When they are re-experienced correctly, they will

no longer lead to our illness and irrationality. One works back in time, since it's necessary to clear the first engram. In 1949, Hubbard wrote about recovering memories of experiences in the womb.

Hubbard made great claims for the beneficial effects of being audited and being cleared—it would increase your IQ by 30 points, eliminate psychosomatic illness, and so forth. One guy said that by simply willing it he could increase his height by three inches.

I think it would be fun to be audited. There are many levels of auditing, and auditors must master many different "training routines," as they are called.

{ONLY IF TIME: The first one seems very simple, the two-hour confront. "The practitioner is asked to do literally nothing except 'be there' in the presence of another." [Given time, quote Whitehead, pp. 201-202.]}

And it would be fun to be an auditor. At least in the early days, once one had passed one stage, one could audit others in the stages one had passed.

8. Hubbard had problems with the Dianetics movement he started. It claimed to be a science, but when systematic research was done, the research seemed to show no beneficial results of auditing. But even as a pseudo-science, there was no place for a central authority. Hubbard's followers experimented with techniques and elaborated theories. Followers audited others for fees and pocketed the fees themselves. The movement went bankrupt.

Hubbard solved his problems by transforming the pseudo-science of Dianetics into the religion of Scientology. Being a religion conferred many advantages. It made the operation immune to falsification from systematic psychological research, at least to its adherents. It enabled Hubbard to centralize authority. There are many levels in the hierarchy, depending on the levels at which one has been audited. The texts required for each level, especially the highest, are secret and copyrighted. The practitioners were increasingly professionalized: to be an auditor, one had to be certified by the Church. The fees collected by the auditors were shared with higher levels in the hierarchy. The Church could mobilize resources to defend itself. A major success was having the Internal Revenue Service define it as a religion, and they zealously defend the definition. In the United States, being defined as a religion offers many legal protections. It's much easier to sue a secular psychological counselor than a religious professional. The centralized authority of the Church very aggressively used the laws against its detractors, libel laws especially, also copyright laws and others.

9. The belief system changed. Whereas Dianetics had recovered repressed memories from events in the womb, Scientologists can recover memories from previous incarnations. Many people had memories of themselves as Julius Caesar, for example, but they found ways of rationalizing that plurality. One could even recover memories of experiences millions of years ago on other planets.

It sounds like fun, but it comes at a price. I really think that Scientology is a racket. It is a fee for service operation, and the fees are high. As you probably know, Scientologists have attracted many celebrities, people like John Travolta, who can pay the fees. Scientology has, and publicizes, special celebrity centers. The fees seem bad, but to me the centralized authority is worse. The authorities are vigilant in their search for deviant members, possible defectors, and outside opponents, and they harass them without mercy.

Of course, this doesn't make Scientology much different from many other old and not so

old religions.

10. I don't want to leave you feeling superior to all those religious folk because you know so much more. There are close secular equivalents to the beliefs and practices of the Church of Scientology. In the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a movement devoted to the recovery of repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, sometimes decades after the events. The practitioners, psychological counselors, profess to have techniques that enable their clients to recover those repressed memories. I think it clearly is pseudo-science. The theories are inconsistent with the best psychological research on memory, and the practice is consistent with psychological research showing how so-called memories can be implanted by practitioners after the fact; children are especially vulnerable. Nursery school operators have been indicted and tried on the basis of alleged memories of abuse implanted in their children by the counselors and law enforcement people. Men have been put in jail on the basis of memories recalled by daughters decades after the fact.

Again, it's hard to call this a racket. The psychological counselors, like the shamans, make money out of it, but, like the shamans, believe what they tell their clients.

But the clients, like the adherents of the Church of Scientology, are saps. It's possible that being non-religious makes it easier to be a sap. "If God is dead, then anything is possible," is a claim made by many in the past two centuries. So why not ESP, telepathy, and the recovery of repressed memories?

So I'm going to give the last words in my service to an opponent, G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton was an inter-war Catholic Englishman whose politics and religion I detest. But he wrote a wonderful series of detective stories, the Father Brown stories, which I encourage you all to read {although I think they are out of print}. Father Brown catches the foibles of people like you and I. One story is about the "Oracle of the Dog." A dog howls at about exactly the time his master is murdered, although the dog is 300 yards from the scene, and then later the dog growls at one of the suspects. Father Brown makes sense of it in terms of what you and I know about dogs. At the end of the story, Father Brown discusses the case with one of the participants, who says.... :

[Omnibus, p. 503]

Sources:

Stephen J. Kelleher, **Divorce and Remarriage for Catholics?** NY: Doubleday, 1973
BX 2250 K4

(The author is a canon lawyer, perhaps a priest, who believes in divorce and remarriage but thinks the present system of annulments unjust and irrational.)

Oliver Stewart, **Divorce—Vatican Style** London: Oliphants, 1971
BX 2254 S72

(The author is an non-Catholic English journalist. But he too thinks the system not corrupt.)

Harriet Whitehead, **Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect** Ithaca: Cornell UP
BP 605 S6 W47 1987

(An anthropologist's study of mostly California Scientologists.)

Roy Wallis, **The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology** NY: Columbia UP
BP 605 S2 W34 1976

(An English sociologist, based on fieldwork in England.)

G. K. Chesterton, **The Father Brown Omnibus** NY: Dodd, Mead, 1982
PR 4453 .C4 A6 1983

Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, **The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse** NY: St. Martin's, 1994
RC445.2.F35L64 1994 (Dane County 616 85836906 51 L827m)