“Hutterite Communalism: A Sociological Account”

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Travis Pickell
The average modern American is committed—if not in ideal, at least in practice—to individualism, consumerism and libertarian freedom. To such a person, the existence of communitarian religious groups, like the Hutterites, is incomprehensible. From the very beginning, the followers of Jacob Hutter “enjoyed the reputation of being among the toughest, most dedicated, disciplined, and zealous of the Anabaptists.”¹ And yet, Hutterites “continue to this day in North America and represent the oldest continually existing communal experiment in human history.”² In a world in which churches ask less and less of members in a desperate attempt to abate hemorrhaging attendance, it would behoove us to ask this question: why has the Hutterite community survived, against all odds, for almost 500 years?

While some would point to paternalism, Biblicism, or radical separatism, it may be more helpful to begin with the following quote from the second generation Hutterite leader Peter Walpot: “‘It would take us too long to recount all the advantages received from this inward and benevolent living together’ (§122).³ In more colloquial words, “Membership has its benefits.” This essay will explore the spiritual and practical benefits of Hutterite communitarian living. It will do so in two steps. First, it will use the work of sociologist Rodney Stark to show that costly demands of religious membership actually lead to greater benefits for members. Then, it will explicate the individual, communal, and evangelistic benefits of communal living as demonstrated by Peter Walpot in his foundational document, “The Great Article Book.”

³ Peter Walpot, “True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods (1577),” in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel Liechty (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 138-196. All future references will be in text by article number (§).
In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark provides a sociological account of Christianity’s ascent from obscurity to dominance. That his work on the early Church should apply also to the Hutterites requires little explanation. The Hutterites were actively seeking to restore the model of communal living described in the second and fourth chapters of Acts. In doing so they required members to relinquish all private property for the good of the community. Naturally, this required great sacrifice, especially for those with greater wealth. Additionally, the Hutterite community was set apart from the rest of society, thereby acquiring a social stigma.

According to Stark, the characteristics of sacrifice and stigma “strengthen a religious group by mitigating ‘free-rider’ problems that otherwise lead to low levels of member commitment and participation.” Higher average levels of commitment then lead to “greater material, social, and religious benefits for members.” This may seem paradoxical, but it is “necessarily the case with collectively produced goods.” High demands of membership leads to higher commitment among members, which leads in turn to greater benefits for members. Therefore, Stark concludes, “Membership in an expensive religion is, for many people a ‘good bargain.’” Given the high cost of membership, Hutterites could trust that those within the community were authentic followers of Christ and not “free-riders.” For Walpot, “whoever says that he would like to follow Christ or be a disciple of Christ without forsaking all that is creaturely and without denying himself does not really believe in Christ” (§36, c.f. also §§36,128).

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4 In this sense, they were truly “radical” reformers – seeking to return “to the root” of Christianity (Latin *radix* = “root”).
6 Ibid., 177. Italics original.
7 Ibid., 178. Stark offers the contemporary example of the Mormon Church. Because members must contribute 10 percent of their time as well as income, the church is able to “lavish social services upon one another” (178).
8 Ibid., 178.
The benefits that resulted from the higher cost of membership had three interrelated dimensions. The purgation of wealth and the reliance on community instilled certain (mostly spiritual) benefits within the individual. These resulted in high levels of commitment and participation, which led to social and material benefits within the community. A properly functioning Christian community (sharing all goods and exhibiting brotherhood and love) then resulted in an evangelistic witness to outsiders. We will examine each of these in turn.

For Walpot, greed—not pride—is the primary sin. “For greed is the root of all evil, the mother of all things evil, the fortress of all malice” (§109). “Greed is a serious and evil sickness which blinds a person’s eyes and stops up his ears… withers the hand so that it is useless in helping others…We should search out the antidote for this disease with which we may kill this terrible beast and pull all greed out by the roots” (§145). Not only does greed keep us from loving our neighbors, but greed also keeps us from loving God. “A person cannot come to God so long as he is not free from and has not conquered all that is creaturely…Nothing defeats and places a person under the power of the devil like love of the creaturely, the pursuit of money and the desire for wealth” (§129). A true Christian cannot pursue worldly goods and God at the same time. What, then, is she to do? “To have one, let the other one go” (§24).

The “antidote” (§145) for greed is Christian community. “A life of Christian community is… an oven of yieldedness in which the person is tried like gold in the fire” (§29). When the Christian yields all she has to God for the good of the community, she discovers that “the one who possesses nothing and has no desire to possess anything is free and liberated and the possession of no one” (§147). This spiritual freedom enables
her to “be[come] the robust disciple of Christ [she] should be” (§50) and to experience
the “contentment, joy and blessedness” of the heavenly realm, where “there is no private
property” (§147).

If all members of the community are, in fact, experiencing such spiritual benefits,
there will be social effects as well. First among them is peace from strife and quarreling.
“Humanity…will lead a most holy life on earth, when they rid their nature of the two
words—“mine” and “yours.” These words have been and are today the cause of many
wars. From where comes war and bloodshed, quarreling and fighting, envy and hatred,
disunity and disruption if not from private possessions and greed?” (§3). While those
outside the Church “tear and bite at each other over ‘mine and yours,’” (§77) the
Hutterites sought to demonstrate the attainability of peace and brotherhood.¹⁰

For Walpot, Christians are united in brotherhood because “out of his great love
[God] has made us inheritors of heaven” (§57) and “to be brothers, all things are shared
with each other—the more evenly, the more brotherly it is” (§140). Not only that, but the
Christian in community “breathes now with ten souls, for he no longer cares for himself
alone but for all the others, even if the number is a hundred. For then their strength
multiplies. Such is the virtue of the chains and bonds of love and Christian unity and
community” (§61). Given the harsh decrees of King Ferdinand I,¹⁰ this sense of security
in numbers was invaluable.

Of course it would be absurd to suggest that someone who was primarily seeking
security would identify themselves with a persecuted religious movement. But that is not
to say that once one entered the community, the bonds of brotherhood could not become

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⁹ Of course, “brotherhood” is a generic term not meant to exclude women from community.
¹⁰ Packull, 190. “All who taught community of goods should be punished with beheading” Article 17 of
Ferdinand’s August Decree (1527).
a benefit to them. A similar point can be made about provision of material needs. No one with wealth would join the Hutterites to secure material well-being (although a destitute person may). Once a part of the community, however, the individual Christian would depend on the community to provide everything she needs. For Walpot, “it is through community that God cares for our daily needs” (§26). For this to work, however, the community could not tolerate “free-riders.” Thus, Walpot constantly urges members of the Hutterite community to work hard for the good of the community. “Each part of the body does what it does for the use and benefit of the whole body… No part leaves the rest to suffer” (§93). “Put your wealth to the use of your brothers and neighbors” (§17) for in “true community… one seeks no advantage over the neighbor but rather mutuality and common concern for each other” (§43). “Caring belongs to God; work belongs to us” (§26). “Daily work… is a public alms… for the good of the neighbor” (§133). The efficacy of these exhortations depends largely upon the commitment of the individual members of the community, which is why the spiritual benefits of relinquishing all private property (i.e. freedom from greed/avarice) are so foundational to the Hutterites.

Writing about the “golden age” of the Walpot era, Robert Friedmann reflects, “It is an amazing fact that… men and women streamed into this land from far and near. Once accepted they submitted willingly to the rather stern discipline of the Hutterite communal life with all its unusual practices. The operation of the Anabaptist ideal of a brotherhood church was thus demonstrated to everyone who wanted to learn it.”11 The separatist tendency of the Hutterites (and other Anabaptists) is often emphasized, but there was an

evangelistic thrust to Walpot’s theology. Walpot urged his community that “when we do works of love and kindness we become an example of good works to others” (§23). He found inspiration in Paul’s words to the Church in Corinth: “‘This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else’ (2 Corinthians 9:12-13)” (§91). The Church, living in community, sharing goods and exhibiting yieldedness is the only true Church. As such, it witnesses to God’s unity, compassion and love. “It will be seen in you above all nations, that the branch of love blooms among you. If you have such love that you create a brotherly and Christian community, suffering together in body and soul, it will be seen that you are of one faith in Christ and are Christ’s true disciples” (§58).

That the Hutterite Church never became a popular movement does not detract from the benefits mentioned. The fact of the matter is that the high demands of “sacrifice and stigma” had a double-effect. It at once limited the number of people who would be willing to become members, and it deepened the commitment of those who did. This essay has shown that the high costs of religious membership actually leads to greater benefits for members, and that Peter Walpot, in enumerating the core values of the Hutterite community, gave expression to such benefits. The longevity of the Hutterite community is a valuable, if counter-cultural, witness to the benefit producing power of commitment, community and yieldedness.

12 Stark, 177.
Bibliography


