

Where Have All the Communes Gone? Religion's Effect on the Survival of Communes

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Although previous research has found religion to have a significant effect on commune survival, these conclusions were typically based on bivariate analyses. Drawing on data collected by the Fellowship for Intentional Community, we present a multivariate analysis of communal survival using a comparatively large sample (N = 454) of modern American communes. Controlling for key factors suggested by the literature, we find that religion does not have a significant, direct effect on commune survival. Rather, the total population of the commune, whether the commune owned the land, and its longevity significantly influenced survival of a commune between 1995 and 2000. We discuss the implications of these findings for research on the role of religion in communes.

With examples dating back to at least 1663, the United States has a rich history of communal movements (Bestor 1950). These attempts at alternative living take a bewildering variety of forms—occupying different locations, varying in requirements and restrictions, using different leadership structures, worshipping different deities (or none at all), and experiencing differing survival rates. Consequently, communes provide excellent “natural experiments” in the capacity of group authority to control individual desires (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:157).

A significant percentage of communal experiments disband within the first few years of existence and those that continue typically undergo large-scale changes over their lifetime (Zablocki 1980). Unlike more diffuse social movements, communes occupy a fixed location, have a specified membership, and have a stated purpose. By studying communes, researchers witness the entire life course of a distinct social movement and view the effects of changes in authority structures, the breakdown of internal ties, and other key social phenomena (Bradley 1987; Carlton-Ford 1993; Zablocki 1980).

That communes differ in their levels of religiosity (Carlton-Ford 1993) is of greatest interest to scholars of religion. Some are formed to practice a particular religion, ranging from the worship of extraterrestrials to strict interpretations of Christian doctrine. Other communities develop to avoid religion and create a secular “paradise.” Still others express indifference to religion or allow members to follow the spiritual paths of their choosing.

The current research is specifically focused on the role of religion in the survival of communes. By taking this approach, we do not conflate the longevity/continuance of communes with their “success” (Latimore 1991). A commune may be considered successful for a variety of reasons other than surviving for an extended period of time, such as its influence on society, its social cohesiveness, its ability to meet stated goals, or even its achievement of utopia by some standard (Wagner 1985). Survival is but one feature of a commune. But as we discuss, there are theoretical reasons to predict a relationship between religion and commune survival.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON RELIGION AND COMMUNE LONGEVITY

Sociologists recognize the benefits of studying communes, and a substantial body of research has developed over the years. This past research takes one of three forms. Some are case studies/

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ethnographies of particular communes (cf. Brewer 1997; Carden 1969; Foster 1997; Hicks 2001; Peters 1965; Zablocki 1971). Others place the communal movement within the context of particular historical periods. For example, Bestor (1950) and Durnbaugh (1997) discuss communes in colonial America (1600–1700s), and Fogarty (1990) examines 19th- and 20th-century U.S. communes (1860–1914). The third group studies communes within the context of the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Melville 1972; Zablocki 1980).¹

Stark and Bainbridge (1996) developed a theoretical explanation for the relative longevity of religious communes compared to secular communes. The key difference between religious and secular communes, they argue, lies in the nature of their rewards. Members of a religious commune expect their ultimate payoff to occur in the afterlife. Their alternative lifestyle is expected to help the achievement of that goal, but religious communes “postpone potential failure until the next life” (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:162). Members of secular communes, on the other hand, expect to see benefits of their chosen lifestyle on earth. Should life in the commune prove less satisfying than the outside world, there is little to keep them from straying. In sum, religious communes focus on intangible rewards, thereby reducing the pressure to provide immediate, worldly benefits.

Religious communes have an added advantage with regard to leadership. While secular communes can easily disintegrate due to internal strife, religious communes have a doctrinal basis for authority. As Abrams and McCulloch (1976:207) note:

Within the religious group we were able to study, many of the difficulties of secular communes were dissolved away on the strength of an implicit belief in the existence of a hierarchy of religious competence.

Previous studies have produced the near-unanimous finding that religious communes are more likely to survive than the secular (cf. Abrams and McCulloch 1976; Gardner 1978; Hall 1988; Hine 1966; Kanter 1968, 1972; Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stephan and Stephan 1973; Zablocki 1980). Kanter’s (1972) historical study of 19th-century American communes ($N = 30$), and Hall’s (1988) later reanalysis of her data, found a strong relationship between religion and survival.² Stephan and Stephan (1973) examined 143 communes operational between 1776 and 1900. Only 17 percent of secular communes survived for 10 years compared to 63 percent of religious communes. Based on his study of 17 California communes, Hine ([1953] 1983) found the average life span of secular communes to be 10 years, while religious communes survived an average of 20 years.

Past research certainly suggests that religion will be a key factor in determining the survival of communes (cf. Abrams and McCulloch 1976; Gardner 1978; Hall 1988; Hine 1966; Kanter 1968; 1972; Stephan and Stephan 1973; Zablocki 1980). However, much of this research has suffered from methodological weaknesses. Given the age of commune studies, it is not surprising that the authors generally performed simple bivariate analyses.³ Thus, most existing research fails to determine religion’s role in the survival of communes when controlling for other key factors such as leadership style and land ownership. Zablocki (1980) performed one of the few regression analyses using commune data, concluding that religious communes exhibit fewer disintegrations than political and countercultural communes. Unfortunately, Zablocki based those conclusions on a regression model with only 37 cases. This article addresses the methodological weaknesses of previous research by examining the role of religion in a multivariate context, using a comparatively large sample of modern American communes.

DATA

The data used in this study are drawn from two directories published by the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC) in 1995 and 2000. Founded in 1986 as a clearinghouse for information on communal living, the FIC began publishing listings of intentional communities in

1990.⁴ Any nonviolent group that does not prevent members from leaving is allowed a listing in the directory. Groups define for themselves the meaning of “community.” Hence, the FIC directories contain submissions from any group that considers itself an intentional community. This results in a wide variety of communal arrangements in the sample—from vegetarians sharing an urban loft to Christian groups living off the land in rural areas.

Given the voluntary nature of the FIC data set, it is not a complete sample of communes in the United States. Questenberry (1996) estimates that 700 communes refuse inclusion in the directory for a variety of reasons, including the avoidance of unwanted publicity and a lack of interest in new members. Furthermore, traditional monasteries, Hutterite colonies, and Native Americans living communally are not included (Questenberry 1996). Nevertheless, the FIC data provide an extraordinarily large and detailed pool of information on modern American communal living. Using data from the 1995 and 2000 directories, we develop a database of 550 communes in North America.

The Nomenclature of Communal Living

The FIC directory bills as a guide to “intentional communities” raise a key question that must be addressed before continuing with analysis. What is an intentional community? Is it the same thing as a commune?

A bewildering variety of terms have been used by researchers and those within the communal subculture as labels, including “communes,” “collectives,” “cooperatives,” “experimental communities,” “communitarian movements,” and “intentional communities.” Although Fairfield (1972:1) gives each of these labels a “specific, narrowly defined meaning that is related . . . to the degree of sharing involved,” most researchers use them somewhat interchangeably.

Many groups included in the FIC data submitted their own definition of “intentional community,” defining the term based on their interests. For example, some religious communes define “intentional community” in terms of theology. As stated by Gita Nagari Village, a Hare Krishna community in Port Royal, Pennsylvania:

A community is a group of people who cooperate to serve God with work, worship, and love. At Gita Nagari, we try to show the natural sweet relationship between the land, the animals, humanity and God. We milk cows, work oxen, school our children, and try to live life in the spirit of Krishna's Bhagavad Gita, India's Song of God. (Questenberry 1996:5)

Adirondack Herbs, a New York community with a focus on ecological conservation and no specified religious path, define intentional community in secular terms:

a group of cooperating nonrelated humans, living by their own choice on one piece of land or in one house for reasons which go beyond mere convenience. (Questenberry 1996:5)

Despite such varied definitions, the groups listed in the FIC directories share a set of characteristics typically used to identify communes. They are all composed of a group of people, not all of them related, that have chosen to live together on a shared piece of property. Members choose this living arrangement to manifest a certain shared lifestyle that differs from the dominant culture. This lifestyle may be based on political philosophy (Marxism, pacifism, etc.), theology (Amish, Hare Krishna, Wiccan, and so on), alternative family arrangements (poly-fidelity, gay, lesbian, shared parenting), vegetarianism/vegan, feminism, or a near-endless variety of other ideological, political, racial, or economic characteristics. The “deviant” ideology held by the commune both separates it from the surrounding culture and, ideally, strengthens ties among residents.

Thus despite its title, the FIC data set consists of groups that clearly meet Zablocki's (1980:7) definition of a commune:

[A commune is] . . . any group of five or more adult individuals (plus children if any), the majority of whose dyads are not cemented by blood or marriage, who have decided to live together, without compulsion, for an indefinite period of time, primarily for the sake of an ideological goal, focused upon the achievement of community, for which a collective household is deemed essential.

MEASURES

Though limited, the FIC gathers a variety of data about the community beyond its name and address, such as location (urban or rural), number of members (adult and child), year founded, the extent of meal sharing (how often members eat together), type of income sharing (if any), leadership structure, ownership of the land on which the commune resides, and religious path (if any). We have theoretical reasons for including each of these items in the analyses. Further, publications intended for use by communities, such as *Communities* (produced by the FIC) note the importance of many of these factors in the development of healthy communities.

Commune Size

Theorists and researchers hold differing opinions on how the size of a religious organization will affect its likelihood of survival. For example, Hall (2001) argues that larger and more complex organizations are at lower risk of “organizational death” than are smaller organizations. As an organization increases in size, its rules and regulations tend to become codified and less dependent on the whims of a “charismatic” leader (Weber 1978). Larger organizations are also likely to have more human and financial capital available, allowing the group to weather the occasional crisis. By extension, we should expect that larger communes will be less likely to disband. On the other hand, Latimore (1991) argues that there may be limits to the benefits of group size. Utopia is inherently “small and short-lived,” Latimore argues (1991:40), for as the size of a commune increases the homogeneity of its members and levels of formal social control tend to decrease.

Given these varied predictions for the effects of size, we include the total population of the commune as a predictor in the analysis. However, we removed three communes that provided membership numbers far above the average of the rest of the sample. Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa, claimed 7,600 members, the Hutterian Brethren of Spokane claimed 40,000, and the Methow Center of Enlightenment in Twisp, Washington, reported 5,000. Unless we are willing to assume, for example, that Maharishi International University comprises approximately 79 percent of the population of Fairfield (listed as 9,509 in the 2000 U.S. Census) and the Methow Center for Enlightenment has 533 percent of the population of Twisp (938 in the 2000 Census), the cases may be safely removed from analyses. Due to skewness, commune size is entered into multivariate analyses as a natural log transformation.

Land Ownership

The FIC gathers information on who owns the land on which the commune resides. Through this item, we can determine whether the commune is owned entirely by the community or by an individual, land trust, landlord, nonprofit subgroup of members, or some combination thereof.

Zablocki (1980) raises land ownership as a key challenge faced by communes. We should expect communities to have a greater likelihood of survival if the commune owns the land on which it resides. After all, if the commune rents space from a landlord, he or she may decide to use the land for other purposes, or raise the rent to a level the commune cannot afford. If ownership is concentrated in the hands of an individual member, his or her disenchantment could prove disastrous for the collective. In sum, we believe that communes in which land ownership is entirely in the hands of the community will be more likely to survive than any other type of

ownership. Consequently, we compare complete ownership to all other combinations (as a dummy variable) in our multivariate analyses.

Location

All producers of collective goods are susceptible to free riders, those who would benefit from group activities without contributing in kind (Iannaccone 1992, 1994). By draining resources and lowering the average level of commitment among members, free riders undermine group strength. One means by which groups reduce free ridership is through the imposition of costs. The stricter a group becomes, the less attractive it is to free riders. Berger, Hackett, and Millar (1972) argued that communes located in urban areas allow members to “experiment” while still easily maintaining ties to mainstream jobs, services, and outsiders. Consequently, rural communes require a more serious commitment from potential members than do urban.

Following an economic/rational choice perspective, we predict that communes located in rural areas experience higher levels of member commitment and, hence, greater odds of survival. The FIC data indicate whether a community is located in an urban or rural area. Location is entered into multivariate analyses as a dummy variable (1 = rural).

Income Sharing and Join Fees

A rational choice perspective also suggests that imposing costs in the true economic sense will discourage those who wish to benefit from the hard work of others.⁵ Both Kanter (1972) and Zablocki (1980) find that the stringency of admission standards is inversely related to failure—“the harder it is to get in, the harder it is eventually to get out” (Zablocki 1980:109). Beyond a rational choice perspective, we can expect a successful income-sharing program to build trust among members, increasing group solidarity (Butcher 1990; Teshu 1998).

The FIC data include two measures of economic costs: whether the commune has a fee for joining and the type of income sharing, if any, required by the community. We include two dummy variables in our multivariate analyses for join fee (1 = commune has a join fee) and income sharing (1 = commune practices income sharing).

Shared Meals

Communities magazine frequently extols the value of shared meals in building a strong community (cf. Kozeny 1997; Ludwig 2003; Sandhill 1997). Sandhill (1997:6) discusses the issue:

Most groups that have developed a strong sense of cohesion understand how eating together contributes to that cohesion. Meals offer a respite from separate toils, the chance for some members to nurture the others, and to share the triumphs and trials of everyday life.

Although somewhat dependent on the presence of charismatic leadership, Carlton-Ford (1993) found that group rituals have a positive effect on “collective effervescence” (intense feelings aroused in individuals by group activity; see also Durkheim 1995). Shared meals may act as a ritual experience, cementing bonds between group members and engendering a “we” feeling.

The Lofland-Stark model of conversion (1965) notes the importance of strong internal ties in retaining group members. Potential converts only join a group when the strength of attachments to members outweighs external attachments. Should internal ties weaken, the member is more easily drawn away from the group by external contacts (see also Beckford 1975). Indeed, Zablocki's (1980:128) study found that “the most powerful single predictor of leaving [the

commune] is . . . the amount of love received from fellow commune members.” The number of times a person was mentioned by fellow members as an “object of love,” the lower the probability of leaving the group. If, as Sandhill (1997) and others claim, shared meals create bonds between members, then we expect meal sharing to reduce defection from the commune, increasing its chance of survival.

The FIC data group frequency of meal sharing into the following categories: rarely, one–three times a month, once a week, two to five times a week, all lunches, all dinners, and all meals. The categories “all dinners,” “all lunches,” and “all meals” were collapsed into a single category, “daily.” The result is an ordinal variable for meal sharing that is a frequency of shared meals running from rarely to daily.

Leadership

While shared activities may bond members together and provide a sense of community, previous research suggests that it is important for communes to manage the energy released by such activities with effective leadership (Bradley 1987). Stark and Iannaccone (1995) argue that in order to grow in size, religious groups must have a clearly defined leadership structure with the ability to make hard decisions. Indeed, sociologists of religion are well aware of the fact that charismatic leaders can generate high levels of commitment among followers (Carlton-Ford 1993; Weber 1978). More specifically, members of communities and the scholars who study them have found that a complete lack of leadership in communes tends to result in anarchy or apathy (cf. Greenwood 1993; Hine 1966; Joreen 1990; Kanter 1972), while oppressive leaders drive members away (Wagner 1993; Walter 1993; Zablocki 1980).

Unfortunately, the FIC data do not contain information on the quality of leaders—their level of decisiveness or willingness to accept feedback from fellow members. However, the data do indicate whether each community has an identified leader, allowing us to test for the gross effects of leadership on longevity. Leadership is entered into the analyses as a dummy variable (1 = commune has an identified leader).

Religious Path

Given the topic of the current research, it is, of course, necessary to determine whether each commune has/had a religious focus. In 1995, the FIC asked groups to indicate their spiritual path, which the FIC broke into categories.⁶ Each commune was also given several paragraphs to elaborate their focus and/or mission. If available, we used the group’s stated religious path. If a group did not state a particular path, we examined its official statement carefully. In several cases, a commune that did not have a stated religious path exhibited a clear religious focus in its mission statement. If we found no clear evidence for a religious focus or if the group simply stated that it is ecumenical or open to all religions, it was coded as having no religious path.⁷ Religion is treated as a dichotomy in our primary analysis (1 = commune has a stated religious path).

DETERMINING SURVIVAL

In order to determine which communes have survived and how long they have been in operation, we compared the 1995 and 2000 FIC listings. We attempt to verify the continued existence of each commune listed in 1995 by finding its companion listing in 2000. However, we did not assume that the absence of a listing in 2000 is conclusive evidence of a disbanding. The FIC publishes a newsletter and a magazine, *Communities: Journal of Cooperation*, that provide updates on the status of communes when possible—such as when a commune has folded or changed its name or location. When we found no information about a missing commune in FIC directories, newsletters, and journals, we conducted Internet and phone directory searches using

the last-known address. In over two dozen cases, we verified that a commune dropped from FIC directories had moved a short distance away and/or changed its name. Using these methods, we determined the survival status of 399 of the 550 communes.

Since communes might remove themselves from FIC listings for a variety of reasons, we did not feel justified assuming that the remaining 151 communities had ceased operations. Therefore, in an attempt to rescue as many of these missing cases as possible, a mailing was sent to their last-known address. The mailing consisted of a cover letter explaining the nature of the research, a one-page questionnaire, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. The authors decided that the questions asked of potential respondents must be brief and unobtrusive. The sample was expected to consist of groups that either decided they did not want the attention of an FIC listing or that had disbanded. In either case, respondents were unlikely to respond favorably to lengthy questioning. The questionnaire simply asked whether the community was still in operation. If so, respondents were asked to estimate the number of adults and children. If the community had folded, we asked for a brief statement about the circumstances under which it ceased operations. Respondents were instructed to leave blank any question they did not feel comfortable answering.

Of the 151 questionnaires mailed, 55 were eventually returned. With the addition of the 55 returned questionnaires, our final sample consists of 454 communes. It is worth reiterating that the sample is based on the conservative assumption that missing cases are not necessarily disbanded communes. Ninety-six communes listed in the 1995 FIC directory could not be accounted for in 2000. Many of these communes have, in all likelihood, folded but have been dropped from our sample given their uncertain status.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNES

Given the rarity of commune data, we briefly present some basic characteristics of our sample before continuing with an analysis of communal survival. The average size of the communes in the sample is approximately 18 members. Although some communes are exclusively male (seven) and exclusively female (seven), the typical gender breakdown was 50/50 (49.7 percent female).

Of the 454 communes in our sample, 85 (19 percent) disbanded between 1995 and 2000. The surveys we received from disbanded communes provided various explanations for the dissolution. Formed in 1994, a California community named Red Mountain folded four years later when the land on which it resided was sold. Earth Family Farm and Ecovillage, a New Age commune devoted to "living a simple lifestyle in touch with spirit and nature, truly sucking from the Breasts of Mother Earth" formed in 1988 (FIC 1995:242). It survived until 1999 on 50 acres in Colorado, when it folded due to "[t]oo much transient energy, improper leadership, [and] no protocol for conflict resolution."⁸ The Permanent Agriculture Land Trust, a commune focused on "holistic resource management" with no particular religious path, deemed "religion to be a personal choice, not a community focus" (FIC 1995:285). Operating in California from 1993 to 1998, the group dissolved when "personal and family demands required some of the key members to become inactive."⁹

Table 1 provides an analysis similar to much existing research on commune longevity (cf. Bradley 1987; Carlton-Ford 1993; Zablocki 1980). We first present frequencies for each of the major characteristics of communes available to us: leadership, land ownership, location, income sharing, join fee, meal sharing, population, and religious path. For purposes of presentation, meal sharing was collapsed into a dichotomous variable in Table 1. For each characteristic, we also present its effect on the likelihood of survival between 1995 and 2000.

Three factors were significantly related to survival changes. Approximately 90 percent (90.1 percent) of communes that own the land on which they reside were still active as of 2000, compared to 81.8 percent of communes that do not entirely own their property. Size was another significant

TABLE 1
BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNES IN THE FELLOWSHIP FOR
INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES LISTINGS (1995, 2000)

		% of Type Still Active as of 2000 ^a
Recognized leader?		
Yes	122 (34.4%)	86.1
No	233 (65.6%)	82.4
Does commune own its land?		
Yes	183 (47.9%)	90.1*
No	199 (52.1%)	81.8
Location		
Rural	247 (61.0%)	85.8
Urban	158 (39.0%)	81.4
Required income sharing?		
Yes	83 (25.4%)	83.1
No	244 (74.6%)	84.0
Does commune require a fee to join?		
Yes	119 (31.6%)	88.2
No	258 (68.44%)	82.6
Shares a daily meal/all meals?		
Yes	147 (40.1%)	87.1
No	220 (59.9%)	82.6
Has a religious path?		
Yes	203 (44.8%)	86.0*
No	250 (55.2%)	77.6
Size of commune		
Mean (<i>SD</i>)	18 (3.66)	Mean size of active groups = 21* ^b
Median	15	Mean size of inactive groups = 10

^aSignificance established with chi-square test.

^bSignificance established with *t*-test.

**p* < 0.05 or less.

predictor of survival. Communes still active in 2000 had a mean size of 21 members, more than double the mean size (10) of communes inactive as of 2000.

As did a host of earlier studies (cf. Bradley 1987; Fogarty 1990, 1972; Gardner 1978; Hall 1988; Hicks 2001; Hine 1966; Pitzer 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Zablocki 1980), we find a simple, bivariate relationship between religion and commune survival. Eighty-six percent of religious communes survived from 1995 to 2000 compared to 78 percent of nonreligious communes.

In bivariate analyses, the other variables identified in the literature do not have a significant relationship with the likelihood of survival between 1995 and 2000. These include having a recognized leader, an urban versus rural location, meal sharing, groups that practice income sharing, and whether the commune requires a join fee.

Unfortunately, this is where most analyses of the effects of religion on communal survival end. There are certainly theoretical reasons for assuming a relationship between religion and the continued operation of communes. However, a bivariate analysis cannot test for a spurious relationship. Religion may simply be correlated with other factors that are the true predictors of communal survival. In order to test for religion's effect on survival controlling for other key factors, we continue with a regression analysis.

TABLE 2
LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF COMMUNE SURVIVAL
(1995–2000)

	<i>b</i>	<i>e^b</i>
Intercept	5.364*	
Year established	−0.077**	0.925
Total population (natural log)	0.472*	1.60
Recognized <i>leader</i>	−0.205	
Commune <i>owns land</i>	0.933*	2.54
Rural location	0.718	
Income sharing	−0.799	
Commune has <i>join fee</i>	0.702	
Frequency of <i>meal sharing</i>	0.175	
Commune has a <i>religious path</i>	0.395	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Model chi-square 33.02.**

Proportional reduction in error 17.3%; $N = 233$.

RELIGION AND COMMUNAL SURVIVAL IN A MULTIVARIATE CONTEXT

Table 2 presents a logistic regression analysis predicting the likelihood that a commune operational in 1995 survived to the year 2000. Although the variable of greatest interest to the current research is whether the commune has a religious path, we include controls for total population of the commune, frequency of meal sharing, dummy variables representing rural/urban location, and whether the commune has a join fee, recognized leader, practices income sharing, and owns the land on which it resides. We also control for the year in which the commune was established. Unfortunately, due to missing data in some of the control variables, the number of cases for the regression analysis was reduced to 233.¹⁰

Having a rural location and practicing income sharing are not related to chance of survival in the univariate analysis and remain nonsignificant in the regression model. Controlling for other factors, neither the presence of an identified leader, the use of a join fee, or the frequency of meal sharing significantly affected the likelihood of survival.

Three variables have a significant effect on survival from 1995 to 2000: the total population of the commune (natural log); whether the commune owns its land; and the year the commune was established. Larger communes may prove more able to weather the exit of any particular member, or may simply benefit from higher levels of financial and human capital when facing challenges. For every 1 percent increase in total membership, a commune was 60 percent more likely to survive from 1995 to 2000. Communes that own the land are less subject to the whims of landlords who may not be committed to the group's survival. Or perhaps land ownership is simply an indicator of the commune's overall financial health. In either case, communes that own their land were 154 percent (or two and a half times) more likely to have survived the period in question.

In terms of survival, communes reap the benefits of longevity. The apparent negative effect of year established on survival must be explained further. Since younger communes have higher values on the year established (e.g., 1996 is higher than 1900), the negative effect indicates that longevity *increases* the odds of survival. For each additional year the commune has been in operation, the likelihood of survival between 1995 and 2000 increases by 8 percent.

The most surprising finding in light of the wealth of previous research on religion and communal survival/longevity is the finding for religious path. As Table 1 demonstrates, religious

communes were more likely to survive from 1995 to 2000. However, when we consider other potential predictors of survival, the religion effect is shown to be spurious or at least indirect. The communes with the greatest likelihood of surviving were those that owned the land on which the commune is located, those that had a larger total number of members, and those that had been in existence for a longer period of time, whether religious in nature or not.

DISCUSSION

This article is the first study of the effects of religion on the survival of modern American communes within a multivariate context. Using a comparatively large sample and conservative assumptions about survival, we predicted the likelihood that a commune that was operational in 1995 remained in operation at 2000. We include in our model several key factors suggested by the literature, such as leadership, land ownership, longevity, and others.

So what happened to religion in the final analysis? We found a simple, bivariate effect of religion, in line with previous research on religion and communal survival (cf. Abrams and McCulloch 1976; Gardner 1978; Hall 1988; Hine 1966; Kanter 1968, 1972; Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stephan and Stephan 1973; Zablocki 1980). While Table 1 findings suggest that religious communes have an advantage with regard to survival, the story is more complicated than bivariate findings would suggest. Religion is only significant until other key factors suggested by the literature are controlled. The communes that survived the five-year period from 1995 to 2000 had larger populations, owned their land, and had existed for a longer period of time.

While we find no religion effect in the final model, this does not necessarily mean that religion has no effect on the survival communes—rather, its effects may be subtler. For example, the analysis found that a commune's longevity (how long it had been in existence as of 1995) significantly affected its survival chances. The religious communes in our sample happened to have been formed significantly earlier (by approximately 3.5 years, $p < 0.001$, based on a difference of means test) than the secular communes, on average. So although religion did not directly affect survival, religious communes enjoyed the benefits of longevity in surviving the 1995–2000 period.

Religion also appears to have an indirect effect through land ownership. But in this case, the effect is negative. Thirty-seven percent of religious communes own the land on which they reside compared to nearly 58 percent of those without a religious path. In other words, the religious communes in our sample were less likely to own their land, ultimately decreasing their chances of survival.

Our findings open several avenues for future research. First and foremost, our study is limited to information collected by the FIC, as such we do not include variables representing some potentially important determinants of communal survival, such as direct measures of the density of social networks (see Zablocki 1980), sources of income (i.e., how the commune earns money), or demographic factors such as average level of education and income. If future survival studies can include such measures, perhaps we can clarify how religion indirectly affects survival.

Although the current article and past research treat religion as a dichotomous variable (communes are either religious or not), perhaps a more nuanced measure of religion would prove a significant predictor of survival. Unfortunately, the tendency for groups to simply identify themselves as “Christians” was problematic in coding them beyond gross categories. For example, the Covenant House Faith Community in New York bills itself as open to “all forms of Christianity” (FIC 1995:235), and the Open Door Community in Atlanta describes itself as a “residential Christian community” without specifying a denomination (FIC 1995:281). The inclusion of dummy variables representing broad religious groupings (Christian, New Age, Eastern, secular) does not influence the results.

Categorizing groups as either religious or secular does not, for example, take their levels of strictness into account. A rich body of theoretical and empirical work has found that strict

religious groups attract more members than those with more liberal doctrines (cf. Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1992, 1994, 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Stark and Finke 2000).

Theorists generally consider two broad areas when discussing strictness: group requirements and theology. Groups with strict requirements expect much of their members in terms of evangelism, tithes, restricted or proscribed behaviors, and so on. The current study includes several measures that arguably tap the requirement dimension of strictness, including join fees, income sharing, and rural versus urban location.¹¹ However, none of these measures had a significant impact on survival. This article is unable to include meaningful distinctions or differences in theology. To do so would require more detailed statements of doctrine/mission statements than are available in the FIC data. We encourage future data collection efforts to include sufficient information about group theology to allow for testing the effects of theological differences on survival. Perhaps such an effort will reveal a hidden religion effect not present in the current analysis.

While we raise avenues for future research in the study of communal survival, this article has answered a simple question—Does religion have an impact on the survival chances of communes in a multivariate context? Previous research has attempted to answer that question and almost invariably reached the wrong conclusion. There is no simple, direct effect of religion on commune survival once key controls are included in the analysis.

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NOTES

1. Rather than summarizing this vast body of literature on communes, we limit our discussion to those studies that have specifically examined religion and length of survival of communes.
2. It should be noted that Kanter (1972) downplayed the importance of religion in communal success. However, all of the communes in her sample that persisted 25 years or longer were religious.
3. Kitts (1996) examined the likelihood of survival between 1990 and 1995 using a sample of 408 communes. Although using a multivariate analysis and a comparatively large and recent sample of communes, the complete findings of the study remain unpublished (summarized in Kitts 2000), and Kitts (1996) did not test for the effects of religion on survival or longevity.
4. A similar organization, the Fellowship for Intentional Communities, was established in 1948 in Ohio. The 1948 incarnation of the FIC gradually decreased its activities through the 1960s. Inspired by this earlier FIC and similar organizations, Dan Questenberry and others incorporated the Fellowship for Intentional Community in 1986.
5. Although logically we expect that income sharing should result in greater commitment among members, Gardner (1978) found that communal sharing actually shortened group life spans.
6. In 1995, the FIC categorized the spiritual paths of communes (based on responses) as Buddhist, Christian, Eastern, eclectic, ecumenical, Emissaries of Divine Light, Hutterian Brethren, Native American, New Social Order in Messiah, other, Pagan, Protestant, Quaker, Roman Catholic, and Unitarian Universalist.
7. New Age groups tend to allow higher levels of religious experimentation than strict Christian groups. So it is possible that some groups that claim to be ecumenical are, in fact, New Age groups.
8. Quote is from survey received from Earth Family Farm and Ecovillage.
9. Quote is from survey received from the Permanent Agriculture Land Trust.
10. We examined missing cases for systematic problems. We found that the distribution of cases was essentially random across the variables included in the analysis. The biggest offender in terms of missing data is the income-sharing variable, whose inclusion causes the loss of 48 cases. We estimate the regression model without income sharing and receive the same pattern of results—total population, year established, and land ownership are the only significant predictors of commune survival.
11. As discussed earlier in the article, urban communes allow members to enjoy the benefits of mainstream jobs and services, while still experimenting with the communal lifestyle. Rural communes require greater commitment from members, who must forgo many conveniences if they wish to belong.

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