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Voluntary Costly Signals in Religious Communities: A Political Interpretation

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Abstract

The article advances a political interpretation of ritual behavior in religious communes, grounded in costly signaling theory of religion. Both asceticism, often involving self-inflicted pain or severe deprivation, and ecstatic behavior, incurring considerable energetic and emotional expenditure, can perform the role of *voluntary costly signals* (vcs) – uncoerced displays broadcasting features that predispose the signaler to higher status or position of authority in the community. vcs, as all costly signals, help the group determine the distribution of relevant traits, but, in contrast to most applications of the signaling theory, it is leadership qualifications, and not commitment, that these signals communicate. The discussion of the vcs' empowering mechanism is illustrated with cross-cultural evidence, focusing on Russian Skoptsy and American Shakers. Voluntary costly signaling had demonstrably contributed to the creation and stability of these groups' power regimes.

Keywords

costly signaling theory – religious communes – religious ritual – political anthropology – the Skoptsy – the Shakers

1 Introduction

In an effort to make sense of aspects of human behavior not easily explicable in economic terms, such as seemingly irrational expenditure of resources, risky or self-harming activities or voluntarily abandoned life opportunities,

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social scientists have turned to signaling theories, largely inspired by research in behavioral ecology. One such theoretical framework – costly signaling – focuses on costliness of signals as an indicator of their honesty in social interactions. The ability to accurately evaluate qualities and intentions of others allows for better partner selection (both in mating and other types of social partnerships), coordination of efforts (Bulbulia and Frean 2010), and effective policing of defectors, among other benefits (Bulbulia and Sosis 2011). In the religious context, costly signaling theory helps explain evolutionary adaptiveness of religion in general and, more specifically, its prosocial effects. It proposes that, by engaging in risky, burdensome or otherwise costly behavior individuals signal their commitment to the group, which allows the group to eliminate free-riders, enhances mutual trust and facilitates effective cooperation (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008). Religious costly signals are hard-to-fake signs of commitment beyond simple profession of faith, such as engaging in time-consuming rituals, celibacy, behavioral restrictions etc. (Irons 2001).

This account of the mechanism through which religion has remained an enduring social force by assisting in solving cooperation problems has initially been informed by two standard, and often implicit, assumptions: 1) that costly signals are *requirements* or *restrictions* – behaviors demanded from the members, imposed on them or forbidden by the community (e.g. Iannaccone 1992; Sosis and Bressler 2003); and 2) that costly signals indicate commitment to the group or willingness to cooperate, rather than other traits or characteristics of the signalers, even though such traits have been analyzed in other contexts (e.g. Hall et al. 2015; see Barker et al. 2019 for a review). More recently, signaling theorists and anthropologists using this approach have begun to recognize that neither of these assumptions is necessary. First, costly signals can be voluntary, rather than obligatory: indeed, “While there is often intra-group variance in ritual performance, religious doctrines or group norms establish minimum levels of ritual performance required for group membership” (Sosis, Kress and Boster 2007: 236). The level varies – logically, it increases where the group faces greater risk of abuse by free riders (usually because of its larger size, making face-to-face social control more difficult). Above this minimum level, individuals are free to signal intensity of socially relevant traits with various, often extreme, displays (Power 2017; Xygalatas et al. 2013; Xygalatas et al. 2021). Second, “in any cooperative endeavor, commitment is only one socially desirable trait among many” (Brusse 2020: 281). Accordingly, costly signals have been shown to communicate traits other than commitment, such as physical strength or being hardworking (Power 2017), the ability to control uncertain, fitness-relevant outcomes (Singh 2018), the possession of supernatural, more-than-human powers (Singh and Henrich 2020) and a multiplicity

of other attributes (see Barker et al. 2018, who categorize them as forms of “capital”) – thereby performing other social functions than just integrating the group.

In what follows, I add to this list another set of traits that can be broadcasted by religious costly signals: qualifications for political authority. The notion of Voluntary Costly Signals (vcs) thus paves the way for a political interpretation of costly signaling. It does not invalidate the prevailing prosociality/integration interpretation, but it does suggest an alternative perspective on some of the demanding, risky, or seemingly irrational behaviors found in many religious communities. While the relationship between social stratification and religious rituals has been studied in already stratified social systems, showing that social status predicts type and intensity of ritual participation (e.g. Shaver 2015; Xygalatas et al. 2021), this article, by contrast, focuses on the emergence and sustaining of power relations through costly signaling in relatively egalitarian groups that are religious communes. It also differs from both Willer’s solution to collective action problem (Willer 2009) and Wood’s model of how costly signaling boosts sociometric status (Wood 2017): in my account, high status is bestowed on individuals because of their presumably supernatural features demonstrated through signals, and not as a selective incentive in reward for their contribution to the group’s collective goods (Willer) nor via personality traits such as increased self-control (Wood).

In a nutshell, the vcs thesis proposes that a community member might, on their own initiative, engage in behaviors that would, by the standards of the group, be regarded as both costly and valuable, but are not absolutely required. The function of such behaviors might be to display an above-average level of a trait, such as commitment. However, such voluntary displays may also, in effect, *increase a member’s status within the group, help assert their authority and thus be empowering*. Religious groups from virtually all cultures and of all types (both communitarian, such as communes or monasteries, and non-communitarian) have adopted various forms of voluntary sacrifices, including self-inflicted pain, body markers, fasts, sleep deprivation, seclusion and other forms of asceticism. At the same time, leadership or elite position is often associated not only with extra commitment, but also with displays of unique features, distributed unequally across the group’s members. As evidenced by groups as diverse as the Medieval Cathars, Indian Jainists and the Hare Krishna sect, adopting a more demanding lifestyle and engaging in more extreme behaviors elevates a member to a privileged position: “elite asceticism” requires radical renunciation over and above “cultural asceticism” (e.g., initiation rites) of a broader category of members (Freiberger 2006: 6). I attempt to expound this connection between positions of power and such voluntary sacrifices building

upon the conceptual framework of costly signaling theory, while adding to this framework in the process. More specifically, I explore the types of signals involved in voluntary signaling; the mechanism through which these signals translate to political power and status; and the criteria of plausibility of the political interpretation of signaling.

The argument begins with the outline of the costly signaling theory of religion (section 2), as a point of departure for the concept of voluntary costly signals (3). I then use cross-cultural evidence to illustrate the political potential of two types of religious signaling – ascetic and ecstatic (4 and 5) – with special focus on the Skoptsy and the Shakers, respectively. These two groups are representative for the class of phenomena falling into the theoretical framework developed here and may serve as an illustration of how this framework can be applied. They were both socially isolated and strongly integrated communities,¹ where power is intertwined with other aspects of life and firmly embedded in the religious worldview.² They also provide good examples of the two behavioral types of signals I focus on: ascetic (Skoptsy), and ecstatic (Shakers). Additionally, the analysis contributes to the study of these groups by reinforcing the case against the Marxist interpretation of castration as subjugation of peasants (Maltsev 2022: 2) and links the ritual of castration with in-group status. For Shakers, it restates the previous sociological discussion of collective empowerment through spirit possession (Humez 1993; Stein 1992: 187) in the framework of signaling theory.

2 Costly Signaling Theory

Costly signaling theory of religion has been adapted from behavioral ecology, where the notion of costly signals refers to external features, patterns of behavior or other traits in animals which have evolved despite the fact that they are

1 The Shakers still are, since there is one village remaining with just two members left (Sabbathday Lake in Maine), but of course little of the analysis concerning the group in its heyday (mid-19th century) applies to present conditions. Note also that the Skoptsy, unlike the Shakers, did not live in communes; however, due to the hostility and often persecution they experienced, their life was in fact quasi-communitarian – their social network was largely constrained to fellow group members.

2 This is in contrast with a local community of the kind studied by Power (2017), who found that the intensity of religious signaling does not predict the reputation of being influential. She offers an explanation based on the distinction between “professional” politicians (local leaders) who are influential, and the wise men of the community with informal yet stronger authority. Such a distinction does not apply to communitarian religious groups, where “secular” power and religious authority are usually indistinguishable.

burdensome, risky or otherwise handicapping their bearers (such as bright or heavy body decoration – the famous peacock’s tale – or provocative behavior drawing the attention of predators). By making such demonstrations, these individuals show that they are fit enough to survive despite this handicap, thereby, ultimately, increasing their fitness (Zahavi 1977) – either by discouraging aggressors or by attracting mates (sexual selection).

While this type of handicap (“Zahavian”) signaling of rare attributes may apply to humans, too, most social science applications of costly signaling, and especially those related to religion, have focused on the displays of commitment: the group may assess the honesty of intentions and engagement of individual members by imposing on them rules, restrictions and requirements that less committed members (the free riders) would not be prepared to bear – both because, for them, the benefits of membership would not compensate for these costs (as in the case of unbelievers in a religious group who do not factor in supernatural rewards) and because, as will shortly be evident, costs of producing a dishonest signal is higher (Sterelny 2012; Brusse 2020).

The above difference between handicap signaling of unique traits and non-handicap signaling of commitment is an important, if often overlooked distinction. The former serves to display rare features that only some members of the group may possess, whereas the latter functions to ensure all members are sufficiently credible and trustworthy. Commitment does not depend on unique characteristics and thus may be controlled by imposing on all members some costly requirements. As observed by Kim Sterelny, “Commitment devices need not be differentially costly. Costly signaling is self-limited: a costly signal functioning as a handicap cannot spread through the population as a whole, for only the highest-quality individuals can afford to signal or can afford to signal at high intensities. Commitment signaling is not self-limiting in this way” (2012: 121–2).

2.1 *Religious Costly Signals*

Religious (costly) signals are understood here as related specifically to the supernatural sphere, rather than as all kinds of signaling behavior in a religious community. Members of religious groups, just as of other social groups, may use a variety of actions – *secular signals* – to show their commitment or other desirable features: they work hard, endure austere living conditions, submit to authority, undergo humiliating initiation rituals, limit their contacts with the outside world (Potz 2022). The function of *religious signals* (participation in religious rituals, professions of faith and other actions inspired by religion), by contrast, is to communicate an individual’s acceptance of the group’s shared beliefs and, often, to indicate their relationship with the sacrum. Insofar as

these shared beliefs assume the existence of morally concerned, punishing supernatural agents, religious signals have a prosocial effect: they reassure fellow members that the signal's sender believes in supernatural watching and the resulting sanctions, which, in turn, increases mutual trust and reduces freeloading (see Bering 2011; Johnson 2016).

Among various categories of religious signals, two are of special interest in the present context: *ascetic* and *ecstatic*. The former include all forms of physical suffering (mutilation, including castration, flagellation, scarification, incision and other forms of self-inflicted or voluntarily accepted pain); renunciation of food (fasting), sex (celibacy), sleep, material goods, pleasures of life etc.; social isolation (seclusion, severing external social ties); submission to discipline, humiliation. The latter, *ecstatic* behaviors include trance, spiritual possession, prophesying, various spiritual "gifts" (e.g. glossolalia), uncontrolled movements, and some altered states of consciousness. These behaviors can also be costly, but they differ from the ascetic signals in their interpretation. Whereas *ascetic* behaviors indicate the attempt to break free from obstacles (sexual desire, material possessions, pride etc.) to ultimately achieve a desired eschatological status, whether by imitating Christ in his suffering, shaking off mundane attachments to break the samsara circle (Hinduism), or proceeding on the path to enlightenment (Buddhism), the *ecstatic* signals mark the actor's privileged access to the sacred, the ability to transcend everyday existence, to communicate with supernatural agents, or receive "gifts" and revelations from them.

Certainly, the distinction is not always straightforward, as some ecstatic practices may lead to physical suffering and serious bodily harm (e.g., self-mutilation during shamanic or ancient priestly rituals) and the same individuals may alternately display both types of behavior. For instance, Ann Lee rose to power as the Shaker leader and prophet through a mixture of voluntarily accepted suffering at the hands of her persecutors and renunciation of sex, and, simultaneously, expressive, ecstatic behavior indicative of spiritual possession (Francis 2001).³ Nonetheless, the dichotomy remains meaningful and analytically significant, because, while both ascetic and ecstatic signals may be costly, the relationship between costliness and honesty of a signal is reversed in the two cases. Asceticism is clearly costly for everyone and it is precisely

3 Similarly, Eleazer Rand, the leader of Harvard, Mass. Shaker village, often spent nights prostrating himself on the ground and praying in solitude out in the woods, while, at the same time, he led the community in trancelike rituals, including the revival of 1807 when, as he reported on hearing of the "work of God", "my Belly trembled & my lips quivered at the voice" (quoted in Thurman 2002: 53, 42).

these sacrifices and sufferings, recognized as such and appreciated by the community, that demonstrate the genuineness of the signaler. The mechanism of recognizing true v. fake signalers is based on differential benefit (Brusse 2020: 279): a dishonest individual, who does not believe in supernatural rewards, would find the costs too high. But it would be a mistake to assume that these costs are lower for a true believer just because (s)he expects the supernatural rewards: rather, the costs are sufficiently compensated for by these rewards.⁴

Conversely, ecstatic signals are mainly linguistic or behavioral expressions of underlying mental states related to the sacrum. As such they are certainly costly – they may be difficult to produce, physically exhausting, sometimes also painful and emotionally demanding – but these expenditures, referred to as efficacy costs,⁵ are actually higher for dishonest signalers. As argued by Sterelny, “But when it is honest, the signal itself is cheap, much cheaper than a fake signal, for it requires none of the scarce cognitive resources of top-down attention, control, and self-monitoring” (2012: 113), with the additional cost connected with the risk of being exposed as a cheater if the performance of the signal is not credible enough. According to Barker and coauthors, “Possession may be such a convincing demonstration of devotion because it is physiologically and emotionally hard to fake” (2019: 88). So, as opposed to acts of asceticism, ecstatic signals are relatively low-cost for honest signalers, since they come naturally, almost as a by-product of the actual state in which the individual finds themselves (both subjectively and in the eyes of fellow community members).

In Table 1, the two key variables of the class of religious costly signals are identified – their obligatory or voluntary character and their ecstatic or ascetic form, along with examples to be expanded upon in the last two sections. It is worth noting that the assignment of particular behaviors to these categories is not absolute: some signals, such as celibacy, may be required in one group, but non-obligatory in another. Similarly, ecstatic acts may have ascetic components (when, e.g., a shaman inflicts pain on himself during his trance performance or a priest self-mutilates in ritual frenzy).

4 In fact, as demonstrated by Stark and Finke (2000: 46–52), members of “strict” religious groups are acutely aware of time, energy, lost opportunities and other types of expenditure connected with their involvement in the group, and yet they choose to bear these costs as a part of rational (given their beliefs) cost/benefit calculus, where the costs are outweighed by supernatural rewards.

5 From the evolutionary perspective, efficacy costs are associated with producing and unambiguously transmitting information, while fitness costs are strategic, i.e. may decrease signaler’s individual fitness (chances of reproduction or survival) (see Számadó 2011).

TABLE 1 Religious costly signals

Signal type	Obligatory	Voluntary
Ecstatic	Ecstatic displays during rites of initiation/passage and other rituals; group dance etc.	Possession/trance behavior; “gifts” of the Spirit; altered state of consciousness.
Ascetic	Painful rites of initiation/passage, permanent body markers, celibate etc.	Castration; extreme fasting; self-inflicted pain (flagellation etc.); extra (voluntary) body markers; voluntary celibate; reclusion.

3 Voluntary Costly Signals

Even though previous scholarship has established a link between costly signaling and religious communes longevity, thereby showing a prosocial effect of obligatory signals of commitment (Sosis and Bressler 2003; Sosis and Ruffle 2003; Soler 2012), there is added value in proposing a political reinterpretation of religious signaling. An instructive analogy is provided by successful attempts of gender-sensitive historiography to interpret certain religious practices as empowering for women in male-dominated social milieus. For instance, self-imposed asceticism (including sexual) of Medieval aristocratic wives can be seen as the way to regain control over their bodies (Pac 2009); entering a monastery was a unique opportunity at a highly esteemed career for women in male-dominated society well into the modern era; and displays of spiritual possession could increase female members’ prestige in their religious communities (as, for instance, among the Shakers during the so-called “Era of Manifestations”; see Humez 1993: 210, 218–219 and a discussion below). Even though these behaviors make perfect sense for the actors in purely religious terms (as *imitatio Christi*; following a religious vocation; or being filled with the Holy Spirit, respectively), they admit, at the same time, a political interpretation. They are structurally empowering, through social reconfigurations they lead to, regardless of the actors’ intentions behind these behaviors.⁶ By the

6 Similar dynamics may develop within monastic communities, where extreme asceticism, interpreted theologically as the imitation of the suffering of Christ, may be a reaction of the underprivileged group – lay brothers – against their subaltern status. See Newman 2006: 108 for a discussion of this aspect of Cistercian monasticism.

same token, signaling theorists have imposed their evolutionarily-informed perspective on behaviors labelled as “cult practices” or “rituals” by more traditional sociology of religion, religious studies and cultural anthropology. This perspective can now be extended to the political sphere, where signaling transmits the actors’ traits qualifying them to positions of authority.

Thus, the notion of *religious voluntary costly signals* refers to linguistic or behavioral expressions of attributes or features that, in the group’s universe of meaning, qualify the signaler to higher status and formal or informal power. That such signals need to be non-obligatory to perform this function follows logically from the nature of power as an asymmetrical social relation (or an unevenly distributed asset) (Wrong 1980: 10–13). Since leadership usually requires unique qualities (or at least above-average level of common qualities), other types of signals (or at least higher intensity of signaling) are needed to advertise them than ordinary signals of commitment to the group.

Consequently, and in keeping with the distinctions made in the previous section, voluntary costly signals ought to be distinguished from entry requirements or rites of passage which are, by their nature, obligatory – a condition of joining the group, not a factor of status or power differential. Thus, when a novice enters a monastery, they have to renounce sex, subordinate themselves to strict discipline, practice various forms of asceticism, wear habit and tonsure and so on.⁷ However demanding (costly) these behaviors are, they are requirements, not voluntary actions, therefore they signal commitment to the group’s ideology, values, and way of life, not an aspiration to a higher status within the group. Whereas joining the monastery might in itself be empowering (monks may be regarded a spiritual elite within the broader religious community), these costly signals of commitment are not vcs inside the group.

A more fundamental question, one that is common to most versions of costly signaling theory, concerns the evolutionary origins – the ultimate causes – of the empowering (political) vcs. Why would such behavioral patterns emerge if they are often fitness-costly, i.e. seem to decrease individual fitness? One possible explanation invokes benefits such patterns bring to the group despite their individual costs. Just as in the case of obligatory ones, the costliness of voluntary signals helps the group distinguish between well and poorly qualified members: the ones who honestly indicate features making

7 For Sterelny (2012: 119), such costs constitute an investment which decreases the future benefit of defection: “When a group exists prior to an individual who wants to be part of it, the relationship is asymmetrical; the commitment mechanism is more purely external and demands from the committing agent a more dramatic upfront investment that reshapes his or her payoff in triggering conditions”.

them fit for positions of authority vs. pretenders lacking such features. It is even more critical for the groups to make such distinction correctly than in the case of obligatory signals of commitment, since the consequences of bad judgment when it comes to leadership are potentially much more serious than letting a dishonest rank-and-file member freeload on the group's resources. So, in this case, the benefits of selecting suitable elites are political: coordination of collective activities, enforcement of norms, the establishment of internal hierarchy which reduces in-group conflict levels (see extensive discussion of these and related phenomena in evolutionary political science literature, e.g. Alford and Hibbing 2004; Blank and Hines 2001; Corning 2017).

As an alternative to this kind of group-level selection explanation, i.e. focusing on how traits in question benefit the group in competition with other groups (see e.g. Alcock 2017 for a critique of such approach), one might point to individual benefits that work through egoism-decreasing evolutionary mechanisms such as inclusive fitness. For instance, becoming a martyr in extremist Islam brings immediate benefits to the martyr's family, which is now looked after and honored in the community. Similarly, an individual who voluntarily undergoes castration cannot reproduce any more, but may instead increase social status and hence the survival and reproduction rate of his relatives – the bearers of his genes.⁸ In fact, such individual-level (adaptationist) selection pressures are even more plausible in the case of vcs (as compared to obligatory signals), since the sacrifices involved in signaling behavior are more likely to be compensated by benefits brought by the increased social ranking within the group, in comparison to rank-and-file membership.

3.1 *How Do vcs Work?*

What is the mechanism by which vcs might actually be empowering? They may facilitate political aspirations by signaling attributes that, within the group's cultural code, predispose individuals to higher status and positions of authority. In religious communes, such attributes may include: privileged contact with the supernatural agents; the status of being anointed or chosen by these agents; special knowledge and powers received from them, indicated by more-than-human qualities such as exceptional endurance in the face of

8 Incidentally, this leads to a plausible assumption that older individuals would be more prone to voluntary fitness-costly behaviors. In fact, Hinduism advises men to embark on the ascetic path (as opposed to intellectual or ritual or pietistic paths to salvation) only towards the end of their lives, after they had seen their grandchildren. See Wilson (2005: 403) for an analogous finding among Indian Jainists.

persecution, indifference to pain, hunger and other deprivations; ability to communicate directly with supernatural agents.

There are, to be sure, more obvious, direct ways of claiming power, such as demonstrating the ability to kill (see Bulbulia et al. 2017 for an interpretation of human sacrifice as “aposematic” signal of such an ability) or otherwise actualizing the threat of coercion implicit in power relations; or the ability to coordinate efforts to achieve collective goals, e.g. leading a war or hunting expedition. However, in religious communes power is theocratic: it is based on supernatural justification. In aspiring to gain and hold on to it, one needs to demonstrate qualities embedded in the group’s religious ideology, above standard, secular leadership qualifications. Considering that, in theocracies, legitimacy is the rulers’ main asset, the success in upholding the ruler’s claim to obedience on supernatural grounds is thus of prime importance.⁹ This is precisely the function that voluntary costly signals perform: in conveying the content of the group’s legitimation formula through symbolic or ritual means, they serve as ritual legitimation transmitters (Potz 2020: 64). Indeed, legitimation of power can be “thought of as an ongoing communication” process between the authorities and the subjects (Toland 1988: 115) or, more precisely in our case, the prospective leaders and their fellow community members. By indicating the candidate’s charismatic attributes, his or her special eschatological status (e.g. being saved), unique position in the cosmic order (being god incarnate or god’s anointed), or privileged communication with the supernatural, VCS support their claim to authority. In this way, they establish a link between ideas these behaviors represent and the bid for power they express. This, in turn, triggers the mechanism of political stratification: the receivers of the signals are incentivized to turn to the sender for advice and leadership, believing it to be divinely inspired or approved.

It is evident from the above analysis that the conception of VCS is firmly grounded in the signaling framework: by communicating the possession of some traits, the sender modifies the behavior of receivers (establishing a power relation with them). These traits need not be tangible, a form of material, embodied or social “capital” (Barker et al. 2018) – they may also represent “symbolic capital”, to borrow Bourdieu’s term, because, within sender’s and receivers’ shared symbolic universe, such symbolic attributes (e.g., being anointed, chosen, possessed, supernaturally endowed etc.) are no less real.

9 In fact, theocratic political systems of religious communes might be virtually free of physical coercion (because they are not territorially sovereign), despite their nearly totalitarian character (see Potz 2012: 385–386 for a comprehensive discussion). The Shakers are the case in point here.

To take this approach does not require the researcher to subscribe to a supernatural ontology: as long as the sender and the receivers share the same worldview, the signal may effectively convey the possession of the desired attributes and modify the receivers' actions.

It would be interesting to see if the types of costly behaviors considered here can also act as "credibility-enhancing displays" (CREDS), defined as practices which "a) are consistent with a model's professed beliefs, and b) a model would be unlikely to perform if he believed something different from what he expressed symbolically" (Henrich 2009, 258). In other words, do they act as proofs of sincerity of ones beliefs, rather than indicators of their attributes? As argued by Brusse, Handfield and Zollman (2022), the CRED and signaling accounts are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Singh and Henrich have demonstrated empirically that the same behaviors may be perceived by observers as both the evidence of the actors' beliefs and the signal of their attributes (here, supernatural powers and non-human features). Of double importance in our context, these inferences were made from the shamans' asceticism. As the authors conclude, "religious authority often translates into leadership roles beyond the supernatural" and their research "identifies self-denial as a potential mechanism by which shamans and other practitioners maintain their authority" (Singh and Henrich 2020: 11).

It would seem that, in the case of ascetic VCS, the CRED explanation can coexist with the signaling framework: ascetic acts, especially extreme ones, are dramatic expressions of one's beliefs (one wouldn't likely castrate if they hadn't believed it pleased God), but at the same time they signal a quality one has (courage, unselfishness etc.) or attains through the act (such as a quasi-divine status gained through the transformative ascetic act or via imitation of Christ). Even so, the political effect – the translation of these perceptions to power and authority – is achieved through signaling, rather than CRED mechanism: extracting a desired response from the receivers (i.e., submission), not just imitation of the sender's beliefs by receivers.

Ecstatic VCS yield even more squarely to the signaling interpretation: the ecstatic behavior signals some sort of supernatural quality (being possessed, chosen, becoming the instrument, mouthpiece etc. of supernatural agents), and not the beliefs per se (though, of course, the underlying beliefs shared by sender and receivers are necessary to render these ecstatic acts meaningful). From the perspective of the observers, these supernatural qualities are not just the performer's subjective mental states, but real interventions of supernatural agents via the performer. The observers can infer the performer is uniquely suited to be the recipient or instrument of the supernatural agents, presumably able to use them to the community's advantage, and thus predisposed to a leadership position.

In sum, the signaling framework seems better suited than the CRED theory to interpreting voluntary costly behaviors, because it shows how the indication of supernatural attributes triggers the response from receivers, namely the submission to the sender's power (informally, or by granting them position of authority). This is especially evident in the case of ecstatic VCS, where these behaviors are perceived as direct displays of supernatural possession, inspiration etc. – of a state in which the signaler finds themselves, not their beliefs. In the case of ascetic behaviors, they may simultaneously act as CREDs and signals: e.g. castration reinforces the underlying beliefs, while also communicating attributes relevant to leadership: here, being more Christ-like (and therefore more powerful) than ordinary community members. It's the latter mechanism, however, that has the political (stratifying) effect.

It is worth noting that, even though the present discussion refers mostly to *claims* to power reinforced through costly signals, the above account of the VCS's empowering effect does not absolutely require intentionality on part of the actors, in the sense of them actively seeking to increase their power or status. The word "voluntary" does suggest intentionality, but it refers to the practice itself, not to its empowering effect. A "holy man" may engage in ascetic practices solely for the Kingdom's sake, gaining prestige and authority in the process. His influence is, to a large extent, independent of whether he actively seeks or exercises power.¹⁰ His power may thus be a structural property emerging from his increased social ranking or personal informal authority. Furthermore, empowerment through costly signaling does not necessarily mean ascending to a well-defined, individual, formal or informal leadership position. It may also mean entering a privileged status group, distinguished through religious criteria. This is characteristic of groups with ascetic (high-intensity signaling) elite and ordinary (low-intensity signaling) majority of rank-and-file members, where ascesis is a passport to the religious elite. Examples include celibate monks in Buddhism, Catholicism or Hare Krishna; the Perfecti among the Cathars or various gnostic or dualistic sects; or the castrated in ancient or Russian heterodox sects. Again, the accompanying increase in authority and influence may not be sought for by the actors, and yet no less real.¹¹

10 The distinction between (non-intentional) influence and (intentional) power finds support in reputational methods of measuring actor's power (see Fischer and Sciarini 2015) which suggest that the perceived amount of power, with consequences for the audience behavior, may heavily diverge from the actor's actual, intended exercise of power.

11 Cyrek (2011) discusses interesting examples of late antiquity and early Medieval ascetic monks extremely reluctant to accept episcopal ordination, which the Church almost forced upon them due to the enormous prestige and reverence they enjoyed.

3.2 *The Criteria of Plausibility of the vcs' Political Interpretation*

When are we justified in treating a particular display as vcs? I propose that, for the political interpretation of signaling behavior to be plausible (i.e., to qualify as an empowering vcs), the costly behavior in question must:

- a) be non-obligatory (thus, not an entry requirement or a rite of passage);
- b) performed by the minority of the group's members;
- c) indicate personal characteristics, related to the sacrum, which are desirable as leadership qualifications by the group;
- d) use the group's symbolic repertoire.

Voluntary costly signals are, by definition, non-obligatory (a), but for the political interpretation to be plausible they should also be performed by the minority of the group's members (b) – a natural condition for the emergence of a power relation. Although it is theoretically possible to imagine a collective empowerment of a majority against a non-signaling minority, in most religious communities the more ascetic, self-sacrificing, or otherwise behaving in an extraordinary way – that is, intensely signaling – members form a distinct minority, which, in political terms, may also be power elite.

While a religious community, just as any other group, might value resolve, reliability, courage, strength of character and similar features in their leaders, the function of religious signals is to convey traits related to the supernatural, such as privileged access to the sacrum, the ability to receive revelations, achieving a superior eschatological status, holiness or other charismatic features (c). If these traits, highly revered by the community, are also regarded as qualifications for leadership, then costly signals advertising them become the signalers' avenue to power. To be effective, these signals need to utilize the group's symbolic repertoire and culturally approved means of expression (d). In general, "Signals are operative within a given context" out of which they became meaningless (Van Baal & Van Beek 1985) or fundamentally change their meaning. For instance, shaking, trembling, and similar ecstatic behavior, which elsewhere might be considered eccentric at best, and a sign of mental disorder at worst, among the Shakers – in an "enchanted" world where such manifestations of various spiritual beings were commonplace – these acts were treated extremely seriously and enhanced the authority of the "instrument". Similarly, "Shamans benefit from their acts of self-mutilation because they live within cultures that valorize their acts", whereas they may be ridiculed or condemned in modern, Westernized cultures (Hewitt 1997: 54).

It would be tempting to treat the actual empowerment of the signaler (i.e. a correlation between the performance of the signal and the improved social ranking or position of authority of the signaler) as the ultimate test of the plausibility of the political interpretation of any given signaling behavior.

This would, however, exclude the possibility of failed vcs. Whether voluntary signaling actually leads to empowerment is an empirical question which I approach in the last two sections.

4 Ascetic vcs

Various interpretations have been attached to acts referred to here as acetic, i.e. willingly inflicting or accepting suffering or deprivation on oneself. Psychologically, they are often linked to personality disorders of various types, usually associated with lack of recognition from others or attempts at regaining control or self-transformation (Favazza 1987; Hewitt 1997: 55, 119). Sociologically, these acts may function as rites of passage or identity symbols, marking belonging to a group. It has also been recognized that such self-destructive behaviors constitute “an act of speech that communicates a political message” (Fierke 2013: 39). The political interpretation, however, has mainly been advanced in the context of the struggle for sovereignty and dignity, where a minority, oppressed or underprivileged group, through self-sacrificial acts such as self-immolation, suicidal terrorism or political martyrdom, counters experienced humiliation and asserts its identity (Fierke 2013; Atran 2016). By contrast, the present analysis refers to in-group empowerment in the religious context.

Among the clearest examples of religiously motivated voluntary ascetic practices is castration. Castration was practiced in some ancient religions, such as the Phrygian cult of Kybele, whose priests (gr. *galles*) self-castrated in a dramatic ritual, as well as among early Christians, including the influential philosopher Origen and, allegedly, Montanus, the leader of a heterodox sect from 2nd century (Taylor 2000). But it were some radical sects of the Russian Orthodoxy, especially the Skoptsy, who elevated castration to an important element in their quest for salvation. The Skoptsy emerged in late 18th century from the Christ Believers (or Chlysti), a schismatic movement in the Russian Orthodox Church. Led by Konrad Selivanov, revered as both the incarnation of Christ and the deceased (or just hidden, according to the believers) tsar Peter III (Reutskii 1872: 178), Skoptsy strove for salvation by abstaining from sex and, at times, physically removing sexual organs, the most visible manifestations of evil. Like Chlysti (also celibate), they were known for their ecstatic worship. The Shalaputs – another, 19th century offspring of Christ Believers – under heavy influence of the Skoptsy in the initial phase of their movement (from mid-1830' to mid-1860'), were also found to practice castration (Zhuk 2004: 100–101). These groups, rather than treating this extreme act

as a means of mortifying the body, subscribed to the justification based on the New Testament passage (Matthew 19:12), where Jesus praises those who “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (NASB 1995). They refused to understand these words of Jesus metaphorically – the way most mainstream churches do – as advising merely celibacy, and believed instead that actual castration is the straightest path to the Kingdom.

Although in modern medicine, the “persistent preoccupation with castration or penectomy without a desire to acquire the sex characteristics of the other sex”, or the so-called Skoptic syndrome, is classified as a gender identity disorder (DSM IV, 1994: 302.6) or gender dysphoria (DSM V; Bryant 2022), there is no reason to assume that the self-castrating religious believers, including the Skoptsy, suffered from such a disorder. Rather, considering the wealth of motivation behind it and social functions it could perform, castration is best understood as a practice whose meaning is not fixed but strongly context-dependent. In addition to the theological and cultural interpretations mentioned above, costly signaling theory admits another, political understanding of castration, as a voluntary costly practice which increases social ranking and political influence of individuals. The strategic (fitness) costs it entails are so obvious that it is very likely to be perceived as extreme sacrifice and thus have high signaling value. Let us examine, based on the criteria of plausibility formulated above, if this interpretation can be adequate in relation to the Russian sects.

Quite clearly, castration entailed a fitness cost, one that the believers themselves were fully aware of and treated as a sacrifice. It also created a high exit cost, insofar as castrated males underwent physiological changes that constituted visible markers of belonging and could result in ostracism and repression outside of the group (Maltsev 2022: 2).¹² At the same time, it remained, however, non-obligatory (Engelstein 1999: 18, 59),¹³ as postulated by (a), even

12 For women, both fitness and opportunity costs were lower: even though some of them underwent mutilation of nipples, breasts or, sometimes, clitoris and labia majora, this did not impair their reproductive abilities nor was immediately detectable to outsiders. In terms of the interpretation advanced here, this could partly explain lower position of women in the sect. The general definition of gender roles in the wider society should obviously be taken into account, too, but women occupying leadership positions were not uncommon in radical Christian sects, including the Christ-Faith from whom Skoptsy broke (with a female member referred to as Mother of God co-leading a community with a male preacher, see Engelstein 1997, 2) and the Shakers.

13 This is true at least for adult converts. There occurred cases of castration of teenagers in Skoptsy families which were not entirely voluntary (while not physically enforced, they were performed under strong psychological pressure to conform to the parents' religion, see Engelstein 1999).

as other such requirements did exist among the Skoptsy: “a neophyte entering the ‘ship’ [the Skoptsy community] must accept some commandments: he/she must refuse to drink wine or beer, and must live without ‘passions’. Neophytes were also forbidden to participate in all secular holidays and festivals” (Tulpe and Torchinov 2000: 84). Since castration was not among these entry requirements (obligatory costly signals), it can be interpreted as voluntary costly signal, a non-compulsory sacrifice that served to elevate one’s position within the group.

It is less apparent to what extent castration was in fact a minority practice (b). In the case of the Skoptsy, some data suggests the percentage of castrated community members could be as high as 60–70% (Engelstein 1999: 96). However, since these numbers usually come from the police reports (Skoptsy were outlawed and persecuted at certain periods in Russia) and the police investigated more effectively members with visible bodily marks of belonging to the group, the castrates are likely overrepresented in these documents. Perhaps more typically, there were 60 castrates among some 300 Skoptsy in the village of Bogdanovka (Stawiński 2000: 163–164) and 32 among 200 under investigation around the city of Orel in 1770s (Engelstein 1999: 25–26) – sizeable, but distinct minorities. The evidence from the Shalaputs leads to the same conclusion: castration was quite rare, performed by the most engaged, active members. Based on an excellently documented study, Zhuk concluded that “These dissidents [Shalaputs] had castrated leaders, who served as role models for their sect. But the majority of the dissidents were not castrated” (2004: 102), and that “Except for the few activists who were ready for the ‘Heavenly Kingdom’, the majority of the Shalaputs controlled their sexual urges by means other than castration” (280). He also tells the story of “The special messenger of the dissident communities from central Russia [who] visited local Shalaputs and performed castration on selected activists” (279).

Clearly, castration indicated desirable personal characteristics (c) and thus could serve as a legitimation transmitter. Among these characteristics was, most importantly, special proximity to God achieved through the cleansing of sin gained by castration, which, in turn, provides access to “direct contemplation of God” and even equals “redemption” (Tulpe and Torchinov 2000: 81). The castrated members were regarded as already saved, which obviously elevated their social status vis-à-vis the non-castrated. They were also seen as following the example of Christ, who, the Skoptsy believed, was himself a castrate and who emasculated the apostles during the Last Supper – an act reported in the Bible with the metaphor of the washing of feet (Panczenko 2002: 372). Engelstein stresses the “pride with which the Skoptsy viewed the loss of organs, whose absence signaled the presence of salvation even in corporeal terms”

(1999: 17) – a bodily sign of achieving a superior eschatological status, which could then translate to social position. The ideas transmitted by the practice of castration were communicated (as postulated by d) with the use of the group's symbolic arsenal: pieces of white cloth donned as a symbol of purity and the special, metaphorical rhetoric of “whitening”, “fire baptism”, “seal”, “flaming crown” etc. (Engelstein 1999: 33–34).

Moreover, there is an obvious connection between leadership and castration. The founder and leader of the Skoptsy Konrad Selivanov was the first to undergo voluntary “whitening” (Stawiński 2000: 163). Their late 19th-century prophet and leader Kuzma Lisin, another self-professed incarnation of Christ (and tsar-savior Peter III), underwent full castration (“great seal”) (Tulpe and Torchinov 2000: 81). The three Kudrin brothers, who gathered a group of female followers, were all castrated (Engelstein 1999: 96). Virtually all Skoptsy leaders and activists were themselves castrated (and often performed the ritual on others), which was clearly not the case for all members.¹⁴ One can thus speak of a “collective empowerment” of the castrates as a privileged status group within the community, as well as castration being a prerequisite to individual leadership. This way, we are perhaps getting closer to solving the puzzle posed by Laura Engelstein: “It is genuinely difficult to understand why this particular signature of holy martyrdom [castration] should function as the door-keeper of community (especially when it did not apply to all concerned)” (1997: 17). In short, it didn't: in converting physical loss to social prestige, it was a tool of hierarchization rather than of gate-keeping.

In contrast to castration, *celibacy* – renunciation of sex and marriage – is a much more widespread fitness-costly ascetic practice. In a non-communitarian context, its political significance is well-established. As noted by Taylor with reference to the Catholic church, “Celibacy distinguished the Catholic clergy from the laity; that distinction legitimated their power. By sacrificing his sexuality for the ‘kingdom of heaven's sake’, the celibate priest acquired a special proximity to God, which enabled him to serve as an intermediary between the ordinary people and the unapproachable divine monarch who controlled their destinies”. Crucially, “Like palace eunuchs, priest were rewarded for their sexual deprivation with access to power” (Taylor 2000: 79).¹⁵

14 Engelstein (1999) reports many cases of rank-and-file Skoptsy who remained uncastrated to the end of their days, despite being loyal members of the faith. Conversely, there are no examples of uncastrated leaders in the author's abundant data.

15 It should be noted that, in the case of priestly celibacy, the cost consisted not only of sexual abstinence, but also ineligibility to have legal offspring, vesting them with an inheritance etc., which made the practice even more evidently fitness-costly.

In religious communes, the costly signaling interpretation of celibacy is not clear-cut: its signaling value is largely context-dependent. In some religious communities, such as Catholic or Buddhist monasteries, it is an entry requirement and thus an obligatory signal of commitment. In many others, it is a voluntary signal which provides access to a privileged category of members – a spiritual elite – thus being collectively empowering. Thus, for instance, in Ephrata, a 17th century American community founded by German immigrants under the leadership of Conrad Beissel, there was a division between celibate members dwelling communally in very severe conditions and the “lay” members living nearby in families and supporting the ascetic elite (Cohen 1973: 38). Finally, celibacy may serve as an individually empowering VCS, when it is taken up by an individual aspiring to a position of authority.

The Shakers provide an ample illustration of such changing signaling value of celibacy. It was first introduced by Ann Lee among the followers of the Wardleys’ group (who later assumed the name “Shakers”) in England in the 1760s and it clearly supported her bid for the group’s leadership (Garrett 1998: 153). According to the Shaker sources, Lee’s announcement of the sin of sexuality and her taking up “a full cross against the doleful works of the flesh” “had such a sensible effect [...] that she was received and acknowledged as the first spiritual mother in Christ” (*Testimonies* [1816] 1888: 21, 15; see also Garrett 1998: 152–154). Later, after the move to America, the Shaker communities consisted of celibate communes and non-celibate families living in outlying settlements. Finally, these out-members and sympathizers were absorbed into the communal villages and celibacy became an absolute requirement of membership (Desroche 1971: 186–188). Thus, the value of celibacy changed from an individually empowering VCS (Ann Lee) to a collectively empowering VCS (celibate communitarians v. non-celibate followers) to an obligatory signal of commitment.

5 Ecstatic VCS

Ecstatic voluntary signals encompass a large class of behaviors which, while not directly inhibiting survival or reproductive chances, as ascetic signals often do,¹⁶ may nonetheless still reliably perform the essential function of assisting the community in recognizing the sincerity of traits broadcast by individual

16 It may be argued that the membership in a commune may, in itself, reduce survival, and particularly reproductive chances because of social isolation, decreased material status (renunciation of goods) etc. However, I’m mostly concerned here with the internal

members. This is because, as indicated earlier, cheaters incur considerable cognitive and emotional expenditure connected with self-monitoring, controlling one's behavior, or the fear of being disclosed (Sterelny 2012: 113). Similarly to ascetic signals, the role of such behaviors is not restricted to signaling commitment – they may function as vcs, either supporting bids for individual leadership, or be collectively empowering, enhancing the status of those who engage in them. Importantly, and in accordance with our criterion (d), to effectively perform this function, such signals need to be firmly anchored in the system of cultural representations of the group. According to Hamayon, the performer (shaman, in this case), has to “respect the model of behavior prescribed for his function”, since his or her “behavior is to be defined as the acting out of a role culturally defined and socially organized” (Hamayon 1993: 29, 31). Consequently, “trance” or “ecstasy” cannot be defined merely by their underlying physiological states: without the culturally established symbolic and ideological content, such acts are meaningless.

Among classic examples of individually empowering ecstatic vcs are succession contests among the Shakers, especially after the death of their founder and first leader. Following their emigration from England to America in 1774, the group was still in the phase of charismatic leadership, to use Weber's terminology, before the institutionalization of their succession procedures. The prospective leaders needed to legitimize their claims by displaying the possession of supernatural features that made them fit for leadership in the eyes of the followers – such as the ability to effectively communicate with or becoming a vessel filled by the divine. Such a need for strong charismatic sanction was underscored by the groups origins – the first “shaking Quakers” took inspiration from the ecstatic Camisards fleeing persecution in France (the “French Prophets”; Garrett 1987). Leadership contests among the Shakers took place during the first two successions, after the deaths of Ann Lee (in 1784) and James Whittaker (in 1787). The Shaker “battles of gifts” were waged in the cemetery, over the graves of the deceased leaders. During the 1787 succession contest, all three challengers – Joseph Meacham, Calvin Harlow and David Meacham – displayed considerable passion and inspiration, but it was Joseph Meacham who staged the most spectacular performance: “Elder Calvin Harlow and Elder Joseph Meacham addressed the audience, and for a time Elder Joseph felt the silent opposition of the people of the place who were in attendance. The oppression was so great that at the grave he shook and trembled from head to foot, and then spoke under the influence of the Spirit with such power that

socio-political dynamics of the group, based on differences in signaling patterns between the members, not between the group and the outside world.

even Believers marveled” (White and Taylor 1905: 69). By shaking, trembling, and nearly losing his senses Meacham sent a mighty signal of the presence of the Christ Spirit, which eventually won him the acclaim of the audience and the position of leadership.

A similar charismatic duel took place between Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon during the 1844 Mormon succession crisis, where the exaggerated spiritual displays had largely tipped the scales of the community’s support in favor of the more suggestive pretender (Young), even though both presented legitimate claims to power based on their previous position in the Church (Quinn 1994: 182–184; Potz 2016: 207–208). Given the widespread belief among the Mormons in God’s continuing intervention in human affairs through the prophets (the doctrine of continuous revelation), such displays were necessary to convince the followers that a prospective leader had the ability to receive such interventions and become, in the group’s language, “a revelator, a seer and prophet” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 2013, 124:125).

The Shakers also supply an interesting example of collective empowerment achieved through ecstatic signaling. During the Era of Manifestations, a revival movement within the sect in the late 1830s and early 1840s, a number of individuals claimed revelations coming from the group’s deceased leaders (Ann Lee), historical figures (Napoleon, George Washington) and an assortment of other spirits (Andrews and Andrews 1969). These individuals – called “instruments” – were initially mostly girls and young women, as well as men from outside of the groups’ power structures (Humez 1993). By invoking supernatural source of their claims, these underprivileged members gained considerable impact: the revelations changed profoundly several aspects of the communities’ lives. Moreover, the instruments, acting as the spirits’ mouthpieces during intense trance sessions, often targeted particular, respected commune members, forcing them to self-criticism and humiliation (Thurman 2002: 99; Potz 2012: 396–399) and even expulsion from the Society (Wergland 2006: 121). Although this political upheaval of religious revival subsided after a few years and Shaker politics mostly returned to normal, it demonstrates the empowering potential of intensive voluntary costly signaling behavior. In keeping with the criteria formulated above, such ecstatic performances, while widespread in certain periods (the first two decades of Shaker history and during the Era of Manifestations), were not universal – even during the revival, were not a majority practice in most communities (Wergland 2006: 180). At the same time, ecstatic displays of supernatural communication and prophetic powers, wrapped in the group’s lingo of “gift” and spiritual “labor” (Potz 2012: 395–396), were indispensable for prospective Ministry members (leaders) at least until mid-19th century.

Shamanism provides another illustration of politically significant ecstatic voluntary costly signaling. A shaman's trance performances are no doubt efficacy-costly: physically and mentally exhausting, emotionally intense, burdened with the risk of failure and thus overall difficult to fake. At the same time, they signal crucial leadership qualifications: the ability to contact and engage spirits/ancestors and to control them for the benefit of the group. Indeed, the shaman, having established his reputation and authority, may perform important leadership functions for the community, typically a primary hunter-gatherer group. On the psychological level, "the clan shaman acts as a safety valve and as a special clan officer in charge of the regulation of the psychic equilibrium among the clan members" (Shirokogoroff 1935: 376), relieving them of fear connected with their relation with the spirits and claiming the ability to control some of the uncertainty surrounding daily existence (Singh 2018). On a sociological level, shamans help reduce the levels of intra-group conflicts, while fueling inter-group hostility (Bohuszewicz 2021), in keeping with the "wary cooperation" model of human social evolution: cooperate with your group members, punish the non-cooperators, compete with other groups (Alford and Hibbing 2004: 710). The analysis of a large cross-cultural sample reveals that in around half of all societies shamans in fact perform authority-related functions (ranging from 44% for political power to 60% for judiciary power), in addition to their healing, divination, or weather control roles (Singh 2018: 9). All in all, there is little doubt that religious specialists, such as shamans, perform important political functions, facilitated by their costly ecstatic rituals functioning as power credentials.

6 Conclusion

Building on the costly signaling theory of religion, the article has explored the function of non-obligatory costly behaviors – voluntary costly signals. In their political interpretation, such voluntary displays may increase a member's status within the group, help assert their authority and thus be empowering. Such empowerment may be individual, when a member aspires to a distinct, formal or informal leadership position, or collective, when costly practices of a category of members increase their social ranking.

Both ascetic and ecstatic behaviors can serve as VCS, as long as they meet certain criteria: they incur some fitness or efficacy cost to the signalers; they indicate qualities qualifying, in the eyes of the community members, for positions of authority; they are meaningful to community members within their worldview; and they are unique, or at least minority practices, revered, but

not necessarily emulated by the majority of members. The Russian Skoptsy, with their fitness-costly, extreme ascetic practice of castration, and American Shakers, with their intense ecstatic displays, are among groups where VCS have clearly led to enhancing the position of signalers.

Importantly, highlighting the political interpretation is not to deny that a particular communicative behavior may resonate on many different levels: ritual mutilation or other acts of self-sacrifice; trance performance and other signs of spiritual possession – all have deep religious meaning for the audience. But they have social consequences, too. As these displays remind the believers of the sacrifice of Christ embodied in the suffering of the ascetic or the presence of supernatural beings speaking through the instrument, they direct the audience's attention to the personal traits of the signaler implicit in the signals. These traits, in turn, may constitute criteria of social stratification and empowerment within religious communities. In this way, voluntary costly signals are constitutive of these communities' power regimes.

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