

## Who is my virtual neighbour?

Simon Stevens

When Alexis de Tocqueville first set foot in the United States in the 1830s, he was struck by many differences from his native France. Though they were both predominantly Christian countries, they were poles apart. While he saw in France only ignorance and unbelief, the Church a stagnant force, he saw in the New World a vibrant religion. Whereas in Europe, democracy and religion seemed to be on diametrically opposing paths, in America liberty and religion seemed to go hand in hand. These two facts had to be linked, indeed he concluded, one must flow from another, and so religious liberty gave rise to great vibrancy of religion.

We may of course look back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and wonder if 'stagnant' and 'unbelieving' are appropriate words, it looks like a golden era of faith, before the relentless decline in Christian belief, which has marked the period since then, through the process known to sociologists as secularisation.

Secularisation is a theory that is as old as sociology itself. In its simplest form it states elegantly that as societies modernise so there is a gradual erosion of the power and prestige of organised religion. Eventually what is left is an entirely privatised religion and a society in which all traces of the pre-modern state sponsored religion have faded away. To be modern is to be secular. As education and science spread, so there is plausibility to non religious ideas. Likewise as religious diversity and therefore freedom of religion spread so universal truth claims lose their plausibility. Choice then is the key factor in the disappearance of religion from people's lives. People choose not to believe.

The empirical evidence for this in Europe seems beyond question, one only has to look at the various statistics from Church bodies, so for example the Church of Scotland membership stood at 938,930 in 1981, by 2009 it had dropped to 464,355<sup>i</sup>; in Sweden less than 4% of the population now attend Church<sup>ii</sup>, and in England active membership is now around a million and numbers of weddings and baptisms have fallen substantially in the last century.<sup>iii</sup>

However what of the rest of the world? For in Africa and Asia religion is growing, and if, like de Tocqueville, we turn our attention to the United States, we find a very large nail in the coffin of the simple equation that to be modern is to be secular. For in the US there is consistently a far higher incidence of religious practice and belief than in most other western societies.

This has led to the emergence, in the 1990s, within sociology of religion of a new paradigm to explain this unfortunate exception to the rule. This paradigm, known as the Rational Choice Theory of Religion, is the work of a group of American academics and draws from economic theory. For scholars from the rational choice school, as its name might suggest, choice is everything. So far from 'all refuting all' actually competition between religions makes for a vibrant market in which religion grows and flourishes.

Rational choice theorists focus on the supply side of religion rather than the demand side as do the secularisation theorists. They argue that the more freely the religious market operates the easier it is to start new 'religious firms' because the start up costs are reduced. With no religious monopoly all groups are equal, forced to compete, their ministers work harder, the problem of free riding, the Christmas and Easter

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attendees who contribute very little to Church upkeep, is reduced as each organisation realises that their members could easily join that lot down the road. Thus spurned on they offer 'better' religious products which attracts more followers, which explains why strict churches flourish and liberal ones decline.

Rational choice theorists have shown, using census data and other sources,<sup>iv</sup> that in areas where there is great religious diversity there is a higher rate of church going. Not just in the United States but in for example in Latin America there is evidence of an emerging religious marketplace.<sup>v</sup> The 'others' with whom one is in competition don't even need to be geographically close. To give two conspicuous examples of European religious vitality: Ireland where Catholicism provided a sense of national identity against British Protestant dominance and Poland where Catholicism provided a bulwark against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>vi</sup>

However despite being widely received among American sociologists, there are few signs of any evidence to back up the rational choice theory of religion in most of Europe. Where most people in France describe themselves as Catholic, most people in Sweden describe themselves as Lutheran but few actually attend the Churches they claim nominal membership of.

There is a place even in Western Europe in which all opinions are given equal air and in which communities can form and disintegrate and reform and loyalties change on a daily basis, a place of course that does not really exist – the Internet. One has only to spend a cursory amount of time perusing blogs and websites to find all manner of religious opinions competing with one another. Indeed it is a well known feature of blogging that it allows not only passive reading of posts but active comment on what has been written. This of course means that people who share the opinions of the authors can form a non geographical community around them. Indeed it is not just those who find themselves in agreement with blog authors but also those opposed to their views who frequently turn up to comment or even to organise websites of their own. Again we see people defining themselves over and against other groups that are the hallmark of the competition rational choice theory predicts.

There is also an increase in the supply of religion. Since the early days of religion on the Internet with small online user news groups in the 1980s the amount of religious websites have grown on literally a daily basis. With minimal time and effort required to start up a religious website (low start up costs according to RCTR is a predictor of religious vitality) and generally speaking it is the most conservative websites that garner the most reaction both positive and (most importantly) negative.

There are also signs that previously non-religious individuals are accessing religious material online. One study noted that 25% of Internet users had searched for religious or spiritual material online, up from 21% in 2000. Furthermore following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on New York City 41% of Internet users asked, "many of whom had never considered themselves online religious seekers, said they had sent or received e-mail prayer requests".<sup>vii</sup>

So far so interesting but what about outside of the US? Can the Internet turn the tide of secularisation in Europe? Here I turn to one particular example. Last year the Pope offered a chance for traditionalist Anglicans opposed to the ordination of women and practising homosexuals a way to join the Roman

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Catholic Church as existing communities as part of a non geographical ordinariate rather than a conventional diocese. Though these groups are traditionalist in their faith and practice, they have relied heavily on the Internet, right from the word go. Despite the setting up of the Ordinariate of our Lady of Walsingham receiving very little attention from the mainstream media, the establishment of an ordinariate portal and various blogs and websites has enabled these still numerically small groups (about 60 priests and slightly fewer congregations) to maintain contact online but also to spread their message. Even one retired Anglican Bishop, now ordinariate priest, is blogging with great passion and always if one examines the blogs a competitive spirit and a self definition of the self over and against the other, in this case the Anglican Church he has left behind, is found.

Of course it is early days for the Ordinariate and we do not know how the story will continue but what I am suggesting here is that as people search the Internet for answers this may be an answer to the problem of religious decline in the west.

Here I might end, except while perusing websites in preparation for writing I came across a blog written by a conservative Catholic priest. Himself an ex-Lutheran – again note religious competition. He noted that he had discovered among the people who read and linked to his blog the Norwegian Anders Breivik, it was among the right wing Christian blogs that Breivik had read before the recent tragic events in Oslo. The blog author wonders if he had written anything to prompt such hatred.

Of course he had not, however we should note, this is the downside of a religious vitality based on competitive world views, built around networks of like minded individuals in which people choose their own truth: rational choice theory of religion predicts a world in which the long decline of organised religion is reversed. It predicts a world in which there will always be religion and a world in which many different communities can flourish.

However it is also a world with a sad absence of the understanding, dialogue and interfaith engagement which was the mark of much ecumenism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A world in which there is engagement with people's ideas but not with the people themselves as they are physically not present, it is easier to dehumanise your opponents and dismiss them. It is easier to hate. A world in which choice can be choice not to engage and ideas developed in isolation become self reflecting and self reinforcing.

Religious vitality, it seems, like the Internet itself, is very much a two edged sword.

- *Simon Stevens is an Anglican Priest and Chaplain to Loughborough University in the English Midlands. He studied theology at the Universities of London and Cambridge. He makes extensive use of the Internet throughout his ministry and is very interested in how society is changed by technology.*

#### **Further Readings:**

Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America", (Penguin, 2003).

G. R. Bunt, "Religion and the Internet", in P. B. Clark (ed.) "The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion", (Oxford, 2009).

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*For both sides of the RCTR/ Secularisation debate:*

R. Stark, and R. Finke, "Acts of Faith", (University of California Press, 2000).

S. Bruce, "Choice and Religion", (Oxford, 1999).

*For an explanation of the religious difference between Europe and America:*

P. Berger, E. Fokas and G. Davie. "Religious America Secular Europe", (Ashgate, 2008).

G. Davie, "Europe, The Exceptional Case", (DLT, 2002).

*Information on the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham:*

<http://ordinariateportal.wordpress.com/>

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- i The Church of Scotland Statistics are available on the BBC website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-11065965>.
  - ii The European Values Survey gives a figure of 3.8% for weekly attendance 1999/2000 quoted in G. Davie, "Europe, The Exceptional Case", (DLT, 2002), p 6.
  - iii The Church of England offers official statistics: <http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2005/01/pr0106.aspx> shows that in 2003 the usual Sunday Attendance dropped below 1 million for the first time.  
The decline of British Christianity as charted in Steve Bruce, "God is Dead: Secularization in the West", (Blackwell, 2002), p 60-74. For example he cites 63% of British babies baptised between 1895 and 1950 but only 27% in 1993. In 1900, 67% of weddings occurred in the Church of England compared with 20% in 2000.
  - iv The first three chapters of the book "Rational Choice Theory and Religion", ed. L. Young, (Routledge, 1997) presents much empirical evidence for RCTR. R. Stark, and R. Finke, "Acts of Faith", (University of California Press, 2000), has extensive empirical evidence.
  - v G. Davie, "Europe, The Exceptional Case", (DLT, 2002), p 74-79 has the most succinct treatment of RCTR and it's application to Latin America.
  - vi <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs/visitreligiouservices.jpg> illustrates this graphically.
  - 7 Sourced from <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/religion.html>.

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