

CURSILLO IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT LITERATURE*

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ABSTRACT

Cursillo has its origins in Spain the late 1940s. Initially a Roman Catholic venture, it now occurs in several Christian denominations retaining the task of promoting religious renewal or revitalization for its members. Since there are no publications which appropriately place *cursillo* in social movement literature this article accomplishes the task using social strain, resource mobilization, and expectancy value theories.

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INTRODUCTION

There are few singular analyses of *cursillo* in the sociology of religion and these are by Dragostin (1970), Marcoux (1982) and O'Sullivan (1988, 1989). The titles for two of these works, "The *Cursillo* as a Social Movement" (Dragostin 1970) and *Cursillo: Anatomy of a Social Movement* (Marcoux 1982), suggest that the reader is included in conversations about *cursillo* as a unique social movement. Because these publications never truly satisfy the expectation, this study of *cursillo* does that which has been left undone by providing a selective triptych of theoretical scenes to describe and explain *cursillo* as a redemptive religious movement.

Several tasks must be accomplished to make this undertaking successful. First, basic dimensions of social movements are reviewed to classify *cursillo* as a social movement. Second, three theories are offered at the macro-level of analysis, the middle range level of analysis, and the micro-

level of analysis to explain how *cursillo* is constructed and directed toward the religious re-creation of the self. Third, the redemptive appeal of *cursillo* is reviewed to delineate this movement from other, secular self-help or self-improvement programs.

When the responsibilities of this article are completed there will be an addition to the body of knowledge about the movement which has received scant sociological attention. These analyses begin with summaries of information about movements.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

There are many definitions for social movements so a recent interpretation is used:

A movement is constituted by human beings engaged in discourses and practices designed to challenge and change society as they define it (Garner 1996).

While it is tempting to identify all varieties of social movements it must be remembered that there is often

interaction between them which hinders the ability to separate their limits, goals, and memberships (Aberle 1966; Garner 1996; Heberle 1968; Roberts and Koss 1979). When more ideas of Aberle (1966) are used, *cursillo* is labeled as a redemptive movement since it is oriented toward the complete reawakening of the self. This classification is extended to designate *cursillo* as a redemptive religious movement since it occurs in sacramental Christian denomination that have defined religious histories, theologies, and promises of salvation. *Cursillo*, then, is composed of members who have gone through similar transformations, who are sympathetic to its purposes, and who bring others into the "psychological crowd" (Park and Burgess 1924) in a collective process.

With a preamble to the study of *cursillo* as a redemptive religious movement completed there is need to turn to the combined works of several social scientists to identify some of the general traits of social movements which are used in this study. Because social movements revolve around complex moral issues, the expression "moral intuition" (Jasper 1991) refers to a people's visions of that which is morally "right" and that which is morally "wrong." A "moral shock" (Jasper 1991) happens when those visions are threatened. Social or religious mores defining right from wrong become indistinct and produce anomie (Durkheim 1951) when accepted voices of authority, knowledge, tradition, and social order are questioned, attacked, and driven by the principles of competing beliefs. People who experience such anomalies may undergo "para-

digm shifts" (Heinrich 1977) or "epiphanies" (Denzin 1989) to re-create noble constancy in their lives. Realigned religious identities (Fowler 1981; O'Sullivan 1995) can be brought by forming social movements to promote alternate principles, or by joining social movements whose views fit emergent ideals.

Many sacred and secular redemptive movements have charismatic leaders of origin (Aberle 1966), but each is dependent upon a "moral community of believers" (Jasper 1991) whose members have a "common paradigm of experience" (Gusfield 1968) to "spread the word" evoking radical or subtle reforms in a region. Because social movements vary by parentage, leadership, conviction, intent, discourse, practice, and history, three sociological theories are used to portray the diversity of *cursillo* as a redemptive religious movement.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY APPLIED TO CURSILLO

Social movement studies have been dominated by social strain and resource mobilization theories. These two approaches are used in conjunction with expectancy-value theory (Klandermans 1984) to describe and explain *cursillo*.

Social Strain Theory

The tenet of this theory is that social movements have natural histories derived from objective and subjective interpretations of social strain and anomie (Garner 1996; Smelser 1963). The premise is joined with contributions from Jasper (1991) to promote

the conclusion that social movements are centered around efforts to invalidate the sources and teachings of those beliefs which create normative disarray in order to reform intellectual, social, moral, and ideological normalcy in a population. Such writers as Bord and Faulkner (1983), Mauss (1975), Smelser (1963), Cleary (1985), and Pena (1995) would endorse this scenario when it is applied to the beginnings of *cursillo* in Spain following the civil and second world wars.

Spain was then rife with local codes like republicanism, anarchy, fascism, nationalism, communism, and splintering within Roman Catholicism which weakened it and the parent theology (Garner 1996; Marcoux 1982; Michener 1968; Pena 1995). The profane beliefs and advocates were reasoned enough to curry favor with many Roman Catholics, goading them to disavow religion, to reject religion's "flattened" teachings (Fowler 1987), to sample replacement lessons (Garner 1996), and to migrate with patterns of belief-exit and belief-entry religious innovation (O'Sullivan 1995).

Spain's balkanization and the people's disenchantment with the ecclesia aroused a layman, Eduardo Bonnin, and a cleric, Bishop Juan Hervas, to explore new or alternative methods to present personalized images of religion to apostates and to those who were being courted from it (Bord and Faulkner 1983; Marcoux 1982). The manifest intentions of Bonnin and Hervas led to *cursillo*'s first retreat in Mallorca during January 1949, and it has since been diffused to other locales such as South America and the U.S. where it serves similar purposes.

From the perspectives of colonial and evangelical history South America has been almost as ecclesiastic as Spain. However, recent events in the region have shown that there is much dissent converging on such issues as international capitalism, allegations of political corruption, charge of abuses of power in the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant missionaries, Marxism, and liberation theology. This climate in areas of South America is almost identical to that of Spain when *cursillo* began. Consequently, *cursillo* was introduced into the region as one theology of reconciliation to defuse the tide of disenchantment with the church and defection from it (Cleary 1985; Pena 1995).

Whether or not *cursillo* is an effective tool against liberation theology is a matter of conjecture. Liberation theology is directed toward the vulnerable masses in the areas that represent a political-economic minority and are racked from maltreatment, corruption, and exploitation at the hands of those who represent a political and economic majority. *Cursillo*, on the other hand, is directed toward the categories and social classes of people who are more privileged (Cleary 1985; Marcoux 1982), who support the church, and who use such influence or power they have to promote Roman Catholicism against the populist beliefs of liberation theology. The conflict there has yet to be settled.

The diffusion of *cursillo* into the U.S. shows that it has been adopted in many dioceses and synods of the Episcopal, Lutheran, and United Methodist churches as an element of instructional technology for several

plausible reasons. First, because these religious chapters are also sacramental the composition and contents of the original cursillo are easily translated into the liturgies, rubrics, and rites of the borrowers. Second, the popularity of cursillo in the Roman Catholic community may have prompted leaders in the other denominations to join the bandwagon and vie for their fair market shares of new members in a competitive environment (Iannaccone, Olson and Stark 1995).

Certainly the social climate of Spain in the late 1940s is not present in the U.S. today, just as the era should not be considered as a viable stimulus for the growth of cursillo outside Roman Catholicism. Yet because assorted threats to Christianity still exist, there is continual need to retain standardized and essential curricula of religious education, to present and preserve the promises of deliverance, to actively reconstitute membership rolls, to preserve the religion, and to re-introduce defectors to the religion and to the churches from which they had strayed.

The means by which the goals are partially met are built into the configuration of a cursillo weekend retreat. As the retreat progresses, the novices or candidates are offered a series of fifteen *rollos* or religious talks that are given by members of the laity and the clergy who direct the weekend. Each rollo is scripted and sequentially presented to facilitate the candidates' epiphanies or paradigm shifts (O'Sullivan 1989). The first rollo, entitled "Ideal," asks all players to reflect upon the lifestyles they have led and upon the "isms", "ologies", and work/aca-

demie endeavors to which they have given allegiance or have been dedicated. An intimated message or call in the talk is to create cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) in the minds of the candidates without attacking any particular lifestyle or belief system. The candidate is allowed to deconstruct a personal doctrine or way of life. Once the seeds for dissonance have been sown, the remaining rollos, group discussions, and worship services allow candidates to discover cognitive consonance (Festinger 1957) with a religious theme by way of reconciliation with God and with the person's denominational affiliation.

A change in religious feelings on the part of an individual, however, does not create a social movement. The application of social strain theory to cursillo has tandem attributes. *Cursillistas* or members of the cursillo community strive to recruit new members through their various social contacts, thereby increasing personal expertise about the movement in a centripetal direction. Then, once the recruits become cursillistas, they too are encouraged to become evangelists or proselytes for cursillo, increasing public awareness about the movement in a centrifugal direction.

Conflicts of belief are rarely won, but they can change course by redefining moral debates. Cursillo was born in a time of social disruption in Spain and the movement has similar purposes in regions of South America, just as it exists in the U.S. to neutralize contemporary vulgar, populist, or secular attacks to the religion and its participating churches. The modern religious movement now deserves fur-

ther investigation with another sociological device.

Resource Mobilization Theory

The second approach which defines these analyses is resource mobilization theory that has been created and refined by such authors as Iannaccone et al (1995), Gusfield (1968), Lawson (1991), McCarthy and Zald (1977), and Tilly (1978). It is an organizational approach which specifies that holdings of human skills, various forms of capital, and material culture are invested to yield high profits in the forms of goal attainment and membership recruitment (Garner 1996; Iannaccone et al 1995). An aspect of this theory is that social movements and their regional cells/pockets of activity need managerial guidance. The superintendence is provided by a "directed" segment consisting of organized and structured groups with specific programs [of study for reform], a formal leaderships [core], definitive ideology, and stated objectives. Its followers are members of an organization as well as partisans to a belief (Gusfield 1968).

The directed segment of a movement has the obligation of dispensing the movement's cultural package to attract religious seekers (Iannaccone et al 1995; Lofland 1966). A cursillo center's boards of management are the steering committee, the servant committee, and the secretariat. They are all comprised of members from the laity and the clergy who have ascended the status hierarchy of a center by learning how to "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" of cursillo and by way

of volunteerism for the movement (O'Sullivan 1988, 1989).

Resource mobilization can be called the resolve side of strain for a cursillo center. Since the weekends vary by religious chapter, the rollos are apt to be modified to fit the characteristics of the host denomination, and daily details of a weekend need to be adjusted for large or small numbers of participants. The weekend retreats usually begin on Thursday night and end on Sunday, but in others there are time abbreviations. In some cases a cursillo center receives candidates almost monthly, yet in some locales a cursillo weekend occurs just once a year. After the governing boards of a cursillo center receive ideas, advice, and suggestions from their respective national offices, the panelists make purposive decisions to cover wide varieties of exigencies relative to local population venues.

Another comparison is now possible between this application of theory at the civic level with events in Latin America. Remember, cursillo was introduced into that region as a theology of reconciliation or redemption in an effort to conquer the attractions of liberation theology for those who felt dissonance between themselves and government, the economy, the church, and the mavens of theoretical theology. Many liberationists believe that the church itself can be freed by returning it to the people or by having the people take back that which has been taken from them. The people must involve themselves collectively, effectively, and passionately.

Comunidades eclesiales de bases

or base Christian communities (CEBs) (Cleary 1985; Pena 1995) are similar to cursillo centers in that they are comprised of local partisans who have been recruited, have a feeling of sisterhood or brotherhood with their fellows, gather for worship, community action, and study, define the church in personalized terms, and feel they have found a spiritual hangout for themselves. Cursillo centers and base communities are also havens of respite, renewal, and encouragement in the face of competition.

The principle differences between cursillo centers and the CEBs are their degrees of bureaucratic composition. The base communities are laity-rooted and decentralized units, being the manifestation of praxis between their members and clergy in the church's theocracy who have contaminated theological tradition by "selling out" to sirens of economic and political power. Cursillo centers, though, exist with the approval of their churches, have designated spiritual directors who are members of the clergy, and whose roles and events are overseen by members of the churches' hierarchies. They are units to be administered by having their assets laid out to provide maximum economic returns on investments.

Expectancy-Value Theory

There is another theory which completes the triple casing of sociological pictures about cursillo as a redemptive religious movement. That image addresses the social psychology concerns of membership and identity. Resource mobilization theory has been charged with over-emphasizing

the organizational and instrumental elements of a social movement while downplaying the individual member (Klandermans 1984). Nevertheless, the contributions the theory and social strain theory have made to the study of social movements helped support the formulation of expectancy-value theory. The two approaches allow logical shifts of emphases from macro-level concerns to middle range level interests to micro-level issues which have dual attributes affecting social movements' courses.

First, *consensus mobilization* identifies articulated public relations campaigns which broadcast communal and non-specific evidence about a movement to a community (Klandermans 1984) as the efferent drive for a movement. This action is conferred with the mass media public relations blitz enacted by the "Divine Precepts" church (Lofland 1966). Second, *action mobilization* refers to specific support of a social movement by enlisting new members (Klandermans 1984) as the afferent energy *within* a movement.

The righteous claims or emotional appeals in both motivational actions will contain debatable truths. Even though the "right"- "wrong" dichotomies are open to interpretation, they have economic merit when religious seekers or pre-converts define their enlistments as being profitable, when delinquent members define "re-ups" or re-enlistments as being beneficial, and when current members define continued presence as being valuable.

While expectancy-value theory emphasis is on the individual and cost-benefit analysis, the utility of the approach to the study of redemptive

religious movements, like *cursillo*, needs clarity. Precise explanation continues with departure from its principles and arrival in the realm of adaptation. The gain-loss and exit-entry dimensions of the theory revolve around the answers to complementary questions: "Redemption from what" and "Redemption to what?"

REDEMPTIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

An earlier section of this article presented an amended perspective of a redemptive social movement to describe *cursillo* as a redemptive *religious* movement. In light of the fact that this schedule is related to self-help or self-improvement groups (Turner and Killian 1987), a clear demarcation between their agendas must be made.

The analogous events are dependent upon a person's paradigm shift or epiphany of altered "moral nets" (Davis and Stasz 1990). The adjustment prompts the formation of new lifestyles and the creation of new networks of friends who have had similar psychological moments. Reformed ways of living are found in secular humanism and secularized religion or in many twelve-step recovery programs which rely on generous invocations of God's assistance. When the latter path is taken then the program should not be labeled as a redemptive religious movement. An organized theology, a defined religious history, and explicit sets of premises, promises, and salvific appeals are not the cornerstones for membership and participation.

This redemptive world view of *cursillo* is distinct because it contains

clear outlines of holiness and faith in the covenant of deliverance. *Cursillo's* regenerative invitations are built into Christianity's several prominent creeds and into additional bodies of internal literature. Fidelity to the belief is offered through re-proclamation, re-affirmation, renunciation, and sacramental inclusion.

It is in this context that Hoffer's (1951) ideas are used to state that leading a secular or an autonomous life is vile, barren, and sinful, which is insinuated in the "ideal" rollo. This contention lends some credence to a modified adage or parable: If an individual is so completely full of the self then there is no room for spirituality. Atonement is possible when the person-as-sinner becomes enlightened about amorality or immorality, how they are manifested, and how denunciations of personal demons and their nefarious deeds are possible.

Redemptive religious movements are composed of spiritually-motivated members who are penitent for their wicked ways, and who have put themselves into positions of piety with a divinity. The apostles amass their skills and supplies to help religious seekers who are entangled in dilemmas of faith, who are pursuing solutions for their quandaries of virtue, and who seek the company of empathetic others in a spiritual community.

Hoffer also states the co-processes of atonement entry into a state of piety with a godhead and joining a religious community, such as *cursillo*, are relatively simple.

"[T]o confess [sins] and repent is to slough off one's individual distinctiveness and separat-

rateness, and salvation is found by losing oneself in the holy one-ness of the congregation [of believers and the attendant creeds]." (1951)

Friends, family members, and work associates are the points of contact between a seeker and cursillo. The proselytes inspire the pre-converts to attend selective events prior to the retreat in order to taste some of its offerings and to meet its "fellowship of believers" (Heberle 1968). Members of the community greet the guests with a combination of general and specific compensators (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). "[C]ome join us...because we are the means of obtaining the right relationship with God" (Lawson 1991), and "We have found it and we will help you find it too" represent teasers often proclaimed by members to the visitors. Advocates assert the opinions that profits earned from membership are unlimited and that similar returns are available to all people of faith. The wholesale subjugation of the self to a group and its beliefs, however, has been the concern of social commentators.

As Christianity, its denominations, and their subcultures like cursillo have emerged, all begat controversy. Dragostin (1970) makes this point salient by excoriating cursillo with the claim that members are trapped in a closed, ethnocentric, self-serving, and vindictive club. Wayward citizens who belittle, neglect, or reject the congregation find that they are discredited, slighted, and ostracized by its members. His warning has literary allusion in

Skinner's (1948) trope about *Walden II*'s sheep which are kept in a symbolic pen and are overseen by a watchful dog lest they transgress.

A religious seeker's decision to join and maintain a career in cursillo is partially dependent on available opportunities (O'Sullivan 1988). The options are also functions of perceived gains or anticipated losses according to expectancy-value theory, whereby seekers join the movement to form religious bonds when had none not existed or to renew religious ties which had waned.

CONCLUSION: REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cursillo is a redemptive religious movement directed toward the spiritual revitalization of its members. Entry into the cursillo community takes place during a retreat which occurs over an extended weekend. Cursillo's candidates or seekers are presented with a series of talks by members of the clergy and the laity who serve as the candidates guides. Until now, though, there have been no sociological observations to identify the qualities of cursillo as a social movement.

This article partially fills that void using social strain theory, resource mobilization theory, and expectancy-value theory, but the task is still incomplete. All efforts to describe cursillo, to explain it, and to interpret it are limited in scope by the general absence of sociologists who study it. Even so, it is not likely that there can ever be a completed picture of the movement. Events seen, described, and explained

should be filtered through diverse interpretive lenses such as those which have been used here.

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Stories of Old-Time Oklahoma

By David Dary

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Most of the stories gathered here first appeared as newspaper articles during the state centennial in 2007. For this volume Dary has revised and expanded them—and added new ones. He begins with an overview of Oklahoma's rich and varied history and geography, describing the origins of its trails, rails, and waterways and recounting the many tales of buried treasure that are part of Oklahoma lore.

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STORIES OF
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