

Review Symposium on American Religion

THE CHURCHING OF AMERICA, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy. By Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. 1992.

SELLING GOD: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture. By R. Laurence Moore. New York: Oxford University Press. 1994.

Why Upstarts Win in America: Religion in the Market Place

Bryan F. Le Beau

It is hardly news to read that promoting religion in America is a bit like marketing fast food, or that Madison Avenue tactics are not entirely out of place in the parsonage. Wasn't it behind the headlines lambasting the PTL (Praise the Lord) television ministry and the indiscretions of Jim and Tammy Baker? More recently, hasn't it been even more directly addressed in the various news reports on the so-called "megachurches"? And, hasn't Jon Butler, one of America's preeminent historians of religion, stated it emphatically, in *The Economist* no less, when he announced that there was "a national market in religion long before there was a national market in economics"?¹

It is difficult to explain why such a popular thesis has received so little scholarly attention, but now it has in two fine books on the subject, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark and *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* by R. Laurence Moore. Finke and Stark are sociologists at Purdue University and the University of Washington, respectively; Moore is an historian at Cornell.²

Both *The Churching of America* and *Selling God* employ the market model known to economists and sociologists as "rational choice" theory. "Rational choice" theory is based on the premise that even in matters of religion people make decisions by evaluating costs and benefits and acting so as to maximize

those benefits. It assumes that, as a result of rational assessment, people not only choose what religion, if any, they will accept, but also how extensively they will participate in it.³

Critics of “rational choice” theory argue that religion should not be examined using a marketplace model because it is less rational than those commodities to which it would be compared. Which is to say, that the “rational choice” model should not be applied to religion because it is different from the profane products with which it would then be grouped; that religion is walled off from the calculation of utility on which competition within the marketplace relies.⁴ There is basis for such criticism. Nevertheless, by narrowing their focus and limiting their goals, Finke and Stark and Moore show that use of “rational choice” theory can be effective.

Both *The Churching of America* and *Selling God* reject the Weberian thesis, that secularization is an inevitable tendency of modernization, and the more recent reformulation of that thesis by Peter Berger, which states that religious pluralism, as it results in competition, inevitably weakens the truth of any single religious tradition and, therefore, is destructive of religion.⁵ Instead, they argue persuasively that in the United States, at least, pluralism has been good for religion, that there has been a congruence between pluralism and religious vitality. A World Values Survey, conducted in 1990-1993 and released after publication of both books, supports this conclusion. The survey reports that 82 percent of its respondents in the United States said that they considered themselves religious, as compared with 55 in Britain, 54 in western Germany, and 48 in France. Forty-four percent of Americans said that they attended a religious service at least once a week, as compared to 18 in western Germany, 14 in Britain, and 10 in France.⁶

The Churching of America and *Selling God*, however, are also quite different. Although it treats historical material and employs historical data, *The Churching of America* is primarily an exercise in the sociology of religion. *Selling God* is first and foremost a history. *The Churching of God* is concerned with winners and losers; *Selling God* examines the role American religion, as a whole, has played in the marketplace of American culture.

The Churching of America is essentially two books in one—one empirical, one theoretical. It presents a compendium of data on religious adherence in the United States from the colonial period to the present, and it applies “rational choice” theory to that data in an examination of the dynamics of religious bodies in the United States as they have sought to attract and hold a committed membership. First, Finke and Stark show how the United States has shifted from a nation in which in 1776 only 17 percent of its adults took part in organized religion to one in which, today, 62 percent participate. They then explain why,



DOONESBURY copyright G. B. Trudeau. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

in the process, denominations have won and lost. In that regard an equally good subtitle for their study might have been: “Why Upstarts Win in America.”

Finke and Stark point to an endless cycle of sect formation, transformation, schism, and rebirth in American religious history, in response to the changing demands of the consumer. Among the biggest recent winners in the process, according to Finke and Stark, have been the Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of God, and Roman Catholics. The list of biggest losers includes Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Christians (Disciples). Finke and Stark attribute success to the effectiveness with which groups are able to market religious doctrine that appeals to the heart rather than the head. Failure, they find, results from doing just the opposite, or, commonly, from attempting to join the American mainstream by softening their doctrine and demanding less of their adherents. Dean Kelley made much the same point nearly twenty-five years ago in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, but he limited his study to conservative religious groups, lacked Finke and Stark’s historical perspective, and failed to muster anywhere near their amount of supporting data.⁷

Particularly persuasive in establishing their assessment of winners and losers is Finke and Stark’s discussion of the period from 1776 to 1850, during which time American religious groups were forced (some leaped with glee) into the marketplace, producing the first dramatic changes in the American religious landscape. While larger, longer established groups (some legally, in the colonial period) responded with disdain, “upstart sects” aggressively courted the unchurched and the fallen away, especially on the frontier. One result was that overall rates of religious adherence rose from 17 percent in 1776 to 37 in 1850. Another, however, was the increase in market share for Baptists from 16.9 to 20.5 and for Methodists, from 2.5 to 34.2, while Episcopalians and Congregationalists declined from 16 to 3.5 and 20 to 4 percent, respectively.⁸

Not surprisingly, Finke and Stark have little use for the fine points of theology, which many historians of American religion have employed in explaining the success or failure of particular religious groups. Many of those studies assumed a model of intellectual progress, wherein the history of American religion was seen as a process of continual refinement toward a more systematic theology, and winners were determined by the degree to which they realized that

level of refinement. In such studies, mainstream liberal Protestant churches have appeared to be most successful, where in Finke and Stark's assessment of gains and losses in market share, they have been the biggest losers.

Finke and Stark criticize historians of American religion for overemphasizing mainstream Protestant religion and giving insufficient attention to "upstart sects." As alluded to earlier, there is much truth in this criticism; it is nevertheless ironic in that historian R. Laurence Moore, author of *Selling God*, has also published *Religious Outsiders in the Making of America* (1986), perhaps the finest study on the subject.⁹

In *Selling God*, Moore presents a history of American religion in the marketplace of culture from disestablishment in 1791 to the present. He opens by reminding us that pluralism may have been a *fait accompli* in 1791 but that it was nonetheless unprecedented and troubling. The nation had already embarked on an experiment in republican government, and few believed that that government could long endure without those values that only a single religion—one that would bind together an already disparate people—could provide. Moore's history, much like Finke and Stark's, shows that such fears may have been understandable but ultimately needless. American religion has flourished, leading Moore to proclaim: "What remains striking is that the two agencies most necessary to the course of American democracy, religious denominations and political parties, were neither foreseen nor welcome" (87).

Moore sets two goals for his history. The first is to show that American religious leaders, in their attempt to expand their market share of the churchgoing population, made effective use of marketplace techniques. The second is to show that the involvement of American religious leaders in the cultural marketplace was not only successful but also positioned them to deal effectively with purveyors of what they feared would become an irreligious and immoral popular culture.

Moore devotes over half of *Selling God* to his first goal. Religion's role in the marketplace of culture, he explains, began in the nineteenth century when, rather than merely being critical of the various forms of leisure and entertainment available to the public, religious leaders decided to market their own alternatives. They began by publishing reading material that, they believed, would instill proper values rather than appeal to readers' more basic instincts, and they achieved economy of scale by entering into mass publishing ventures. For example, by 1829 the American Tract Society had produced over six million items, which were appealingly written, inexpensive, and effectively promoted through attractive advertising and door-to-door sales.

Nineteenth century religious leaders soon diversified into other areas of popular entertainment. They organized camp meetings with an eye toward

providing amusement, as well as religion, for the entire family. In response to the increasingly attractive secular theater, they produced plays “full of Christian sentiments and morals,” and staged them in public places like Central Park. And, as tourism began to develop, they organized summer retreats in the country that combined moral uplift, education, and relaxation.

Moore, of course, provides many other examples of the successful marketing of religious products, but one of his most useful sections deals with the first few decades of the twentieth century, wherein religious leaders most openly and unabashedly embraced marketing techniques developed by the leaders of commerce. The peak year might have been 1926, when Francis H. Case wrote *Handbook of Church Advertising*. When Case predicted that some would react to his book by objecting that religious leaders were “mixing faith with business,” and then responded that “they must mix if civilization is to endure” (213), however, he was only stating what many other church leaders had believed for years. It was, Moore explains, American religion’s response to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). And, even Taylor’s seminal work was preceded by *Principles of Successful Church Advertising* (1908), wherein Charles Stelze urged religious leader to create religious products that guaranteed customer satisfaction, and to market those products so effectively that people would be convinced that religion was a good choice—much like Ivory soap, Campbell’s soup, and Pond’s beauty lotion.

Moore is just as persuasive in developing his second point; that is, in showing not only that religious leaders were effective in creating alternatives to suspect forms of popular entertainment, but also, because they were so successful in that endeavor, they were able to persuade purveyors of secular popular culture to run their businesses according to guidelines provided by a Protestant moral economy. One example will suffice.

Film, Moore points out, posed the first truly major challenge to the strong position held by American religion in the marketplace of culture—to wit, in 1937, weekly box office numbers were three times weekly church attendance. In response, American religious leaders marshalled their forces on several different fronts. With the nickelodeon’s first appearance, they forced producers to exercise self-censorship and operators to relocate their theaters from proximity to saloons, brothels, and dance halls they originally favored, to more genteel areas. They also insisted that their darkened halls be well monitored so as to insure proper patron behavior. Later, American religious leaders convinced film makers such as Cecil B. De Mille that he could profit from films with religious content, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923), and pushed the film industry into creating for itself and abiding by national film boards of review. (The alternative, religious leaders made clear, was agitation for greater censorship.)

To be effective in the marketplace of culture, religious leaders had to work together, overcoming pre-existing levels of divisive parochialism. Finke and Stark not only insist that such united fronts as the American Home Missionary

Society, in the nineteenth century, and the National Council of Churches, in the twentieth, proved detrimental to its participants in that groups entering into such alliances soon lost market share, but also that such “religious cartels” or “interdenominational front groups,” as the authors also term them, were, in reality, attempts by larger established churches to muscle out much smaller “upstart sects.” Moore, in contrast, points out that such “sacred canopies” produced products that sold Christianity, broadly speaking, rather than denominational doctrine, and that, regardless of the fate of individual members, they were successful in the cultural marketplace.

It would be easy to criticize Finke and Stark for being reductionist in their employment of “rational choice” theory. In fact, they anticipated such criticism, so I will resist the temptation and note instead that, although they perhaps have overly hyped their findings, Finke and Stark largely achieved what they set out to do.

Finke and Stark are at their best in discussing the rise and fall of the Methodists in the United States, as they are among history’s biggest winners *and* losers. As noted, Methodists rose from obscurity in 1776 to be the largest denomination in the United States in 1850. By the end of the century, however, they were overtaken by Baptists and Roman Catholics and, when they ejected from their ranks the Holiness Movement, poised to be one the biggest winners of the 20th century, they began their descent. Less satisfying is Finke and Stark’s attempt to force Roman Catholicism into their mold, and their omission of any substantive discussion of winners such as Mormons, Pentecostals, and Black Baptists.

And, finally, readers of *The Churching of America* are likely to be cautious in accepting Finke and Stark’s use of gains and losses of market share as the principal measure of winners and losers. As impressive as it is, it can be misleading and may underestimate, or overstate, the remaining, or resulting, strength of losers and winners. Methodists, for example, Finke and Stark’s biggest losers, have lost 48 percent of their market share in the past half century. Yet, they continue to be the third largest denomination in the United States (a position they have held for nearly a century) with some 64.3 adherents for every 1000 church members. Compare that to the Church of God, one of Finke and Stark’s biggest winners, which, in the same half-century, has increased its market share 260 percent, but still accounts for only 3.6 adherents per 1000.

Moore ends on a cautious note. He too recognizes his tendency toward reductionism. He admits to a secular bias, and calls himself a “soft determinist” (8). He nevertheless acknowledges those who have argued that applications of “rational choice” theory are limited by the uniqueness of religion and that religion is not entirely at home even in the cultural, to say nothing of the commercial, marketplace. He realizes the limits of studies such as his that ignore the fine points

of theology, and, therefore, stops short of insisting that he has shown a perfect correlation between levels of church membership and acceptance of religious doctrine.

And, finally, having effectively argued that American religion has fared well in the marketplace of culture, he discusses the limits within which that conclusion must be viewed. He preempts his likely critics by acknowledging that American religion has sullied its skirts in the marketplace. He agrees with those who have argued that despite their increased membership, churches have lost their power to enforce moral sanctions, even against their own members. While insisting that religion continues to be important to the American people, he allows that they have relegated it to its own "time and place," and often refused, or at least failed, to apply its teachings to their daily lives. In sum, Moore concludes, having successfully competed in the marketplace, it has become a commodity.

Notes

1. "America and Religion: The Counter-attack of God," *The Economist* (July 8, 1995), 20.
2. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have authored *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, 1985), in which they introduced some of the concepts more fully developed in this book.
3. For a discussion of "rational choice" theory, see Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995), 76-89.
4. Iannaccone, 76.
5. Peter Berger, "From Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity," *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age*, eds. Mary Douglas and Stephen M. Tipton (Boston, 1982) and Peter Berger, "A Market Model for Analysis of Ecumenicity," *Social Research* 30 (1963), 77-93.
6. "America and Religion," 19.
7. Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York, 1972).
8. Another particularly good study of this period is Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989). Like Timothy Smith and Jon Butler, Finke and Stark question the reality of the First and Second Great Awakenings, at least insofar as they have been described as spontaneous, yet linked, and widespread. Finke and Stark argue that the "awakenings" were actually a series of well-organized, marketing techniques by "upstart sects" such as the Baptists and Methodists. See Timothy Smith, "My Rejection of a Cyclical View of 'Great Awakenings' in American Religious History," *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1983), 91-101; and Jon Butler, "Enthusiasms Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982), 305-25.
9. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders in the Making of America* (New York, 1986).