

# AN IDEA, A TRIBE, AND THEIR CRITICS: RATIONAL CHOICE AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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David Lehmann

## *A tribe and its leader*

The case of rational choice is one of a tribe within the broader tribe of sociologists of religion, identified by a distinctive sense of embattlement and by a particular jargon. The writing of the highly prolific founding scholar, Rodney Stark, is interspersed with dismissive, even offensive, remarks and often sarcastic attacks on the secularization thesis and its defenders (Stark and Finke 2000: 60-1), on those who would despise deductive theory or simply do not know what real theory is (Stark 1997), on historians who accept the secularization thesis or versions thereof or who write approvingly of a long-term trend towards liberalization - notably Martin Marty (Finke and Stark 2005: 7-8 and 244-7) - on Emile Durkheim (Stark and Finke 2000: 7), on intellectuals and theologians in general, placed sarcastically in quotes as 'learned professors' (Finke and Stark 2005: 87,133) on journal editors who would not publish his papers ((Stark 1997: 9-11), and on structural functionalism ('more like astrology than astronomy' (Stark 1997: 5; Lehmann 2001) The list is very long.

The school can be said to have announced its birth in Stark and Bainbridge's *A Theory of Religion* (1987), and to have its existence confirmed by Stephen Warner in a 1993 paper whose title referred to 'a new paradigm' (Warner 1993) and highlighted the use of concepts drawn from economics as its hallmark. The school is variously referred to as 'rational choice', 'supply side', 'market theory of religion' and 'economics of religion' and its main claims have been summarized with admirable clarity by Alejandro Frigerio (Frigerio 2007):

1. Pluralism is the natural situation of religious economies
2. Pluralism strengthens the religious economy
3. Monopoly religions are inefficient
4. There are no effectively monopolistic religions, but rather regulated [religious] markets
5. variations in religious behaviour are best explained by variations in supply than by variations in individual religious needs
6. Secularization is a misnomer: the phenomena it refers to are better described as a desacralization of society
7. Desacralization does not necessarily bring a diminution of the importance of religion in the lives of individuals

(Translation/paraphrase by DL)

Stark's writing –that is, the books and articles he has written himself and those written with his colleagues, principally William Sims Bainbridge and Roger Finke - is also sprinkled with *obiter dicta*, containing overarching and sometimes overbearing verdicts on human nature and on history in general: 'What is history but the record of the choices that humans have made and the actions they have taken on the basis of their choices?' (Finke and Stark 2005: 282); or 'Most people desire immortality' (Stark 1997: 7). These statements are not really truth claims at all, but affirmations of self-sufficiency, intrusions or excursions into and away from the arguments of a text. They are particular striking because they appear not only in the retrospective texts published since the mid-1990s, but also in the austere *Theory of Religion* (1987) which is rooted in the more considered type of axiomatic theorizing which Stark has thought out very carefully: this is the procedure which meets his exacting criteria of what is a 'big theory' ('make social systems emerge from micro-axioms', as George Homans, the prominent exchange theorist and precursor of rational choice, had called for in his 1964 address to the American Sociological Association (Stark 1997: 5).

The approach to the subject is indeed unique and self-sufficient: that is to say, it draws on almost no other contributions to the sociology of religion, or indeed to sociology generally, builds its own theory of human motivation from scratch – with only passing mentions of Freud, Darwin or Wilson – and exhibits only a schematic notion of social structure, or stratification. Indeed, even the economists who presumably hover behind the basic maxim of their framework merit little mention beyond a deferential nod ((Stark and Finke 2000)p. 45). (Iannacone has corrected this absence as we shall see.) But a more elaborate understanding of economics would have helped: for example a distinction between maximization and optimization would offer a basis for a more sensitive account of motivation.

In explaining this unadorned way of presenting his ideas, shorn of ancestral invocation or legitimation, Stark complains that much of what goes by the name of sociological theory is little more than 'ancestor worship' (Stark 1997: 21): for him, the merits of a founder of a school have little to do with those of applying its insights many generations later (biology students do not study Darwin, he notes, in Young (ed.) p.21), so he takes little trouble to place himself in a tradition or intellectual lineage. This adds further to the distinctiveness of his writings, setting them apart from the mainstream in which it is customary to use footnotes and potted histories of a concept as markers of allegiance to one or another school of thought. It does, however, leave his version open to the criticism that it is an over-simplification and conceivably inspired by a mission: at the very start (p.2) of *The Future of Religion* (jointly authored with Bainbridge) it is stated, baldly, that 'social scientists have misread the future of religion [and] not only because they so fervently desire religion to disappear ...'.

The separation is to some extent mutual. The endorsements on the covers of Stark's books are written by people who are not known for their contributions to the study of

religion - like the grand theory specialist Randall Collins (see the 1996 edition of *A Theory of Religion*) - or by others – like Andrew Greeley and Christian Smith (see *Acts of Faith*) – whose research is admittedly and perfectly respectably driven by a concern for the survival of one or other religious institution or tradition. Leading figures like David Martin, Robert Wuthnow or José Casanova ignore Stark, Iannacone and their circle, albeit mistakenly, for reasons which shall be explained below. David Martin has never mentioned Stark or Rational Choice and Wuthnow does not mention them even in a 2005 book entitled *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Wuthnow 2005), in which one chapter title includes the words ‘shopping in the spiritual marketplace’. It is hard to believe that a scholar of Wuthnow’s erudition had not considered whether to include a discussion of rational choice approaches to this subject.

### *Religious commitment*

Mention of the discrete religious commitment of Greeley and Smith leads us to the thorny question of that of Stark himself and his circle. This is complicated. Stark’s work, as has been mentioned, is littered with expressions of contempt, even hostility, directed at theologians, erudite clergy and intellectuals. In *A Theory of Religion* Stark and Bainbridge describe themselves as ‘personally incapable of religious faith’ (p. 23). Stark’s contribution to the Laurence Young volume (Young 1997) recounts his academic career, and in a 2007 interview quoted on Wikipedia he slips in a swipe at the intelligentsia: ‘I have trouble with faith. I’m not proud of this. I don’t think it makes me an intellectual...’ as if to set himself apart from the standard atheistic stance of intellectuals as he sees them. The same entry also quotes an interview given to the American Enterprise Institute and reproduced in the Mormon magazine *Meridian* <http://www.meridianmagazine.com/ideas/050210darwin.html> in which he describes himself as neither a Darwinist nor a creationist, but denounces anti-creationism at length as an atheist campaign against religion.

Stark’s disparagement of an out-of-touch or elitist intelligentsia goes hand in hand with much more positive language used in connection with the religion or religiosity of the people. *The Churching of America* can be thought of as an extended homage to popular religion – a term which the authors do not use but which fits their purpose.

Yet their reverence for the popular is not unlimited. The book gains much of its credence from a rich vein of data from the Bureau of the Census which had previously, according to Finke and Stark, been dismissed by demographers on the grounds that, being the result of responses from Church officials, the data they contained would be wildly inflated. The authors’ response is disarming: it is only when individuals, not churchmen, are asked their religious affiliation that the statistics are inflated: ‘Ever since the start of public opinion polling in the late 1930s surveys have found that approximately 85-95% of the population claims a religious affiliation’. Certainly the Church officials’ Census returns are more modest and quite stable over time (*The Churching...* pp.13-14). So although they clearly believe – and their data clearly show - that at least in the United States Christian religion survives and grows thanks to popular religion, theirs is not a naïve enthusiasm for popular spontaneity: indeed, they live up to their supply-side moniker by expressing

greatest enthusiasm is for the entrepreneurial preachers who would stir up the presumed latent religiosity among the people. Their theory of religious motivation is, as we shall see, not a very populist one at all.

Stark and colleagues have no compunction in describing popular religion's openness to mobilization and to what some might describe as manipulation. Uncharitable or snobbish commentators might say that the methods they describe in the marketing of religion are no different from those used in promoting mundane consumer items. They emphasize entrepreneurship and the supply side, and the importance of preachers' ability and willingness to engage with the daily lives and needs of their actual and potential followings: these themes in turn reflect a powerful assumption about humans' disposition to religious affiliation, namely that it is present in human existence and ready to be tapped. This is no longer as controversial an assumption as it might have been a generation ago: cognitive anthropology and psychology have given us reason to believe that the functioning of our brains does indeed predispose us to religion – though it is a predisposition, not an inevitability, and it predisposes us to give credence to supernatural agency generally, not to the institutionalization of religion. Interestingly, when Pascal Boyer, one of the most prominent exponents of the cognitive approach to religion, comes to explain institutionalized religion, he takes a straightforward rational choice approach – though he does not use the term itself, preferring the word 'coalition-building'. (Boyer 2001; Atran 2003; Boyer 2004; Lehmann 2005).

The rational choice school takes its name not from cognitive science, but from a basic quasi-economic axiom, namely that 'humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs' (*A Theory...* p. 27). The challenge is then to show how not only immediate and material offerings but also soulful longing or yearnings for salvation, or discourses on the transubstantiation or on Rabbinic law, can be seen to flow from this axiom. We will come to this, but the approach also calls itself supply side because the rational choice theorists are also deeply interested in the organization and entrepreneurship required to respond to this basic feature of human behaviour by providing rewards and cost-reducing resources.

The supply side explains how preachers reach their audience: the dedication of circuit preachers riding thousands of miles on horseback in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century United States enabled them to hone their skills, endlessly rehearse their exhortations, and accumulate a wealth of quasi-ethnographic experience. The camp meetings organized by Methodists and Baptists required meticulous organization and fund-raising, just as modern-day evangelicals use a battery of media and marketing resources, and immigrant leaders set up community halls. All this does not in itself detract from the supernatural or spiritual appeal of the outcome – it is merely a necessary condition for any successful event from the Christmas pantomime to a collective spiritual experience. And indeed the camp meetings were characterized by all sorts of trances and ecstasies, much to the distaste of the establishment clerics whom Finke and Stark love to mock (*The Churching...* p. 95).

If the truly thriving religion is the religion of the people, and if the most enthusiastic or committed forms of religious life (sects especially) tend to be overrepresented among the

disempowered, is this not a version of Marx's 'opium of the people'? Are Stark and his circle trying to promote the religion of untutored spontaneity or of the manipulated masses? Are they secret elitists, contemptuous of the intellectual and theological elite but resigned to the admission that the masses are a disposable mass ready to follow the best that the science of marketing can offer?

### *Compensators*

That is indeed a question which arises in respect of Stark's concept of a 'compensator', which was central to the books he wrote with Bainbridge. Although it was set aside in *Acts of Faith*, written with Finke, this was for presentational rather than substantive reasons. The concept of 'compensator' emerged out of a formally structured sequence of axioms, definitions and propositions which start on page 27 of *A Theory of Religion* (Stark and Bainbridge 1987) by defining the complementary words 'reward' and 'cost' and by page 36 have reached proposition 15: 'Compensators are treated by humans as if they were rewards'. Rewards are 'anything which humans will incur costs to maintain' and costs are 'whatever humans attempt to avoid'. (By its end the book has accumulated 7 axioms, 104 Definitions and 344 Propositions.) The argument is that when the rewards sought by individuals are not achievable they may accept intangible substitutes which are also called 'explanations' (*A Theory of Religion*, p. 36), though some might call them consolations or even sublimations. The generality of the rewards and the explanations is crucial: since no answer to 'fundamental questions of meaning' can be unambiguously evaluated some people accept 'untestable and extremely general explanations' as compensators. Note that the word 'general' is important: even though it is a very vague word, it is used repeatedly in these texts to emphasize the ultimate or fundamental nature of the questions the compensators are supposed to answer. And the authors affirm that 'many humans do often desire answers' to 'questions of ultimate meaning' – though the only evidence offered is that the 'Neanderthal performed burial rites' (p. 39). Religion is a term to describe systems of generalized compensation based on supernatural assumptions (p. 39). Cognitive scientists (like Boyer and Atran) take it almost for granted that if religion is 'hard-wired' in our brains, it is, as already mentioned, the religion of what might be called naïve supernatural belief and definitely not the religion of the afterlife or of eternal damnation or salvation. Given Stark and his colleagues' aversion to theology, it might have been expected that they would relegate eternal truths to a lower level of explanatory force than that accorded to it through the compensator concept. But while naïve supernatural belief is counted as magic by them and does not qualify as religion, the importance they attach to a universal human search for ultimate meaning sits uncomfortably with their persistent denigration of theology.

The appeal of the compensator idea lies in one crucial implication, namely the uncertainty and inherent untestability of these very generalized expectations, for later in the theory we find (a) that the poor and the powerless tend to be those most drawn to them, since the more fortunate and more powerful can gain real rewards and are not drawn to compensators, and (b) that the power to convince people, or the power that comes to those in whom others place their trust, is quite significant (pp. 43, 140). In other

words, high-status members of a religious organization are less dependent psychologically on the truth value of eschatological futures, or on the supernatural guarantors of future benefits. They have less to gain from believing in those prospects than their followers. Indeed, a rather chilling pair of propositions claims that those who gain real rewards have little vested interest in recognizing the limitations of those rewards while those with few real rewards, taking refuge in compensators, will have a vested interest in denying the worth of real rewards: that is, the model has a built-in polarization between the scepticism or realism of the elite and the naïveté of the relatively deprived (p.141). Stark and Bainbridge and later Finke are keen to clarify that nothing they write has any implication for the truth or falsehood of religious explanations – but this apparently rather cynical account does little to enhance religion’s attractiveness. Stark and Bainbridge are not worried about cynicism, but they do go out of their way to preempt an accusation of marxism. Theirs, they say, is not a Marxist claim that ‘the powerful will profit while the poor pray’ (p. 44) because even the rich and powerful believe in some general compensators. The issue of marxism is surely peripheral: a more significant question is that of power and uncertainty, which Stark and colleagues do address.

The uncertainty of outcomes in the religious marketplace is very important. Uncertainty links in to power, especially in sects where the followers are drawn from among the poor and disempowered (for reasons which Stark and colleagues explain) and compensators are more general, or vague and almost unspecifiable, than in what they call ‘mainline’ religion – i.e. Christian denominations. Religious specialists can define, interpret and manipulate the meaning of their promises. ‘Since it has proven impossible to determine what the gods promise and desire, the terms of exchanges with the gods are freely defined by the specialists’ (*A Theory...* p.98). The reasoning behind this is largely that it is also in the interest of specialists to provide some benefits for their followers even as they impose strict demands on them (notably in respect of sexual activity, for example, or dress, or contributions in time and money), but the argument could go further, by invoking the substantial investment which followers make in the most sectarian movements and the consequent resistance to any evidence of failure. This is brought out by the argument that individuals who invest most in the positive self-image conferred by adherence to the cause and its cosmology (general compensators) tend to be the most powerless, and therefore are unlikely to take on the risks of revolt (*A Theory...* p. 140).

Eventually, as already noted, it was decided to set aside the idea of a compensator. In *Acts of Faith* (p. 88), Stark and Finke use the expression ‘otherworldly rewards’, and in a footnote explain that that the term compensator ‘implies unmeant negative connotations about the validity of religious promises’ (p. 289) – in other words its use led some readers to think that compensators were compensating for the impossibility, even dishonesty, of those promises. It now sufficed, they said, ‘to analyze aspects of the religious means of fulfilment of such explanations and the issues of risk and plausibility entailed therein’ (ibid.) In other words, they looked to use a term which left room for a range of plausibility and did not even hint at the notion of zero plausibility. No commentator seems to have asked whether their usage of the word compensator might not have a Freudian origin on account of its resemblance to sublimation or displacement.

*Secularization and waves of renewal.*

Stark and colleagues have a strong claim to be precursors of the reversal of consensus which has questioned the concept and the reality of secularization and its measurement. In *A Theory of Religion* an argument is developed to the effect that secularization is self-limiting, and that, taking place in a 'cosmopolitan society', it tends to encourage more sectarianism than in a society with a single dominant religious culture. This is for several reasons: religious institutions of a lax or liberal kind, which exist in low tension with society as a whole, which 'modernize their values' and 'embrace temporal values' (*The Churching... p. 9*), are led by salaried religious specialists and comfortable lay members, and pay little attention to the provision of the sort of general compensators which are of benefit to their less advantaged followers. Their learned theological disquisitions often dismiss as superstition cherished ideas about the supernatural, confer little value on proselytization, and care little for the religiosity of everyday life. They – the elite – have plenty of rewards in this life, and have little need for the consolations ('compensations') of life after death, salvation and eternal happiness. They also may have many other satisfactions outside the life of their coreligionaries, whereas the less powerful have more restricted sources of reward.

Even if not many of these more humble people disaffiliate, for reasons principally of inertia, those who do leave will, in a 'cosmopolitan' society where the religious arena is tolerant and competitive, be able to choose from a variety of alternatives. Disaffiliating from the low-tension denominations, they will gravitate to the 'high-tension' sectarian alternatives rich in those ill-specified and unattainable consolations (the 'general compensators' or general 'otherworldly rewards'). They may not be many, but they will be an increasing proportion of the overall religious or observant population. In addition, the claim is that people from a religiously disaffected or unaffiliated background, if they do seek religion, are more likely to join high-tension religious groups – i.e. sects or even cults (*A Theory... p. 303*). The interpretation is again somewhat chilling: those who have the privilege of living the elite life can do so without religion, or at least with a religious affiliation which is undemanding and even flattering to their status, and have little if anything to gain from making their institutions more welcoming or even of benefit to the mass of the disempowered. The wording seems to suggest that the disempowered include not only the lower reaches of society but even the middle ranges of empowerment and income: all these are left to console themselves with promises which will be realized only when it is too late.

The notion of high-tension is evidently central to this argument. It means 'broad sub-cultural deviance' (*A Theory... p. 121*) or, quite simply, sects and cults and hostility to a notional liberal mainstream: denunciation of abortion, of sexual permissiveness, and same-sex marriage for example (*The Churching... p. 278*). It is sub-culturally, not morally, deviant. Membership in sects is costly, and so the leaders must maintain a high level of tension to preserve the idea that their followers' objectives – to attain impossible

compensations – are far superior to the illusory rewards of more comfortable members of society. But if a sect survives – and many do not - its leaders seem, in this model, to develop a life of power and high income and manage their followers by giving them positions of responsibility, or simply minor tasks, while keeping them in a state of deprivation, poverty and powerlessness. This interpretation is puzzling because the tone of so much of this rational choice writing is, if not sympathetic to sects, then certainly hostile to hierarchies and institutionalized churches. Maybe we should welcome the frankness of the following (*A Theory...* p. 248): ‘In contemporary America... members of high-tension sects will be heavily recruited from among low-income, low-IQ, uneducated, female, older, non-white, handicapped, neurotic and otherwise less powerful persons.’ Chapter 8 of *A Theory...* is mostly devoted to showing that most sects disappear before they can grow to a significant size, while those which do grow must gradually reduce tension with their environment, a model which feeds back into the waves of secularization and desecularization.

This version of the secularization thesis does not deny a contemporary falling away in church attendance, but it regards this as part of secular fluctuations which will never end, and it also offers a theory to predict the increasing power of the leaders of sects, evangelical churches and what we might call conversion-led movements to set the agenda in public debates about religion. Yet it also foresees a constant ebb and flow between more and less institutionalized religious organization.

The fluctuations are well described in *The Churching of America*. The idea of a decline in religion just after the Revolution turns out to be a decline in attendance at established churches and neglects rapid growth of Methodists and Baptists. (p.59-60). This fits neatly with the Stark thesis – which is also that of Adam Smith - that maintained churches tend to lose their followings (p. 53-4). The revivals, waves and great awakenings which have been the received wisdom of US history turn out, on this account, to be inventions, both in the sense that a closer examination shows they were not exceptional upsurges, and also in the sense that although they were particularly shocking and surprising to those who commanded the media at the time – namely the erudite clergy of the denominations – they were routine for their organizers. And Stark and Finke’s main point is to emphasize the meticulous planning which lay behind these campaigns, downplaying the theme of spontaneity and thus of outbursts of innate religious fervour (pp. 87-92). These occasions may have appeared uncontrolled, but in fact they took place in well organized contexts.

When it comes to contrasting the US with Europe the theme of a salaried clergy recurs with much rhetorical flourish. Not only have the established churches of Europe maintained an indolent clergy with little incentive to deliver – they have also never really been very religious nor above all very Christian at all. *Acts of Faith* assembles various sources to show that levels of church attendance even in medieval Europe were quite low. ‘The Christianity that prevailed in Europe was an elaborate patchwork of state churches that settled for the allegiance of the elite and for imposing official requirements of conformity, but made little effort to Christianize the peasant masses’ (p. 69). So the secular character claimed for Europe by standard secularization theory is wrong because



the continent – a least in the West – was not very religious, or at least not very Christian, in the first place.

The treatment of Europe, marked as Bruce shows (see *infra*) by a very superficial historiography, is an illustration not only of Stark's focus on the US, but also of a certain animosity towards Europe, depicted here as a more or less heathen space. There is disquieting ignorance, as when, in *The Churching...* it is said, with reference to the Catholic Church, that 'in many parts of Europe the head of state holds veto' over the appointment of bishops' (p. 131). This was still at least half true in Franco's Spain, but Franco had been dead for 30 years when the book was published. (Of course the state does have a role in non-Catholic episcopal appointments in England and several Scandinavian countries, but the process is too consensual to allow anything so strong as a veto.) Further on we shall come to Steve Bruce's exposure of many other errors.

Despite the aspiration to completeness, signified by the formal structure of *A Theory...*, Stark and colleagues leave some threads untied. They describe the more or less inevitable process of sect institutionalization, and one can see how this fits into the idea of waves of revival followed by periods of calm, but does this mean that the contemporary upsurge has been a passing phase, or does it apply at a more micro – or maybe meso – level? If the model is local, then local churches and sects can evolve in waves, but at a national or global level the waves would not be visible.

In this connection too a recognition that the wave of conversion-led religious movements may have brought about deep changes in the last two or three generations in what it means to be religious would have been necessary to complement the model's formal and empirical merits. This change may have taken different forms and had differing impacts in different parts of the world, but given the school's enthusiasm for religious revival and participation, the fact that most Protestants worldwide are now Pentecostals should not have been overlooked – a trend whose implications will be examined further on.

### *The 'club' model*

This section considers a second 'wave' of rational choice theories, spearheaded by tighter economic reasoning and even modelling, and which is more applicable across cultural and geographical boundaries.

Iannacone and Stark speak of each other like two lonely warriors who met one day and saved each others' lives. This fits with their outsider status in their own disciplines. When Iannacone began to work on religion in the 1980s economists were liable to look with disdain on 'real world' problems, let alone on problems which lay outside the traditional purview of their subject. That has changed and today economists have extended their reach to crime, health care and much besides - .

Iannacone's contribution has been to bring some rigour to the formulation of the rational choice approach, drawing on Olson's essay and the institutional economics which it prefigured. Olson's original examples had been taxes, trade unions and voluntary

organizations. We pay taxes because the penalty is punishment by the state. The benefit to each individual tax-payer is hard if not impossible to relate to the taxpayer's own contribution. But why do we join a trade union if the wages negotiated by its officers will in any case be paid to all the employees of a firm? How can the trade union deal with this now-famous 'free-rider problem'? Answer: under a closed shop agreement the firm has agreed only to employ members of the union. (Closed shops are much rarer now in North America and Western Europe than they were in the 1960s of course.) Why do we join a voluntary organization? Here the answer is not so obvious to those who adopt an economic view of motivation, but Olson finds that voluntary organizations very often provide all sorts of 'separate and selective incentives' of direct personal benefit to encourage members to contribute their dues: academic associations provide subscriptions to their journals at a fraction of the price to non-members; Touring Clubs and Automobile Associations provide insurance, manuals, maps etc. Charitable donations are tax-deductible as is membership of professional associations, and participation in voluntary associations can bring social contacts and status. An important feature of Olson's model, though, is the theme of interest groups' involvement in regulating market access – as in the case of the closed shop – and this is highly relevant to the rational choice analysis of religion precisely because, as we shall see below, sect leaders build barriers around their following so as to restrict access to the benefits membership brings.

Turning now to religion, this model can be applied with particular force to the most demanding sects. It is a response to the question why people who are – or appear to be – under little compulsion would voluntarily join an organization which imposes a tight dress code, makes very heavy demands on their time, requires members to have very large families, and so on. The reference is not to weird cults, but to the thousands of evangelical and Pentecostal churches scattered around the globe, to ultra-Orthodox Judaism, and to North American Christian fundamentalism. Much 'commonsense' sociology has explained the growth of Pentecostalism in poor countries with reference to migration, social disintegration and the consequent search for meaning or for a refuge from the loss of secure values. Norris and Inglehart confirm this intuition with data from a host of national surveys which show that 'levels of societal and individual security... seem to provide the most persuasive and parsimonious explanation for variations in religiosity' (Norris and Inglehart 2007: 47). That is the demand side. No doubt gross numbers of religious participants are of interest, but more precise explanations are needed for the particular form of 'strong' religiosity which has become so vociferous and influential in many countries despite its relatively small number of followers. That is where the supply side comes in.

Iannacone explains that religious movements provide benefits for their followers: not just – maybe not particularly – salvation, but 'worship services, religious instruction, social activities, and other quasi-public "club goods"' (Iannacone 1997: 1482). In tightly knit groups like the chapels of the Assemblies of God or the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhoods of Stamford Hill (London), Crown Heights (Brooklyn, New York) and Ramat Shlomo (Jerusalem) one can count on quite a lot of social support and mutual aid, but, as in Olson's trade union case, how to discourage free riders, who would take

advantage of these benefits without truly believing? The question is serious enough when the group itself provides the support – chapels which collect charitable gifts for their members for example – but it becomes even more serious when the group has access to some special external benefit. This can arise when the pastor of a chapel has preferential access to a politician to whom he has promised the votes of his congregation – though that is certainly a relationship involving multiple moral hazards. More concretely, among ultra-Orthodox Jews there is the question of access to charitable funds, to places in centres of religious learning (yeshivas), and in Israel exemption from military service and access to the small but regular government subsidy to married men engaged in full-time Torah study. This has been explored in depth by Eli Berman (Berman 2000) who seizes on the Israeli case to explain the self-imposed burdens imposed on the ultra-Orthodox in terms of the free-rider problem: membership has to be burdensome to avoid free riders. The issue is not a person's contribution in labour or time, but evidence of sincere moral or ideological commitment. The substantial material benefits available in Israel do, of course, make it a very suitable case study. No wonder Iannacone concludes: 'many of the bizarre and apparently pathological practices of deviant groups can function as rational, utility-enhancing attempts to promote solidarity and limit free riding' (Iannacone 1997: 1489). In New York there are few such concrete benefits beyond the famed fund-raising talents of some leaders, and among Assemblies of God, who do not have access to a relatively wealthy international network, the benefits are even less concrete: but since the followers of the Assemblies are overwhelmingly drawn from low income groups, their calculus may be different and their needs more modest. The benefits of belonging to a chapel in a very low-income and low-security urban neighbourhood are probably to do with social contacts and social recognition, which in a location where levels of trust and institutional presence are abysmally low can be very substantial indeed. More research on the economics of low-income Pentecostal churches would be welcome, but it is not easy, because it would be regarded as intrusive: secularization theorists and mainstream sociologists generally have said very little about the financial side of religion, as if they were slightly embarrassed by it, whereas Stark and Iannacone and Berman have engaged with that subject with perhaps excessive enthusiasm.

This is not entirely surprising: among secularization theorists – who show little overt enthusiasm for religious observance – religious motivation tends to be a matter of ethos, while rational choice advocates are both less apparently sceptical about religion and more down-to-earth in their interpretations of religious behaviour. For them, if Pentecostals, say, are obliged to contribute regularly (tithing), then the proliferation of small churches illustrates their dream of graduating to the point where they too can make a respectable preacher's living from those selfsame tithes. Did not David Martin, for example, describe the pastor as a model of upward social mobility and the church as a type of social escalator ((Martin 1990), p. 283), though the task of collecting evidence to support this observation and related claims about the social origins and destinations of Pentecostal churchgoers and activists, is still pending, and may face almost insuperable difficulties as a research project. The data used by Iannacone for example is drawn not from inquiry into church finances, but from surveys which in a much less intrusive way ask individuals about their own religious contributions, such as US National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys (Iannacone 1997: 1472).

Berman has pursued these themes into new territory by applying the model to violent political groups claiming a religious inspiration. In a working paper published on the National Bureau of Economic Research website in Washington DC he compared Taliban, Hamas and a short-lived Jewish underground which aimed to blow up the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (Berman 2003). Here the religious factor in the argument recedes into the background but still the model derived from Iannacone remains: only, because the surrounding society in Afghanistan and the Occupied Territories of Palestine possess no effective state, the sacrifices demanded of militants are even tougher. So the strategy of the Taliban pre-2001 was to drive a wedge between their personnel and the local population in order that the former's loyalties would not be divided; thus they retained a degree of power by providing the security which their enemies, warlords and Mujaheddin, had failed to provide (Berman 2003; Berman and Iannacone 2006). The argument is neither that the violence has a religious explanation nor that the religious rhetoric is just a mask for violent politics. Rather, it seems to be that religious organizations like others may adopt new aims, and this may involve using violence as a survival strategy or as a way of pursuing political power – in which case they are little different from other organizations, especially in an environment where the state is weak or scarcely existent. For its part the Jewish underground collapsed at an early stage because Israel has a functioning state and the population cannot be persuaded to pay for alternative protection from a dangerous environment. Paradoxically, using the club theory, he points out that rebels in Afghanistan and the Hezbollah and Hamas all accentuated the 'required levels of sacrifice' precisely when they received substantial external funding which in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas enabled them to branch into social assistance on a very large scale and thus to become an attractive target for free riders (Berman and Iannacone, 2006). The draconian measures came into their own.

#### *Rational choice's fiercest critic*

Like Stark and Iannacone, Berman makes a point of excising emotions and belief from his analysis, and this is one of the main aspects of rational choice theory attacked by Steve Bruce in an unusual book-length critique (Bruce 1999). Like Stark, Bruce feels victimized by journal editors, complaining in his Preface of biases in their procedures, and like Stark he can use some intemperate language, expressing the hope in the same Preface that this book will be 'the stake through the vampire's chest'. His brandishing of his adversaries' nationality – 'a handful of US sociologists' (p.2); 'US economists may find it hard to believe but...' (p. 141) – is in poor taste, as is his allusion to 'the entrepreneurial world of US fundamentalism'. But these lapses should not detract from the seriousness of Bruce's arguments and the detail of his critical analysis. Some of his criticisms take up points already raised in this contribution, albeit more sharply: his doubts about compensators, his complaints about Stark and Bainbridge's 'atheistic premises' (p. 34). Bruce's most important contribution is his deployment of a far wider range of information across many more countries, cultures and periods and with much more scholarly care than is found in supply-side writing. He shows for example the fallacy of Stark's assumption that a country with a state church places that church in a monopoly position (pp. 44-54), and the superficiality of the assumption that monopoly is

an imposition, by quoting in some detail the examples of England and Scotland from the Reformation onwards, and of 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland. He reminds us of the fundamental importance for a church of its identification with national or tribal identities as in Serbia and Russia (p.116), Ireland and of course Poland again. In the process the role of competition in the religious field becomes more and more multifarious and context-dependent and one is led to agree with his quotation from the historian Hugh McLeod on the impossibility of sociological generalization about religion across a broad range of countries (p. 115). Certainly, Bruce leaves the empirical claims of rational choice theory, especially about the relationship between religious activity and competition or deregulation, severely weakened.

On the other hand, he himself recognizes that when applied to the United States those claims have much validity (p.120). One reason for this is that behind the words ‘market’ and ‘competition’ there lies, in the United States case, a proliferation of ethnically homogeneous religious-cultural niches in which there is not really much competition at all. So that market, because of the country’s size and because of the pattern of immigrant settlement and residence, looks more segmented than is allowed – something to which we shall return.

Bruce’s other main objection is more theoretical and concerns religious motivation. He will not accept the refusal of the rational choice approach to consider altruism and idealism in religion (p. 141), and he does not think ‘that people believe in God because they get a good return on that belief’ – an oversimplification even of the supply-siders’ concept. Instead he says both that people perform spiritual exercises because they want to go to heaven, and that ‘most people believe because they are socialized into a culture of belief’ (p. 157). But these are merely statements of opinion, and involve precisely the delicate issue of the relationship between belief and action which the rational choice advocates choose, prudently, to sidestep. He does not accept the idea, central to much social science, of a model which explains actions independently of motivations, and so in the end his argument with Iannacone is as much about metaphors (viz. the notion of a ‘return’ on, or an investment in, religion) as about propositional claims (p.56). There remain, nonetheless, many puzzles – not least that of how writers who do not conceal their enthusiasm for organized religion refuse to take seriously the question of belief as a motivator in religious participation, preferring to adduce more mundane, lateral costs and benefits.

### *Refining and thickening rational choice.*

The rational choice approach can be improved, firstly by taking on a less provocative name: a term such as ‘the sociology of everyday life’ would be preferable if only because the approach is not claiming that religious belief as such is rational. It would also nuance an otherwise provocative emphasis on the use of economics. Rationality is about means towards ends, yet it is essential to take into account that the ends of religion are different from other ends in that their attainment is unknowable. Bruce’s criticism could be reformulated as a complaint that Stark and colleagues, aside from their highly contestable concept of the compensator, barely recognize that religious organizations are different

from any other. To improve the approach requires taking certain basic theoretical and empirical points into account.

The first empirical point which the theory needs to admit is the decline in religious participation and observance, however defined, almost throughout the world – another point on which Bruce insists repeatedly and correctly. The debate about the facts – the ‘secularization debate’ - is no longer of intellectual interest. The serious challenge is to interpret the growing influence of evangelical and fundamentalist movements within this shrinking religious field and their disproportionate – and possibly growing - political and cultural influence beyond the religious field in certain geographical, cultural and ethnic contexts. Linked to this is the prominence of conversion in these movements. At a time when Pentecostalism is a vast global mass movement, it no longer makes sense to say people joining conservative sects with extremely heterogeneous followings are returning to traditions with which they already identify (as Bruce claims). Indeed, even the phenomenon of return – as is now common among a vocal and influential minority of Jews and Muslims – is itself a radical conversion in psychological and social terms.

These conversion phenomena are characterized by a higher degree of holism in the lives of individuals than is perhaps usual. Following Frigerio (Frigerio 2007), just as people live their identities in the personal, social and collective spheres and do not necessarily integrate them in the way we observe among fundamentalists, returnees and, to a lesser extent, evangelicals, so also the variety of ways in which religion itself is experienced must be allowed for. He is critical of simplistic assumptions that ‘once upon a time’ there was complete Catholic domination in Argentina, and that this has now collapsed as beliefs diversify. He presents opinion poll data which seem to show that Argentinians expressed more Catholic beliefs, quantitatively and qualitatively, in 1999 than in 1984. The data lack a counterpart in religious observance and participation, but the point he insists on is that religious change can take many directions, for in that country the market has opened up the religious landscape, which has become more varied with the growth of Pentecostal sects and possession cults like umbanda imported from Brazil, yet, to believe the response to surveys, the population seems to have become more Catholic than before. He concludes by evoking Pierre Sanchis’ idea (Sanchis 1993) that Catholicism could be a *habitus*, a frame within which Argentines think their participation in all sorts of religious subcultures, just as in France even the most ferociously lay are described sometimes as ‘catholâique’. But the main message is that categories such as monopoly, belief and even Catholic have fuzzy edges.

If the economic model is to be maintained then the supply-siders should invoke another economic concept, moral hazard, to take account of the impossibility of knowing whether the benefits of religion have been attained. Stark and indeed Bruce recognize that one way for religious institutions to deal with failure to meet expectations is to branch out into social services of various kinds. Sects do not have this opportunity unless – as in the Islamist cases mentioned – they obtain external funding – or rather sects take up the opportunity when external funding is made available. For the issue is not one of tactical opportunity: rather it is the structural, pervasive moral hazard not just of unattainability, but of the awareness of not ever being able to know whether the proclaimed end has been

attained by anyone. It is possible that the worldwide success of the Gospel of Health and Wealth is a consequence: that Gospel sets worldly success side-by-side with, maybe even ahead of, otherworldly salvation as a goal, but significantly the attainment of the dreams of wealth thus purveyed is made conditional on conversion and exorcism procedures which place great power in the hands of pastors in small congregations, and in the case of neo-Pentecostal churches of a vast organization. So long as the follower remains in the church the authority will be able to decide whether the exorcism has been done correctly and to offer explanations as to why the desired outcomes have not yet been attained: in this environment there is little practical difference in attainability between the promised prosperity and peace and eternal salvation itself.

Although Iannacone recognizes that ‘religions are risky business’ and that ‘their fundamental assertions lie within a realm of "radical uncertainty" beyond the range of empirical verification’, he is surely wrong to conclude that subscribing to a religion is a strategy ‘to hedge one's bets’ ((Iannacone 2002)p. 210), trading finite losses in this life for the possibility of infinite rewards in the next, because whereas we will eventually know whether an investment has gone sour or not, the overwhelming majority of religiously committed Christians and Muslims are perfectly aware that neither they nor anyone else will ever know the result of their ‘wager’ on the afterlife.

Evangelical and Pentecostal churches nowadays have multiplied to such an extent, and their basic model has exhibited such a remarkable capacity to adapt and create without sacrificing its core recognizability that wholesale generalization is barely possible any more. But because of the core elements of exorcism and healing and the accompanying moral hazards, the variable of power, already recognized by Stark, must be taken into account – power to determine what counts as salvation and what as healing or exorcism – as must the fund-raising and tithing which are central to these organizations’ survival.

The power factor is also important among ultra-Orthodox Jews who presented such a suitable case for Berman. Here the availability of subsidy from the state and from Jewish charities around the world place leaders in a clear position of power as well as presenting them with a strong imperative to issue ever more stringent rulings on the subject of dress, marriage, sex and whatever anyone brings before them. But the pressure for stringency may also come from below. Nowadays large families and the culture of permanent Torah study makes their followers’ lives humdrum, even poor, and so all depend to some extent on the benefits of membership, and look out for signs of insincerity among their co-religionaries. (cf. (Lehmann 2008) Unsurprisingly, researchers find that they are anxious about gossip and the evil eye.<sup>1</sup>

Conversion – the extreme case of exercising choice in matters religious - accentuates the power factor because converts – including the Jews and Muslims who renounce a secular lifestyle and become returnees to strict observance – tend to change their lifestyle, their social circle and their jobs, and become heavily dependent on their new community as well as anxious to conform and to serve.

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<sup>1</sup> Observation based on current field research by the author with Batia Siebzehner in Israel.

Thus the phenomenon of conversion has changed the landscape underlying the theses of rational choice theorists and of their opponents: converts and returnees have become a major force in religious life worldwide, undermining the hold of the traditions which for Bruce are a strength – albeit a declining one - and for Stark and colleagues a weakness. This in turn goes together with an ever more open religious marketplace where entry is easy and ‘consumer protection’ almost non-existent.

At this point the rational choice advocates’ concern with regulation becomes analytically interesting, but their faulty conceptualization of it is brought to light. Their simplistic assumptions about monopoly and state control have to be clarified and it has to be understood that the unattainability of convincing certification of the quality of the salvific and material goods offered by religion and so strongly emphasized by sects and conversion-led movements is a central feature, not just a detail. It tends to engender an inward-looking culture whose followers are taught that the best they can do for society as a whole is to persuade ever more people to abandon ‘the world’ and join them.

This ‘mainline’ sector of religion may not enjoy much approval from Stark or Finke, but it is open to the world and by operating usually according to classic secular rules of bureaucratic impersonality avoids the opacity of the sects. In contrast, even large neo-Pentecostal churches depend only on the authority of a single leader whose authority extends across all spheres but who has little influence outside their own flock.

Markets are also institutions and no theory or philosophy denies the need for public regulation to ensure, or try to ensure, fair dealing. Iannacone’s statement that ‘government regulation of religion tends to reduce individual welfare, stifling religious innovation by restricting choice, and narrowing the range of religious commodities’ (Iannacone 1997: 1489) needs qualification. Like the informal sector of the economy, the mass of Pentecostal sects operate in an unregulated institutional void where denominations and ancient churches are only sketchily present. In the informal economy regulations governing wages, health standards, contracts, minimum standards are irrelevant, wages and productivity are very low, and so access to entry is easy. The similarity to Pentecostal churches is brought home forcefully by Omar McRoberts’ study of religious districts in Boston (McRoberts 2005) in which ‘the glut of vacant commercial spaces... provided ample space for religious institutions looking for cheap rents’ (p. 139). It is a market far more deregulated than anything the rational choice theorists – who do not claim to be extreme libertarians – might imagine in the way of free competition. The pattern whereby Christianity’s most rapid expansion is carried forward by evangelical or charismatic churches which prosper in economically depressed areas where other types are absent, may simply reflect lack of competition rather than the merits of religion as a social good.

Supply-siders often write in tones of approval, sometimes enthusiasm, of the large numbers taking part in religious activity, yet they do not tell us why they adopt such a tone – especially since, as has been stated, some of the interpretations rest upon religion’s social and psychological rewards, not on its truth value. Their underlying conception of



what it means to be religious, and what society should expect from religion, is entirely implicit.

While it is true that the headlong growth of charismatic religion contradicts some versions of secularization theory, it must also be remembered that the Christianity which is growing is found in quite different social and geographical locations from the Christianity which has lost millions of adherents, participants and members in the secularization process. Similarly, while Judaism in general suffers a demographic crisis, the numbers and influence of the ultra-Orthodox are growing through the return movement. The minutiae of secularization debates, so well represented in the disputes between Bruce and Stark et al., sometimes make the sociology of religion itself look like an inward-looking sect, and they distract from the other story – namely the change brought about in the meaning of what it is to be religious by conversion-led and charismatic movements.

We may thus conclude by asking what is at issue? The rational choice question seems to be what are the conditions in which religious organization thrives, but the question whether its survival is good for the rest of society remains tantalizingly out of bounds: the authors' tone conveys a sense that they regard religious organization with a very positive eye, but they do not engage with the issue at all. Perhaps this is because they do not want to raise issues of the truth of religious claims, and perhaps it is because they do not want to enter into the discussion of the benefits religion might, or might not, bring to society as a whole: that, after all, would detract from an implicit idea that religion is its own justification. Stark's open contempt for religious trends which seek to provide non-religious goods – i.e. liberal, non-exclusionary churches and synagogues– is a source of deep division separating him from Bruce and no doubt many others who see mission diversification as a path for sects out of their ghetto-like existence, towards eventual church or denominational status where, one might deduce, they fit into secularized societies. These differences are not purely academic, they are about belief and commitment.

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