Religious Consensus and Secular Dissent
Two Alternative Paths to Survival for Utopian Communes
Christoph Brumann

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 therapeuta 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” (Hostettler 1974b), or “intentional communities” (Andelson 1996) although common usage of these words is not always confined to cases that share their property.
and in the Middle Ages, several of the religious movements branded as heretics followed the Primitive Christians' precedent of having all things in common. Such utopian ventures, however, have been most numerous in the modern period where communes have sprung up all over the globe, with the United States of America providing a particularly fertile ground. The small trickle of independent experiments has sometimes swollen into whole streams, most intensely in the period around 1970 when communes were considered as a societal alternative by many, mostly young people in North America, Europe, and Japan. While utopian communes are not more than a marginal phenomenon in most of their host societies most of the time, they are a remarkably persistent one, and at least the Hutterite colonies in the U.S. and Canadian Great Plains and the kibbutzim in Israel include substantial portions of the regional populations.

In sharing all their possessions, utopian communes face considerable problems. By definition, they can neither enforce cooperation from their members, nor can they offer them individual material incentives in return for conformity to the self-given norms. Such an arrangement opens the door to human egoism and could invite a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968) dynamic: given nontotal social control, the temptation for individual members to reduce their contribution to, yet not their use of, the common resources arises. As long as it goes unnoticed, such free riding is profitable for members who rationally maximise their personal utility, irrespective of how other members act. Such a classical Prisoners’ Dilemma situation should lead in due course to the destruction of the joint resource, i.e., the commune and the goods and services it offers to its members.

Small wonder, then, that many commentators expect utopian communes to be inevitably temporary creations, and the historical record is indeed full of premature failures. Of the 277 communes established in the U.S. before 1938 (Oved 1988: 485–490), the majority did not even last for a decade, and neither is there more than a handful of the thousands of communes founded around 1970 – possibly tens of thousands in the U.S. alone (Jerome 1974: 17) – that have retained community of goods until the present day. In other periods of intense communal experimentation, such as after World War I in Germany (Heineke 1978; Linse 1983), quick failures have also been the rule. It would seem that utopian communes share the destiny of communist state economies that, in the end, have proved impossible to perpetuate. There are, however, a number of communes that have existed for a long time, and some of them have even outlasted the Soviet Union by far. Thus, the question what distinguishes these cases from the others arises.

Of course, when the members of a commune are not utility maximisers and/or when they expect to be – or already feel they are – sufficiently rewarded by immaterial, nonreducible goods such as spiritual blessing, moral legitimacy, or eternal life in a celestial afterworld, there is no dilemma. Such gratification is most commonly offered within the framework of a religious belief, and consequently, previous authors have sought to associate communal longevity with religion. Comparing samples of U.S. American communes of the 19th century, Stephan and Stephan (1973) and Erasmus (1977: 143 f.) correctly observe that the religious communes existed longer than the secular ones and attributed this to their religious beliefs, and extending the scope to all 19th- and early 20th-century American communes listed by Oved (1988), Sosis (2000) confirms this result by way of a statistical study. Other authors do not ask for religion but rather for consensus, be it on the supernatural or on something else. Already in 1875, Nordhoff stipulated that communes must be “of one mind upon some question which to them shall appear so important as to take the place of a religion, if it is not essentially religious” (1960: 387). Oved (1988: 370) likewise states that

[all those who have studied the history of the communes agree that the presence of an ideologically motivated core of members who adhered to their doctrine or religion, as well as the predominance of their central principles, was an essential element that ensured the commune’s existence and its survival.

And in the most widely quoted contribution to the considerable literature on the question of communal survival, while conceding to religion the value of providing a comprehensive framework (Kanter 1972: 136 f.) for the “commitment mechanisms” – such as being celibate, wearing uniforms, regular confession, etc. – which directly increase the commune’s survival chances, Kanter also agrees that “the particular faith is not what promotes the success of a utopia, but rather the fact that all members believe in it” (1972: 122). A consensus on basic beliefs, whether religious or secular, is thus unanimously regarded as indispensable for communal longevity, with only few calls for caution (Shenker 1986: 104 f., 127 f.) and no outright
dissent on record. Members must be dedicated to some higher, shared purpose, if the impossible arrangement of a utopian commune is to achieve at least some degree of permanence.

In the following, I will show that this conclusion is partly too simplistic and partly wrong. Not just any religious belief system but only specific ones are associated with communal longevity, and the latter can also be achieved with secular beliefs and even in communes that lack consensus on even the most basic questions. I will first outline my analytic strategy before systematically explaining these findings.

**Method**

For assessing the importance of religion and consensus, I collected a sample of all the well-described modern communes that I could find; meaning that there are scholarly articles and/or at least one scholarly or popular monograph on each case, or that I refer to data obtained during personal visits. Most of the cases are U.S. American, European, and Japanese communes of the last two centuries. This spatial concentration may reflect a bias in related research, and given the fact that the precise extent of the phenomenon is unknown, the sample cannot claim to be representative. All communes for which ethnographic data is too scarce to include them, however, are very similar to at least one sample case (that may be taken to represent them) and conform to all my – nonstatistical – conclusions. The 43 communes are listed in Table 1 together with their life dates and durations and include all the famous and widely discussed cases, such as the Hutterites, the kibbutzim, Twin Oaks, Brook Farm, Oneida, and the Shakers. The existence of good descriptions becomes more likely, of course, the longer a commune exists, so the sample is biased towards the more durable cases. Thousands of additional short-lived communes have existed whereas it appears that long-lived communes outside the sample are few in number.

As will be immediately apparent, the durations of the sample cases vary widely. The absolute life span alone, however, can be misleading since it does not accurately reflect the fact that after an equal amount of time, some communes live on as thriving social institutions while others only barely avoid falling apart and would most probably be brought to an end by the slightest mishap. The latter is especially true for the later life of the numerous celibate communes where in spite of decreasing institutional vitality the members still left, lacking the alternative social unit of the family, tend to stay together (Brumann 1998a: 146–148, 164 f.). Therefore, I introduce a second variable, the time period until the commune falls below one third of the maximal membership reached, and call it the “active” life span. This is a useful measure since whenever a case did so – except in the formative first few years (as in the Bruderhof communities [Zablocki 1973: 73 f., Eggers 1985: 92–96]) or on account of unusually harsh external circumstances beyond the commune’s control (as with the consequences of the Pacific war in Atarashiki mura [Brumann 1998a: 67] and the violent racist attacks on Koinonia [Lee 1971: 176, 179]) – this ushered in irreversible decline. While the commune might linger on, it did so in a state of apathy permitted only by the economic fruits of the initial period, and what members and enthusiasm remained would never have sufficed to get it started in the first place.

Even this second variable, however, does not accurately capture the fact that the present-day communes continue to exist, facing very diverse perspectives. Some of them appear highly stable and must be expected to last at least several more decades. Among the older cases, the Hutterites, the kibbutzim, and the Bruderhof communities, none of which shows any clear signs of decline at present, enjoy much brighter prospects than any of the other cases (including the Shakers and

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2 I visited the Japanese communes twice in 1990 and 1993, staying for a total of between two and seven days in each commune, and conducted interviews with members. Aijisai mura I visited only for one day in 1993. I also use the information material collected then and written accounts by members and other outside observers. In a few of the other cases, I collected additional information by exchanging letters and e-mails with members. Additional ethnographic information, also on the cases not specifically discussed here, can be found in Brumann (1998a: 33–71 and passim). A number of communes have more than a single settlement and some even more than a hundred. The large number of Hutterite colonies, kibbutzim, or Shaker villages, however, are not independent social institutions. Instead, they are subject to decisions made jointly with the other settlements or by some overarching leadership body, and they also redistribute members and resources, minimally during emergencies but often on a fairly regular basis. Founding and closing a specific settlement is often also determined with the goals of all settlements – rather than only the one concerned – in mind. Thus, the settlements within such a larger organization are most appropriately considered as a single communal unit. For the social organizational advantages of a branch structure of a decentralised structure for utopian communes, see Brumann (2000).
Table 1: Life-Spans and Religious Orientations of the 43 Sample Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Case</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>End</th>
<th>Absolute Duration</th>
<th>1/3-limit Reached</th>
<th>&quot;Active&quot; Duration</th>
<th>Religious Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shakers (USA)</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>&lt;1900</td>
<td>&lt;113</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutterites (Canada/USA)</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abode of Love (England)</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony (USA)</td>
<td>1804</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>~1851</td>
<td>~47</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of David (USA)</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>&lt;1963</td>
<td>&lt;61</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowhill (USA)</td>
<td>1798</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>&lt;1872</td>
<td>&lt;74</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kibbutzim (Israel)</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amana (USA)</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ittô-en (Japan)</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atarashiki mura (Japan)</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruderhof (USA/England)</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoar (USA)</td>
<td>1819</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koreshan Unity (USA)</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephrata (USA)</td>
<td>1732</td>
<td>1797</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1778</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman’s Commonwealth (USA)</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Christian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shinkyô (Japan)</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>secular</td>
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<tr>
<td>Riverside (New Zealand)</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koinonia (USA)</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajisai mura (Japan)</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arche (France a.o.)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icaria (USA)</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point Loma (USA)</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>&lt;1941</td>
<td>&lt;44</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reba Place Fellowship (USA)</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamagishi-kai (Japan)</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethel/Aurora (USA)</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oneida (USA)</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Oaks (USA)</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Fruit Society (USA)</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukuzato tetsugaku jikkenjô (Japan)</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Farm (USA)</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llano Colony (USA)</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiyetoro (Nigeria)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethlehem (USA)</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerista Village (USA)</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAO (Austria a.o.)</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop Hill (USA)</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohemia Manor (USA)</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>1698</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1690</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Farm (USA)</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Phalanx (USA)</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peoples Temple (USA/Guyana)</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brook Farm (USA)</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1846</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajneeshpuram (USA)</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

> = greater than/after, < = smaller than/before, << = much smaller than/much before, ~ = approximately. Durations are given in years; the reference date is 2000. "non-Christian" is short for "non-Christian religion."

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Abode of Love) did after a similar time span. Riversides, the Arche communities, Yamagishi-kai, and Twin Oaks are younger, but their present condition – much more vigorous than that of the other contemporary cases their age – makes them the most promising candidates for comparable durations in the long run. These seven cases will receive special attention in the following. To do so is to engage in prophecy, but in the attempt to build a general theory, the obvious future potential of these communes should not be ignored.

Religious Communes

When looking at the last column of Table 1, the received view seems to be confirmed: Of the 15 most durable communes no less than 13 are religious. Moreover, all but one of these cases are also based on some sort of Christian belief. The large number of Christian communes should not come as a surprise, given the precedent/competitor of monastic orders and the extent to which sharing and altruism are generally emphasised in Christianity. In addition, Acts of the Apostles 2, 44–46; 4, 32–35; and 5, 1–11 can be interpreted as saying that the Primitive Christians lived as a property-sharing commune in Jerusalem. Vague as these passages may be and much as they are called into question by James 5, 1–4, no Christian commune I know of fails to refer to this model. Most of the non-Christian religious sample cases, by contrast, had a shorter life-span, so it might be concluded that religion – and more specifically a Christian-based religion – is indeed conducive to communal survival.

However, the durations of Christian communes are very diverse, so a closer look is required. While most of them start out from the diagnosis that ordinary religious practice in the surrounding society is insufficient and church institutions have become estranged from the spirit of true Christianity, the nature of their other beliefs differs widely. Some, including the Pietistic (such as Amana, Harmony, and Zoar) and the Anabaptist cases (such as Hutterite colonies and Bruderhof communities), try to recapture a purer, more encompassing religious practice lost by historical accident, but otherwise stay within the established limits of Christian doctrine. Others, however, diverge significantly from the latter; assuming postbiblical divine revelations to further prophets or messiahs; believing in the possibility of immortality, reincarnation, or a life without sin; regarding the Bible as purely symbolic and God as androgynous; and/or mixing Christian belief with other religions or political ideologies. As Table 2 demonstrates, these special features often appear in combination. In all cases except the Shakers – and previous to the communal period even there – these communes were founded and headed by charismatic leaders, and it is to them that many of the special beliefs refer. Usually, it is the leader who is believed to be a prophet or messiah invested with all kinds of supernatural properties.

Comparing the life spans of the two groups created in this way, it turns out that the three Christian cases among the seven most promising present-day communes – Hutterites, Bruderhof, and Arche communities – all belong to the more “orthodox” variety and that 8 of the 12 most

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3 This may seem debatable on account of the recent schism of the Schmiedeleut, one of the three traditional Hutterite federations, and the conflicts between the Bruderhof communities and a self-help organisation of former members (see Miller 1993). The continuation of community of goods, however, is not at issue in these controversies.
durable Christian communes do so too. A closer analysis of the more “heterodox” communes shows that these were extremely dependent on their charismatic leaders with whom the special beliefs originated, making for an almost inseparable complex; so when these leaders weakened or died, only apathy and decline⁴ or even collective suicide (Hall 1987: 263–279) could follow. By contrast, a good number of orthodox communes had no charismatic leaders or – such as Bruderhof and Arche – leaders who consciously built up successors or institutions that could take over most of their functions.⁵

Still, the durations of the – clearly heterodox – Shakers and Abode of Love are considerable. To explain this, a further differentiating aspect of religious beliefs is important. It can be described as the contrast between “dualistic” and “holistic” worldviews. Dualistic communes draw a clear boundary between the sacred and the profane, meaning that they explicitly mark out ritual from everyday activities and precisely determine the places, times, procedures, texts, and functionaries of such rituals. In a moral sense too, objects and activities are unambiguously parted into those that are good and expected from members and those that are bad and prohibited for them. Often the moral line is both more clear-cut and more encompassing than in ordinary Christian practice, and the general mode of life is markedly ascetic.

The separation of sacred and profane, the paramount theme of all religion for Durkheim, has already been demonstrated to be characteristic of only some religions by several of his critics. And among the religious communes there are also those which, by contrast to the dualistic cases, gloss over distinctions until almost no specific religious forms clearly separated from mundane activities and no specific beliefs clearly separated from other possible beliefs remain. Then, all places, times, activities, and objects are equally sacred (or equally profane). This holistic orientation is exemplified by the numerous religious communes fusing occidental religion with elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and humanist psychology that have been formed since the 1960s, with Point Loma as a kind of distant precursor. These have found their adherents mainly among middle-class youths to whom they offer spirituality (rather than strict morality), mysticism, a philosophy of personal growth, and the prospect of the “new age” that has become their epithet. Holism in this sense is, however, not restricted to such a religious background, since some Christian communes also play down the separation between the sacred and the profane.

Table 3 lists all these cases and those of their features that attest to what I call their “holistic” religion and worldview. In these communes, there are often either no religious rituals recognisably partitioned off from everyday activities, or these rituals are performed only for obvious reasons of expediency, such as retaining a judicial

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Table 3: “Holistic” Religious Sample Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of case</th>
<th>No regular religious rituals</th>
<th>Everyday activities seen as religious practice</th>
<th>Few or no specific religious contents</th>
<th>Pantheistic</th>
<th>Type of religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman’s Commonwealth</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>orthodox Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point Loma</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Where the “x” is bracketed, the presence of the respective feature could be subject to debate but appears given to me. On the one hand, this concerns the three religious cases that apparently performed religious rituals only for the sake of expediency. On the other hand, Borowski reports that many members of Renaissance did not distinguish between work and prayer (1984: 165).
church status and the corresponding tax benefits in Kerista (Pines 1987: 624), Renaissance (Borowski 1984: 59–62), and Rajneeshpuram (Carter 1990: 177, 185 f.). Instead, common everyday activities are declared to be religious acts — in Rajneeshpuram, the commune founded by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his sannyasins followers in Oregon, work was collectively designated as “worship” (Carter 1990: 17). There are no boundaries to the divine, rather it is — in typically pantheistic fashion — believed to be present in all things. In these communes, it is often difficult to identify dogmatic specifics, and Rajneeshpuram emphatically denied to have a creed (Carter 1990: 41; 259; Braun 1984: 56), with members admitting their ignorance of the leader’s religious writings without any embarrassment (Carter 1990: 29). Kerista, declaring “responsible hedonism” the express goal of its religion, would develop its “rational pantheism” in the directions decided by the members’ majority vote and published comic strips about the adventures of its gods (Pines 1987: 624; Sill 1990: 25). With the possible exception of this case, however, religion — even if just in the form of a very generalised spirituality — is clearly a serious concern and a major attraction for members. The lack of differentiation between the sacred and the profane and the scarcity of absolute moral tenets are presented as a positive value, not a matter of expediency but rather the very point to be made against petrified, dogma-ridden established creeds. Thus, although these groups are far from the dualistic mode of most thought that would ordinarily pass as religious morality, there is still a clear and momentous difference to the communes with secular ideologies.

It could be objected that a number of Christian communes not included in Table 2 also aimed at lowering the threshold between religion and everyday life, born as they were from revolts against contemporary church Christianity. The Anabaptist communes Hutterites and Bruderhof, for instance, have no church buildings and no ordained priests. Moreover, they reject most sacraments and celebrate the Last Supper as a purely symbolic act in which transubstantiation is not believed to take place. Nonetheless, they have divine services at fixed places and times, and fixed persons — the office holders — lead the ritual proceedings. And while the Hutterites deliberately celebrate their services in the schoolhouse or some other ordinary building, they still mark ritual time as special, if only by turning pictures — used in the state-administered school education but otherwise prohibited — to the wall (Hostetler and Huntington 1980: 98) or by not ringing the bell that signals the start and end of all other joint activities during the day (Hostetler 1974a: 158; Stephenson 1991: 153–155). Besides, in terms of clarity and scope, moral tenets leave nothing to be desired. Clearly then, this is an instance of the dichotomous ordering of the world that I call dualistic, not holism in the sense described above.

### Table 4: Overview of Types of Religion in Sample Cases

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<th>Dualistic</th>
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<td>Orthodox</td>
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<td>House of David</td>
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<td>Peoples Temple</td>
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<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>Ittō-en</td>
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Table 4 presents an overview of how these two dimensions differentiate religious communes. In the majority of cases the dimensions parallel one

6 The social functional rationale given by one member for the group’s religion — “The religion of Kerista... provides a culturally accepted and shared way of describing to each other what values are important to us, and gives us a very clear and cosmology to settle into” (Sill 1990: 26) — and the charismatic leader’s remarks about his initial divine revelation (25) make it dubious whether religion was more than a joke or a publicity gag for the members.

another: Christian communes are dualistic, non-Christian communes are holistic; and while there are spectacular examples of persistence among the dualistic Christian cases, none of the holistic non-Christian cases continued for more than Point Loma’s 45 years. Ittô-en, however, is not a Christian commune. Its religion is chiefly based on Buddhism but also includes elements from other creeds, including Christian prayers, and assumes a common nucleus of truth in all religions. Despite this all-embracing syncretism, however, the group performs daily divine services in a hall reserved for this purpose, and everyday activities are guided by an ascetic, repentance-oriented morality – with free toilet-cleaning in the houses of strangers as the preferred exercise in humility – that is clearly dualistic. Opposite Ittô-en, there are three communes which, while Christian, were not dualistic. Among these, Woman’s Commonwealth originated from a Methodist background, but after the initial period, Christian rituals hardly played any role. "... religion – rituals, codified beliefs, traditions, institutions – was quickly and irrevocably replaced in the daily lives of the Sanctificationists [i.e., Woman’s Commonwealth] by spirituality – a sense of personal connectedness with a divine presence and a feeling of comfort and blessing supplied by a higher power" (Kitch 1993:133). Oneida, basing itself on the Perfectionist tenet that true believers in God are able to live without sin, regarded the communal everyday life as sufficient expression of the members’ faith. For most of the time, there were no standard Christian rituals, and common meals were regarded as equivalent to Last Supper (Carden 1969:45 f.). Social control was exerted primarily via an institution named “mutual criticism” in which – anticipating modern group therapy – members had to listen in silence to the others’ evaluation of their character.8 Almost automatically, this must have made the standards of good and bad more negotiable than if there had been a set list of unviolable rules by which members' conduct would be measured. In Spirit Fruit Society (Murphy 1989) as well, religious rituals were not performed, although the charismatic leader was an Adventist preacher. Moreover, a great deal of tolerance against other creeds (144) was coupled with a pronounced rejection of organised religion and priesthood (67, 107, 137, 166), and standard Christian invectives against alcohol, swearing, adultery, and non-married love affairs (68, 75, 98, 101, 141 f., 150, 152, 171 f., 202) were taken lightly. Only after the leader’s death, something that could pass as ritual – spiritistic seances – were engaged in for a while, yet mostly for the purpose of communicating with the deceased leader (169 f., 198, 231), not with standard Christian supernatural beings.

Turning to durations, it shows that Ittô-en lives on in the present after a long history, while the three holistic Christian communes disbanded after a much shorter time. More generally, for all three types of creed holistic communes have fared worse than dualistic ones; be it orthodox Christian Woman’s Commonwealth in comparison to Hutterites or Bruderhof; heterodox Christian Oneida in comparison to the Shakers; or the non-Christian New Age communes in comparison to Ittô-en. So while orthodox Christianity is more clearly associated with communal longevity than heterodox Christianity and this, in turn, more clearly than non-Christian religions, this dimension is overshadowed by the question whether religious communes clearly differentiate along the axes sacred-profane and moral-immoral. No holistic case has ever reached an active life span of four decades while numerous dualistic cases have exceeded this by far.

In a sense, a utopian commune as such is a dualistic institution by nature. Existing within an ambient society which is invariably far larger and stronger, it has to maintain its boundaries and withstand the perennial challenge of the conventional, leading to a natural juxtaposition. It appears as if an all-embracing creed, that excludes nothing from the presence and blessings of the divine, does not fulfil this task well. More than the nature of beliefs, it is the charismatic leader – present in all holistic cases but absent in several dualistic ones (including the Shakers, Hutterites, Snowhill, and Koinonia) – who provides for a clear boundary, with his followers on the one side and everyone else on the other. This, however, ties the fate of holistic religious communes to that of their leader, and they lose their vitality or even perish together with him or her.

Secular Communes

What has been said about the religious communes modifies the received view but does not turn it on its head. Rather, it is the secular communes that deviate most widely from the assumption of indispensable ideological consensus. Although a majority of long-lived utopian communes are

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religious, there are also notable exceptions, as can be gleaned from Table 1.

Two of these secular cases may be seen as dubious. Ajisai mura formed around a charismatic leader who is also head of a small religion, and although adherence to this religion is no prerequisite for membership and nonbelievers have entered the commune, most members are attracted by the leader's religious, somewhat shamanistic properties and charisma (Brumann 1996: 181 f.). Shinkyô was formed by a missionary of the Japanese religion Tenri-kyô and his followers. While members officially severed their connection to that creed early in their history and have denied any ideological foundation ever since (Brumann 1996: 179–180), the subsequent development of the commune remained very much built on Tenri-kyô morality, as has already been pointed out by Plath (1969: 178–181). The social fabric of both cases has rested very much on their charismatic leaders whose opinions became the members' consensus most of the time, and at least initially, this charisma was without doubt backed by religion.

Still, a number of cases remain that were never connected to religion or that completely disavowed it, and aside from the kibbutzim and Atarashiki mura, these include Riverside, Yamagishi-kai, and Twin Oaks, i.e., three of the above-mentioned younger communes who appear to have a particularly promising future. One might, therefore, suspect these cases to agree on some nonreligious belief "which to them shall appear so important as to take the place of a religion" (see Nordhoff above).

Yamagishi-kai, for one, fits this characterisation. This commune built itself on the philosophical system of its founder and charismatic leader that emphasises mutual dependency in cosmic, natural, and human relations and places a particular emphasis on agriculture. All decisions are taken by a procedure named kensan ("thorough investigation") in which members inquire into the nature of a given problem, carefully listening to the others' opinions until the right solution will emerge of itself. Since every member undergoes a training in kensan that allegedly enables them to approach any problem in an unbiased and impartial way, consensus is said to be reached without fail, and members will never get angry. There is no reference whatsoever to the supernatural, but both from the accounts of Japanese observers and personal visits it strongly appears that members are, if anything, more strongly and unanimously convinced of their common beliefs than those of many religious communes (Brumann 1998b: 355–363).

In the four remaining cases, however, members all but agree. Atarashiki mura had a charismatic leader—a well-known novelist—in the beginning, but he left the commune a mere eight years after its foundation, among other reasons in order to promote equality among members. For the kibbutzim, Riverside, and Twin Oaks the possibility to let one trusted person settle what all others will conform to was ruled out right from the start. It would be exaggerated to say, though, that members never agreed with one another. While a number of authors would not concede the kibbutzim more than a flexible structure of loosely integrated values—a mere "ideologization of the improvised" (Near 1992: 396) – others contend that patriotism, socialism, and physical toil on the own plot of land had a quasi-religious status in the early period, amounting to a "religion of labor" (Rayman 1981: 116). The philosophy of uninhibited self-development of Atarashiki mura's charismatic founder, the radical Christian pacifism of the World War II conscientious objectors who formed Riverside (Rain 1991: 9–23, 60–63), and the blueprint of B. F. Skinner's behaviourist utopia "Walden Two" (1948) that brought Twin Oaks' founders together (Kinkade 1973: 7–9, 56 f.) also provided belief systems which members agreed upon and turned to as a guide for joint action.

In time, however, these belief systems have become almost dispensable, and the members' consensus even on basic questions has shrunk to a degree that would never have sufficed to form these communes in the first place. Sometimes this happened surprisingly fast: In Twin Oaks, for instance, the orientation on "Walden Two" was officially dropped a mere seven years after the start, and present members are if anything embarrassed by this chapter of the communal past (Komar 1983: 62; Kinkade 1994: 13). Instead, the diversity of the members' personal beliefs and goals is expressly recognised (Kinkade 1994: 24 f.), and there is "no one ideological name tag beyond 'egalitarian'" (13) today. Komar summarises that "... in the history of Twin Oaks there has never been a time when one-hundred percent of the membership fully endorsed all the community's policies and directions" (1983: 196). Symptomatically, in a group of less than one hundred members, about

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five different dishes are usually prepared for every meal in the communal kitchen. Despite the effort involved, it is considered of prime importance that the palates of the various types of meat eaters and vegetarians among the members are satisfied (Kinkade 1994: 116–119). For getting work done, the commune uses a complex system of labour credits that asks equal hours of everyone but – with the exception of very few unpopular tasks to which everyone has to contribute – leaves it up to the individual members to choose their jobs and times. Two members are fully occupied with operating this system, yet this is still considered preferable to other means – such as permanent specialisations or rotating tasks after a fixed schedule – that would press the members into a rigid scheme (Kinkade 1994: 29–36).

In Riverside, the Christian morality of the initial period would cast substantial pressure on married couples to stay together even if unhappy, and divorcees were accepted as new members only with reservations (Rain 1991: 51 f., 56, 94 f.; Popenoe and Popenoe 1984: 263). After the requirement of a Christian faith was dropped in 1972 and members from a hippie or alternative background moved in, however, any family form has become permissible, with unmarried people and single parents constituting the majority of households now (Rain 1991: 95, 143 f., 153, 156, 160; Popenoe and Popenoe 1984: 258). Religion has become a private affair, and individual members are followers of Sai Baba, the Japanese new religion Mahikari, Steiner’s anthroposophic teachings, Buddhism, or Catholicism, in addition to the Methodism that was prevalent in the initial period (Rain 1991: 93). Neither is there agreement about the legitimacy of alcohol and marijuana, and the related debates have a long history (1991: 95 f.).

Even in agriculture – the mainstay of this rural commune’s economy – the discussion whether to use conventional or organic methods in the fields and orchards has continued for decades, without ever reaching a definite conclusion (132–137). In Atarashiki mura – predominantly agricultural as well – the narrow cages in which almost all laying hens are held have repeatedly come under attack from some members, and here too, the debate is never really laid to rest. As a working solution, the individual members in charge of the single coops are free to proceed as they please at present. Even for the kibbutzim, Bowes has concluded that many of even the most basic questions are controversial now (1989: 8).

It is not rare that members in these communes are hardly motivated by the official beliefs any longer, and they also feel – this being the most significant deviation from the religious communes which also have their share of disbelievers – uninhibited to admit this openly. Socialism and Zionism are hardly ever mentioned as a personal motivation in the kibbutzim now (Blasi 1986: 49), and central values such as cooperation and equality are given by less than one half of the members asked about what keeps them in the commune. By contrast, more than ninety percent mention the possibility to enjoy one’s family life, a value that, while not denied, is anything but glorified in the official ideology (Liegle and Bergmann 1994: 33 f.). The elected head of Atarashiki mura complained to me that about one third of the members do not really care to engage in the moral, spiritual, and/or artistic self-development that is the raison d’être of the commune. As long as they contribute their share of the workload, however, he felt that nothing could really be done about this. In effect, the basic tenets of the communal life formulated by the charismatic founder stipulate that no member may give orders to any other.

Decision-making in these four cases is another field which does not really produce consensus. Officially, Atarashiki mura and Riverside – never having grown beyond 75 inhabitants – base their decisions on the unanimous consent of members. Even if only for a single dissenting voice, decisions are postponed, and a controversial issue may continue to be debated over a whole series of the regular meetings (Rain 1991: 145). In Riverside, reaching agreement is seen as a difficult process. The concerns of a small portion of members who feel strongly about a certain point will often sway the others who care less but whose interests may still not exactly be served by the consequences (145 f.), and there are members who complain that the more eloquent or simply more persistent people often get their way in the end (146). Clearly, consensus is a technique of compromise here and not enthusiastically embraced. Many members of Riverside are rather disillusioned about the meetings, several both there (144, 146) and in Atarashiki mura have stopped attending them altogether, and individual members of Atarashiki mura complain that nothing ever really changes (personal information).

After experiencing similar problems, Twin Oaks – a bit larger with its up to 100 members – abolished decision-making meetings after only a few weeks (Kinkade 1973: 51–54). Initially drawing on an idea of “Walden Two,” the commune rather delegates politics to three or four specialists with a tenure of 18 months each, the so-called...
“planners.” This leadership body acts autonomously most of the time and also picks its own successors. Everyday management is in the hands of “managers,” specific members who are in charge of one or sometimes more of the considerable number of departments and special tasks and will decide most minor issues for themselves (Kinkade 1994: 17–20). Major decisions of both planners and managers have to be reported to the members. Weekly meetings were held for this purpose but were not very well visited (Komar 1983: 84, 99). Now, instead, the planners’ working meetings have become public but this still does not provoke more than perfunctory attendance. For important matters, however, special meetings are convened which draw larger audiences, and most members keep themselves informed by the postings of decisions on a general notice board. A single member’s veto suffices to delegate a manager’s decision to the so-called “council” of managers in related fields, a council’s decision to the planners, and a planners’ decision to the majority vote of all members. Characteristically, a ballot box open for a set period instead of e.g., a show of hands at a meeting is used for such a vote. Candidates for the planner office who collect vetoes by as few as twenty percent of the members are already rejected (Kinkade 1994: 19–21). As a consequence, while there have been assertive governments in the past, the recent trend is towards planners who seek to gauge the general mood on a particular problem by informal talks, opinion surveys, and other means instead of risking vetoes (1994: 238; personal communication by a member). Since criticism is freely uttered and much more easily gained than praise, offices are not much sought after, and lengthy vacancies of planner positions have occurred (Kinkade 1994: 19, 235; Komar 1983: 97).

“Process” – Twin Oaks’ term for decision-making – generates a considerable amount of bureaucracy (Komar 1983: 320), but members retain their right to air their complaints while being able to keep clear of positions of responsibility at the same time (Kinkade 1994: 265). Any dictatorial tendencies are thus held at bay, yet members who attempt to change a particular aspect of communal life for the better often end up thoroughly frustrated. For a commune that is vociferously egalitarian, it is surprising how many positions may be allotted to members who crave them – such as in the case of member Veena (Kinkade 1994: 255–264). But these members often realise in time that the commune does not follow their moves and may even end up leaving in despair (Komar 1983: 317–321). The fruits of their efforts, however, stay in the commune, such as the various building projects that have a notorious record of costing the member in charge (Kinkade 1994: 124, 265). As one member criticises, the commune thus feeds parasitically on unrewarded personal efforts (265) while fully continuing to be what has been described as “paranoid about hierarchy, power, and authority” (Kor 1983: 143). It is more than apparent that unanimous agreement is not what Twin Oaks’ political system brings about, and correspondingly, the average duration of membership has still not reached eight years (personal communication by a member), with only one founding member – who has also left and returned several times – still present. The commune as a social institution, however, continues to thrive.

Majority votes – the epitome of a lack of consensus – are even more important in the kibbutzim where single settlements usually have many hundred and in some cases more than one thousand inhabitants. Everyday management is the task of a central leadership board – the secretariat – and sometimes more than twenty specialised committees in charge of specific productive departments, finances, education, etc. All committee members and officeholders – amounting to as many as 20 to 30 percent of the adult population in one (Ben-Rafael 1988: 46) and almost one half in another kibbutz (Barkai 1982: 22) – are elected by the general assembly of the full adult members, and this is also the authoritative decision-making unit on any controversial point (Bowes 1989: 70). But a similar pattern as in Twin Oaks arises: in most kibbutzim, attendance at the general assemblies does not exceed one third or even one fourth of members, with a substantial minority of between 10 and 30 percent never showing up at all. Given the largely conventional division of labour among genders, female participation has further suffered from the termination of children’s houses that has brought the children back into their parents’ apartments (Melzer and Neubauer 1988: 30 f.). Political apathy and/or resignation on the part of some members is resulting from, as well as conducive to, the concentration of power in the hands of others: while a good number of members avoid offices (Melzer and Neubauer 1988: 27; Spj-

ro 1972: 96 f.), the rotation of important positions among just a few persons is reported for a number of kibbutzim. In kibbutz “Goshen” studied by Bowes, many complain about how a clique of mostly founding members – generally referred to as “the mafia” – shrewdly monopolises power positions, giving the other members no real chance to participate (Bowes 1989: 49, 71, 79). As in the cases discussed previously, a true consensus of members appears impossible to accomplish, and decision-making procedures aim at the least controversial solution at best. At the same time, the luxury of disengaging oneself from any kind of responsibility, while retaining one’s right to complain about anything that others may decide in one’s stead, also goes unchallenged.

Given such conditions, it is safe to say that the compromises reached in any of these four cases will hardly ever be confounded with a true unity of hearts and minds by the members. And much the same must also be said for the effects of their measures of social control. Generally, a close monitoring of personal conduct is not esteemed. The nearest approximation to this is the relentless gossiping in the kibbutzim that functions as a kind of permanent evaluation system of members and censures all kinds of misbehaviour. When individuals show themselves immune to negative gossip and social marginalisation, however, the kibbutzim are astoundingly helpless (Bowes 1989: 48 f.; Spiro 1972: 207 f.), given that outright expulsion – a major breach of the self-image as the ideal society – is taken recourse to only in very extreme cases. Often, there is not more than one such incident on record in a specific kibbutz (Bowes 1989: 78). Thus, it is often marginal members and their violations of the communal rules that become the motor for cultural change. Bowes (1989: 73 f.) describes this for a generally disliked member couple of kibbutz “Goshen” who so stubbornly refused to surrender the personal TV set they had acquired in violation of the rules that the kibbutz leaders finally had to give in and, in order to restore equality, buy private TV sets for all other households too. In Riverside and Twin Oaks as well, the reluctance to exclude members – a very rare occasion in Twin Oaks (Kinkade 1973: 28 f., 33, 45–48; Komar 1983: 78 f.) where it was avoided even after a member had embezzled thousands of dollars (Kinkade 1994: 220), and not reported for Riverside at all – has often led to a deliberate testing of the limits by individual members. Thus, one female senior member of Riverside, when inheriting a car, resisted all efforts to persuade her of relinquishing this illicit piece of private property. In the end, the specific status of noncommunal resident – living among members but having private property and paying for the commune’s services – was established to accommodate her case (Rain 1991: 169). In Twin Oaks too, individual challenges of the communal norms have at times been contained, yet at times managed to establish new rules, with officeholders being characteristically reluctant to meddle in hotly debated questions such as to whether, e.g., microwave ovens should be permitted or not. It then has been very much a matter of the opponents’ personal character and popularity rather than programmatic consistency, how such affairs were eventually settled (Kinkade 1994: 203–208).

In Twin Oaks and the kibbutzim, there is also an extensive grey zone of minor infringements of the common rules – such as withholding personal presents that, in theory, should be handed over to the commune – which as single instances are insignificant enough to make individuals as well as leadership institutions wary of premature interference, but collectively have developed into a major nuisance. And where this compounds with a general reluctance to closely scrutinise the activities of others, even major violations capable of seriously harming the commune’s well-being may go unsanctioned. A case in point is the member who, when building Twin Oaks’ new kitchen-dining complex, overspent the allotted budget at no less than 70,000 dollars before this was noticed by other members (Kinkade 1994: 130 f.). Atarashiki mura’s above-mentioned reluctance to deal with members who do not strive to live up to the founder’s ideals is of a similar kind. In sum, whoever does not succumb to the more or less subtle pressures of public opinion becomes a serious problem in all these communes.

Frequent experiences of community might attenuate such problems, but not even this is forced upon the members. While in the religious communes and also in a number of secular cases there are, in addition to work, joint activities such

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as divine services or obligatory meetings on an almost daily basis, the secular communes just mentioned do hardly have any. In Atarashiki mura where the coops are the major source of income, members take care of their coop individually, and only female members with jobs in the communal kitchen and the small museum work together on a regular basis. Lunch and dinner may be and, from my observation, quite frequently are taken home to the separate family houses or individual rooms in singles’ houses. Other than the imperfectly attended monthly meetings, there are no regular reunions, so one member surprised me by saying that he had hardly exchanged more than greetings with some newer members although these had been around for years.

In Twin Oaks as well, members will not find themselves assembled in one place more than about once a year (Kinkade 1994:22). A private room for each member became an unassailable right as soon as the commune acquired sufficient space (96). While the lack of more intimate, family-like groups has at times led the mostly single members to experiment with “small living groups” and common living rooms in the residences (96–102), most members opt for “a private room and a public life” (101) instead of voluntarily focussing their social contacts. Participation in the various support and encounter groups that keep being formed is also far from universal (Kinkade 1973:61 f.; Komar 1983: 179, 185–187, 192 –194). Meals may be taken wherever it pleases the members, and steam trays in which meals are kept warm for hours help to control any unwanted sociality as well (Komar 1983: 50; Kinkade 1994: 101).

While the kibbutzim initially fostered a “mystique of group experience” (Spiro 1972: xii-xiii) and lack of privacy was still complained about by some members in 1951 (247), privacy is now respected and an ideal of polite distance and noninterference followed in the relationships of members who do not know each other well (Blasi 1986: 40 f.). Outside the scantily attended general meetings, there are few occasions where all members meet (Niv 1976: 189). Riverside is also described as “not an intimate community” (Rain 1991: 143). Families live in separate houses, and while work, three or four of meals per week, the weekly meeting and festivals bring members together, there is not a lot of mutual visiting and no place to meet casually. At least one single member has finally left because of perceived loneliness (143 f.). Typically, a “Communal House” which was built in 1986 to bring a larger number of families and single members into closer contact did not succeed (156). Support groups have been formed here as well but are not continued (146). “We are the least communal of communes”, as one member remarked (143).

In all four communes, then, the degree of social interaction with fellow members is thus more or less completely determined by individual choice, and it can be assumed that social control – comparatively loose as it is anyhow – will hardly be fostered thereby. Another corollary is the surprising degree of indirect communication. Almost every kibbutz publishes an at least monthly, if not weekly periodical for its members (Niv 1976: 209, 211; Tiger and Shepher 1975: 65), and some have even started to broadcast their general assemblies on TV (Liegle and Bergmann 1994: 37). Twin Oaks also relies heavily on a central notice board for internal communication and debate (Kinkade 1994:21) and has also had radio programs for this purpose (Kanter 1972: 27), surprising already an early observer with the ubiquity of signs and written messages (21 f.). In Atarashiki mura, a large blackboard in the common dining room where members must at least fetch their meals is used for announcements. Characteristically, I was also introduced via that blackboard during my week-long visit; and while this was certainly impersonal by Japanese standards, with no meeting close by it could apparently not be helped. Even in Riverside that, from Rain’s account (1991), must be suspected to have a higher density of personal interaction, members still felt the need to publish a community newspaper for a while, with each new issue being “eagerly awaited” (147). This emphasis on written communication further reduces face-to-face interaction and whatever consensus or subtle pressure to conformity the latter might produce.

In sum, the four discussed communes are far from striving to put some agreed-upon, a priori utopian blueprint into reality and lack any necessary tools, even if they were to attempt this. Rather, they experience an endless series of compromises between members’ diverging interests that never yield more than provisional solutions. These are good only until the next turn of events or – in a group such as Twin Oaks where membership turnover is high – the next generation of members. The communards themselves are often well aware of this fact. In the words of a Riverside member (Rain 1991: 77):

... all ideas originated by an individual member get modified – sometimes out of all recognition – when they

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pass through a community meeting. The meeting tends to adapt views which are off to one side so that they meet some norm of community feeling. ("Extremists have never got far at Riverside," it was said recently.)

And even more tellingly, members in Twin Oaks play the "Trade-off Game" once a year. They receive a large sheet of paper on which the economic departments, their current labour and money budgets and their demands for the next year are listed. Each member is then asked to distribute the total amount of resources available according to individual preferences. Of course, demands always exceed the supply, and it is left to each member to work out a personally suitable solution, with the "planners" who decide the final budget staying close to the average of the members' individual suggestions (Kinkade 1994: 63–68). Nothing could bring it home more clearly to everyone involved that the commune is built on compromise and is not the realisation of an abstract ideal.

From an objective point of view, decisions taken in the religious or the more consensus-oriented secular communes are often compromises as well; but importantly, members do not see it that way or at least do not openly say so. Instead, there is often the concept of the one right solution; be it one emerging naturally from unbiased consideration and discussion, as in Yamagishi-kai, or suggested by the voice of God that will become audible among members, if they only really strive to listen, such as in the Bruderhof communities (Zablocki 1973: 155, 157; Eggers 1985: 69). There may be a specialist for the one right solution in the person of a charismatic leader – him or herself often believed to transmit God's will – or they may be detailed catalogues of rules that offer the one right procedure for almost any everyday situation, such as the Millennial Laws of the Shakers (Stein 1992: 95, 183, 198 f., 203; Andrews 1953: 251–289). Yet the one right solution is there, and also there are ways for the members to find it and thus keep their faith in the utopian vision of the one right society.

Many members of the secular "compromise communes" also have a utopian vision and clear ideas about how the commune should be organised. But as there is no procedure to determine whose vision is right, none of them will be fully realised. Consequently, there is always a considerable number of members who are dissatisfied with the status quo and do not hold back their misgivings. The kibbutzim, for instance, have been diagnosed as to be in crisis almost continually since the 1950s. None of these secular communes can realistically expect to be a realised utopia for more than a fraction of its members.

Nonetheless, these communes continue, demonstrating thereby that continual compromise can also be a source of institutional strength. As one member of Twin Oaks summarises (Kinkade 1994: 192):

Despairing of agreement, Twin Oaks began to see ideological diversity as a virtue. The idea is that, because we don’t get whole group agreement on any one direction, and therefore have to compromise virtually every decision we make, we avoid all the dangers of going off any deep ends.

It is difficult to see how a higher degree of consensus would hurt these cases, if it suddenly fell from heaven. But secular as these communes are, it could only be reached by violating the one basic tenet which is really agreed upon, that members have equal rights, meaning that – unless under extraordinary circumstances – no member and most often not even a majority has the right to force any other member. Tolerance of individual needs and whims is thus the paramount principle, and any kind of pressure used to violate it, while possibly increasing economic efficiency and the level of satisfaction of some members, would inevitably drive a considerable portion of others out of the commune. Ruling by compromise and turning suboptimality into a principle, by contrast, keeps the – more or less disgruntled – members together and ensures that while utopia is never reached, dystopia is also avoided. Descriptions such as those by Kinkade (1994) and Rain (1991) suggest that many members still find a considerable degree of fulfillment and identify with the commune that increasingly becomes its own raison d'être, not a vehicle for the realisation of abstract ideals. It seems that the controlled erosion of the principles established in the ideological phase – "The most extreme decisions this Community ever made came from the initial founders, who were either few enough to agree or else strong enough to ignore those who didn't" (Kinkade 1994: 220) – has turned into a survival strategy here. Very clearly, it has done so in the case of Riverside that, when doomed as a Christian commune, dropped its former religious creed and became a secular commune tolerant of a wide variety of life-styles (Rain 1991: 87–103).18

18 The accounts on Twin Oaks (Kinkade 1973, 1994) and on Riverside (Rain 1991) I chiefly use have been written by members, and in Atarashiki mura I did not stay for more than a week. The aspects of communal life I build my argument on, however, are (although not silenced)
As already emphasised, this is not to say that there never was consensus in these communes or that they did not need it to get started. It must also be suspected that there is a lot of agreement that is so much taken for granted by the members that it goes unmentioned, comprising, e.g., the norms and values of the liberal-alternative segment of the educated middle class that furnishes most members of Twin Oaks and Riverside, or those of the specific ethnic groups that are dominant in a given kibbutz (Niv 1976:373). Contrary to what previous authors have suggested, however, an explicit consensus on aims and objectives is not needed in the long run, and it may help these cases more to water down the initial agreements than to sustain them by all means or to work towards the creation of new ones. Not utopia, but the trade-off has become their second nature.

Conclusion

With respect to the beliefs upon which they build themselves, two paths can lead to the long-term survival of utopian communes. One is based on religious beliefs that clearly distinguish between sacred and profane and between good and bad, rather than dissolving these dichotomies in an all-embracing mystical union. While such an orientation is often coupled with Christian beliefs, it is the dualism of these communes, not the specific creed, that matters. For these communes, the consensus on basic beliefs that has been held so important in previous writings is indeed indispensable.

There is, however, an alternative path to communal survival that, although being followed by a smaller number of cases, does exist nonetheless. In several secular, egalitarian communes, the consensus on basic beliefs that the initial ideology provided has been all but lost in the course of time. The only ideal left, equality – which is more of a procedural than a substantive ideal anyway – is interpreted as ruling out the coercion of individuals, and thus, unanimity of opinion is out of range. Consequently, decision-making procedures and mechanisms of social control are geared towards the achievement of working compromises rather than what anyone would take for an optimal solution. Starting out as utopian ventures to create model societies, these cases in many ways have come to resemble modern parliamentary systems that likewise fail to please more than a majority of those subject to their rule or even to engage them into the political process at all. There may be limits to the range of opinions a commune can take, yet the extant diversity has not harmed the kibbutzim, Atarashiki mura, Riverside, and Twin Oaks but rather seems to protect them from the danger of extreme decisions. Moving as slowly as these communal institutions do, it seems that they have sufficient time to become aware of any trap on their way. Consensus may be a prerequisite for religious communes – these secular, egalitarian groups are better served by sacralising dissent.

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