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Every Sparrow That Falls: Understanding Animal Rights Activism as Functional Religion

ABSTRACT

This article reports original research conducted among animal rights activists and elites in Switzerland and the United States, and the finding that activism functioned in activists' and elites' lives like religious belief. The study used reference sampling to select Swiss and American informants. Various articles and activists have identified both latent and manifest quasi-religious components in the contemporary movement. Hence, the research followed upon these data and anecdotes and tested the role of activism in adherents' lives. Using extensive interviews, the research discovered that activists and elites conform to the five necessary components of Yinger's definition of functional religion: intense and memorable conversion experiences, newfound communities of meaning, normative creeds, elaborate and well-defined codes of behavior, and cult formation. The article elaborates on that schema in the context of animal rights belief, elucidates the deeply meaningful role of activism within a filigree of meaning, and concludes that the movement is facing schismatic forces not dissimilar to redemptive and religious movements

KEYWORDS: animal rights, activism, religion, belief

In politics, intensity matters. Organizations and movements that are able to muster and sustain intense support generally are able to effect change over time;

hence, the passionate participation of true believers has always marked the politics of successful mass movements. (Huntington, 1981; Berry, 1994; Wildavsky, 1991; Wilson, 1994). The animal rights movement exemplifies this political fervor and has met with varying degrees of success. The movement, which traces its contemporary emergence to 1975, combines a critique of scientific empiricism characteristic of the Victorian anti-vivisection movement with the reaction to modernity that has mobilized many modern social movements (French, 1975; Richards, 1990). Uncommon levels of commitment to the cause and zeal for social redemption characterize its activists (Sperling, 1988; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). Indeed, the resultant normative goals of animal rights activists often require extraordinary levels of personal commitment and conviction (Jasper & Nelkin, Herzog, 1993; McAllister, 1997).

What are the sources of this intensity and commitment? Once mobilized, what keeps an animal rights activist motivated toward the transformation of society's relationship with animals? And what course of action will the movement take should it fail to redeem society? A guide for activists who object in conscience to classroom vivisection and dissection advises that their objection is a constitutionally protected exercise of religious belief (Francione & Charlton, 1992). The authors' claim that such activists are acting out of religious belief may surprise many observers. Social science data indicate that most animal rights activists are not members of traditional churches; indeed, they think of themselves as atheist or agnostic (Richards, 1990).³ Nonetheless, social scientists have argued that animal rights may serve as a cosmological buttress against anomie and bewilderment in modern society (Sutherland & Nash, 1994; McAllister, 1997; Franklin, 1999).⁴

Francione and Charlton (1992) argue that. . . . "The law does not require a belief to be 'theistic' or based on faith in a 'God' or 'Supreme Being'" in order to be protected.

If a belief is a matter of 'ultimate concern' and occupies in the lives of its adherents 'a place parallel to that filled by . . . God' in traditionally religious persons, then it passes the test for religious belief. . . . Most animal advocates possess a deeply spiritual commitment to justice for the oppressed and a general revulsion toward violence against sentient beings.

The United States Supreme Court, the authors point out, has adopted a “functional” definition of religion:

The Court has recognized that in order to determine whether a set of beliefs constitutes a religion, the appropriate focus is not the substance of a person’s belief system (i.e., whether a person believes in a personal God of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions), but rather, what function or role the belief systems plays in the person’s life. (Francione & Charlton, 1992, p. 4)

Yinger (1970) articulated the distinction between substantive and functional definitions of religion for social scientists. It is a distinction that allows us to analyze seemingly secular movements as religions because they function as religions; that is, they provide meaning around which individuals coalesce, interpreting life through a system of beliefs, symbols, rituals, and prescriptions for behavior. Indeed, Berger (1992; 1999) has noted the emergence of such functional, secular religiosity as an alternative expression of “repressed transcendence.” Berger argues that in response to modernity’s cultural delegitimization of traditional religions and objective truth, individuals, rather than ending their quest for religious truth, shift the foci of their quest toward other outlets.

Francione and Charlton (1992) leave it to individuals to determine if their beliefs function as religions. However, their advice opens up an intriguing line of inquiry about the movement itself. If Berger’s (1992) hypothesis is correct, and if Sutherland and Nash’s (1994) argument is accurate, the contemporary animal rights movement may serve as an outlet for the expression of functional religiosity. Indeed, if the recollections of activists are any indicator, then indeed animal rights ideology may serve as functional religion (Cobden-Sanderson, 1983; DeRose & Tiger, 1997; Franklin, 1999; Willet, Chadderton, Boice, & Robison, 2000). Likewise, if sustained intensity matters in politics, than quasi-religious fanaticism is useful in focusing, maintaining and applying the political pressure necessary for success. This being the case, do published statements and interviews with Swiss and U. S. informants suggest that animal rights beliefs may function as a religion? We intend to elucidate the elements of conversion, community, creed (system of belief), code (prescriptions for behavior), and cult (symbols and rituals) as they are found in the animal rights movement.

We drew the data for this article from long interviews with informants in both the United States and Switzerland. Although the political manifestations of animal rights ideology are context dependent, social scientists have hypothesized that mass movement activism (e.g. animal rights) may be a reaction to sociological factors that transcend culture and thus share relatively uniform causes (Giddens, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Sutherland & Nash, 1994). Switzerland and the United States share similar representative, federal political systems that are highly decentralized and shunt many political issues toward the lowest levels of political participation where, over time, intensity in citizen involvement is emphasized. Likewise, democracy in the United States resembles Swiss democracy in that citizens have the opportunity to pass or amend legislation through direct democracy, and this similarly emphasizes political intensity among political participants. The Swiss and U. S. systems are similar in that multiple checks and balances thwart radical political movements and cause incremental change (Linder, 1994). Hence, success in stifling, incremental systems is achieved not only through the mobilization of enthusiastic belief but also its maintenance.

The animal rights movements in both countries differ in significant ways. The U. S. movement has diverged into a reformist arm that allows for humane use of animals and a radical arm that seeks to protect them from all human use through the extension of inalienable rights. In Switzerland, the *Tierschutz* movement similarly contains reformist and radical branches, but because of political history the Swiss movement tends to shy away from the language of rights. Another difference is that the U. S. system is intentionally confrontational, pitting interest groups against each other in perpetual conflict, whereas the Swiss system is by intent more consensual and cooperative (Berry, 1994; Linder, 1994). One manifestation of this difference is that in the United States the animal rights movement has sought confrontation outside the boundaries of political legislation both to shock citizens and to bring about strategic legislative change (Francione, 1996), while in Switzerland the animal rights movement has sought redress through primarily political means and has stayed relatively non-confrontational (Linder, 1994).

Nevertheless, the movements are very similar in that activists are intensely committed to changing the way people view and interact with nonhuman animals. More important, since Switzerland offers the closest analog to the

U. S. political system, it offers an opportunity to test the hypothesis that animal rights functions as a religion in the lives of activists, thereby affording lasting intensity in the face of incremental social change. Indeed, many movement activists and intellectuals, as well as scholars, have used quasi-religious language in describing the movement. Thus, the research examined the religiosity of activism using Yinger's (1970) typology through extensive interviews with activists from Switzerland and the United States.⁵

Methods and Approach

The fieldwork took place over several years among self-identified national leaders and activists of the animal rights movement in Switzerland and the United States and consisted of two phases. In the first phase, content analysis was performed in both countries to identify value-laden language and symbols that resounded with religious significance. The content analysis guided hypothesis formation and interview structure and also identified potential selection criteria for movement informants. The frame consisted of elites and activists within the movement.⁶ Then, culture brokers were cultivated within the movements in both countries and served as initial contacts from which to begin the snowball selection of potential informants. Semi-standardized interviews were used and pre-tested among activists and the culture brokers in both countries.

In the second phase, informants were selected using reference sampling. Importantly, reference sampling is intended to describe fully the domain of content within a specific frame and cannot be extrapolated to informants outside that frame. Hence, rather than attempting to define functional religiosity among all adherents of animal protection, our research focused upon the most committed, most enthusiastic, most zealous advocates of animal protection in each country. Each informant was given full disclosure regarding the research and re-interviewed in cases where clarification or further elucidation was needed. The size of the reference sample was determined to have reached theoretical saturation when the interviews ceased to yield original or undisclosed information and when no additional data were being found. Using a grounded theoretical approach, we terminated data collection within the frame when informant responses were repeated over and over again and

the domain of content for Yinger's (1970) categories had been delimited (Glaser & Strauss, 1980).

Results: The Elements of Functional Religion

Conversion

Morally persuasive religious belief often originates in an experience of conversion. Coming from a biblical expression meaning "to be turned around," conversion can reverse a person's life. Enlightenment may come with the force of epiphanic revelation, stopping converts in their tracks and turning them around so that they see a whole new world. Conversion, according to theologian Lonergan (1972), is the transformation of a person's epistemological horizon. Conversion can include several experiences that, despite differences, bear resemblance. Psychic conversion, such as one often facilitated by a counselor or analyst, happens when one comes to understand and master one's feelings. Intellectual conversion occurs when someone not only knows but also becomes conscious of what counts for knowledge and truth. Moral conversion turns one from acting on previous values toward making decisions on the basis of newly perceived values that often deride and trivialize the previous forms of belief. Living by such newfound values often means giving up immediate and personal gratification as the convert first identifies the creedal norms of the new belief and then begins implementing its behavioral codes. Indeed, religious conversion achieves reconciliation and union with a previously unnoticed, transcendent Truth that may lessen guilt for previous unenlightened action. Its unfathomable mystery relativizes all life's woes, even the problem of innocent suffering.

At its essence, conversion provides a cosmological lens with which believers may interpret reality and an epistemological keel to balance their existence (Sutherland & Nash, 1994). In some people, these myriad conversions appear as a single experience; in others, they occur separately, one often precipitating the next. Thus, although frequently entailed in religious conversion, moral conversion can occur by itself (James, 1958). When that happens, as it did most often among our informants, the convictions and behaviors it generates may function like traditional religion.

In his study of religious experience, James (1958) defined conversion as “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy” (p. 157). He draws this definition from several accounts in which converts attribute their pre-conversion uneasiness and aimlessness to wrongdoing and sin. That sense was prevalent among our informants.

Our informants reported having had formative events that sensitized them to movement rhetoric and images and began the process of dissonance. Our informants confirmed Jasper and Poulsen’s (1995) hypothesis concerning activist recruitment. For our informants, awareness of incongruence between behavior and feelings remained a vivid but nebulous reality coupled to a vague sense of guilt over not doing more. Their unease grew until it eventually became manifest in a single emotional epiphany. One informant noted:

I received literature, [that was] doing an exposé on dog-meat markets in Asia; I still remember it vividly. I was reading this mailing postcard while eating a ham sandwich. There was a picture of this dog, his legs tethered, a tin cup over his muzzle; then it hit me! I made the connection between the being in the picture and the being in my mouth. Before, everything seemed to be OK, but now, I realized that treating animals as objects was bad. It was like someone had opened a door. I felt incredible sadness, and at the same time incredible joy. I knew that I would never be the same again, that I was leaving something behind . . . that I would be a better person, that I had been cleansed . . . I knew that it was now all right to tell others that it’s OK to believe. It was as if I was coming out of a closet; there was no more shame or guilt.

The epiphanic event and its place in helping overcome dissonance by consolidating a new belief were central to the stories of our informants. For them, life could not remain as it was. Again and again in the stories of both Swiss and American informants, a persuasive epiphany caused conversion to the cause. Indeed, Jasper and Poulsen (1995) identify moral shocks and epiphanic events as central to recruiting new believers. Among our informants, the epiphany was not uniformly precipitated by morally shocking imagery, but facilitated first by movement arguments, followed by exposure to emotionally charged contact with animals or animal imagery. One informant recounted

how he had felt dim misgivings about doing experiments on animals - that is, until one day he looked into the eyes of a rat he was cutting and felt immense conviction. He felt his previously vague misgivings suddenly crystallize into an encompassing moral mandate and knew that his life would never be the same after his conversion. Our informants were conscious of their conversion and aware of its enormity.

Community

Converts create communities. Having foregone the old order, they seek inclusion in the new. They gather together, share their common views, and sustain each other's commitments. Animal rights activists reflect this need for community as they come together on a regular basis to recount their personal tribulations and triumphs. The U. S. organization, Students for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, provides evidence of the centrality of fellowship. Participant observation and our informants confirmed that participants take turns at the meetings, informally relating their experiences to the group. One activist related:

[As] I tried to relate frustration over my dog's death to friends, they didn't understand. Some of them even laughed. They said, 'It's only an animal!' That was really disheartening for me. So I eventually became cautious over telling non-activists about my experience . . . I only told others who were like me.

Another informant experienced separation from her previous relationships: "I had a sense of being 'called out.' I had trouble relating to some people. People would stare when I would order [vegetarian food] in restaurants. It was embarrassing for me, and very uncomfortable." Indeed, some of our informants attributed their divorces to their newfound beliefs. After their conversion, our informants uniformly experienced feelings of social isolation, which in turn led them to seek out others who believed. Our informants often faced ostracism and scorn from family and friends as they tried to relate to their conversion.

Although our informants experienced varying degrees of isolation from individuals who didn't share their beliefs, conversion doesn't necessarily entail separation for those who are converted. Indeed, if converts regard their trans-

formations as complete, they may form a community or sect that cuts it off from the unconverted world (Yinger, 1970). They are more likely to have dysfunctional relationships with their natural families, acquaintances and friends whom they have left behind. They still retain contact with non-believers, but they return to their community of belief for rejuvenation of enthusiasm and reification of their epistemology. Conversely, if converts think of themselves as people undergoing continual transformation, then their resulting community may remain in the world, just as the world remains in the members awaiting transformation. Members maintain positive interactions with family and friends. In this case of inclusive membership, the community is what Yinger calls a church. Nevertheless, our informants exhibited primarily sectarian behavior.

The epiphany and subsequent isolation surfaced in the stories of most informants. Indeed, one informant lost a prestigious job because of his conversion, losing the respect and friendship of colleagues and becoming the object of scorn and the focus of accusations ranging from insanity to irrationality:

After I thought about it, I couldn't do [research on animals] any more. I was very radical, very confrontational, very 'in your face.' My boss and colleagues all hated me and thought I was a traitor, like I betrayed them or something. [There were] no more dinner parties for me! So my wife and me only stayed around others who believed in protecting animals. I eventually was able to be around [colleagues] again . . . after I came to see how, why they were the way they were. I could understand them because I used to be like them.

Many of our informants mirrored other religious adherents who encounter contrary secular phenomena; they amalgamated their traditional and new secular beliefs, thus overcoming dissonance and allowing them to interpret the world positively and relate to those in it when necessary (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter, 1964).

Creed

Although most animal rights activists do not recite a formal profession of faith (Richards, 1990), they have beliefs that may be compared to traditional religious doctrines. At first glance, their creed seems obvious and simple: A

nimals either have the right to live their lives without human interference or have the right to be considered equally with humans in the ethical balance that weighs the right and wrong of any action or policy (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983). Nevertheless, the commitment of our informants to political guarantees of rights for animals is part of a larger system of beliefs about life and the human-nonhuman animal relationship. That system includes several beliefs about nature, suffering, and death and is typified by creedal doctrinaire beliefs. Our informants agreed that active inclusion in the movement carries with it certain proscribed beliefs such as the assertion of the moral righteousness of the movement and the necessity of spreading that revelation. Believing entails spreading the faith, and animal rights activists are proselytizers. Herzog (1993) has found that the involvement of almost all animal rights activists contains an evangelical component. One informant related that. . . . "Seeing the light come on for somebody is really rewarding!"

Our informants each depicted the world as tainted, where the human-caused suffering of animals is wrong and can be abated. Each placed at least partial blame for this suffering on the shoulders of a blind and unfeeling humanity. One stated, ". . . everywhere I turned I saw suffering permeating the world," while another felt that. . . . "There seems to be so much needless pain caused by people. If people realized the level of suffering that they cause, they would probably do something about it." Central to the creed is an acknowledgment of the distressing totality of suffering in the world, coupled with a paradoxical, ecological perspective that links humanity to the nonhuman world - while placing ethical obligations and failures singularly upon humans. One informant recounted:

Humans are one species among many. We're not owners of the planet. All life is interconnected. And like us, other animals have a desire to lead their own lives. They want to be left alone. However, unlike animals, we have choices, we can make decisions. This is wonderful! People cause so much suffering for selfish reasons.

In our informants' creed, suffering is evil, and its alleviation is good; humans are at once derived from, and unique in, the natural world. In other words, people are related through evolution to animals but ethically constrained from using them because we, alone, are conscious of the suffering such use causes and can exercise free will to end it. Interestingly, each of the infor-

mants had struggled with the problem of how far to extend the moral sphere outward to the nonhuman world. Yet, many employed the same litmus test to mark the separation. They drew a distinction between animals who possess eyes and those who don't. One activist stated, "I personally draw the line at an animal that can see me and evades humans." Another responded that "there's something about eyes that makes it personal . . . they can see me," while still another believed that "animals see what people will do to them!". Indeed, for our informants, animals' ability to recognize humans as a threat, and thus something to be evaded, accentuates the divide between human and nonhuman nature. Scholars have noted that many activists view humanity as a malignancy upon the natural world, and thus the animal's ability to see people as they really are becomes paramount (Chase, 1995).

The divergence of these beliefs from Western religious beliefs that influence the cultural milieus in Switzerland and the United States might appear slight, but it is significant. The tradition we know as mainline western Christianity takes its instruction about life from the constant refrain in *Genesis* (New Jerusalem Bible), "And God saw that it was good." The theocentric doctrine posits humans as the pinnacle of creation - often interpreted as, "humans alone really matter." However, our informants spoke of the goodness of nature but not people. To our informants, nature acquires normative value and is the repository of nobility and virtue, while humans acquire negative and even evil attributes (Dizard, 1994; Chase, 1995). Activists celebrate the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the birds and the beasts, but not humankind. The boundary between good and evil, rather than dividing the human heart and making everything in nature ambiguous as is common with substantive religious beliefs, demarcates nature's goodness on the one hand and human evil on the other. Thus, humans are singularly to blame for animal suffering.

Certainly, animals are part of nature, but to our informants their goodness lies in their perceived moral innocence. The wolf may stalk the lamb and one bird may impale another for its dinner, but these animals are not evil by intention. Our informants echoed an editorial letter to the *New York Newsday* columnist, Colen: "Unlike you, the cockroach has never done anything deliberately malicious in its life - unlike every human that ever lived. I actually have more moral grounds to murder you, than you have to, say, swat a fly"

(Colen, 1992). Indeed, for our informants it appeared that people were the problem, that innocence could be found only in animals, and that humans - just by existing - are detrimental to animals. Their comments closely mirrored Ingrid Newkirk, leader of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who expresses it most forcefully:

I am not a morose person, but I would rather not be here. I don't have any reverence for life, only for the entities themselves. I would rather see a blank space where I am. This will sound like fruitcake stuff again, but at least I wouldn't be harming anything. All I can do- all you can do- while you are alive is try to reduce the amount of damage you do by being alive. (Brown, 1983, p. B9)

The belief that humans could put an end to suffering in nature also served as part of the credal doctrines for our informants, and its plausibility and attraction may be a derivative of the urbanization of western culture, where most people live far removed from traditional interactions with nonhuman nature and where modern society often portrays animals not as predators but as fluffy and fuzzy friends propped up on the bed (Wong-Leonard, 1992). Furthermore, when "nature, red in tooth and claw," manifested itself in our informants' consciousness, the demarcation equating nature with moral good while concurrently equating humanity with moral "bad" allowed at least temporary cognitive resonance, for death in "nature" becomes a natural process, whereas death at the hands of humanity becomes "unnatural" (Dizard, 1994).

Code

Conversion places animal rights partisans under the sway of a new set of values - the newly recognized importance of animals esteemed for their own sake rather than their usefulness to society. No longer do our informants drift in the mainstream of consumer culture, pulled this way and that by what they thought were needs and pleasures. Conversions always entail new ways of living that come to be codified in guidelines and rules. It is not surprising, then, that our informants, whose conversion is primarily moral in nature, had elaborate codes of behavior. They uniformly identified well-defined behavior codes. Furthermore, content analysis revealed similar behavior codes in

both countries: their publications were filled with advice for vegetarian and vegan cooking, cruelty-free shopping, cruelty-free entertainment, and cruelty-free giving.

An all-encompassing statement of faith professed by some of our informants demonstrated the codified edicts of animal rights: "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use in any way!". Finding its ultimate expression in the form of veganism, this lifestyle consciously forgoes the use of materials that have, in any way, caused animal suffering. Our informants defined vegans as "a person who doesn't use, to the greatest extent possible, any products that come from animals . . . it's impossible to get away from animal use . . . but if an alternative is available, they use it."

Unlimited in scope, veganism provides an elaborate superstructure with which activists support their lives. Bordering on asceticism, the constraints placed on personal behavior and the resultant emotional demands of compliance can be extraordinary (Sperling, 1988; Herzog, 1993).

Such legalism confronts activists with a dilemma. Our informants acknowledged the impossibility of keeping the code but, nevertheless, felt compelled to achieve it. The compulsion derived from their conversions, whereby they became individually responsible for animal suffering. Hence, with a normative goal of minimizing pain and suffering, they are driven to attempt reforming themselves through strict codes of conduct.

Cult (Collective Meanings Expressed as Symbols and Rituals)

Substantive religions often organize their worship around the teachings of sacred texts/inspired narrative or the consumption of a holy food. Although nothing so formal as listening to the inspired text or eating a sacred meal characterizes the gatherings of animal rights partisans, elements of those gatherings nevertheless resemble the ritual behavior of traditional religions. An informant reflected this repetitive reification of belief:

I] was shy. . . . I don't classify myself as an activist, but I went along with a friend. When we got there, the meeting began with people introducing themselves and talking about the problems [professing the creed and keeping the behavioral code] they had had.

Another informant demonstrated striking similarity to Yinger's (1970) definition of cult in recounting. . . . "Most of the meetings I go to usually follow along some sort of pattern; we usually talk about ourselves, and sometimes people will talk about slipping up, but everyone is really supportive." Animal rights activists often share news clippings, letters, and personal stories that tell of recent conversions and encourage participants in their commitment. The introduction and welcoming of new and potential members often are an integral part of animal rights meetings. Group meetings that we attended followed this pattern, and many of our informants mentioned the centrality of personal profession whereby resolving to amend one's life followed acknowledging discovery of behavior that had infringed upon the well being of animals.

Less frequently, someone will confess particular and culpable failures in the manner of animal activist and writer Alice Walker: "Since nearly a year ago, I have eaten several large pieces of Georgia ham, several pieces of chicken, three crab dinners and even one of shrimp" (Walker, 1988, p. 172). Like Walker, one informant confessed to specific sins that were accompanied by a sense of guilt. Asked about eating meat, the person leaned over and quietly whispered, "I eat chicken, but I don't tell anybody." Asked about the role of a personal community of belief, the informant noted it helped as a reminder of reasons for becoming an activist and why the movement would triumph. Indeed, we found that the cult served to resolve dissonance, reinforce "proper" belief, and subtly reemphasize individual culpability for suffering.

It seemed that our informants had only one principal method of assuaging guilt in the face of disconfirmation: They ratcheted up their commitment and resolve. The absence of absolution may serve to fuel the animal rights movement's intensity. Many informants repeatedly acknowledged that early in their conversion they had difficulty with the ascetic behavioral code. In order to avoid personal conviction for causing suffering, they repeatedly ratcheted up their activism. Many informants agreed that the attraction of increased activism as secular penance was indeed strong. Thus, the community of belief serves as a functional cult, reifying activist beliefs, policing dissension, rejuvenating enthusiasm, and encouraging increased proselytizing as a mechanism to assuage dissonance (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter,

1964). Sperling (1988), Jasper and Nelkin (1992), and Herzog (1993) document this phenomenon.

New converts, at first tentative in their approach to activism and the vegan ethos, are often drawn into the movement through a highly personal epiphany. After confronting the enormity of societal transformation, they confront their own complicity in animal suffering. Yet, ending animal suffering in their lives proves to be difficult. With no exterior source of atonement, they see increased activism as an act of penance. Likewise, although animal rights activists have no explicitly ritual meals, eating is very much a redemptive act. Through vegetarianism and veganism, they purify themselves while liberating animals. "The more I got involved, the more my diet changed. And the more my diet changed, the more involved I got" (Herzog, 1993, p. 117).

Whereas the shared, ritualized behavior of their fellow believers often reminded our informants of their commitment, they often found their beliefs challenged when they left fellowship and returned to their day-to-day lives. During such moments of epistemological challenge, symbols helped to remind and rejuvenate our informants. Symbols, like rituals, play a large role in religion. Animal symbols such as the dove (the Holy Spirit), the serpent (Satan), the lion (the apostle Mark), the eagle (the apostle John), the ox (the apostle Luke), and the birds that flocked to the sermons of St. Francis, are especially significant in Christianity. Similarly, animistic and pantheistic religions employ animals as symbolic projections of god/human attributes, whereby the crow represents wisdom, the fox represents craftiness, and the jackal represents cunning. Animal rights activists use pictures of monkeys strapped in chairs, cats wearing electrodes and rabbits with eye or flesh ulceration in much the same way: that is, as symbolic representations of human values and the corresponding affronts to those values. Looking on and identifying with those innocent victims, just as Christians look upon and identify a lamb as the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus, can bring about conversion and redemption (Sperling, 1988; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). Indeed, most of our informants had such symbols in their social environments.

In a study of anti-vivisection in England, Sperling (1988) has pointed out that Victorian women saw animals as symbols of their own victimhood. Women then and now were upset by:

The perceived manipulation and corruption of nature by human technology, for which the scientific use of animals is a key symbol. In both periods . . . revitalization of society is believed to hinge on the abolition of the abuse of animals.

Similarly, in her investigation of the Edwardian era's anti-vivisection movement, Lansbury (1985) describes the nexus of disparate political interests that coalesced around the statue of an old brown dog. She elucidates the powerful symbolism that animals held in Edwardian industrial culture:

Dogs were not simply people; they were more faithful, loving, and sympathetic than human beings. They were the children who never grew up to criticize or abandon their parents, the servants who were always obedient and grateful for a pat or a plate of scraps, the company whose greatest joy was to share your company. (p. 171)

Hence, the cult as used in a definition of functional religion is defined by symbolic interaction around images that crystallize and manifest the horror of animal suffering. The symbols and rituals reified the separateness of our informants' beliefs; and the pictures reminded and rejuvenated our informants' commitment to the cause.

Analysis and Forecast

We have argued that the animal rights movement may serve as a functional religion in the lives of our informants. This thesis may help to explain its phenomenal growth. In times of rapid social change, people are cut loose from traditional communities of meaning. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of modernity is secularization, or "pluralization." Modernity tends to castigate tradition, and, when coupled with the effects of naturalistic science, traditional transcendent religious beliefs are debunked as "myth" (Berger, 1976; 1990; 1999). Such beliefs then become repressed. In such a milieu, individuals are open to the offer of alternative communities that provide a filigree of meaning through which they can interpret their world. In their search for meaning, they may be attracted to absolutes such as those found in mass movements and functional religion (Sperling, 1988).

A functional definition of religion also aids in understanding the dedication of our informants' for the cause, their adherence to abolitionist goals, and

their enthusiasm. Their uncommon passion constitutes religious zeal fueled by conversion to a distinctive world-view most often embraced as an alternative to traditional epistemologies about nature (Dizard, 1994).

Finally, the thesis may explain how our informants retain enthusiasm and how the movement retains its cohesion in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles posited by the incremental U. S. and Swiss political systems. Central to the stories of our informants was a profound sense of guilt at discovering personal complicity in the suffering of animals. The movement places moral culpability squarely upon their shoulders, and its rhetoric exacerbates this. Then, in the tradition of all purposive mass movements, it offers itself as the ultimate form of absolution. With a creed that presents a disheartening picture of their world and a code of behavior that at once is unattainable and noble, believers are drawn into further activism as a source of penance. The community reinforces belief, and the cult provides symbols around which our informants interacted. Likewise, the same unattainability that thwarts their most virtuous efforts also deflects informant disillusionment away from the movement and turns it toward the corrupt society that shuns them. In other words, the movement's failure is offered as evidence of the omnipotent corruption of society. Ultimately, the total disconfirmation of informant beliefs may serve only to strengthen them (Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, 1964). In response, activists often redouble their commitment to the cause. Indeed, our informants related how, upon confronting the enormity of their mission, the only recourse was to ratchet up their activism. The movement offers absolution through increased activism, and the increased activism refuels its zeal.

Predictive Power

Our thesis that the animal rights movement wears the face of religion has not only analytical value, but also predictive power. We can look to the course run by religious and secular movements to find answers to intriguing questions about the animal rights movement's future. Wilson (1994) generalizes about the courses followed by redemptive organizations that put forward systemic critiques of society coupled with calls for societal and personal transformation. He states:

Redemptive organizations never attain their larger ends. Though a society may occasionally be captured by an ideological organization, it is never transformed by a redemptive one. Hence, redemptive groups are forced to choose among collapse, inward-looking sectarianism, or acts of rage and despair. (p. 49)

Our informants believed that the extension of some degree of rights to animals is inevitable but were disheartened by the pace of change. Like activists of all political persuasions, they believed that they have the moral high ground and that time is on their side. However, what should happen if the movement should fail to achieve its redemptive aim? We can't infer that the movement, foiled or at least stalled in advancing its cause, will pursue the option of acting out rage and despair.

More likely alternatives are what Wilson (1994) calls inward-looking sectarianism/collapse and pragmatism, or what we name sectarian exclusiveness and ecclesial inclusiveness. The movement's leaders face a clearly defined choice that is rare in politics. In an attempt to retain their membership, they can remain doctrinally pure and risk permanent political marginalization (sectarian exclusiveness). Or, in an attempt to move into the cultural mainstream, they may become politically pragmatic and risk alienating their core of zealous activists who were converted to a distinct world-view and whose intensity serves to recruit new members, police behavior, and fulfill the numerous maddening details of politics (ecclesial inclusiveness). The Swiss *Tierschutz* movement has adopted this strategy, but many of our informants expressed exasperation with compromise and waxed for the confrontational tactics of their American counterparts.

Already we are witnessing conflict about a strategy for survival. Regan and Francione (1992) and Francione (1996) have argued that even though the steps taken by the movement may be gradual, they must always be ideologically pure. Just as American abolitionists could have no truck with those who wanted more humane treatment of slaves, so, according to Regan and Francione, animal rightists cannot work with those who call for a gentle use of animals. Enactment of any welfarist position, they contend, actually impedes the animal rights agenda by distracting people from the real goal the other hand, Newkirk (1992) has pleaded for building coalitions and excluding no one from the cause of animals. Achievements of welfarists become the spring-

board for further advances by animal rightists. The Swiss movement is facing the same choice, having lost recent ballot initiatives that were conciliatory to their opponents, thus giving lie to the notion of pragmatic progress for the cause.⁷ For the animal rights movement, two moral paths have diverged in the political woods: the one less traveled, an elitist purity, and the other, a well-trammeled pragmatism. Wilson (1994) observes the following:

By their nature, organizations relying on either ideology or redemption to hold and motivate members tend to attract persons prepared to make deep and lasting commitments to the cause, if not the particular organization. Ideological and redemptive organizations display little flexibility about their objectives or, if the objectives are changed, the transformation exacts a heavy price in associational conflict and personal tensions, often resulting in factionalism and sometimes in fissure. (p. 47)

Emerging Beliefs

If the movement disintegrates, our data indicate that two distinct sets of belief would emerge: (a) those that are ameliorative and reconciliatory, given to compromise within the political institutions and (b) those that are radical and see conflict and protest as much as social functions as agents of change. On the one hand, the pragmatists would lose their distinctiveness and influence - after all, our informants uniformly attributed their conversion to the evangelical zeal and enthusiasm of the movement. On the other hand, the purists would become farther marginalized and socially isolated, and some indicated that they would turn to direct action out of frustration, while others contemplated leaving the movement.

We might ask how the movement, should it evolve into a mainstream political force, might retain its distinctive redemptive flavor? First, while maintaining its transcendent goal, it could pick and choose its battles, settling for those it can win: not the end of animal use in agriculture, but the end of raising calves for veal; not the end of all animal products, but the end of wearing furs; not the end of using animals in medical research, but the end of research that can be presented as an affront to decency. Second, the movement might develop two distinctive and separable tiers of membership. As Wilson (1994) states:

The organization can expand in membership to the extent that prospective members are willing to agree to the doctrine or, in the case of the church, to the creed, but as it expands a distinction develops between those at the center who are doctrinally sophisticated (the inner leadership, the politburo, the priesthood) and those in the rank and file who are to be educated and led. (p. 48)

An elite would hold out for the original vision of societal transformation, keep themselves from any compromise, and pursue a prophetic course. Others entangled in earning a living, rearing a family, and enjoying friendships do what they can: adopt a dog, write a protest letter to a shampoo manufacturer, or buy synthetic clothes.

A parallel with the early Christian church is instructive. The Church moved in this direction during the second, third, and fourth centuries. An elite chose to move into isolation and live by the evangelical counsels. With their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they foreswore personal property and wealth, family responsibilities, and even personal autonomy. The way of these monks was declared the way of perfection. For those who were not able to live so purely a second tier of citizenship developed. Gradually, the word *laos*, which in earliest times referred to all Christians (as in the expression *laos theou* or 'the people of God'), came to refer to those who did not follow the monks - the laity. In other words, the animal rights movement may develop a secularized monastic system as a means to assuage the schismatic tension between pragmatism and purity implicit within an incremental political system.

Second Generation Leadership

The discussion of two-tiered membership leads to final reflection on the movement's leadership. Inevitably, that leadership will pass to a second generation. The outcome of its choice of survival strategy might very well determine the nature of that transition. If it evolves from an exclusive, sect-like phenomenon into the inclusive, church-like organization, more institutional types will replace its charismatic leaders. Sect leaders are self-appointed, relying upon nepotism or divine fiat. Church leaders are selected in some manner by the members. The former rule autocratically while the latter are held accountable through checks and balances. The former gather followers by the

strength of their personalities and fecundancy of their doctrine while the latter do so through good organizational management (Troeltsch, 1960, volume 1, pp. 331-343).

Will more organizational types replace charismatic founders? In the early 1990s, editors of *Animals' Agenda* magazine had raised questions of organization and accountability (Bartlett, 1991; Clifton, 1991). *Animals' Agenda* is widely seen as a principal publication of the animal protection movement and hence is important as a harbinger of change and conflict. Indeed, some observers of the movement saw the replacement of those early *Animals' Agenda's* editors with Kim Stallwood as evidence that the movement was heading toward institutionalized accountability. By publishing data on the financial assets, ratio of program to administrative expenses, and compensation and benefits for staff of all animal protection groups, *Animals' Agenda* editors as well as others in the movement have created pressure for a style of leadership that, though more responsible, will likely dissipate some of the movement's energy.

Conclusion

Various scholars, including Herzog (1993), Sperling (1988), Jasper and Poulsen (1995), have noted the intensity of activism in the animal rights movement as well as the extraordinary commitment to the cause. Yet each has shied away from painting the movement in religious terms. Sutherland and Nash (1994) have argued that animal rights may be a new environmental cosmology, thus coming close to casting the movement in an explicitly religious light. However, activists and movement intellectuals have not been so reticent, often using expressly religious language or, in the case of Francione and Charlton (1992), arguing outright that animal rights functions like religion. Following this line, we have argued that animal rights activism fulfills Yinger's (1970) typology of functional religion. Our informants were socialized in doctrinal creeds and behavioral codes. Our informants experienced conversions to a distinctive epistemology, realigned themselves with new communities of belief, and relied upon cult symbols and rituals to manifest latent beliefs and reinforce their commitment. Indeed, uniform throughout the stories of both Swiss and American informants were the elements of Yinger's functional religiosity. Though previous research has noted the movement's deep

moral concern and earnest desire to redeem society, it has left some interesting questions unanswered. What is the source of this intensity? Once adherents are converted, what keeps them motivated? What factors facilitate group cohesion in its striving for a sweeping and transcendent cause? Should the movement fail to redeem society, what courses of action will its members pursue?

We have maintained that understanding the movement as fulfilling a functional definition of religion answers these questions about its intensity, motivation, cohesion, and future course of action. We believe that Yinger's (1970) typology is accurate; in applying it, we may obtain a unique perspective on the politics of the animal rights movement. This is not to say that animal rights activism or the legitimate concerns it raises regarding the status of non-human animals in industrialized countries are contrived or marginal. Rather, we believe that - as the nineteenth century French political commentator Proudhon declared about all politics - the animal rights controversy, if pursued far enough, turns out to be religious in nature. In so acknowledging, we can begin to strip away the polemic and gain valuable insight into the epistemology of a significant and growing number of citizens. We likewise can understand how a redemptive mass movement may be able, over time, to muster the intensity that is required to reform societies with incremental political systems. It is no mistake that the movement has had success - although each of the informants was disheartened by the glacial rate of change. The modern movement to protect animals, whether it be in Switzerland or the United States, has, at the least, sensitized non-believers to the plight of animals and perhaps even continued to sow the seeds of epistemological discontent that led our informants to convert to the cause.

Notes

- ¹ Correspondence should be sent to Wes Jamison, Interdisciplinary and Global Studies, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 100 Institute Road, Worcester, MA 01609-2280. The author wishes to thank the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology for providing a visiting professorship, as well as the Herman Herzer Stiftung for funding this research. The author also wishes to thank Susan Sperling, Hal Herzog, Marianne Janack, and Monique Dupuis for their thoughtful comments and assistance with the research. This paper has been previously presented at the STS lunch seminar series at Oregon State University.

- ² Anecdotal accounts point to the absence of traditional religious belief, and social science data support this. For an example, see Richards (1990).
- ³ For a relevant discussion of animal rights as a derivative of modernity, see Franklin (1999).
- ⁴ It could be argued that cultural differences between the Swiss and Americans confound any useful examination of animal rights activism. On the contrary, a central theme in modernity and the study of pluralization is that 'modern' post-industrial western nations are buffeted by the same effects of modernity. Our data showed little cultural differences between informants from the two countries.
- ⁵ It is useful to note that selection of informants within the frame occurred very readily through reference sampling and the help of culture brokers, but that the actual selection of the frame was more problematic. Elites were chosen because of their role as opinion leaders, and as ecclesial authorities in Yinger's typology. The applicability of elites as a research frame was verified by participant observation, consultation with culture brokers within each movement, and through content analysis of opinion leadership within the movement.
- ⁶ In 1997 the Swiss *Tierschutz* movement joined forces with various political interests in opposing gene technology and its application in research and biotechnology. The *Genschutz Initiativ* lost by a significant majority (approximately 66:34), thus causing a set back for animal protection advocates. Interestingly, many animal protection leaders did not want to champion the initiative because it was seen as too moderate and conciliatory to their opponents. Likewise, leaders of the more radical groups felt that their support of reforms could only hurt their cause - they wanted outright abolition of many research practices rather than increased regulation. Nonetheless, they supported the initiative, reasoning that a minor, pragmatic victory would help the cause. When the initiative failed, the leaders who had initially opposed it vowed to forgo pragmatic politics in the future.

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