

THE MIRACULOUS ECONOMICS OF RELIGION: AN ESSAY ON SOCIAL CAPITAL.

David Lehmann

‘Religion may have a salutary effect on civil society by encouraging its members to worship, to spend time with their families and to learn the moral lessons embedded in religious traditions. But the impact of religion on society is likely to diminish if that is the only role it plays.’ (Wuthnow 1999:362)

The title of this paper alludes to an apparent puzzle: how is it that so often it seems that the only institutions being built in the highly unfavourable circumstances of impoverished and excluded populations are religious institutions? This is the ‘miracle’ of our title, and I will respond to the question by relating it to the contribution of religious movements to the creation of social capital. Inevitably, though, like all big questions it is crudely formulated, and we must therefore explore the underlying analytic questions and reformulate it.

We may begin by recalling that it was hard not to notice, in December 2004, that as the tsunami receded, the only buildings left standing were often churches and mosques. This image of the permanence and stability of religious institutions in the midst of chaos is complemented by other evidence, for example accounts, in documentaries and journalism, of *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro where gangsters inspire fear and the only respected figures are the pastors, many themselves former dealers: even the gunmen respect them.¹ So how do we explain that it is precisely in these circumstances that evangelical churches, and also perhaps madrasas, have apparently proliferated with the greatest rapidity? But how far can this image of trust amid distrust really go? The ‘unfavourable circumstances’ refer, in analytical terms, to the lack of institutions operating on the basis of abiding rules subject to disinterested application and adjudication – an environment in which the frontier between the private and the public sphere is far less clear than in the standard model of modernity

¹ Joao Salles’ documentary *Historia de uma guerra particular*, a realistic complement to the film, and book, *Cidade de Deus*. The evidence that evangelical churches find their followings principally among the poorest strata is abundant, see, for Latin America, Lehmann (1996). In Africa they tend to grow more among the social strata just above the poorest (Garner 1998 and 2000).

and secular society, and in which patron-client relations are the dominant form of power and authority, inhibiting universalistic rule-based behaviour and encouraging relations of personal dependence. In more practical terms, they evoke deeply rooted violence and poverty which have persisted despite the efforts of governments and NGOs, and despite massive social change in their immediate and global environments.

In addition, in these circumstances religious organizations face hostile vested interests of all sorts, including landlords opposed to any form of organization among their workers; other religious organizations; bandits and gangsters (despite the exceptions just mentioned), even secularists and atheists.

1. Institutions and social capital

The idea of social capital as originally formulated by Coleman was concerned principally with explaining educational achievement (*human capital*) in terms of the involvement of students' parents and the density and stability of their social and familial networks (Coleman 1988). Putnam's development of the term extends it to a relationship between intense civic associationism (well beyond the family) and institutional transparency and trust in the wider society. In his book on Italy the two are more in balance than in the later and more famous *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000) which tends to pay more attention to participation, though it does not ignore transparency. Participation has many facets: one contrast is between what might be called the 'real' and the 'virtual': some people go to meetings, tend to sick friends or relatives, volunteer for the local Red Cross, attend church or mosque or synagogue, help to organize the school Summer Fair and so on. These are forms of participation involving a commitment of time and also of one's personhood: a person appears in public as a participant. Such real participation can of course be further subdivided, in a manner which is not irrelevant for our subsequent discussion: some people volunteer but do not deliberate: they are happy to help out and no doubt to donate funds, but do not get involved with decision-making or management, that is with the 'politics' of their organization. Virtual participation is slightly different: it accounts for an ever-increasing share of association membership, and refers to the millions who contribute

their membership dues but do not attend any meetings or participate publicly at all. They are contributing to organizations which are run by professionals, headquartered in capital cities, and devoted to lobbying. In *Bowling Alone*, which is all about the USA, Putnam expresses some doubts whether such participation contributes much to social capital and worries that it accentuates partisan politics: locally only the ‘true believers’ participate (Putnam 2000), while nationally a ‘gaggle of professionally dominated advocacy groups’ (Theda Skocpol’s words quoted on p. 344) garner large sums of money and tend to highlight single issues and sharpen their differences. Putnam provides ample evidence of declining active, ‘real’ participation in the last third of the twentieth century in the United States (p. 58ff.), and expresses corresponding concerns about the health of the country’s democracy.

In this context, the contribution of religious participation to the creation or maintenance of social capital is of obvious interest. In the US, because that country is well known for the high levels of professed religious attendance among its population, especially when contrasted with Western Europe, and in poor and middle income countries where we observe high levels of religious attendance or belief – not necessarily the same thing (Inglehart and Norris 2004). Countries characterized by extreme poverty often exhibit a high level of religious participation, or perhaps better, religious involvement, side by side with what might be called the *degré zéro* of civic institutional life. This caricatured correlation, of course, raises innumerable questions about what type of involvement and what type of belief (from possession cults to high Catholicism in the style of Opus Dei), but even if we restrict ourselves to institutionalized religion, the upsurge of evangelical Christianity in Africa and Latin America has to merit consideration as *prima facie* evidence of religion’s contribution to social capital. Putnam’s chapter on religious participation in *Bowling Alone*, however, creates a basis of doubt: it shows sustained high levels of involvement in associative life on the part of people who profess a religion, but also shows that this involvement is concentrated among evangelicals, and evangelicals tend to be inward-looking, strengthening their own communities but not the community as a whole – though there are exceptions (p. 78). And later, buried in a footnote, there is the remark that ‘churches organized congregationally, such as Protestant denominations, tend to provide more opportunities for parishioners to build civic skills than do hierarchically

organized churches, including Catholic and evangelical denominations' (p. 494, based on (Verba, Schlozman et al. 1995).

To this I would add that patterns of organization and leadership reinforce the contrast and add further features: evangelical churches are organized quite differently from other types of church, as Putnam notes, and also from the standard model of civic association. Authority tends to be concentrated in an individual who is not subject even to token participatory decision-making: he, or very occasionally she, is after all a charismatic leader in a strong or at least literal, sense of the word, and if the pastor loses their confidence, followers close their wallets and vote with their feet. The followers pay dues, but they do not appoint a pastor. The same goes for fundamentalist Jewish organizations: among Chassidim authority stems from a *Rebbe* or from a central committee (as in the Lubavitch or Chabad community), not from a congregation; among other ultra-Orthodox² life revolves around the yeshiva which is controlled by its Head; and increasingly nowadays we find entrepreneurial Rabbis who develop a following and a community which will survive only until their leader withdraws or dies, or maybe loses his 'touch', like evangelical pastors. In these circumstances, among Jews, committees and procedures usually exist to manage the premises of a synagogue or charitable activity, but that democratic, institutional activity does not extend to the appointment of a religious official. In other words, levels of democracy among the ultra-Orthodox (Chassidim and 'Lithuanians') in the field of religious organization proper are low: on the other hand, there will be much concern to have committee and participation-based management of charitable bodies, even if they grow out of a highly centralized religious organization. One could say somewhat similar things of the Catholic Church, where lay organizations have a long, deep and fundamental historical role in the organization of popular religion, and one which is not usually controlled by the clergy; but among evangelicals and fundamentalists, although the local basis of loyalty may provide an appearance of

² The differences between Chassidim, who tend to be more mystical and, very broadly speaking, more worldly, and 'the rest' who are often known as 'Lithuanians' could be the subject of a long book (yet to be written) because the two categories have changed markedly in the post-war period and continue to evolve today. Lithuanians are known as such because of the method of Talmudic study which developed in yeshivas in Vilna and spread throughout Eastern Europe from the late 18th century. For them the lead institution is the yeshiva, but their loyalties – and most importantly their choices of marriage partner – are to the Lithuanian community generally, not to a local institution, while the yeshivas tend to be independent and not to dominate the private lives of the community.

democracy, the pastor centralizes both religious leadership and administrative and the all-important financial authority. Pentecostal pastors in small churches retain control and often ownership of their premises and donations are directly or indirectly persona to them – to pay their salaries. Even in the vast Brazilian-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, with its millions of followers worldwide and its highly centralized management, it has been unclear whether the ownership of its television network, TV Record, rests with the church or with its leader, Edir Macedo (Birman and Lehmann 1999).

This concern with impersonal administration links in with Putnam's Italy book, which was more directly concerned with trust and its importance for the development of modern institutions than with social capital, which emerged at the end as the overarching explanatory variable. For the problem in Italy's regionalization – the prism through which Putnam examined Italian political culture – was that in the South, with its patronage-ridden politics and its pattern of social loyalties revolving around family and extended kin, regional government had difficulty in laying down a basis of legitimacy for modern state administration, while in the North, with a tradition of popular participation, these difficulties were far less pronounced. Of course, matters are more complicated³, but that was the core concluding argument. Now evangelical churches and fundamentalist sects share these 'Southern Italian' characteristics to some extent: authority may not be entirely family-based, but it is personalized in the figure of the pastor. In the Assemblies of God in Brazil, for example, the President of a state convention, which is the *de facto* locus of power (rather than the national organization which is a loose confederation), routinely holds office for decades and if he passes it on to his son nothing would be thought strange (Lehmann 1996). Among the Chassidim, dynastic succession is the rule; among other ultra-Orthodox yeshiva heads are not community figures, but equivalent to the head of an independent educational institution. In the Church of England or the Catholic Church procedures are more elaborate and presumably more transparent, though still the voice of the laity

³ Notably because no sooner had the book been published than Italy's entire political system was engulfed by the fistful of corruption scandals known as the *mani pulite* inquiries. These led eventually to a complete restructuring of the parties as they then were: the Christian Democrats and the Socialists were dissolved, as were the Communists. The scandals started not in the South but in the North, arising from deals involving the building of the Milan metro for example. It would nevertheless be wrong to draw conclusions from these affairs involving the elite about the tenor of social relationships in the streets and neighbourhoods of Northern Italy.

is secondary or, in Catholicism, unheard. But in both churches parishioners and followers have a wide scope for running institutions with little or no hierarchical interference: charities, fiesta management, Christian Base Communities (CEBs in Spanish and Portuguese – of which more later), Sunday School, etc. are operated with varying degrees of independence from hierarchical control. Crucially, great institutions have mechanisms for ensuring a degree of recourse against abuse of power. These may not always be used appropriately or when necessary as is illustrated by the sex scandals which have engulfed the US Church, the Irish church, other Catholic provinces, and the *Legionarios de Cristo* in recent years, and the brick wall encountered by African nuns who sought some redress against the sexual exploitation they had suffered from priests (Cornwell 2004) but they do exist: in Pentecostal and fundamentalist organizations, Christian or Jewish, avenues of recourse against abuse of power do not exist. They have powerful leaders and apparently followers trust these leaders; but that word ‘trust’ needs dissection: their trust is in individuals, not guaranteed or protected by an institutional apparatus governing the exercise of their authority as leaders.

There is then a structural tension in the model of social capital, between trust and participation. As the trustworthiness of institutions depends on their impersonality, the more trustworthy they become, the less participatory and the more bureaucratic – leading ultimately to precisely the virtual participation and personal disengagement which in Putnam’s eyes do not feed or reflect social capital, and which some claim weakens the appeal of the more institutionalized churches. It is also true that Putnam finds the sort of ‘hot’ social capital which evangelicals promote too partisan, too exclusionary of others: it does not feed the community at large. Rather – at least as a promoter of social capital - Putnam approves of a colder version, in which people participate in several different fields and with several different networks and spread the practice of association and civilized debate. In this version, associations are more institutionalized: they have committees whose secretaries take minutes, elections, shared leadership, a wide spread of managerial roles but are possibly more conservative. At the same time Putnam sees much benefit to the general good (though he does not use that term) from personal participation. Face to face participation forces people to engage with one another, while impersonal participation through for example phone-ins and perhaps mass meetings (though he does not mention the latter)

does not provide a forum for ‘real conversations’ and ‘democratic feedback’ (p. 341) rather stimulating and rewarding polarized and uncompromising stances. To this I would add that there is much in civic association which requires us to stand up and appear in public as public persons, something for which face-to-face participation does not necessarily train us. Maybe some people just prefer to stay in the intimacy of their friends, creating a quasi-psychological limit to the total quantity of public life a community or society can produce; and maybe, also, there is to some extent, but only to some extent, a pay-off between hot and cold forms.

So it is necessary to refine the variables we are trying to relate to one another and the indicators which allow us to track those variables. On the one hand the hot and cold forms can evidently mix in different ways, and on the other, there being little to gain in asking how religion ‘in general’ can encourage trust and social capital, we have to ask how *different varieties* of religious institution and especially of religious authority help to build trust: some cases, as mentioned by Putnam, may be a bit too hot for comfort, while others, which because of their institutionalization may contribute more to the general good, may be too cold to fuel participation, and may have a bias against risk-taking and innovation.

One reading of Wuthnow could indicate that institutionalised religion carries within itself the seeds of the ‘hotter’ variety, leading to a hypothesis that what some might have seen as ‘progression’ or ‘evolution’ from sect to denomination is merely a snapshot of a longer-term cyclical movement in which more sectarian and stringent breakaways from denominations are a repeated phenomenon, as is the institutionalization of sects. This is illustrated by the emergence of evangelical churches out of American denominations in the post-war period and later by the gradual separation of a more politicized right wing within the evangelical movement. The evangelicals both grew in numbers and provided many more pastors – for example by 1980 the Assemblies of God, which had grown by 18 per cent in 1952-62 (adding 2,000 new churches) had, by 1980, 13 clergy and 27 church buildings per 1,000 members, compared with the Methodists’ 4 clergy and 4 churches, so that the more intimate evangelical churches had more than one pastor for each hundred members (Wuthnow 1988). Wuthnow describes three moments: first a split in the institutionalized churches like Methodism over the excessively liberal stance of their

leadership, who were out of tune with the increasingly evangelical inclinations of their grass root followers; then a shift to the left among an influential generation of evangelicals during the 1960s, in tune with the crises of the country and the rapid increase in College graduates among their number; and then a renewed division with the rise of what became known as the Christian right, led by televangelists and others who were much less wary of partisan political-electoral involvement than earlier generations of evangelicals.

The shifts and breakaways and confluences occur along and across fault-lines which change in character from one generation to the next: in the first moment the divisions seem to have been organizational and spiritual, in the second political, and in the third moment they were over issues of personal morality: but the common thread is that the splits bring a revival of a 'hotter' more inward-looking religiosity which accentuates pressures on individuals to become more personally and physically involved.

Times change however, and if there are cyclical patterns each rise and fall nevertheless occurs in changing circumstances from its predecessor. Thus statistical association between broad categories, such as religious traditions and civic associationism, may exaggerate the sense that they reinforce one another in particular churches and communities, because of the volatility of religious affiliation, religious institutions, and religious cultures in the contemporary world: in a world of weakened family ties and high migration people switch their affiliation, above all abandoning that of their parents, or they switch to a different version of their religion, sometimes becoming less observant, sometimes returning to their ancestral roots and adopting a much more stringent version – again sometimes to their secularized parents' regret; or they grow up in ignorance of religion and acquire an affiliation late in life. The religious traditions themselves fragment under various influences, including that of each other, and under the pressure of international migratory movements and of internal differentiation into fundamentalist, charismatic and liberal streams. It is the relativized 'bricolage' of which Hervieu-Léger speaks (Hervieu-Léger 2001), which is hard – though not impossible - to capture with statistical methods because, although these provide, without doubt, suggestive lines of inquiry, they depend for their reliability on hard and fast categories which bricolage renders so fuzzy. Behind Hervieu-Léger's 'mise en forme narrative', as found in the conversion narratives

which are notoriously uniform across the boundaries of religious traditions (Lehmann 1998; Hervieu-Léger 2005) – conversion-led movements have rendered the categories ‘on the ground’ much more unstable than established religious canon.

For example, as we saw, Putnam classed both Catholic and evangelical churches together as hierarchical – and by implication inward-looking – as against the more ‘congregational’ – by implication less fundamentalist and evangelical – denominations. I am not sure this works: we have already contrasted the Catholic Church with evangelicals in terms of the degree of personalization and institutionalization of authority and although there are murky areas in mainstream Catholicism, the Church clearly possesses a far more elaborate bureaucratic apparatus than evangelical churches where pastors enjoy a vast latitude and personal power over their followers and members and are subject to little bureaucratic control. The Church’s bureaucracy may hardly be transparent – and in recent years the secrecy and protectiveness have come to the fore in embarrassing, even shocking circumstances – but it is nevertheless clearly more institutionalized than Pentecostal or evangelical churches, and Wuthnow locates Catholics somewhere between mainline Protestants and evangelical in their participation in voluntary activities. But the mould is broken by the ever-increasing Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which borrows much from Pentecostalism, yet remains within the Catholic fold and indeed found a strong sympathizer in Pope John Paul II, who presumably was drawn to the conservative social atmosphere surrounding charismatic practices.⁴ This is one example of cross-fertilization between religious traditions, and one could mention many others – for example the influence of fundamentalist Christianity on Jewish revivalists (Lehmann and Siebzeiner 2006) and the growth of the ‘evangelical wing’ inside the Church of England.

2. Quantity *versus* quality

Let us reformulate the question posed at the start, about the apparently solitary role of religious movements and organizations as builders of institutions in ‘difficult circumstances’. Firstly we must emphasize the word ‘institutions’: the issue for a

⁴ One increasingly notices the spread of charismatic practices – their style of singing, their gesturing to the heavens, their glossolalia – to the services celebrated in average parish churches – whereas they were once confined to the meetings called by the Charismatic Movement itself. (Observations in Campina Grande, Brazil, 2003.)

social scientist is not just the striking success of churches in building themselves up, but the impression gained that they are the only institutions, and that they stand out when compared with the apparent fragility of state institutions and with the weakness of civil society. But are the churches really building institutions, as distinct from large and lively organizations?

Secondly, our introductory discussion points to the importance of analysing how different forms of religious authority affect the production and maintenance of social capital. The word ‘authority’ is used advisedly because that is the underlying factor which Putnam and Wuthnow refer to when using the word ‘denomination’: variations in trust between leaders and led, variations in the degree of personal dependence governing these relationships.

There is a climate of opinion in these matters which takes it for granted that, in Latin America especially, the only successful movements are Pentecostal, or Pentecostalism’s cousin the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (Chesnut 2003). Successful here of course means little more than fast-growing, so now is the time to delve deeper and lay the basis for asking questions about the real contribution of these rapidly growing movements to the creation of social capital, and to compare them with their less dynamic competitors.

We are told repeatedly (by David Martin (Martin 2001) and also by the rational choice theorists (Stark and Finke 2000) – of whom more later) that the most institutionalized churches often rest upon scant real associative life. They are described as a moribund bureaucracy while in contrast the movements of renewal and return are an example of ‘hot’ religion – for which, it should be said, Stark expresses more unconcealed approval than Martin - mobilizing the faithful in their hundreds and thousands. But the story can hardly end there. Even a moribund bureaucracy may be heir to a stock of social capital and this type of capital, though not very active, having been painfully built up, does not fritter easily away (unlike financial capital (Coleman 1988)). We see this in the curious legitimacy of the Church of England which, despite declining attendance and financial contributions in many places, still remains a treasured piece of English culture, and indeed of English-speaking culture

worldwide⁵, so that the largely non-churchgoing public and the thoroughly irreverent media express vehement opinions on issues such as the sex life of priests and whether the heir or heiress to the throne should marry a divorcee. Conversely, we should be wary of judging the contribution to social capital of churches and movements simply by the size of their rallies, attendance at services, or the number of their hinterland outposts and urban storefronts. Social capital is more than collective effort plus altruism – quite apart from the difficulties of deciding what is ‘pure’ altruism and what is a mixture of altruism and other motivations, sanctions and rewards. And there is also the risk of facile inference: are we asking whether institutions *reflect* social capital, *embody* social capital, or *produce* social capital?

If a condition of the existence of social capital is its infectious, bonding potential, then the real question may not be whether the religious organizations give birth to *other* organizations which may create it: Base Christian Communities, NGOs, schools, religious orders and medical institutions... The Church of England may seem moribund to some, but one way or another it invented much of the British education system and the Catholic Church invented health care as well as education in many countries, just as Christianity invented secularism. (‘One of the motives for defining a space of the secular has always been theological in Christendom, and continues to be so today’(Taylor 1998).)

3. ‘Unfavourable circumstances’

Building an institution means formulating and implementing a set of rules and rituals which set and protect boundaries, offer predictability and iteration (in rituals), and ensure trust. This may seem elementary, but in religion it touches on sensitive areas. Boundaries and rituals shape rites of passage, regulating the sex lives of followers. As an institution involved in such intimate matters religion differs from others because it straddles the public and private spheres in ways that make it impossible to be totally transparent and modern. Other institutions, such as medicine and the law, also straddle these spheres, but whereas doctors and teachers are supposed to apply a

⁵ As witness the ferocious debates about same-sex marriages and homosexual priests in the worldwide Anglican communion.

specific type of knowledge only to specific areas of people's intimate lives under specified conditions and rules, in some movements, churches and sects, pastors, priests and Rabbis give instructions in unlimited spheres and are bound only by rules of their own making. Furthermore, when people consult pastors and Rabbis, or submit to their authority, they trust them not for their qualifications but for their innate gifts – hence the word charisma which refers to qualities received by a magical procedure - which confer unconstrained authority on them. So the trust placed in them can on occasion know few limits. The most mainstream, hegemonic and respectable religious institutions place limits on charisma, yet even the most ponderous retain a hint of this charismatic authority. This does not compare, however, with the most dynamic contemporary movements – evangelical Christians, Jewish *t'shuva* (return) movements, even West Bank settlers – which place far more authority in the hands of religious leaders, who themselves have often acquired their office through self-designation.

In some movements, enormous powers are in the hands of individual pastors, who are free to diagnose possession and conduct exorcism for example, or Rabbis whose advice is sought on everything from the choice of marriage partner to business decisions. Generally, in less institutionalized churches and movements, officiants have more unfettered power and become closely involved in followers' personal and family lives, a pattern which is not easily compatible with rule-based trust.

This uncontrolled crossing of public-private boundaries goes together with a degree of closure and esotericism. Religious organizations cannot ever, perhaps, be entirely open. In a trivial sense no institution is entirely open because all impose conditions of entry, membership or protection. But religion conditions entry in quite distinctive ways: Christian institutions, even those whose followers are mostly 'born into' their faith, require all individuals to pass certain ritual tests or to go through certain symbolic performances, to be members – baptism as a minimum, but more elaborate procedures for Pentecostals such as kneeling in public and 'accepting Jesus', and eventually baptism by total immersion. In some sense, these rites of passage involve or invoke the supernatural. In Judaism the supernatural is not invoked because entry is by birth and conversion is a learning, not a ritual, process. These considerations

obviously mean that religion is not an open institution, and indeed the building and maintenance of frontiers is central to a religious institution or movement. In the more dynamic and evangelical sects and movements, rituals of joining become more and more elaborate, and are equivalent to the establishing of frontiers, even though they are not codified and are almost entirely unspoken. Secularized Jews who change their lives and return to strict observance or ultra-Orthodoxy change the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they walk, where they live, their jobs, and so on until they have burnt their bridges with their previous life. In both cases there are many stages as a person moves from being – in the evangelical case – a regular attendant, to ‘accepting Jesus’, to paying dues, to receiving gifts of the Spirit (speaking in tongues, the gift of oratory and so on⁶), being entrusted with small jobs like sweeping the Church, teaching Sunday school, patrolling the aisles during services, preaching and so on.⁷ Jewish returnees also have to go through a series of stages, notably generational stages, before they can marry their children into longstanding ultra-Orthodox families.⁸ Adepts born into ultra-Orthodox families also go through a series of stages, changing their clothing, their headdress, the way they wear their beards, at different stages of the domestic and life cycle: among Chassidic sects children have their first haircut at a certain age, graduate from one type of hat to another, wear a prayer shawl and attend the ritual baths only after marriage, etc. etc. Women attend the ritual baths and cover their heads after marriage on a monthly basis, and so on.

All these ritual practices draw and thicken frontiers and thus close the organizations off to outsiders. The campaigning ethos of evangelicals opens certain doors, but does not open the organization; rather the contrary: the most evangelical (the Jewish Lubavitch sect, the Pentecostal Brazil-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) are the most secretive. Researchers are made acutely aware of this when they appreciate that certain subjects – notably money, internal politics and decision-making – are off-limits, and also when they realise how hard – indeed impossible - it is to feign membership: even where dress seems not to be a badge of belonging, an outsider stands out and is aware of standing out.

⁶ I Corinthians 12:8-10. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues

⁷ A pattern observed during fieldwork in Brazil in the 1990s, especially in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

⁸ Observations in fieldwork in Israel and North London in 2003-5.

These closure mechanisms are in contradiction to the assumption in a model of secular society that religious organizations are much like others: open to scrutiny, and operating on the basis of impersonal rules. Here authority is personal, especially when healing and exorcism come into play, and so despite great commitment by followers, the ability to generate social capital is in doubt for structural, not incidental, reasons arising from core features, especially of the evangelical movements, which are precisely the ones which flourish in 'difficult circumstances'.

Above all, it is notable that the followers of Christian evangelical and Jewish fundamentalist movements seem more ready than the members of more institutionalized, or more open, religious bodies, to give generously, especially when their own low incomes are taken into account. Although these movements exhibit elaborate mechanisms of closure, they can generate a remarkable array of organizations for their followers, and those organizations are operated on a rational basis different from the bodies charged with the management of the supernatural and the ritual: among ultra-Orthodox Jews schools, charitable works, old age homes, community centres providing (for example) fixed rates for weddings, rotating credit societies (*gemachim*)⁹ on a truly remarkable scale. Evangelicals, in my observation, spawn fewer such offshoots, but the Universal Church has gone into social work, education in Brazil in partnership with municipal and state governments (Birman and Lehmann 1999). It sounds like a lot of social capital, but does it increase the social capital available in society as a whole? And was not the point of Putnam's theory that somehow associative life and the modes of interaction it encourages are of benefit not merely to those directly involved but to society as a whole, notably to the construction of institutions?

We can illustrate the point by noting that rotating credit functions on a delicate balance of trust and gossip: although borrowings are not secured against assets, they are guaranteed by individuals and registered in a legal document: the individual who defaults has trouble both with the guarantor and with other members of the community. This can only operate in a tightly-knit community. Religion's

⁹ An acronym of *gemilut chasadim* – acts of kindness.

contribution to social capital, therefore, may itself be a question of balance between internal and external, public and private, openness and closure in a movement or organization's relation to potential followers and outsiders.

4. Rational Choice

Sociological explanation often looks to broad-brush features of societies (modernity, inequality, church attendance – the list is obviously very long) to explain particular features such as social capital, trust, the growth of some churches and not others, religious fundamentalism. Interpretations of contemporary religious movements tend to be of a general kind, based on the idea that the social environment offers a comfortable niche into which these movements can be fitted: an identity niche, a modernity niche, a social protest niche etc....

Although these explanations are not necessarily mistaken, they can be frustrating. They provide general propositions which are hard to apply in particular situations. I have taken up related general issues elsewhere (Lehmann and Siebzehner 2006), as have others (Sperber 1996) so here I will explore the usefulness of an account of the relationship between religion and social capital which starts from the individual and everyday life, without arguing aggressively against the macro-approach, which obviously is deeply embedded in the tradition of sociological argument. The religious movements we are interested in depend on the sustained and active participation of individuals from whom they demand a great deal, and this is the participation which is at issue in a discussion of social capital: if their participation is passive, or transient, it is unlikely to reinforce the sort of associative life which is expected to create social capital, and as rational choice theorists do not tire of reminding us, religion can hardly exist without placing demands on individuals. Also, one of the many ways in which religious movements vary, is precisely in those demands, ranging from those which try to involve all their followers in the management and administration of the church, and which recognize gifts of the spirit among even the humblest, to those who treat their followers almost as customers at a supermarket.

Rational choice theory goes some way to offering a plausible and parsimonious explanation of why some religious movements and organizations succeed, both in

general and in the ‘difficult circumstances’ which are at the core of our question. The quasi-tribal division among sociologists of religion over this approach seems divided along quasi-tribal lines over this approach, is as irrational as all tribalisms. It is clear from Wilson’s response for example that he had a quite different understanding of secularization from that of the leading advocate of rational choice. Stark, (Wilson 1998), while Stark muddies the waters by conflating hostility to the method (rational choice) with hostility to its conclusions on the part of secularization theorists, whom he regards (wrongly and unfairly) as opponents of religion, as in the early chapters of *Acts of faith* (Stark and Finke 2000). Bruce’s polemic (Bruce 1999), which is peppered with intimations of hostility to ‘a handful of US sociologists’ (p.2) is concerned principally also with the secularization thesis, which is not our concern here. However, his argument is relevant for us because he takes issue with the free-rider concept which is central to the rational choice understanding of conservative religion, notably to the question of ‘stringency’ or ‘strictness’.

The rational choice approach focuses on why it is that those religious organizations which impose the most stringent demands on their followers seem to attract and retain so many of them. The answer is that these organizations provide benefits to their followers in the form of charity, solidarity and shared facilities, and the sacrifices imposed on the followers ensure that only true believers will join, and free riders will be discouraged (Iannacone 1997; Berman 2000), thus ensuring that the collective effort required to sustain the benefits will be postponed. These explanations largely eschew ideological choices and focus on the everyday life of the people concerned – indeed it would be better if this approach were called the ‘everyday life approach’ because focus on the word ‘rational’ has been a distraction, leading many people to think that it advocates the claim that religious belief itself is rational. I prefer to see it rather as an approach which attaches much importance to the strategies individuals adopt in their daily lives and which does not stress belief very much at all – despite the evident religious sympathies of some of its advocates. Indeed, one of the merits of this approach is precisely that it does not require the interpreter to make always uncertain assumptions about the relationship between individuals’ professed beliefs and their actions. Bruce takes this to be a drawback, largely on the basis that faith and belief are observable causal factors: the rational choice theorists, though they may not doubt the existence of faith, do not see how it can be observed and introduced into a

causal sequence. But since Bruce also lists the numerous everyday non-ideological mechanisms whereby a church like that of the North Ireland politician-preacher Ian Paisley places members under severe pressure to conform, contribute and participate (p.144), it is hard to see the disagreement as more than a point of detail.

The rational choice approach may not be the key to explaining all religious behaviour: indeed, much popular religion, which is non-theologically driven and non-institutionalized, yet accounts for most people's lived religious life, is better explained by a cognitive approach (Boyer 2001; Atran 2003), and much contemporary 'soft' or 'liberal' religion may also not be amenable to either a cognitive or a rational choice approach, being simply embedded in the rituals and rhythms of convention. But rational choice seems to work well when benefits of membership in a 'club' (economists' technical term) are material and observable: for example in Israel, where direct and indirect government subsidies flow into the institutions of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, and where men who study Torah full time are exempt from military service, the incentive to free ride to avoid military service could be substantial, and so the leaders of the ultra-Orthodox institutions (yeshiva or study centre heads, and dynastic or quasi-dynastic Chassidic authorities known as *Rebbes*) have over time taken measures to insure that those who do benefit from these provisions are sincere in their adherence, or at least behave as if they were (Berman 2000). Among Chassidim there is quite often a division of labour between those who study or otherwise devote themselves to full-time religious activity and those who are involved in business. The latter make large donations to the religious institutions, so again the leadership must make sure that these donations only support the true believers. Pentecostals in Latin America, and perhaps elsewhere, have an excellent reputation as honest and hard-working employees, so they must guard against impostors. This self-protection is helped (though perhaps not exactly 'caused') by the imposition of very austere dress codes – as among Chassidim and other ultra-Orthodox Jews - of the sort which impostors would find troublesome. The Brazilian *Deus é Amor* church (Lehmann 1996) offers an extreme example of an austere dress code, but others do the same perhaps less explicitly. All Pentecostal churches, from the largest federations to the tiniest local chapel, demand tithes, and sometimes donations beyond the standard 10

per cent of pre-tax income¹⁰ which is the tithe: some do so in a very public way during services, others more discretely.

It is here that we must remember that religious organizations really are different: benefits of religion (*inter alia* salvation, divine healing, eternal life, peace of mind, overcoming infertility)) are inherently uncertain and intangible: traditionally sociologists have been less concerned with individual rewards of religion than with social and cultural effects or sanctions. Rational choice theorists, who are concerned with individuals, have conjured compensators out of an idiosyncratic psychology of their own. ‘Most people desire immortality’, Rodney Stark tells, us (Stark 1997) but do they? In Stark’s understanding a compensator compensates for the unachievable desires which humans are so to speak condemned to harbour: thus compensation for mortality can be obtained, for example, by following a religion’s instructions about how to achieve immortality. No guarantee, of course, but a help nevertheless: as much a consolation as a compensation.

I would prefer a different assumption: religions – that is to say, religious activists and officials - try to place their followers and potential followers in a position where their choices are limited: at one extreme the limitations are light, at the other they are strict. Organizations achieve their ability to enforce these limitations – their power – by various means: controlling reproduction and influencing the upbringing and education of new generations; attracting streams of converts who become highly dependent on the organization; obtaining resources from the state and allocating them among followers and movement activities.

Thus the decisions made by ultra-Orthodox (also known as *haredi*) Jews about their lives are deeply affected by the enormous pressure their parents are under to send them as children to haredi schools where skills needed for pursuing a conventional career or profession are excluded from the curriculum. This is especially the case in Israel where those schools are fully state-funded, but even in the diaspora the secular skills imparted in these schools are few and so very few people indeed become, say, doctors or lawyers. In Israel most boys seem to either become full-time Torah learners

¹⁰ Though, to be sure, few Pentecostal Church members earn enough to qualify for taxation.

and small-time religious artisans, or they go into business, while girls become schoolteachers and often support their families while their husbands learn. The Rabbinic authorities have established this educational control system with the purpose of making it hard for the ultra-Orthodox to pursue secular careers. At the micro-level there are also powerful constraining pressures from below: in tightly knit social worlds gossip plays a part in keeping people away from the secular world, and, given the unpredictability of Rabbinic rulings, a preference for the most stringent alternative in cases of doubt is a prudent strategy to avoid a Rabbi's disapproval. In addition, through their control of funds and the economic disabling of their followers, Rabbinic leaders have surely created a system of personal dependence – not of the sort which would spread social capital.

So power is important in setting the parameters of choice. Stark readily states that those who are wealthier and have more opportunities are much less likely to accept compensators than the poor who have few alternatives. This seems trivial. The argument here, in contrast, is that leaders exercise power to limit those alternatives or to encourage complicant behaviour, thus framing the choices made by their followers, and that the inherently intangible and uncertain character of religious rewards determines how they exercise power.

There are pressures for transparency too. Persons or institutions who provide funds to a religious community probably want among other things some degree of confidence that the funds will be properly spent, and the other, in the case of individuals, is to be spared pressures from hordes of petitioners, scroungers and hangers-on. On the other side, those who stand to benefit from their largesse want to be assured individually that they will benefit, and that others will not benefit unduly. So, in a perfect world, everyone has an interest in a rational, impersonal and highly institutionalized method of distributing the benefits. Thus they might seek out, as leader, a person ready to risk sacrifice, a saintly Rabbi or pastor, above the slightest hint of vested interest, who is more likely to be trusted by donors as a partner and by followers as a leader in a cooperative venture. Ultra-Orthodox Jews also create innumerable rotating credit societies (independent of Rabbis and of supernatural dealings) which both receive and lend out funds: the loan agreements, note, are formal and legally enforceable, not based merely on a handshake, and in cases of dispute go either to court or to a

mutually acceptable Rabbinic authority. Paradoxically, that reflects more trust: when a mere handshake is enough it usually means that one party is so powerful that the other might be afraid, in requesting a formal document, to suggest that the dominant party (a landlord, a mobster, a 'man of honour') might fail to honour the agreement. In short, the weaker party is intimidated and trust is deficient.

But the world is not perfect and information is not perfect, and so transparency is not always available. Although individuals know that they can deceive one another and are also, broadly, aware that if they persist in deceiving one another, the 'moral basis of community life' will founder (Atran, 2003:117), there is always a risk that people will try to 'get away with' something. That is why witches and mafia, who live by deception and by doing deals behind the backs of others, are held up as examples of what can go wrong, but that is also why they are feared. It is also why special powers are attributed to charismatic individuals, who are not only prepared to risk sacrifice, but are said to possess charismatic gifts and special powers of insight.

So, somehow, the leader has to tread a delicate path between rational authority and supernatural empowerment. If the balance goes too far towards the former, then the institution loses its supernatural qualities and becomes a company or a legal apparatus, the fate predicted by rational choice theorists for established and hegemonic churches in Europe. If it goes too far the other way it can go to the extreme of self-destructive cults, though more likely it will just fail to develop and rise and fall with one single leader.

We can observe contrasting examples among the Lithuanian community of Talmudic scholars and in the Chassidic community. Among the Lithuanians, who regard themselves as less superstitious and less enamoured of the physical and emotive exhibitions of their religiosity, the authority figures are the heads of yeshivas and they tend to marry their daughters to suitable successors, thus avoiding the risks of handing their organizations onto a dud son. In Chassidic sects, in contrast, the principle is broadly dynastic, but it is balanced by the creation of numerous organizations and advisory Committees which presumably guide and constrain the *Rebbe*. Chassidim consult their *Rebbe* on 'everything' – who to marry, who should marry their children, what investment to make, what career to choose, how much to spend on a wedding etc

etc. ad infinitum. Since the Rebbe cannot deal with the tens or hundreds of messages and consultations which reach him every day, he must have a secretariat. Even so, their healing powers, for example to put an end to a woman's childless condition, are legendary.

Evangelical churches probably receive less from the state or from charities than the Jewish sects and institutions we have mentioned, especially per capita, given the far larger numbers of their followers. Without wealthy donors or substantial state support, most of them are even more reliant on their followers for funding, but not as a rule as stringent as the Jewish ultra-Orthodox in their life-style demands (though to be sure one would have to develop an index of stringency in life-style demands and test the claim with it.) Unsurprisingly, therefore, they exact a tithe, though we know nothing of how this varies between countries, classes, churches or anything. (Sociologists seem shy of dealing in any detail with the central question of money in religion...) The personal quality of the relationship with the pastor varies a lot, from churches where he administers cures, exorcises, diagnoses and cares for souls in a very personal manner, to others where we observe 'wholesale' exorcisms and cures – as in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which has devised a system to prevent pastors or preachers getting too close to their followers.

These manipulations confer added power on pastors: if a cure is successful the pastor's influence is enhanced, more people will come to him and his coffers will bulge. More usually the outcome is in doubt, and the respective responsibilities of healer, exorcist and sufferer in even greater doubt: here the healer plays with his or her monopoly of access to the supernatural: maybe the cure was administered by an impostor or by someone who was possessed, maybe the sufferer is hiding something, or maybe the devils are just too powerful. Shamans and curers always possess superior knowledge, and since many people consult them, they know a lot about the private lives of villagers, of their churchgoers or of their community. No wonder they offer counselling on all sorts of matters. The followers for their part consult them precisely because of their possession of strategic information (Boyer 2001) which will help in discovering who is responsible for one's misfortune, and in maintaining fear of witches, devils and evil spirits and therefore also of those who claim to exorcise or combat them.

Power is present at the micro and the macro levels. At the macro level examples abound: the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA - which does not necessarily enjoy the support of mainstream Assemblies) seems, like some other examples, to be an organization riddled with personal enrichment and led by people who cosy up to local dictators (Maxwell 2001). In Guatemala the civil war reached its bloodiest phase under a military dictator who preached the evangelical word on the radio and encouraged the army to polarize the country's indigenous people and farmers into (friendly) evangelicals and (subversive or Communist)) Catholics (Le Bot 1992), with frightening and bloody consequences.

Yet at the same time, the ultra-Orthodox have created institutions which are durable: this is illustrated by the rebirth after the Holocaust of their culture in Western Europe, the US and Israel, especially when compared with the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East (Lehmann and Siebzehner 2006) (Friedman 1987). The latter, in their migrations to Israel, Europe and the Americas, did not transplant their institutions, because in the countries of origin they were run on a clientelistic and personalistic basis by notables, on whom the Rabbis were dependent, instead of by independent Rabbinic elites (Deshen 1989). The problem continues: the sumptuous Sephardi synagogue in Geneva is currently subject to disputes because an individual says it is 'his' synagogue, whereas if this was an Ashkenazi synagogue it would be run by a committee and owned by the community, a charitable body.

I do not want to exaggerate or distort: these ultra-Orthodox Jewish examples embody much social capital, but their religious core is an undemocratic apparatus, lacking participative decision-making: the authority of Rabbinic office-holders is enormous and even if it is not necessarily based on patron-clientelism, it allows invasive involvement of religious authority in people's private lives. There is furthermore a wealth of beliefs about evil eye, the harm done by gossip (the evil tongue), the 'drive to evil'. Also, interpretation of Rabbinic texts for the purpose of rulings is in the end a matter of the personal judgment of the Rabbi in question. This is not the jurisprudence we are accustomed to in the system of common law or Roman law.

So even where religion spawns social solidarity in bucketfuls, there is still personal dependence and concentration of power.

5. Political involvements

Evidently Jewish sects and institutions have benefited from the unprecedented wealth of the world Jewish community in the post-war period and from the support of the Israeli state. Evangelical sects in contrast are particularly successful among people who live in situations of deprivation and with little capital of any kind, and in often extreme versions of the ‘difficult circumstances’ we have discussed. These are obviously stylized facts which need more careful dissection, but they nevertheless reflect a reality which is sufficiently widely recognized for us to explore what their implications might be.

In such circumstances a higher proportion of individual followers of a church will have to contribute their own labour and their own resources. This may seem paradoxical since being poor they may have less to give, but rational choice tells us that the same ‘club theory’ principles apply. The benefits they gain from the church seem to be even less tangible than those obtained by the ultra-Orthodox Jews we have been discussing, but maybe that is a misconception: churches help people to find jobs, pastors try hard to get on good terms with politicians, irrespective of ideology, and their ability to deliver a small but solid bloc of votes makes politicians value their support (even where there are no free elections) – so they offer their supporters access to political patronage.

The involvement of evangelical pastors and ultra-Orthodox rabbis in politics is becoming increasingly visible. The ultra-Orthodox have taken care to ensure their representation on local government in the town borough of Hackney, and in Israel they have political parties of their own and control the Jerusalem municipality. At elections in Israel the *haredi* turn-out exceeds 90% , which explains their success in local elections where the secularized middle classes have a much lower turnout. In Brazil the last Congress had an evangelical ‘bancada’ (caucus) of 80 members though this has been cut drastically in the 2006 elections due in part to their involvement in corruption scandals. In systems of proportional representation (like Brazil and Israel) religious leaders are valued for their ability to deliver secure nuggets of votes. This trend tends to detract from the social capital potential of the religious movements

mentioned, shifting attention to material benefits and patronage and consequent relations of personal dependence. At the same time it might lead pastors and Rabbis to accentuate their demands on followers for sacrifice and stringency, since the more patronage there is to disburse the greater the risk of attracting free riders and impostors.

6. Conversion

An extremely important factor in explaining sustained participation and submission to stringent requirements in evangelical sects may be the role of conversion as their *raison d'être*. This phenomenon of churches whose membership is almost entirely accounted for by converts is relatively modern – i.e. twentieth century – and has also spread to certain Jewish sects (notably Chabad/Lubavitch and, in Israel, Shas) and Islamist movements where the converts, though strictly speaking returning to their own heritage, can to all intents and purposes be counted, sociologically and psychologically, as converts. This helps to empower pastors and thus helps them to impose a tight framework on the choices made by followers, because, having ‘burnt their bridges’, converts are heavily dependent on their new community and eager to show readiness to help and contribute. (Bruce (p. 137) provides data to show that most ‘converts’ are actually migrants from other churches, but the data are from Canada, not the regions of massive evangelical growth in Africa and Latin America). Whatever the quantities involved, or indeed the shades of conversion, ranging from those who are born into evangelical families but still have to be ‘born again’ to be fully accepted to those who come from completely secular backgrounds, the point to bear in mind is that qualitatively, conversion is a driving force in all evangelical sects and movements.

It is also possible that the presence of high proportions of converts and ‘returnees’ or reverts accentuates the pressure for stringency. Converts, if they stay in the church or sect – and many don’t – are likely to experience anxiety about rules and customs, and so will tend to the more stringent alternatives, and may also, collectively, exercise pressure on pastors and Rabbis in the same direction.

We lack the research to know how the conversion factor influences the creation of social capital. From one point of view it might be claimed that by drawing converts in and encouraging them to cut their links to their previous life, evangelical and similar movements reduce their contribution to social capital; but from another point of view their permanent proselytisation can be seen as exporting to society an ethos of mobilisation and dedication.

7. Conclusion

This paper has distinguished between social capital and quantitative growth, between the internal cohesion of a religious organization and its contribution to the institutional apparatus of the society in which it exists. It has also distinguished between institutionalization in core religious institutions and in organizations which have grown out of them.

The paper has discussed the role of the unfavourable circumstances in which religious organizations are observed to grow sometimes very rapidly, but we have provisionally reached the conclusion that the religious organizations which do grow in those circumstances may not exactly be providing social capital to society, even if they are empowering their leaders and providing benefits for their followers.

The modified version of rational choice presented here is based on the idea that it is necessary to introduce a concept of power if it is to provide a good explanation of the functioning of evangelical churches and sects. The type of power involved is invariably personal and grounded in personal dependence, so that the churches' contribution to social capital is correspondingly limited.

The perverse examples I have given (like ZAOGA, and Guatemala) are only examples, and not typical, designed to illustrate the relevance of power at the macro level. The rational choice approach explains why people are prepared to make the contributions in money and time to build churches physically and institutionally. This can apply in the impoverished neighbourhoods of Latin America's vast conurbations and also among the marginalized indigenous rural populations, as well as among other strata: the churches provide social networks and yet at the same time they tie converts

into a tight web of obligations and bind them to the personal authority of pastors. It can also explain how in Africa, where evangelicals tend to be found slightly higher in the social scale (Garner 1998; Meyer 1998) (Garner 2000) they build among the slightly less impoverished and marginalized who seek protection against the family pressures and everyday violence which threatens to engulf them. Evangelical churches may create social capital for their followers but the style of authority and the importance attached by the churches to drawing up and consolidating social boundaries between their members and 'the world' or 'the world of darkness' (*as trevas*) as my Brazilian interviewees used to say, militate against their chances of creating social capital for others. Indeed, it is possible that there exists some sort of quantitative ceiling for the expansion of these movements: it is worth noting that nowhere in Latin America have evangelicals passed the 20 per cent mark, even though they would have done had they sustained the rates of expansion they were achieving in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Israel too, if the ultra-Orthodox community experienced no leakages, its fertility alone (some 6.5 children per fertile woman) would by now have ensured that it surpass the 11 per cent figure which is the current maximum estimate. Perhaps there is a pay off between the thickness of boundaries, and the ability of a leadership to retain control over their following.

The increasingly visible involvement of evangelical Christians and ultra-Orthodox leaders in politics raises concerns about their modernizing force, for their politics are almost invariably opportunistic and non-ideological and occasionally venal, as has been seen recently in Brazil.

It would nevertheless be wrong to conclude on a pessimistic note, for we cannot fail to recognise the feats of organisation of pastors and followers who build church organisations in the midst of poverty, social exclusion and very often violence and chaos. These people exhibit remarkable courage and integrity which bring hope and even security to their followers. The doubts expressed in this paper concern their ability to spread their own social capital beyond their own organisations, and the possibility that building thick frontiers around them, which may be a condition of their success, at the same time prevents them from spreading this precious resource.

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