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# Potential Causes of Ritual Instability in Doctrinal New Religious Movements: A Cognitive Hypothesis

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## Abstract

Within the animal kingdom, hierarchical social structures appear in very similar forms, even if the organisms that make up the social structure differ drastically. Hierarchical social structures and apparent power centralization patterns can be witnessed in insects such as ants and bees, avian species such as chickens and vultures, and mammals such as wolves and humans. Here, an attempt will be made to apply conceptions and terminology of evolutionary theory, concerning alpha male, charismatic leaders in new religious movements (nrms), and cognitive psychology in an interdisciplinary explanation for ritual instability while testing established ritual hypotheses. This will be done by hypothesizing how charismatic alphas attain their status within religious groups and how this presence affects the ritual stability of the group from a cognitive level.

## Keywords

New Religious Movements, Ritual, Cognition, Evolution, Alpha, Charismatic Leader, Harvey Whitehouse, Jesper Sørensen

... For many species a purely social construct in that the queens [honey bees] have no different genetic constitution than the workers but are “made” into their superior role and size by being served special foods much the way human groups “make” certain of their individuals, through ritual behaviors towards them, into chiefs, pharaohs, popes, presidents, and Dalai Lamas. If one of these dies, another is made (Paden 2008: 13).

## Introduction

In the animal kingdom, there are many similarities among animals that have gone largely unnoticed in the span of human history. This article attempts to shed light on a similarity that is shared among many species and genera: the alpha male. It pays particular attention to the effect they have on the ritual systems they are involved in.

Here it is appropriate to make some admissions of method and theory. Throughout this endeavor, the methods of cognitive and evolutionary psychology are employed, both of which assume evolutionary processes as their theoretical basis. That having been said, one must keep in mind that the scope of the word

“history” no longer limits itself to the past 10,000 or so years since anatomically modern man<sup>1</sup>; rather, an evolutionary timescale widens to the dawn of biological life on this planet, and more reasonably, to 200,000 years ago with the first traces of modern *Homo Sapiens*.

Following this, any integrated study of religion must have similar theoretical assumptions if the methodology is to be sound (Martin 2001)<sup>2</sup>. This reconciliation of method and theory links the study of religion, previously exclusive to the social sciences, directly with the “Naturwissenschaften” of the biological sciences. The cognitive science of religion follows that religion exists as a product of human minds<sup>3</sup>– the mind being the collective output of the brain and the brain being an evolved organ – therefore any output of the mind, including religion, is bound by the evolutionary processes that governs and gives rise to the organ we currently study in psychology.

Within the wide range of NRMs in the United States alone you find actions and theologies ranging from peaceful prayer to public acts of violence and from traditional Christianity to “new age” mysticism. How then do we talk about these groups? Or is it fruitful to talk about these groups as a religious type at all? In many endeavors of contemporary religious scholarship, terminology is mixed and matched from a sprawling variety of methodological backgrounds: sociology, history, economics, and psychology to name a few. To talk about such a wide variety of behaviors and groups, which make up the category “New Religious Movement”, one should use a terminology that has cross-cultural (i.e. pan-human) applicability for there to be any attempt at a theoretical basis that can be tested outside of the United States; American culture is not the only one with such movements, indeed NRMs exist in every part of the world. Here it seems fruitful not to talk about “cult leaders” because these religious groups are considered “cults” only in relation to the larger socio-historical context in which they are found; rather, one could talk about alpha leaders within small or socially exclusive novel religious groups because alphas in these contexts appear not only across cultures but across species<sup>4</sup>, thus being a valid subject and terminology for a study assuming evolutionary processes as its theoretical basis.

One aspect of many NRMs that scholars see throughout the historical record is the presence of a central leader, or alpha. In these groups the alpha usually functions in the group as the god incarnate and serves as a charismatic authority.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Being of near identical structure in the cortical areas of the brain to contemporary humans.

<sup>2</sup> Luther Martin has deemed studies of religion that are not conscious of their methodology’s theoretical assumptions as “methodologically promiscuous”, i.e. when scholars pick and choose different methods and points in order to put together an argument regardless of irreconcilable differences between the method’s theoretical assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Whether this is a by-product of human minds or an adaptation is still debated. For more on this, see Kirkpatrick 2004 and Bulbulia et. al. 2008.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that other species have religion or religious institutions; rather, other species that exist in small, socially exclusive groups exhibit behaviors parallel to those found in novel religious movements.

<sup>5</sup> Many religious theories and descriptions, such as those put forth by Weber (1947) and Stark and Bainbridge (1987) hinge on the concept of charismatic leadership. Here I use charismatic leadership with the full admission that it is *not* an explanatory category, it is a descriptive category, and the psychological basis for why alphas and charismatic authority has explanatory power, but simply saying that a leader is “charismatic” is not explanatory but descriptive.

These charismatic alphas draw their power and authority by being the superhuman agent(s) or of an equal and direct divine authority to the superhuman agent(s). As it will be shown later, the alpha draws on the same cognitive mechanisms and proclivities that go into making gods in order to sustain their power, whether the leader aware of it or not. As noted by Jesper Sørensen, the presence of a charismatic authority creates instability in the group (Sørensen 2005). To clarify, the alpha in NRMs serves as a charismatic authority in that they are the sole highest power within the religious hierarchy/social system; other forms of religious authority, such as priests of different Christian traditions or Indian sadus can be forms of charismatic authority, but unless they are the sole proprietor in a given social context, they do not function as an alpha, even though they may be charismatic leaders. This is because an alpha maintains his niche status as a sole incarnation, emanation of the divine, or god, and draws his or her power over the group<sup>6</sup> from that belief.

Many sociologists might say that destabilization is caused because of the internal structure of the group, or might cite clinical (i.e. psychological) abnormalities in both the group members as well as the leader. Although these observations may be valid at times, they fail to tell us why these movements are unstable in other contexts, which is to say that they provide no explanatory or cross culturally applicable theory that could be tested and present repeatable results. The cognitive model has the potential to map the factors that cause cross-cultural instability in religious movements.

### **Cognitive Construction of Alphas in New Religious Movements**

Todd Tremlin states that the gods our minds lead us to believe in “are ideas – and particularly successful ones at that” (Tremlin 2006: 9). However, how do these gods become well established and well developed ideas with such magnitude?

Many religious belief categories such as animacy, artifice, objects, and ontology rely on reflexive human responses in the mind, and therefore involve little to no conscious reflection (Tremlin 2006: 2, 125–126). Reflexive beliefs surface immediately and are seemingly linked with the autonomic nervous system (Tremlin 2006: 2–3, 7). Because of their ability to arise almost immediately, reflexive beliefs create the basic foundation for reflective beliefs and therefore logical reflection rarely supersedes reflex (Tremlin 2006: 12). It is mainly on these beliefs that we will concentrate because, by their reflexive nature and their rooting in the autonomic nervous system rather than more cortical areas of the brain, they are believed to be evolutionarily older than beliefs constructed through reflective mechanisms.

One such reflexive cognitive ability the Agent Detection Device (ADD) aids in constructing such a successful idea as god; the ADD serves to attribute agency to objects or events. “In many contexts, ADD may detect agency given only scant information; hence, it may also be termed the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device” (Tremlin 2006: 125). A worldly example of how the ADD works comes

<sup>6</sup> Whether this is termed as type of Weberian charisma, or a coercive leader is a matter of sociological interpretation. On the cognitive level there are direct parallels between the cognitive mechanisms (e.g. Agent Detection Device, Theory of Mind, etc.) that go into the construction of superhuman agents and alphas.

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in the form of a misattribution of agency, such as when one walks in the woods and mistakes a rustle in the leaves as a predator or believes a noise at night is a burglar. The ADD works in the best interest of our survival; one could easily agree that it would be better to mistake a stick for a poisonous snake with no harmful repercussions than mistake a poisonous snake for a stick, which could have fatal consequences. This reflective device works so quickly that “there is always a trade-off between speed and accuracy, and it inevitably results in misidentifications of agency” (Tremelin 2006: 77).

On the evolutionary level, this creates heuristics that can efficiently classify agents into different categories, be they predator/non-predator, animate/inanimate, or one of different ontological categories. Pascal Boyer found that our brains cognize concepts regardless of the amount of input by automatically assuming that all entities of a certain ontological category are alike; meaning, “we do not need to cut up a huge number of tigers and produce statistics of what we found in order to conclude that organs are probably similar in all members of the TIGER category” (Boyer 2002: 61). This allows the reflexive belief system to operate with little information because “on the basis of very little information, we spontaneously use ontological categories and the inferences they support to create particular expectations” (ibid.). Thus, through a combination of these evolved heuristic reflexes we might attribute false-agency to an entity or event that comes with previously assumed attributes of the perceived agent’s ontological category.

These categories are not immutable in the mind, of course. In fact, it is the way these categories are violated that promotes the retention of these concepts up to a certain point (Barrett 2004: 23). If a concept violates too many of the intuitive inferences understood to be constant in its ontological category, it has little chance of retention. Boyer stated it most concisely by saying: “The religious concept preserves all the relevant default inferences except the ones that are explicitly barred by the counterintuitive element” (Boyer 2002: 73). Gods, ancestors, and prophets all successfully violate their given ontological category in some way, and due to these violations are simply more memorable. Barrett defines gods as “any minimally counterintuitive agents believed in by a community of people for which there are observable behavioral consequences of the belief” (Barrett 2004: 126). The community is important here because it differentiates a religious concept from a personal belief.

So far, we have covered the cognitive mechanisms that go into making a superhuman agency, and making that agent believable and well socially transmitted. This creates a preliminary link from the individual perception familiar to psychologists to the social construction familiar to most social theorists, be they religious scholars or socio-biologists. In fact, when talking about niche construction, building the contextual basis from the individuals who fulfill niches to the broader society in which they are found is imperative; by definition as well as theoretical constraints, no niche, or religion exists in a contextual vacuum. Evolutionary theory states that our genetic ancestors grouped together as primates for increased protection; the hypothesis basically states that the more eyes and ears, as well as able-bodied individuals, the more protected and efficient the group and thus fitness and reproduction increase (Tremelin 2006: 30–31).

Throughout time religions and religious specialists have been trying not only to interpret and understand the intentions of superhuman agents or the actions attributed to them, but also to manipulate them as well. This becomes the basis for ritual, rituals being actions involving a superhuman agent where an agent (either superhuman agent or a religious specialist such as a priest) acts on another entity in order to create something that would not be the natural result of the performed action (Barrett 2004: 126; McCauley – Lawson 2002: 15–16).<sup>7</sup> These should not be confused with religious acts. The difference between a religious act and a religious ritual is that “religious actions are typically open to outsiders, religious rituals typically are not,” (McCauley – Lawson 2002: 15) thus making the ritual accessible and meaningful only to a particular in-group. For example, in the Catholic tradition, prayer is accessible to anyone, even a non-Catholic, however, the Eucharist is only offered to confirmed Catholics, thus making it an exclusive act of an in-group.<sup>8</sup>

The previously mentioned cognitive mechanisms can come together on a social level and are exploited to create a basis for religious ritual. Robert McCauley, E. Thomas Lawson, Harvey Whitehouse, and others have also looked at the belief trends that form around superhuman intentional agents. Whitehouse’s conclusions formed the basis for his theory of religious modes (Whitehouse 2004a; Whitehouse – McCauley 2005), which posits that religious traditions tend to fall into trends that become more or less solidified into one of two classifications over time. Known as the doctrinal and imagistic modes, they are not immutable classifications or synchronic typologies; rather, they are diachronic projections that predict religious behavior based on observable trends over time. The doctrinal mode arises through religions that have frequent ritual transmissions with low levels of arousal and activates itself through one’s semantic memory. The imagistic traditions, on the other hand, usually revolve around low frequency ritual transmissions that have extremely high levels of arousal, which imprints itself through the activation of episodic memory, examples being Native American and many indigenous African initiations (Whitehouse 2004a). See *Figure 1*.

Most religious traditions fit fairly well into one of these trajectories. It would seem that the more one tradition fits into either the doctrinal or imagistic mode, the more stability it would have.<sup>9</sup> However, since a religion is not born directly *into* one mode or the other, there is a formative period wherein it wanders between its original trajectory and the non-original mode. Almost by definition, if a religious tradition were characterized by its ritual system, as is the case with most of cognitive psychology, a novel religious tradition would have to break its religious system in order to instate a new religion.<sup>10</sup> In the United States NRMs originate

<sup>7</sup> It has also been hypothesized that counterintuitive actions are in themselves cognitive attractors, a hypothesis that could yield very interesting empirical data with further experimentations; for more see Barrett 2004: 73.

<sup>8</sup> It can not go without clarification that once in a ritualized tradition, prayer can function very well as an obvious mnemonic device and should be considered important in a ritual study. However, given the social nature of ritual and this particular study, a dialogue on prayer and other religious actions as part of a ritual system is not directly applicable without further empirical evidence.

<sup>9</sup> Here a ritually stable tradition would be defined as a tradition with established sets of routine practices directed towards or appealing to the power of a superhuman agent of little to no variance.

<sup>10</sup> Using actions (i.e. rituals) as defining factors of religions rather than things and theologies seems very fruitful but sadly there is not enough space to go into such a broad discussion here. For more see Paden 2001, 2008.

**Modes of Religiosity Contrasted (from Whitehouse 2004: 74)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Doctrinal</i>	<i>Imagistic</i>
<i>Psychological Features</i>		
1. Transmissive frequency	High	Low
2. Level of arousal	Low	High
3. Principal memory system	Semantic schemas & implicit scripts	Episodic/ flashbulb memory
4. Ritual meaning	Learned/acquired	Internally generated
5. Techniques of revelation	Rhetoric, logical integration, narrative	Iconicity, multivocality, and multivalence
<i>Sociopolitical Features</i>		
6. Social cohesion	Diffuse	Intense
7. Leadership	Dynamic	Passive/absent
8. Inclusivity/exclusivity	Inclusive	Exclusive
9. Spread	Rapid, efficient	Slow, inefficient
10. Scale	Large-scale	Small-scale
11. Degree of uniformity	High	Low
12. Structure	Centralized	Non-centralized

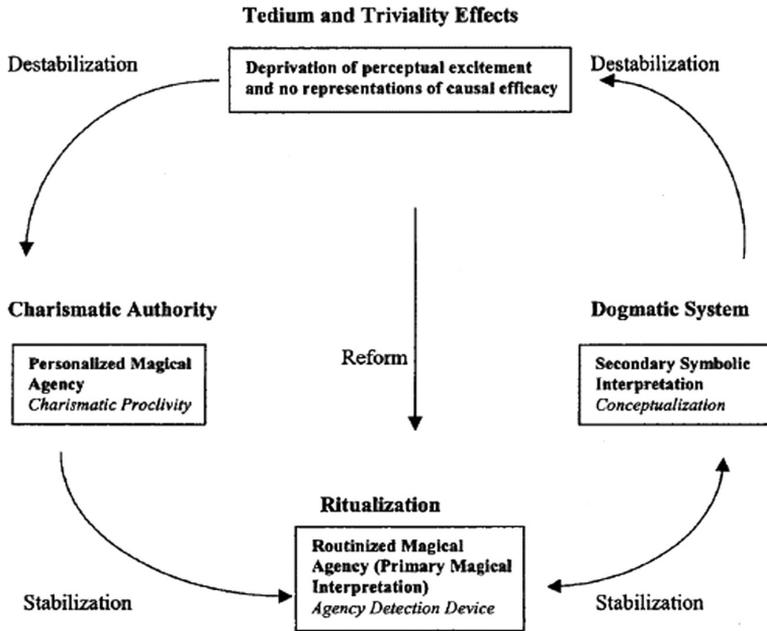
*Figure 1.**(Taken from Sørensen 2005)*

almost exclusively from doctrinal Protestant ideologies that saturate the culture, and the centralized structure of such religious traditions supports the niche of alphas as the centralized leadership within these doctrinal traditions, a point seemingly in agreement with Whitehouse's theory. Recent work tries to explain how charismatic authority, an aspect of alpha leaders in NRMs the world over, affects the stabilization into one of these two modes.

Jesper Sørensen hypothesizes that in dogmatic systems the tradition battles between stabilization and destabilization by combating the effects of tedium and triviality, where, simply put, adherents become bored with the ritual structure (Hinde 2005; Sørensen 2005). In order to resolve tedium something must change in the tradition, whether it is the ritual or the context.<sup>11</sup>

According to Sørensen's model, a tradition can vacillate between emphasizing a dogmatic system and ritualization before moving on to a stage of tedium, which Sørensen reasonably notes as more unstable than previous positions in the ritual cycle because here it is more apt to innovation. In order to overcome the tedium the tradition must move to another stage, either to reemphasize ritualization within the tradition, or to another destabilized point where it introduces a form of charismatic authority – defined as “a revolutionary force that enables the abolition of conventional rules of conduct and the construction of new ones” (Sørensen 2005: 169). From there a ritual system usually stabilizes by moving back into a period of ritualization; Sørensen states that ritual and dogmatic beliefs must be frequently performed to ensure a stable relation, a statement that is backed by Whitehouse's

<sup>11</sup> Although it is in need of further empirical analysis one could hypothesize that a drastic change within a ritual context would serve to resolve tedium within a tradition because of the direct and reciprocal relationship between the actions and context of a given tradition.



*Figure 2.*  
(Taken from Sørensen 2005)

hypothesis that doctrinal or dogmatic traditions are based on frequently repeated rituals (Sørensen 2005: 181–182). However, this re-ritualization inevitably returns to tedium and triviality at which point Sørensen notes that there are two courses of action for the situation: (1) “ritual actions can be re-ritualized” or reformed, or (2) further destabilization can follow “where alternative sources charismatic authority are sought after” (Sørensen 2005: 182). In the second option, ritualization turns the focus to the charismatic leadership, a social structure foreign, and somewhat problematic, to Whitehouse’s definition of a doctrinal religion and fairly absent from the mostly non-hierarchical imagistic mode. (Whitehouse 2004b: 218). In the doctrinal mode, authority needs to be ritualized in order to maintain stability because an individual’s power is not crucial to the modal structure or the religious tradition, rather the authority is transmitted ultimately to the doctrine of the tradition, any power of charismatic authority in the doctrinal mode would then only be as a conduit or authority of the doctrine that lies outside of any one persons charisma or authority. *See figure 2.*

The analysis of the effects of a charismatic authority within a religious tradition touches on a number of aspects directly pertaining doctrinal NRMs, especially those in the United States. One aspect of ritualization that Sørensen mentions comes from Weber. Sørensen states:

Weber's theory of charismatic authority suggests that all new religious formations draw extensively on imagistic practices... but that this phase of religious innovation is extremely unstable and therefore must be controlled by other forms of authority connected to some sort of doctrinal encoding and orthodoxy. Further, as Weber argued with respect to charismatic groups, the initial excitement surrounding novel religious revelations must be controlled or at least coordinated with everyday activities (Sørensen 2005: 170).

This promotes the idea that there is an ambiguous, or indistinguishable progression in a religious tradition that is neither doctrinal nor imagistic, rather it results from a doctrinal tradition becoming imagistic via the presence of a charismatic authority. Indeed, if one refers back to the chart provided by Whitehouse and goes down the two categories it can be found that "popular" new religious movements<sup>12</sup> such as Heaven's Gate, the People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, the Solar Temple and many other NRMs from the ethnographic record that have had known periods of destabilization cannot be easily projected into any one mode but rather their destabilization comes at times when they show an apparent shift from doctrinal to imagistic due to the presence of an alpha. Since these traditions do not show signs that would denote the creation or hypothesis of a new mode, it seems safe to say that traditions are unstably balanced between the two when they are in their natal stages or while they may be showing signs that they are transferring to a new mode.<sup>13</sup>

Many aspects of NRMs point to the conclusion that they are in or vacillation or transition between modes and that during their formation they vacillate between the stages of ritualization and the formation of a dogmatic system as well as between the stages of tedium and triviality and charismatic authority. Alpha leaders of doctrinal NRMs tend not to ritualize the traditions they produce. Although, Jim Jones' institution of "White Nights" (Moore 1985) could be seen as a ritual, cognitively speaking, it is closer to a rehearsal because the ritual actors expect a cause that is inline with the natural effects of the action of drinking poison. The members' act of drinking Kool-Aid that was not poisoned, with the understanding that if the time came could be poisoned and they would therefore die, violates the cognitive definition of a ritual (McCauley – Lawson 2002: 15–16). The only rituals associated with the People's Temple, that were not due to the charismatic authority of Jones, were earlier continuations from their Christian roots (Layton 1999; Moore 1985). Marshall Applewhite also instituted many constraints and behaviors that had to be specifically followed much and constantly repeated like rituals; however there are very few institutions of Applewhite's that have been brought to light that would cognitively fit into the category of ritual because these mandated actions did not (1) make a claim to superhuman agency or (2) expect and outcome that violated the natural cause of the action. The only rituals that can be

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<sup>12</sup> By "popular" I have chosen those NRMs that have received the most attention from the media and academia.

<sup>13</sup> Here I would like to reemphasize the timelines that one deals with as a scholar of NRMs: The traditions listed, as well as many others, were not formed as wholly new entities, rather they were adaptations and recreations from earlier doctrinal traditions and their appearance within that given context gave them their novelty.

found are present early in the group's formation and seem to have stemmed from Bonny Nettles' earlier occult studies and Applewhite's Christian training.<sup>14</sup>

What makes these two exemplars particularly interesting, and pertinent, is that they enter Sørensen's ritual cycle from two different places. Heaven's Gate entered the cycle at the stage of charismatic authority and then moved through the ritualization period early on, through emphasis on the western esoteric and occult traditions of the 1960's American context from which they sprung, formed its belief system and then got caught between tedium and charismatic authority. The People's Temple, on the other hand, entered the cycle through the already present American Protestant Christian tradition, moved through tedium and triviality, and also got caught wavering between charismatic authority and tedium. Both of these groups, as well as others like them seemed to spiral into instability during this period in their respective traditions, seemingly supporting Sorensen's argument.

## The Alpha

As quoted in the beginning of this article, William Paden has noted:

... For many species a purely social construct in that the queens [honey bees] have no different genetic constitution than the workers but are "made" into their superior role and size by being served special foods much the way human groups "make" certain of their individuals, through ritual behaviors towards them, into chiefs, pharaohs, popes, presidents, and Dalai Lamas. If one of these dies, another is made (Paden 2008: 13).

The leaders of these groups are human alphas. The human alpha shows many of the same behaviors as alphas of other primate groups and hierarchies involving them are no stranger to religious worlds or the scholars who study them (Paden 2008; Burkert 1996: 81–101). Alphas are the leaders whose decisions are followed, who make the rules of the group, and oftentimes the one who controls reproduction. For many outsiders, the ends to which some of these groups come to and the beliefs they hold are irrational and begs the question of why humans would follow the charismatic authority of certain people when that authority alludes to such actions that are culturally unacceptable as well as disruptions to the evolutionary imperatives of survival, fitness, and reproduction. For the answers to these questions one can turn, again, to the findings of cognitive psychology.

As stated earlier, humans have a natural proclivity to believe in superhuman agents such as gods or ghosts. All normal human minds have cognitive mechanisms, which function in a way that create superhuman concepts and, those concepts, which are minimally counterintuitive, are more successful than those which are not. An alpha of a doctrinal NRM, such as Jim Jones or David Koresh, is human, and through observation our minds categorize them as ontologically human, which assumes the retention of the given knowledge that comes with such an ontological label (Barrett 2004: 23). However, through a mixture of self-propagation, as well as additions and embellishments on the part of their followers, these alphas gain certain attributions that cause them to violate their own ontological category and thus become superhuman agents. For Jim Jones it was attributions such as the power of healing (McGehee 2008) and for Marshall Applewhite it was the ability

<sup>14</sup> For a good overview of the actions of Heaven's Gate see Lalich (2004) or Di Angelo (2007).

to communicate with the Next Level (Lalich, 2004). This culmination of religious aspects turned Applewhite and Jones into living gods.

Alpha leaders such as these are retained more effectively. This is for a number of reasons, one of which is because alphas are not non-material abstract concepts like “god”, they are well described as human in ontology because their followers can see and interact with them; this solidifies the cognitive perception that they fall into that category and lessens the cognitive load on the heuristic. The violations that alphas claim are also noticed first hand by their followers and this strengthens the perception that these individuals are minimally counterintuitive in some way. This interpersonal communication between alpha and subordinate strengthens the perceptions that afford them their god-like status and does not rely on just abstract imagination like traditional forms of superhuman agency.

These alpha leaders add high instability into the groups they produce. Sørensen notes, “For various reasons, ascription of charismatic authority is highly unstable” (Sørensen 2005: 169). This might be because “charismatic authority is a revolutionary force that enables the abolition of conventional rules of conduct and the construction of new ones,” (ibid.) which results in the vacillation in highly unstable periods in ritual structures as well as a state which lies in an ambiguous place between modal trajectories.

## Conclusions

The presence of an alpha, as a charismatic leader, promotes destabilization by locking the ritual system in a place where, on the cognitive level, the belief system has no clear projection as either a doctrinal or imagistic mode of religiosity; if there is no stability in the rituals then there is no stability in the religion. This ambiguity may arise because, as stated earlier, some NRMs fail to ritualize themselves; they persist in a state where they vacillate between different points without ritualizing, thus hanging them in a dual balance between Sørensen’s cyclical model of formation as well as without clear projection towards one of Whitehouse’s imagistic or doctrinal modes.

Christianity for instance, started much like many NRMs: a charismatic leader creating a splinter group from the main tradition with novel teachings; it even has the apocalyptic message we attribute to so many modern-day “cults”. After time, Christianity changed and stabilized itself as a doctrinal tradition that adheres to the model as proposed by Sørensen, with traditional orthodoxy adopting the Pope as the charismatic authority. Many of the western NRMs come from the Christian tradition but leave the typical cycle during the stages of charismatic authority, sometimes to battle the tedium and triviality effects of the parent group, and become increasingly imagistic, creating instability.

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