

Acting in Good Faith:

An Economic Approach to Religious Organizations as Advocacy Groups

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A Partially Incomplete Initial Draft Version of a Working Paper That Is Still in Process
and Needs to Be More Fully Completed at Some Later Point.

New social movements are all the rage! Over the past two decades, a new cottage industry has erupted in academia examining the seemingly explosive growth in new social movements, advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that has occurred in Western industrialized nations and several developing nations as well. Many of these movements and NGOs have crossed international boundaries feeding the notion that globalization is eroding boundaries between people all around the world. This literature certainly has added to our knowledge of how advocacy groups originate and operate. But curiously missing from recent studies of new social movements and NGOs has been any discussion of what amounts to the world's oldest social movements and currently largest NGOs – religious organizations.

Consider the following question. What is the world's oldest formal, hierarchical institution that is still in existence today? If you answered the Roman Catholic Church,¹ go to the head of the class. Depending on how one defines the hierarchical origins of the Roman Catholic Church, that institution has been around between 1700 to 2000 years.² Even with the lower estimate, the Catholic Church has existed far longer than any contemporary state. Historically, the Church even has outlasted the longest Chinese dynasty. Further consider that the Catholic Church possesses roughly one billion members around the globe with a presence in nearly every country. What other formal organization can boast of such tremendous size and international scope? One would imagine that political scientists and sociologists interested in state formation, preservation and collective action would want to know what makes this organization tick. Furthermore, if we drop the criteria of “formal hierarchy” from consideration of religions,

¹ Credit will also be given if you answered the Eastern Orthodox Church.

² It is somewhat difficult to date when the Catholic Church became a formal hierarchy. Christianity has been around since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in 33 C.E. and there certainly were efforts made to provide organization to the movement at least by 50 C.E. (cf. the Council of Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 15). Thus, an estimate of roughly 2000 years seems reasonable. The other common dates associated with the creation of a hierarchical Church are 313 C.E. when Constantine declared Christianity to be one of the official religions of the Roman Empire and 325 C.E., the First Council of Nicea wherein Church leaders set about defining a unified Christian canon. However, even prior to the Edict of Milan (313), the Church did have well-defined leaders who had authority over territory and who interacted with one another.

we can look at Hinduism, Judaism and Islam as social movements that have transcended international boundaries and have managed to survive for several thousand years as well.

Can these religious traditions be considered advocacy groups? Most certainly! At a bare minimum, they are advocating for the acceptance of their spiritual ideas to be adopted by as many people as possible – something known as evangelization or proselytization.³ And religious leaders frequently find it necessary to advocate for government policies that guarantee the legal protection and property rights of their organizations and members (cf. Fetzer and Soper 2005). Promoting religious freedom has been a major advocacy cause for Protestant missionary groups worldwide. On the flipside of that coin, some national churches have become advocates for policies that limit the freedoms of religious minorities that are seen as a threat to their own spiritual hegemony, often asking governments to ban missionary activity or make it difficult for a religious group to get a building permit (Gill 2007).

Beyond promoting their own interests in evangelizing, religious organizations have long been influential actors in social and political advocacy movements, many of which have influenced government policies across a wide swathe of nations. The abolitionist movement in the 18th and 19th centuries, wherein leaders from a number of different Christian denominations pressured for the end of the international slave trade in the West, immediately comes to mind. During the 1960s through the 1980s, the Roman Catholic Church, joined by the World Council of Churches, in countries such as Chile, Brazil and Nicaragua became highly vocal opponents of the authoritarian regimes that were ruling over their respective nations and in other parts of the region (Gill 1998). In contemporary times, an uncountable number of Christian missionary groups are active throughout the world providing relief following natural disasters, engaging in community improvement projects, and providing education to children. Indeed, when we think of secular international NGOs at work in various parts of the developing world, we often forget that they are frequently outnumbered by religious missionaries or indigenous members of international churches who perform similar tasks, often more efficiently and based upon purely volunteer labor. Surely anybody interested in studying advocacy

³ This is certainly true of Christianity and Islam. Contemporary Judaism probably could not be considered an aggressively proselytizing religion. The current author is not familiar with how actively Hindus and Buddhists proselytize, though there are indications that they are open to converts.

organizations would want to rethink (or just *start* to think about) the role and historical success of religious groups.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to issue a clarion call to individuals studying advocacy groups to consider the role of religious groups as advocacy groups. Second, while I understand that asking a group of scholars embedded in one field of research to immerse themselves in an entirely new literature is difficult and costly, I will present some of the basic findings about religious organizations associated with a newly-emerging “religious economies” school. This theoretical perspective borrows heavily from microeconomic (or rational choice) theory to understand how churches organize and function in a variety of environmental settings. In particular, I will argue that scholarship on how religious leaders solve collective action problems is especially instructive for researchers studying advocacy groups. This section will refer to the historical development of Christianity and various denominations within that faith tradition. Christianity arguably has been the most successful transnational “advocacy” movement in world history. Finally, I will briefly talk about the general strategy of Christian missionaries and the impact they have had in countries around the world, with particular reference to Latin America. It should be noted that the present author is not an expert on the role of religious missions, nor is he deeply steeped in the advocacy group or NGO literature. Nonetheless, it may be refreshing to have such a neophyte crash the party and blurt out his ideas like a drunken sailor on shore leave. Who knows? We all might just learn something.

THE ECONOMICS OF RELIGION

Scholars studying advocacy groups, new social movements and NGOs can be forgiven⁴ for long neglecting the role of religious institutions. For most of the past century, scholarship around religion was informed by secularization theory – i.e., the general notion that as societies modernized religious practice and/or belief would become less prevalent in society, if not extinct (cf. Bruce 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004). If

⁴ What is a paper on religion without a little bit of forgiveness after all? If you are one of the scholars who has ignored religion, I shall turn the other cheek.

experts on religion thought religion was becoming arcane, why would anybody else want to consider it important? But by the last few decades of the twentieth century, a giant problem emerged for secularization theory – the data didn't match the predictions. Not only was the world's most modernized country – the United States – seemingly immune from secularization, but people started to notice a “global resurgence” in religiosity, particularly of the fundamentalist or evangelical variety. A variety of terrorist attacks by Islamic militants certainly drew attention to the ongoing religious fervor of populations in the Middle East, and Central and South Asia. Slightly less noticed but equally amazing was the “rapid” spread of evangelical Protestantism and Pentecostalism in Latin America (Stoll 1990, Martin 1990),⁵ prompting the Catholic Church to “re-evangelize” the region and increase active participation in their faith (Gill 1998).

In response to the empirical problems faced by secularization theory, a small number of sociologists, economists and political scientists began exploring new theoretical models that explained both the persistence and growth of religion in some areas of the world (e.g., the U.S. and the developing world) and its apparent decline in other parts (most notably Europe). Relying upon “rational choice theory” (the foundational basis of modern microeconomics), these scholars formed what would become known as the “religious economies school.”⁶ The basic idea behind their theories was simple. Religiously-motivated people tend to respond to cost-benefit incentives just as much as people operating in non-religious spheres of life (e.g., in secular businesses). The religious economies school tended to place a high level of explanatory emphasis on the “supply side” of religion, explaining differences in religious practice based upon how well religious firms (churches) matched the underlying demand for religious goods in society (cf. Stark & Iannaccone 1994) . For present purposes, two central findings from the religious economies school are important for those studying the relative success and failure of advocacy groups: 1) strict churches that impose sacrifices and stigmas on their members tend to be more efficient and successful than churches that are less strict; and 2)

⁵ Protestantism seemed to “explode” out of nowhere in Latin America in the 1980s and '90s giving the impression that it was all based upon rapid mass conversions. However, Protestants had been missionizing in the region several decades before academics really took note of the phenomenon. The “explosion” of Protestantism was no more miraculous than the typical growth curve of most historical religions that rely upon simple geometric expansion to seemingly burst forth from nowhere.

⁶ See Stark and Finke (2000) and Iannaccone (1995) for good summaries of this perspective.

religious groups (and religiosity in general) tend to flourish in countries where the religious marketplace is deregulated – i.e., where there is extensive religious freedom.⁷

RELIGIONS AS SUCCESSFUL COLLECTIVE ACTORS.

As noted above, many religious organizations have been remarkably successful at surviving historically, often in the face of remarkable persecution. What has been more surprising is that the religions that impose extensive financial and behavioral costs upon their members have tended to be some of the most dynamic denominations in terms of active participation and growth. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals are some of the fastest growing religions today. The Latter Day Saints (Mormons) prohibit members from consuming alcohol or caffeine, Likewise, Witnesses are forbidden from drinking alcohol, are required to do significant amounts of "doorbelling" and are not permitted to pursue a college degree (significantly restricting their career opportunities). Pentecostals face similar restrictions on booze and engage in a variety of behaviors that set them apart from their neighbors (e.g., glossalia, faith healing). Iannaccone (1994) provides empirical evidence that these denominations have higher rates of attendance, voluntary participation and financial contributions than religions that have fewer restrictions (costs) on members.

To understand why "high cost" denominations tend to perform well, and then to further understand why religious organizations are effective advocacy groups, we must first conceptualize the collective action problem facing religious groups. In order for the group to succeed, individuals must voluntarily commit to certain behaviors or financial support that enhance the church's survival. While many churches have historically solved this problem by relying upon government support in collecting tithes and enforcing membership, typically the most successful religious movements have relied upon voluntary contributions of time and money. Given that many secular advocacy groups also rely upon voluntary cooperation, understanding how churches have solved

⁷ To anybody with a rudimentary understanding of economics, this finding should be a "no-brainer." However, it remains a surprisingly controversial notion in the sociology of religion.

their collective action problems might lead to insight into how secular groups can be more successful.

The ability of religious groups to solve their collective action problem successfully becomes more paradoxical when one considers that the “goods and services” provided are highly intangible and difficult for consumers (parishioners) to verify. The most fundamental religious “goods” fall under the rubric of what economists call “credence goods.” A credence good is a good wherein a consumer cannot determine the quality of the good until some future date, often long after the point when it is purchased. Insurance is a classic example. A motorist buys car insurance under the expectation that when he is in an accident the insurer will pay to fix his auto. However, it is only after having paid the premium and been in an accident can the purchaser know if the company will follow through on its promise to pay. In essence, a consumer buys insurance on “faith.” Religion, particularly one offering some afterlife salvation, represents the ultimate credence good; one “purchases” a religion in the present with the expectation that they will receive everlasting life or spiritual enlightenment at some point in the future.⁸ It is reasonable to assert that church’s face an uphill battle in convincing people to pay a significant price for something that they don’t know whether or not they will receive, and can only verify after they die. There are no refunds associated with religious goods and lemon laws do not apply.⁹ Religious goods also include philosophical (or theological) answers to the great mysteries of life that people do seem to desire – Why are we here? Is there meaning to life? The answers to these questions are also difficult to verify the quality of.

The difficulty that churches face in trying to get parishioners to pay for the supply of religious goods is further exacerbated by the fact that most of those goods are

⁸ As will be noted below, the purchase price of a religion may be quite minimal in that one only needs to make a “belief commitment.” However, demonstrating that such a belief commitment is truthful usually requires some degree of commitment (or “sacrifice”) of time and/or resources. This may include anything from tithing 10% of one’s annual income to foregoing an important football game to attend services on Sunday morning. The cost of the latter sacrifice should never be underestimated, particularly if one’s team is in the playoffs.

⁹ Lemon laws were created to alleviate the credence good problem associated with the purchase of automobiles, particularly used cars. If a vehicle did not perform according to some minimal standard, the purchaser would be owed a full refund from the seller. The U.S. court system does impose a “Lemon test” on government policies associated with the support of religion (see *Lemon v Kurtzman*), but these are not the same as lemon laws.

intangible and can be easily disseminated much like digital music on the Internet. Given that many Christian faiths merely require a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ to achieve salvation through God's grace,¹⁰ once word gets around about this simple requirement there is little incentive for people to pay a priest for repeatedly telling them this. It is thus evident that collecting money (or voluntary time) for the provision of a church organization to continually disseminate the organization's belief to potential converts becomes a huge collective action problem. Given that most religions have a stated goal to proselytize their beliefs – their primary advocacy goal¹¹ – this collective action problem is particularly acute and demands effective resolution. Even non-proselytizing religions (e.g., Judaism) require resources to maintain organizations that assist in maintaining the existence of the organization among future generations. So how do religious groups solve their collective action problem? And why is it that “strict” (high cost) religions have the most success in organizing collectively for their goal?

Our first step towards answering these questions lies in the nature of providing credence goods. Effectively convincing someone to purchase a credence good requires that both the good and the seller of the good are credible. Insurance companies and banks need to appear successful if they are to garner business. A large bank or insurer that owns expensive skyscrapers and has a large advertising budget at their disposal appears more solvent than a bank or an insurer who operates out of a garage in an industrial park. Likewise with religions. To ensure that people believe the spiritual message (credence good) provided by a denomination, the clergy have a strong incentive to invest in their credibility. Taking vows of poverty, undergoing extensive theological training, and engaging in other sacrificial behavior (e.g., celibacy) are some of the ways that leaders of religious institutions have invested in their trustworthiness.¹² Public

¹⁰ Reference the New Testament passages in John 6:47 and Luke 23: 39-43 for evidence. This is the essence of Pascal's Wager, wherein noted scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal argued that it was a good bet to believe in the existence of God since that came at a low cost relative to the enormous benefits to be accrued if God rewards belief with heavenly delights.

¹¹ For Christianity, the primary focus of this paper, this goal can be found in Matthew 28: 16-20 (not in all versions of the New Testament) and the entire book of Acts.

¹² I have always been fascinated by the extravagant facilities and clothing that many televangelists maintain and have thought that this would be an interesting research project (dissertation) in the sociology of religion. The lavish lifestyles of many televangelists would seem to send a signal that the religion they are pedaling is less than credible. Financial scandals involving the likes of Jim Bakker certainly chip away at the credibility of other televangelists, at least this would seem a reasonable hypothesis. Nonetheless,

testimonies from the clientele (parishioners) also enhance the credibility of religion, and public baptisms are a staple of Christianity. Witnessing by middle or upper class missionaries who gave up a comfortable lifestyle to live among and minister to people of much lesser means also lends to the believability of a spiritual organization. Maintaining a pantheon of religious martyrs also enhances the credibility of the spiritual message; if someone was willing to give their life for their religious belief, that religious belief must be pretty good or at least worthy of investigation on the part of a curious bystander. Economies of scale also help established religions bolster their credibility. After all, can a billion Catholics be wrong? Of course, none of these things are fully sufficient to provide complete credibility to a religious faith, but each in its own way certainly helps.

Scholars studying secular advocacy groups would do well to examine how the leaders of different groups build and preserve the credibility of their organizations.

In a similar fashion, religious organizations will often attempt to do “good deeds” or offer tangible benefits to potential converts as a way of demonstrating that they can be trusted. Churches frequently run soup kitchens for the poor, clothing drives for the homeless or assist in building houses for low income families. This sends out the signal to potential members that the church is genuinely concerned about the “here and now” needs of others. If the church is kind enough to help the less fortunate, surely their message of salvation is meant to enhance the well-being of those that believer believe in their less tangible spiritual message. Churches also provide various tangible goods and services to their own members as well, ranging from counseling services for those facing difficulties (e.g., alcohol addition, terminal illness) to groups for people with similar interests (e.g., horseback riding, quilt making, playing softball) or seeking to build various job or social skills (e.g., leadership seminars, emergency preparedness).¹³ Should anyone feel sad about bowling alone, they could invariably find a church league within a few miles of their home. Providing these tangible services are a small step towards building trust within a community. If the church does a good job helping me through trouble times or provides me an opportunity to share my interests with others, it may well

televangelists appear to remain popular. Perhaps the grandeur of the televangelist lifestyle indicates that God has blessed this particular ministry, much in the way that the Sistine Chapel signals the glorious achievement of the Catholic Church.

¹³ All of these have been offered by the author’s present church.

be trustworthy enough for me to accept their guidance in matters of salvation. Again, there is a lesson here for scholars of advocacy groups. **It may be worthwhile to consider how different activities offered by an advocacy group, but not directly related to its central mission, enhance the willingness of others to participate in or contribute financially to the group.**

The provision of tangible goods to members reveals another aspect of religious organizations. In addition to providing credence goods, nearly all religions provide club goods to their believers. A club good is similar to a public good in that provides benefits to a population that are not rivaled in consumption, but different than a public good since some individuals can be excluded from consuming these goods. Consider Sam's Club. All members of this "club" benefit from lower prices that accrue from bulk purchases. However, only those individuals who are willing to pay an annual fee are allowed to take advantage of these lower prices. The same is true of religion. Those who are members of the church often have access to services that are not available to non-members, such as the aforementioned counseling services or special funds for members who find themselves in financial straits due to unemployment or sickness. There is also the general sense of fellowship or belonging to an exclusive group. For any church, trying to determine who is a "club member" in good standing and eligible for such services is problematic. Given that religious organizations frequently rely upon voluntary contributions, it is easy for somebody to "free ride" on the group by claiming an inability to pay or participate.

This is where strictness comes in. Iannaccone (1992) has argued that various sacrifices and stigmas associated with different religious groups serve to limit free riding in the organization. If being a member of a certain religious denomination entails wearing specific clothing (e.g., yarmulkes, turbans), agreeing to different behavioral restrictions (e.g., no drinking, eating meat or attending college) or making an extensive time commitment (e.g., doorbelling ten hours per month), those who are most likely to free ride on the tangible benefits of the religious group will not likely be the ones willing to pay those up front costs. Sacrifice and stigma, in essence, screen out free riders. The members who do agree to these sacrifices and stigmas are more likely to be active in other areas of the church organization and add to the overall club benefits, be it singing

louder during services, helping out with child care or contributing financially.

Iannaccone has shown that members of strict churches attend services at a substantially higher rate and contribute a greater percentage of their income relative to less strict churches, even after controlling for various socio-economic factors (1992, 285-86). This implies that strict churches tend to be more efficient than their less strict counterpart when it comes to furthering collective action. In this situation, the overall club benefits will actually increase, thereby making membership in a strict religion a “good bargain” even when the high costs of sacrifice and stigma are considered.¹⁴ The fact that many of these religious organizations appear so vibrant from the outside acts as an inducement for some people to consider joining them, and hence such strict religions often have high growth rates.¹⁵

Religious organizations that do a good job in screening out potential free riders also enhance their collective action potential in two other ways. When members of a church find it in their best interest to be active participants in that organization, they build up what Iannaccone (1990) has termed “religious human capital.” Simply put, “religious capital” is the stockpile of knowledge one has about a theology, religious practices and relationships within an organization. A certain “virtuous cycle” is at play here: The more one is active in a church, the more one builds up religious capital and makes them more willing to participate in the church. Successful experience with collective action begets more collective action. Additionally, greater participation in a religious group helps to build denser social networks between the people involved in that church. This has the effect of enhancing trust and trustworthiness among the group’s members. Successful collective action often involves knowing the intentions of others within a group so as to

¹⁴ Iannaccone [get cite] does note that strictness does have its limits, though. Religious groups or cults that demand members turn over their worldly possessions to the group may be able to get a few followers, but they seldom grow to any significant size. Likewise, Amish and Mennonite communities show a remarkable ability to control free riding within their community, but they tend not to be attractive religions to join. I consider Iannaccone’s 1992 article to be one of the most insightful (and most overlooked) articles on collective action written in the past 20 years and students of advocacy groups would be advised to give it a serious read.

¹⁵ There are still a large number of factors that influence an organization’s effectiveness that have not been discussed here. One of the obvious questions left unanswered is if strictness enhances the vibrancy and growth rates of a religious organization, why don’t all religions follow suit and become stricter? And why do some previously strict churches such as the Congregationalists (now United Church of Christ) and Methodists (namely the United Methodists) become much more “lax” in their behavioral codes? I would argue that much of this can be explained by the organizational structure and its effects on the incentives of clergy, but that is another topic for another time.

prevent possible defection in a collective endeavor. If I know that a person close to me is planning to cooperate in a potentially risky or costly endeavor, I am more willing to participate. Dennis Chong (1991) has shown that church social networks were immensely important in signaling trust among participants of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and was a key element of the movement's success.

While the issues of requiring sacrifice and stigmas may not be of direct applicability to secular advocacy groups (after all it would be silly for environmentalist groups to require all their members to wear Birkenstocks and maintain vegan diets), understanding why religious groups are so successful at collective action should be of interest to those studying advocacy groups. What institutional mechanisms reduce free riding in groups? What organizational requirements enhance trustworthiness and build social capital within an advocacy group? Are there strategies and tactics that successful religious groups have employed that are transferable to secular NGOs? On a more normative front, to what extent can secular advocacy groups partner with (or piggyback on) the organizational strengths of religious groups, benefiting from their pre-existing efforts to collectively mobilize?¹⁶ As noted above, religious groups have had their fingerprints all over a number of very successful social movements throughout history, from the abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, not to mention women's suffrage, Prohibition, the Central American sanctuary movement and anti-abortion protests. And Christian missionaries currently can be found in all corners of the world providing medical care, education, and other social services to communities lacking in basic infrastructure. How these missionaries locate in these different areas is related to the next topic – religious freedom and pluralism.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND PLURALISM

In addition to noting that churches have been successful in collective action, the other major finding of the “religious economies” school has been that religious organizations tend to flourish in countries with a great deal of religious pluralism, which

¹⁶ Froese and Pfaff (2001) note this tendency for secular advocates to find a home in religious organizations in Poland and East Germany under communist rule. Not only did these activists benefit from the organizational structures of the Catholic and Lutheran churches, but these denominations also provided them with some “cover” from persecution as the communists in these two nations were more reluctant to attack a traditional religious institution than a secular protest movement. Hewitt (1991) noted a similar phenomenon in Brazil during the bureaucratic authoritarian period in that country.

in turn is a function of the degree to which the religious marketplace is deregulated (Finke 1990; Iannaccone 1991). To state it a different way, where a government provides a substantial degree of religious liberty it is likely that a wide array of religious organizations will arise and will be free to pursue activities their mission via the means they best see fit. It is likely that these religious groups will find themselves in competition with one another. Where this happens, clergy have an incentive to find the best means of attracting converts and keeping them active in their church. This in turn enhances the collective action above and makes churches (or their members) more likely to participate in advocacy causes. In contrast, where there is a state-supported monopoly church, there is little incentive for the clergy to devote extensive energy to evangelization, particularly if their salaries and other organizational costs are paid for by the government (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Let us examine how this works.

The religious economy school begins with the notion that religious preferences within society are naturally pluralistic and may vary by general theological approach or more mundane desires over presentation style (Stark and Finke 2000); some people like to handle snakes in church, while others would just as have them remain on the plane or in Genesis. From this assumption, it is argued that no one single church can completely satisfy all religious preferences. A “successful” religious monopoly requires government coercion to prevent upstart sects from entering the religious market and stealing away the dominant church’s flock. Along with prohibitions on religious competitors, religious monopolies often receive official sanction and, perhaps more importantly, financial subsidies from the government. Noting that churches do face a collective action problem in providing intangible credence goods (see above), it is not surprising that religious officials may welcome government funding for their mission. However, research has shown that such subsidies come at a substantial cost in terms of organizational energy. First, where competing denominations are essentially prohibited, clergy within the dominant faith have little incentive to constantly evangelize the population since their membership is essentially guaranteed.¹⁷ If the clergy are guaranteed some level of

¹⁷ This does not imply that clergy no longer care about the pastoral cultivation of their flock. What it does imply, though, is that with a “captured market” clergy with scarce time resources will feel less pressure to devote extensive amount of time on getting people into the pews on Sunday, especially if government funding makes voluntary contributions less necessary (cf. Smith 1976 [1776]). Parishioners who are

funding from the state, they have less of an incentive to seek voluntary contributions from their members. Pleasing government officials who control budgetary matters becomes more important than enticing parishioners to tithe by providing interesting services that they may want or demand. Advocacy also suffers as religious leaders will likely discourage any clergy or parishioners from undertaking activities that may run counter to or compete with government interests.

In countries where the religious marketplace is deregulated and churches are “on their own” with respect to funding, it is totally predictable that the religious market would be more dynamic.¹⁸ Without any government-imposed barriers to organization, different denominations are likely to arise and satisfy different niche markets. Pluralism flourishes under conditions of religious freedom. These denominations will likely compete with one another for members. Such competition may have zero-sum qualities to it such that one denomination may draw members from another denomination.¹⁹ But there may also be positive-sum qualities to religious diversity in that the leaders of one church may learn how to better serve their own congregants by observing the successful techniques of other churches. This has substantial consequences for the advocacy role of churches. First, given that the fundamental role of a religion is to spread the faith, there is an incentive to be as successful as the competing denomination down the road by seating as many people in the pews on Sunday. No minister would like to feel that his²⁰ message is less appealing than another minister’s, thus he will likely work hard to be at least as successful as others. This implies working hard to solve the collective action problem faced by churches (as noted above). Second, in working hard to attract and activate lay members of their congregation, clergy in a pluralistic religious market will actually be

disgruntled with the services they receive have few remedial options given that their “exit” option to other denominations is essentially forbidden by government decree. Their only real option is to not attend services that they find boring or distasteful. While a monopoly church may see low levels of attendance, the inability for disgruntled consumer to move to a different denomination makes it appear as if the non-attendees still belong to the major faith but are just too lazy to come.

¹⁸ Although the present author finds this assertion to be remarkably predictable, there are some who find it completely counterintuitive. Noted secularization theorist Steve Bruce, when confronted with the fact that the United States maintains high levels of religious freedom and is one of the most religiously dynamic Christian nations, claimed that US citizens were either lying about attending church or not practicing real religion at all (2000, 205-13).

¹⁹ A recent Pew Foundation survey found that roughly 40% of all Christians in the United States, a country with a relatively free religious market, have switched denominations at some point in their life.

²⁰ Female clergy are still a small minority so I am using a gender specific term here.

laying the groundwork for future advocacy activities. Keeping people engaged in their faith often means providing them small leadership roles in the congregation, which in turn provide those members with organizational skills that can be used for other activities, whether it be overseas missionary work, providing social services in the local community (e.g., clothing drives for the poor) or mobilizing politically for specific causes (e.g., advocating prayer in public school, lobbying politicians for tougher abortion laws).²¹

The important lesson here for scholars of advocacy groups is that when organizations are forced to compete independently for the attention and resources of members, they will tend to devote more time towards solving the inherent collective action problems associated with bringing together such groups. Should such groups become beholden to government funding or protection from competing organizations, they are less likely to cultivate the needed voluntary human resources that can make an organization dynamic. This assertion could be tested empirically by determining whether voluntary-funded advocacy groups are more efficient in accomplishing their tasks than government-funded ones. I will leave this task to others.²²

[The above section needs to be better written and filled in with more citations.]

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

With the above theoretical groundwork laid, we now turn our attention to two brief illustrations of the religious economies school. These examples are not meant to be rigorous empirical tests (since I didn't have time to do that and Aseem said it would be okay if I didn't), but rather only illustrations of the principles noted above.

The Rise of Christianity.

²¹ There has been research showing that members who are active in a religious community are more likely to volunteer and contribute financially to secular causes (Brooks 2006; Gill 2004).

²² My own casual impression is that private charities tend to have much lower deadweight costs associated with their activities than do government agencies performing similar tasks. Of course, a government agency is fully funded by the government. The more appropriate comparison would be with a private advocacy group that gets a portion of its funding from government grants. The recent Faith-Based Initiative of the Bush Administration offers a perfect test case. One of that program's intentions was to allow private religious charities to obtain government grants for their work. Not all religious charities signed on to this program. The empirical prediction, if I am correct, is that those religious charities that did participate in getting government grants would have higher deadweight (administrative) costs than those that continue to rely upon private contributions, controlling for such things as the nature of the charitable work, size of organization, etc.

It can be said that Christianity is one of the world's most successful social movements, transcending national, racial and ethnic boundaries. From a mere handful of disciples following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the movement has come to engulf nearly two billion individuals in the world today (Barrett, Kurian and Johnson 2001). But the success of Christianity was in no way guaranteed.

Bullet point argument from here on out.

- Early Christians relied upon voluntary effort, built strong social networks. No state support for roughly 300 years.
- Martyrdom – sends signals that Christianity is worth it.
- Good deeds – cared for the sick and poor, built trust among the populace.
- When Constantine provides state funding, essentially making the Church a state-Church, things change. Loss of vigor.
- All of this based on the work of Stark – *Rise of Christianity* and *For the Glory of God*.

Contemporary Missionary Movements.

- Tend to go to places where they can build buildings and proselytize freely. China used to be good in the early 1900s but war and communism made it bad place. Turn to Latin America and found open door in some countries but not others. Work of Gill cited here. Same thing in E. Europe and Russia – flood of missionaries in early 1990s.
- Missionary movements do good deeds. Discussion of “rice bowl Christianity” – not a direct quid pro quo, but way of building trust.
- Show how missionaries who give up much tend to increase activism back in home country. Just like early martyrs.
- May include more extensive discussion of Faith-Based Initiative (Charitable Choice) of Bush administration, but probably would have to be separate section. Very instructive.

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