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Rational Choice and its Discontents: Sociologists and Religion

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In 1844, Friedrich Engels wrote in his classic treatise on the working classes in England that an irreligious society was close at hand. The worker's "faulty education," wrote Engels, "saves him from religious prepossessions, he does not understand religious questions, does not trouble himself about them, knows nothing of the fanaticism that holds the bourgeoisie bound; and if he chances to have any religion, he has it only in name, not even in theory. Practically he lives for this world, and strives to make himself at home in it. All the writers of the bourgeoisie are unanimous on this point, that the workers are not religious, and do not attend church."[1] Engels' stark prognosis makes quite a contrast, however, with the optimistic tone of the Unitarian Minister Robert Vaughan, whose 1842 book *The Age of Great Cities*, envisioned the new urban environment as the culmination of human civilization; a place where pure, more enlightened Christianity would find a new home, finally removed from the ignorance, excesses and feudal practices of the countryside.

The question of whether modernity - a necessarily vague term used to cover a wide series of transformations, from urbanization and industrialization to democratization and the atomization of the individual - inevitably leads to secularization, or whether it merely destroys established Church practices, leaving individuals alone to engage in a more real and pure exploration of religion, has a been a subject of strife since at least as long as people have thought themselves "modern."

In the past three decades, sociologists have taken up the debate, largely provoked by the writing of two Americans, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge. The two have sought to refashion the thinking in their field by arguing for a rational choice based theory of religion centered around the concepts of "rewards" and "compensators" - they define the latter term as a "set of beliefs and prescriptions for action that substitute for the immediate achievement of the desired reward. Compensators postulate the attainment of the desired reward in the distant future or in some other unverifiable context. Compensators are treated by humans as if they were rewards."[2] Sociologists of religion have thus begun appropriating the language and the concepts usually left to political scientists and economists - rational choice and "religious economy" - and in the process have discovered rational actors (believers) in a market place (society, the state, life), looking for institutions (churches, sects, cults) that can best represent their specific interests (eternal life, the cure for a disease, a job promotion).

Steven Bruce, a sociologist at the University of Aberdeen, wants little to do with the "malign influence" this "small clique of US sociologists" has had on his field, and has thus written a book that he hopes will be the "the stake through the vampires chest" (pp. 1-2). Bruce holds on to the secularization thesis and argues that, on the whole, secularization has been both a very real experience, and that differences between the more enthusiastically religious U.S. and his own European home are best explained by other factors: "What I [take] issue with," he writes," is the very specific claim that *economic* (as distinct from social, legal, or political) rationality provides a useful model for understanding religious belief and behavior" (p. 127).

Bruce contends that it was the idea of choice, rational or otherwise, that led to secularization in the first place. The Reformation - though Luther himself was more than unreceptive to the idea of alternate Biblical interpretations - "played a particular role in demystifying the world" (p. 15), displacing the sole authority of the Church and giving the power of interpretation to each believer and his Bible. Since at least the French revolution, however, this trend has been reinforced by one more: state building. As greater social and geographic mobility led to diverging class, regional and religious

identities, states where trying to forge a unifying national culture. The result made toleration a social necessity and meant that the separation of Church and State - and thus also of religion and the public sphere - could not be far behind.

There are several issues at stake in the competing claims, the first and most obvious being what might best be called one of geography. The rational choice model began as American sociologists poured over American data and saw that it did not correlate with their European-derived ideas of "modernity = secularization." Secularization, on the other hand, is a model mostly based on research in Europe which focuses its attention on what Bruce, as well as many sociologists, politicians and other observers, perceive to have occurred all around them in the last few centuries: less and less openly religious people, less and less crowded Churches, and a less and less noticeable public religious presence.

A second issue has to do with what brings about religious change. Stark et al. believe that changes in religious practices come from the "supply side," i.e., that "religious belief and behavior are determined by the structure of the religious market or environment [and] intertwines [with] at least four analytically separate variables: pluralism, market share, competition, and regulation" (p. 46). For Bruce, however, this is just not the case: "The ups and downs of the popularity of religion in Britain (and in other European societies) do not fit what we expect if competition were the crucial variable;" only "if we take the modern Protestant view that religion is a question of individual knowledge and commitment" (p. 53) do they fit together. Bruce then goes on to argue for the need to take other factors into account and, in his strongest chapter, explores religious differences in European countries, east and west, by examining national histories in conjunction with data on Church attendance, survey results and demographics. As one would guess, they vary quite a bit and only occasionally correlate with what one would expect using Starks model.

Yet here, in a sense, also lies the crux of the argument between Bruce and Stark. What, exactly, are we measuring? Is it individual piety or Church attendance? Is it at all possible to measure the ˆreal religious commitment of a society or of its members? If commitment were the sole criteria, the Thirty Years War would have been the most ˆreligious period in European history. Yet Stark would probably claim that the Peace of Westphalia was yet another exercise in state regulation, while for Bruce it would be a further step in the move to break the power of – *the* Church by replacing it with the power of *a* church (see p. 15). It is interesting that - at least from what I have read of both authors -neither seems all that interested or comfortable in German history or the early modern period. Yet this is precisely where the most engaging studies on such problems as popular piety, confessional absolutism, state building, etc., could be done.[3] It is also while talking about Germany that Bruce begins to muddle his facts: the ˆallies, for example, had little to do with the creation of a secular German state after WWI (p. 108).

A further issue is one of historical scope. Stark seeks to explain all religious belief since the dawn of time in one fell swoop: Christianity could conquer Rome because it both offered a more egalitarian ideal and better health care;[4] America is more religious because it has more religions, which offer a wider scope of services (in this world and the next), and thus can attend to a greater percentage of the population. Conditions and locations may thus change, but peoples wants and needs translate universally. For Bruce, again, this is not so simple: America has many religions and they are on the whole better visited, but this is because it is an immigrant society, and each group brought its Church with it when it came and, in turn, still clings to it in order to reinforce its own identity in a multicultural society. Thus while America as a whole is diverse, any given community - as defined by class, region or place of origin - tends to be much less so. Britain, in turn, has almost as many denominations, but more of them tend to be in the same place at the same time and cater to the same population, leading to fragmented communities and empty Churches.

The question then, if one dares ask it, is who is right? The debate is certainly not over (Stark recently published an article entitled "Secularization, R.I.P." [5]) and both sides seem unwilling to give much ground. Overall, it seems that Bruce is much more interested in describing a process the transformation of religious life in the West over the past four centuries while Stark wants to create a universal theory of religion, applicable to all people in all place at all times. As a historian, I would naturally tend to side with Bruce: there was/is a process of transformation in religious life that took place in Europe in the past few centuries, and secularization seems a good word to describe it; also, I am generally skeptical of any attempt to create universal theories of human behavior. On the other hand, reading the materials for this review has also made me appreciate the very value of (in economic terms) scholarly competition: both sides, if nothing else, have only spurred each other on to more interesting findings and tighter arguments.

Notes

[1]. From the Chapter "Results" in Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1844). The text can be found on the web: http://csf.colorado.edu/mirrors/marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1840/cond-wc e/cwe07.htm

[2]. Rodney Stark et al., "Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models," *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979): 284. Cited in Bruce, *Choice*, 31.

[3]. See Rodney Starks article, "The Early Church's Health Plan," in *Christianity Today*, 15 June 1998, 54-56; as well his, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[4]. A short list of works on the more modern period would include: David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); William D. Bowman, *Priest and Parish in Vienna, 1780 to 1880*, Studies in Central European histories (Boston: Humanities Press, 1999); John W. Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna: Origins of the Christian Social Movement, 1848-1897* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897-1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Gangolf Huebinger, Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: Zum Verhaeltnis von Liberalismus und Protestantismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland *(Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994); Wilfried Loth,* Deutscher Katholizismus im Umbruch zur Moderne *(Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1991); Thomas Nipperdey,* Religion im Umbruch: Deutschland, 1870-1918 *(Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1988); Joseph Patrouch,* A Negotiated Settlement: The Counter-Reformation in Upper-Austria under the Habsburgs *(Boston: Humanities Press, forthcoming); and Jonathan Sperber,* Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Germany_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For further works, see the review essay by Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "Piety and Politics: Recent Works on German Catholicism," Journal of Modern History 63, no. 4 (1991): 681-716.

[4]. Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 249-273.

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