



Religious Consensus and Secular Dissent

Two Alternative Paths to Survival for Utopian Communes

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Abstract. – In previous studies, the rare cases of long-term survival in property-sharing utopian communes have been attributed to a consensus of members on basic beliefs, particularly religious beliefs. A comparative study of a broad sample of 19th- and 20th-century cases reveals, however, that longevity is associated only with religions that clearly separate between sacred and profane and between good and bad. Moreover, there is a small but significant number of egalitarian communes that are secular and lack consensus even on basic questions. Procedures of decision-making and social control in these cases cannot aspire to produce more than compromises, but this, in turn, also protects them from any risky, potentially dangerous moves. [*Utopian communes, religion, institutional survival, egalitarian societies, common property*]

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“Utopian communities are society’s dreams,” writes one of their most influential students (Kanter 1972: 237), and indeed, the range of experimentation in these groups has often tested the limits of human sociality. And while some utopian communes – groups of both men and women who intentionally and voluntarily live together and

share all their property¹ – object to being seen as cultural laboratories, others pride themselves of such an orientation. Be it true equality (including that between the genders) or rather rigid meritocracy; be it the even distribution of emotional attachment over all fellow members, even to the disadvantage of marital and family relations; be it a life without sexuality or rather one suffused with it; be it the renunciation of any superfluous technology or comfort; be it the complete erasure of sin – all these are goals that different communes have tried to put into practice within their utopian schemes. The *therapeutae* of the first century B.C. (Moffatt 1971) were the first recorded case,

1 There is hardly a utopian commune that fails to allow its members at least some private property, such as the trunk in which adult Hutterites keep their personal belongings. Its scope, however, is highly limited and does not include productive assets such as land, buildings, or vehicles which no member can claim as their own. These groups thus differ widely from their ambient societies where private ownership and corporate ownership built on private ownership (such as in joint-stock companies) are usually the dominant mode of allocation. Utopian communes are distinct from monastic orders since these are restricted to only one gender; kolkhozes and people’s communes since these were not voluntary; and traditional cases of shared property (as e.g., in hunter-gatherer groups) since in these, community of goods follows established practices and is not an intentional, voluntary deviation from the societal norm. Communes are also often termed “communal groups,” “communitarian groups” (Hostetler 1974b), or “intentional communities” (Andelson 1996) although common usage of these words is not always confined to cases that share their property.