Chapter 6
Shopping for a Church?
Choice and Commitment in Religious Behaviour
Francesca E.S. Montemaggi

Introduction

In the neoliberal world, religious organisations, as much as other organisations, face competition for ‘customers’. This marketisation of religion turns the ‘goods’ of religion into commodities and religions into either the agents or victims of commodification.¹ The ‘silent takeover of all aspects of life by the corporate world’² leads to ‘the colonisation of our collective cultural heritage by individualist and capitalist forms of spirituality’,³ which needs to be resisted. Religious symbols and practices are in danger of being stripped of their intangible value. Thus goes the theory. As I sat in the steam room of the gym recently, I noticed that the music in the background was a Gregorian chant. There goes ‘sacred music’, I thought. However, I also pondered whether the playing of a Gregorian chant in a steam room of a gym necessarily devalued it. The following day, Grieg’s Morning Mood was playing, and the commodification claim seemed even less persuasive. Listening to Grieg or Gregorian chanting in the gym does not preclude one from appreciating music and devoting one’s entire attention to it when at the ‘appropriate’ venue. Arguably, music in non-conventional venues reaches a wider audience which might not otherwise experience it.⁴

The feeling of discomfort at the twin processes of the marketisation and commodification of religion implies that consumer choice eschews considerations of value, and that, more worryingly, left to our own devices, we neglect what is

³ Ibid., 171.
⁴ Tia DeNora, Music in Everyday Life (Cambridge, 2000).
considered ‘authentic’ or ‘valuable’ in the religious life. This normative judgement obfuscates the reality of the choices religious people make. I thus propose a distinction between ‘formal commodification’, which indicates the marketisation of religious goods to consumers, and ‘substantial commodification’, which identifies a decrease in the value of religious life. Accordingly, the ‘formal commodification’ of Gregorian chant means that it can be ‘back in fashion’, and its ‘purchasing power’ is not limited to a religious audience, or that Hillsong Christian music is a successful music enterprise among Christian evangelicals and beyond. ‘Substantial commodification’, by contrast, reduces the value of religious practices, beliefs, and symbols to being simply merely of commodities. ‘Substantial commodification’ describes a situation where, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, we know the price of religious practices, beliefs, and symbols, whilst ignoring their value. I pose that ‘substantial commodification’ is not the inevitable consequence of marketisation. By contrast, an example of ‘substantial commodification’ is the application of a market-oriented logic to the study of religion, as pursued by rational choice theorists. Rational choice theory, instead of explaining the effects of marketisation on religion, imposes a reductive perspective, which ignores the actors’ motives and devalues their actions.

This chapter presents a critique of the market-derived logic of rational choice theory and raises the question of the complexity of ‘choice’ on the basis of an analysis of primary data from a Christian evangelical church. It is argued that rational choice theory (RCT), by reducing choice to ‘rational self-interest’ and thus adopting a utilitarian and instrumentalist ethic, misinterprets the intentions of religious actors. RCT, far from being neutral, ascribes an instrumentalist system of values to religious behaviour, ignoring subjective motivations based on value. This is not to dispute that there are no market dynamics in religious life. Religious establishments and groups do not live in isolation from the rest of society. Churches often engage in activities that are designed to attract people and to compete with other providers of non-religious activities or, even, other religious establishments and initiatives. Religious practices can indeed be seen as ‘commodities’ to be advertised and ‘enjoyed’. However, this does not necessarily lead to a devaluation of substance, as those who lament marketisation claim, nor does it turn subjects into ‘rational’ calculating agents, choosing merely what ‘suits them most’, as RCT proponents suppose. Indeed, self-interested rationality discounts the increasing relevance of moral values in the markets.\(^5\)

The chapter focuses on the assumptions of rational choice theory in relation to self-interest, choice, and rationality, which underpin what I term ‘substantial

commodification’. It includes an analysis of an alternative formulation of RCT, which is more closely connected to Weber’s idea of rationality. It then reflects on the dynamics of choice on the basis of the findings from my own ethnographic research in ‘Bethlehem’, a Christian Evangelical church in Wales. The fieldwork included participant observation and interviews which took place between 2009 and 2011. The selected data consists primarily of public and private speech. This is to underline the actors’ reflections on their faith and how they relate faith to their everyday lives. The section on the findings is divided into two parts: the first part interrogates the data which exhibits features that might conform to a rational choice interpretation, and the second part presents data which highlights the meanings of their choices for the actors. The latter proposes a reflection on the relationship between choice and commitment, which takes into consideration how values shape forms of behaviour which override self-interest.

Having provided a critique elsewhere of ‘religious capital’ or ‘spiritual capital, as developed by Iannaccone on the basis of RCT, my reflection here focuses on the notions of choice and commitment as they emerge from the data. By paying closer attention to the actor’s intentions, we can begin to appreciate the multidimensional nature of choice. Accordingly, choice cannot be reduced to a mechanical calculation, as espoused by rational choice theorists; rather it is suffused with the actor’s cognitive and emotional processes. Thus, the ‘voices’ of religious actors are here employed to open the door to a deeper understanding of decision-making and faith.

**A Critique of Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory provides a neat and simple conception of the basic rationale and process of decision-making which human beings apply in their daily lives. The framework seemingly offers a way of understanding behaviour, in particular organisational behaviour, and claims to predict changes in and outcomes of the decision-making of the actors. It is predicated on actors choosing freely an optimal course of action in order to maximise their gain. The essential element of ‘maximising behaviour’ imputes to actors the fundamental rationale of self-

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interest. The actor chooses between a set of alternatives. Lack of information does not invalidate the model, as ‘an actor will act on the basis of his or her beliefs about possible action opportunities and their effects’. The theory is, therefore, aimed at predicting trends resulting from the choices made by a group of individuals.

Rational choice theory assumes that the logic of self-interest applies to all individuals, where differences in values and cultures only count as variables. Accordingly, what an individual values is a mere preference which is to be pursued as a goal within a framework dominated by self-interest. Satz and Ferejohn explain that profit maximisation is ‘an externally derived theory of interests’, which supplements RCT. Kiser and Hechter, drawing on Weber, recognise that there are non-instrumental orientations, such as ‘value-oriented action’, ‘emotional action’ and, also, habitual action. However, when faced with lack of evidence on the action orientation, the assumption is that ‘actors are instrumentally oriented. Instrumental action is least ambiguous and therefore most understandable to the analyst, who may not share an emic perspective with her subjects.’ The rationale of instrumentality is assumed to be present in all human beings.

There are several problems with these conceptions of choice, instrumentality, and self-interest. In reference to choice, this is reduced to outcome-driven behaviour, which dismisses any other concern of the actor, any dynamic of the group, and any environmental and circumstantial influence. It is a mechanical conception of choice as the outcome of a calculation. Social relations seem to count only as a cultural reference impinging on one’s preferences, rather than a continuous dynamic interaction. In reference to instrumentality, rational choice theorists claim that instrumental actions are based on the assumption of the shared ‘pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige’. However, the ‘pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige’ is not a goal-orienting action, but a value.

Consequently, rational choice theorists are not as ‘instrumentalist’ as they think they are; rather they are disingenuous about the underlying values informing the theory. The self-interest assumed by RCT is not informed by a theory of value. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how actors seek to maximise profit when profit does not equate with money. Further, rational choice theorists, by isolating individuals, prevent any reflection on what can be deemed ‘efficient’ or ‘rational’. Even a consideration of costs and benefits requires an explanation as to what the agent considers a cost and a benefit and how these are balanced. Indeed, actors

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9 Hedström and Swedberg, ‘Rational Choice’, 128 (emphasis in the original).
11 Ibid., 87.
14 Ibid., 801.
15 Ibid., 802.
may choose very destructive and ‘irrational’ behaviour in order to pursue ‘wealth, power, and prestige’.

More significantly, the logic of economic self-interest, here implied, is generalised to all and in all circumstances, given the claims rational choice theorists make to explain the most diverse behaviour in the most disparate situations. Money might make the world go round, but the logic of economic self-interest is but one of many and is not necessarily the dominant logic in human behaviour. It is thus arbitrary to assume that self-interest is the most fundamental motivation in all human beings. Arguably, an actor’s pursuit of wealth, power, and prestige could be determined by a deep-seated need for love and longing for human relationships, meaning and purpose in life. Whilst it is difficult and often impossible to establish the underlying motivation for the pursuit of wealth, it is likely to impact on the actors’ choices much more than an external and mechanical understanding of rationality.

This is not to dismiss self-interest as a powerful orientation in action; rather it is to appreciate that there are overarching ‘logics’, including faith, which inform human decision-making. Thus, the sense of belonging to a group will engender a particular type of logic that will affect our interaction with members of the group and our identity. Even instrumental action will be directed by the logic of place, culture, identity, and belief, to name just a few of the possible factors. This is not to be intended in a particularistic fashion, but to include the many factors that will shape how that logic will work in a situation, including psychological mechanisms. For example, the logic of love is not to be thought solely in a sense of rosy, positive and altruistic feeling. Love engenders a logic leading to various dynamics, such as attachment and a diminished self, which can bring out constructive or destructive behaviours. ‘Out of love’ people kill even the objects of their love. ‘Out of love’ people endanger or destroy their livelihoods. Actions might still be deemed instrumental, although in a very superficial sense of the word, but not self-interested.

Rational choice theory is heavily biased towards an assumption of self-interest. This is partly mitigated by the consideration of the context of the action. However, an adequate understanding of the societal, cultural and psychological constraints is prevented by the logic of a very narrow rationality. One’s identity is not irrational, neither are one’s feelings, rather they construct their own logic, rendering the RCT approach hollow. This is not to say that identity and emotions do away with choice; rather that they actively create a worldview in which meaning is ascribed according to values, experience, and individual cognitive processes, not according to utilitarian standards of behaviour. Thus, the French sociologist and rational choice theorist, Raymond Boudon, rejects any idea of RCT providing an explanation for behaviours motivated by beliefs, in particular, non-common place beliefs, non-consequentialist beliefs; and behaviour that is not dictated by self-

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interest. Boudon proposes a model of cognitive rationality which includes non-instrumental action; however, such rationality is still deprived of the ‘rational’ role of emotions and their multifaceted nature.

Finally, rational choice neglects altruistic motivations by giving primacy to self-interested behaviour. Many rational choice theorists seem reluctant to recognise that not all behaviour is motivated by self-interest and adduce the excuse that self-interest should not be confused with selfish interest. However, such a distinction fails to acknowledge altruism, which is by definition not self-interested, let alone selfish. Altruism is simply denied and transformed into ‘deferred self-interest’, where the altruistic act is performed with the aim of achieving one’s own personal gratification. On the contrary, altruism is ‘behaviour intended to benefit another, even when doing so may risk or entail some sacrifice to the welfare of the actor’.

Monroe stresses the importance of the intentions over the consequences. If an action results in benefit to another, regardless of the actor’s motivation, it cannot be considered altruistic.

The Actors’ Meaning Making

A perhaps more fundamental problem with RCT is, as mentioned previously, the way in which it effectively insulates the actor from reality whilst claiming superior knowledge of the actor’s motives. The theory removes actors from everyday reality, imposing motivations on them that are alien to their way of thinking. It is, of course, reasonable that a social theory should shed light on the mechanisms behind behaviour which might not be fully acknowledged by actors. However, it is difficult to see how this can be applied to allegedly self-interested action and, in particular, motivation. By definition, motivation needs to impel the subject to act in a certain way. Thus, one needs to be aware of one’s motivations in order to make a ‘choice’. Whilst there may be unconscious or subconscious influences on one’s actions, these do not count as ‘rational’, in RCT terms, for the subject is not aware of them, nor can the subject make a free choice on how to act. After all, the theory is of rational ‘choice’, but if actors ignore the reasons why they act

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23 Ibid., 862.
in a certain way, can they still be said to be pursuing profit? Are they exercising choice? Is it still rational behaviour or just ‘chance’ behaviour? RCT imputes the wrong motives to actors and exercises guesswork rather than analysing the data.

Hedström and Swedberg present an alternative version of rational choice theory that is heavily reliant on Weber’s sociology. Here, actors’ meanings are factors to compute rather than understand (Verstehen). Accordingly, for Hedström and Swedberg, RCT is a mechanism of ‘ideal-typical action’, based on methodological individualism, to explain ‘aggregate social systems’. The ideal type is an abstracted construction modelling action. The interests, beliefs, and opportunities of an actor are elements of the mechanism. They are factors carrying what appears to be the same weight in the ‘final calculation’ producing action. Such interests, beliefs, and opportunities are decontextualised in the ideal-typical framework.

Hedström and Swedberg refer to situational analysis to ‘explicate mechanisms that make individual action social, in the Weberian sense of the term. Actions are social when the choice of one actor influences or is influenced by the choices of other actors’. It is true that Weber privileged a rationalistic approach to Verstehen that reflected ‘purposive-rational action’. However, he recognised the epistemic value of psychological and emotional understanding. Thus, ‘the “recapturing” of an experience (die Nacherlebbarkeit eines Erlebnisses) is important for accurate understanding (Evidenz), but not an absolute precondition for its interpretation’. Thus, as noted by Harrington, the ‘psychological acts of sympathy and imagination could be used to grasp the “artistic” or “emotional” context of action’.

This aspect was pivotal to Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. In the Ethic, Weber explored the individual subjective processes which are not confined to purposive rationality, as will be examined below.

Finally, this version of rational choice theory, whilst leaving out self-interest as the paramount logic, takes typologies in a non-problematic fashion. Typologies are abstract constructs, which have less to do with the empirical reality they try to explain than with the mind of the social scientist creating them. Yet there is no acknowledgement of the bias and context of rational choice theorists and how these play out on the framework. Indeed, it can be argued that Weber too showed a strong tendency to read phenomena through the lenses of rationalisation. As

24 Hedström and Swedberg, ‘Rational Choice’.
25 Ibid., 129.
26 Ibid., 134.
noted by Vandenberghe,\textsuperscript{30} for Weber the sociologist has no access to the mind of individuals; therefore, it is necessary to construct an ideal-type of possible meanings that can explain action. However, as the ideal-type stops being a construct for the understanding of motivations and becomes an explanatory device for rational action, meanings are lost and utilitarian logic prevails.

... [I]t is necessary to construct an ideal-type of the hypothetical meanings or motivations that would explain the observed course of action. ... [T]he problem arises when Weber subsequently tends to reduce this understanding of motives to the understanding of purposively rational action (\textit{zweckrationalen Handeln}), sliding thus from a hermeneutically sensitive methodological individualism to the purely utilitarian one which is nowadays advocated and promoted by the world-wide movement of the rational choice theorists.\textsuperscript{31}

The \textit{Ethic} and \textit{The Sociology of Religion}\textsuperscript{32} are far more focused on the actors’ subjective processes, including their emotions. The \textit{Ethic} is a classic example, which is often cited and often misunderstood by rational choice theorists. RCT scholars seem to be under the impression that the Protestant believers, Weber discusses in the \textit{Ethic}, are seeking salvation and, thus, engaging in productive work in order to secure it. This understanding turns on its head not only Weber’s analysis, but also the fundamental tenet of the Protestant theology of \textit{sola fide}. Protestantism was a reaction to the use of good works and indulgences to secure a place in heaven. The purchase of indulgences and the pursuit of ‘good works’ would have been much more ‘rational’ in obtaining salvation. Instead, Protestants believed that they were saved by faith alone, which could not be proven. For Weber, this caused ‘salvation anxiety’, which influenced the systematic activity in which they engaged.

Rationality, here, clearly does not equate with profit maximisation or even with choosing the course of action that would most likely guarantee a certain outcome, as supposed by rational choice theory; rather it is a methodical procedure. Further, it must be stressed that Weber considered such systematic behaviour to be the unintended consequence of the doctrine of \textit{sola fide}, rather than the result of the intentional, let alone instrumental, action of rational choice theory. Salvation anxiety is thus the unintended consequence which generates systematic behaviour. Such systematic behaviour has an affinity with, but is not parallel to, and certainly has no correspondence in, capitalist activity. It can be argued that Weber’s reflections in the \textit{Ethic} and his sociology of world religions do not fit neatly with his wider sociology, especially ideal types. There is undoubtedly room for misunderstanding and picking and choosing according to one’s preference and intention. However,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{} Ibid., 73.
\bibitem{} Weber, \textit{Sociology}.
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the brief analysis provided here has highlighted the fundamental distortion of Weber’s thesis by rational choice theorists, which no amount of theorising could possibly legitimise.

Weber’s approach to the study of religion, and society in general, is ground-breaking for recognising the importance of how individuals interpret and live culture. The diversity of religious behaviour warrants an investigation of the actors’ sensings (Sinn) of their religious ideas and practices. The Ethic, despite its focus on economic behaviour, is a testament to the importance of the meaning-making processes the individual activates. As expressed by Talcott Parsons in his introduction to Weber’s The Sociology of Religion:

[t]he central problem was whether men’s conceptions of the cosmic universe, including those of Divinity and men’s religious interests within such a conceptual framework could influence or shape their concrete actions and social relationships, particularly in the very mundane field of economic action.33

Weber highlights the inner dimension of the actor and how this is translated into ‘rational’, in the sense of methodical, behaviour. His famous method of Verstehen – the understanding of human subjectivity and its interpretative role – is central in order to identify what shapes behaviour. Human beings interact with their environments and attribute different meanings to every aspect of life. Therefore, individual consciousness plays an important role in ‘translating’ ideas about the world into one’s relationship to them and one’s resulting actions. Weber’s attention to subjective processes has been mechanised in rational choice theory, depriving the subject of meaning. Rational choice theory is the best example of what Weber lamented of the modern era: the disenchantment of the world.

For Weber reason had succumbed to mechanistic rationalisation, thus denying freedom. It is, therefore, clear that, contrary to rational choice theorists, Weber was lamenting rationalisation rather than celebrating it. Undoubtedly, he employed an excessively rationalistic methodology; yet, he saw in the disenchantment of the world the demise of ethics, to be confronted and not accepted as inevitable.

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.34

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Bethlehem Church: Commodification or Commitment?

According to RCT, believers pursue their own self-interest, engaging in religious activities in order to get something back, so to speak. In the words of Iannaccone, believers invest in religious activities to accumulate ‘one’s stock of religious human capital’. Religious actors spend time and money to increase their familiarity with the religious environment and customs. Below, I present examples from my informants that could be interpreted within the framework of RCT, which is then examined critically. As mentioned previously, the selected data consists of public and private speech collected during participant observation and interviews, as specified in parenthesis at the end of every quote.

Bethlehem Church was established nearly 30 years ago with the intention of giving a community feel to a newly developed area of a city in Wales. The church adheres to a conservative Protestant Trinitarian theology, loosely affiliated to the Baptist tradition, although it requires no strict behavioural codes. When it was first established, the Sunday services were ‘seeker services’, seeking to communicate the message of Christianity in simple terms to ‘non-Christians’. The overarching philosophy was and still is to be a ‘welcoming and caring’ church. Thus, the ‘vision’ of the church, as often described by its founding and current Elders, is to provide a community centre to ‘meet people’s needs’, both spiritual and practical. To that end, the church leadership has sought to provide non-religious activities for the local community, including parent and toddler groups, groups for people suffering from a chronic illness, for the elderly, for young people and prayer groups.

‘A Church That Fits’

The church has a nursery and a café, where the staff are friendly and always willing to ‘have a chat’ with customers. Most of the church members live locally, although some choose to travel to Bethlehem from further away. Some of the informants had attended other churches in the past before choosing Bethlehem. Some had even decided to move house to be closer to the church. Many church members had been attracted to the church because of its welcoming atmosphere. Some had developed friendships through making contact with the people in the nursery and the parent and toddler group and later became Christians and joined the church. Dorothea, one informant, said that when her husband went to Bethlehem, he told her that he knew that they would ‘fit in this church’ (7 August 2009, interview). She added that she felt that it was ‘the right place’ for her. In interviews and informal conversations, informants described the church as welcoming and that they felt it was their ‘home’. Selina, who is a regular attendant of the ‘women’s prayer group’, told me that she likes it because she feels free to share with other women what goes on in her life.

Rational choice theorists argue that actors choose to ‘maximise behaviour’. ‘Profit’, in this sense, is not necessarily pecuniary; rather it can be emotional. It could thus be argued that members of Bethlehem church are involved in the religious and social activities because they perceive that they will get something in ‘return’. Accordingly, ‘feeling at home’ and friendships are the ‘goods’ people gain by attending church. In this vein, we could interpret Dorothea’s thinking that ‘there’s a God out there that really cares about me’ (7 August 2009, interview), as an emotional ‘good’, which provides comfort and reassurance. Further, Dorothea, in her interview, contrasted Bethlehem Church with other churches she had attended previously and stated that she felt Bethlehem was the church for her as she felt accepted for who she is. Thus, Bethlehem, by being a ‘spiritual home’ where everybody is welcomed and where people care for one another, provides a comforting physical and emotional place.

During Nicholas’ interview, I asked him – in a spirit of provocation, adopting marketing terms – ‘if you were to sell Christianity to non-Christians, what would it be that Christianity offered?’ In his reply, he joked about the ‘benefits’ of Christianity ‘from a sales and marketing perspective’. He thought they were ‘pretty major’. He said:

[i]f you do a SWOT analysis, there are pretty major ones, some of them are faith based, like heaven … but also there’s the here and now aspect of that as well. There’s the whole aspect of quality of life … the characteristics that we would describe as the fruit of the [Holy] Spirit: love, joy and peace, patience and kindness, and goodness and humility, and self-control. (Nicholas, 13 December 2010, interview)

Arguably, Bethlehem ‘fits’, it is ‘the right place’ and ‘meets people’s needs’. It undoubtedly satisfies many of its members’ needs. It does not simply provide services but also relationships. The guiding philosophy of the church is explicitly oriented towards meeting the physical and emotional needs of a person.

‘Choosing Faith’

Church members, as mentioned previously, have chosen Bethlehem and often preferred it to other churches. They choose to attend without necessarily feeling compelled to do so. They will occasionally miss services, study groups, and social activities with no reproach from the leadership. Further, conscious choice is also believed to be fundamental to embracing a religious life here. Thus, believers are not generally baptised before they reach their teenage years. For my informants, faith is not culture, or something one grows up with, but a conscious decision. Dorothea explained that it is not sufficient to grow up in a culturally Christian country in order to be a Christian.
I was brought up in a non-Christian home, but my parents sort of thought that to be a Christian you just have to be brought up in a Christian country, 'cos in a lot of faiths that seems to … sometimes it’s the case. It seems to be that it’s not a conscious decision, but it’s like you’re brought up with it. (Dorothea, 7 August 2009, interview)

Arguably, the prominence of choice makes ‘shopping for a church’ more likely in the search for the environment which stimulates one’s spiritual development, and emotional and physical needs. Rational choice theorists might argue that Bethlehem members choose the church for its multiple benefits, including a caring community, friendships, and groups for all ages. However, the image of Christian identity that emerges from my fieldwork is multifaceted and does not lend itself to such simplistic interpretations. Accordingly, Dorothea told me how she became a Christian and how she ‘realised that it was all about Jesus’ and felt that there needed to be a commitment to ‘follow Jesus’. Accepting Christianity thus requires a conscious decision, from which commitment arises.

**Christianity as Countercultural**

My informants contrast the Christian life with ‘the world outside’ and its ‘rationality’, which is centred on self-interest. The world outside is experienced as lonely and cold, competitive and harsh. Contemporary society is perceived as, at times, a hostile place, characterised by a loss of morality. Being a Christian, therefore, means challenging the dominant culture. Bethlehem seeks to be the refuge that goes against selfish and empty consumerism. Informants, however, do not withdraw from the ‘world’. On the contrary, they are fully and, to an extent, painfully aware that they are part of a materialistic world. Being a follower of Jesus is thus an admonition against selfish and materialistic pursuits and an exhortation to be ‘counter what normally happens, the way we normally are’ (Arthur, 9 June 2010, home group evening).

We tend to think that we own what we have … the culture around us tells us so. Materialism is a fundamental part of our society, we are part of society so it affects us … The challenge of the bible is how we deal with our possessions and money. (Arthur, 7 October 2009, home group evening)

In Western society it’s ‘what’s in it for me?’ We move into the upside-down Kingdom [of God] with its upside down values about what I can give back. Society is focused on comfort. (Arthur, 8 July 2009, home group evening)

Religious life is the fruit of a ‘personal relationship’ with God, which requires a deep commitment and a different way of living. Such way of living is ‘countercultural’ for it is centred on God and God’s will, rather than one’s own will. Informants,
especially those who became Christians in their teenage years or adulthood, such as Nicholas and Lucy, compared how they used to see religious people as ‘loonies’ or as members of the ‘flat-earth society’ when they were non-Christians. Following their conversion, both Nicholas and Lucy came to see reality in a different light and learnt that religious life involved ‘listening to God’ even when what they heard was in opposition to what they wanted. Christians choose to ‘follow Jesus’, and this choice engenders a duty. Choice is thus not opposed to duty, but is the source of duty.

The duty of ‘being a Christian’, in Bethlehem, is understood as being ‘countercultural’. The Christianity, my informants espouse, is primarily a challenge to contemporary culture, a challenge to themselves in their daily lives, and also to the ‘world-friendly church’ and to the ‘traditional church’. Churches which do not challenge the cultural norms outside their doors, or that do not demand commitment are seen as ‘world-friendly’ for they provide comfort but lack obligation. However, churches that are not inclusive are disparaged as a ‘holy huddle’, which erects barriers separating church members from the outside. Bethlehem church is not ‘strict’, yet core members feel that being a Christian requires a continuous effort to make ‘the presence of God’ felt. As Nicholas also put it:

We try to live our lives almost as if we weren’t Christians, you know, not really following Christ, not really living as his disciples, where belief is almost second-hand. ‘I believe you for my heaven, but I’m not sure about finding you down here’, you know (Nicholas laughs). That’s where we’ve done a disservice to the gospel. (Nicholas, 13 December 2010, interview).

Choosing Commitment

The believer chooses God. This choice engenders commitment and, consequently, duty. By choosing God, the believer establishes a ‘personal relationship’ with God, which, in turn, calls on the believer to ‘answer’ God. In this case study, believers respond by seeking to ‘be like Jesus’, to live differently, the way Jesus would live. This relationship and this response create a religious perspective from which the believer views the world. The initial choice thus becomes a commitment to ‘live differently’ and be in accordance with ‘God’s will’ by following the ‘upside down’ logic of faith as it is understood by the community of believers. However, whilst commitment might have originated in an autonomous choice, the ‘personal relationship with God’ transforms that choice into dependence on God. In other words, believers choose to commit, but in doing so, they create a bond with the overarching authority of God.

During the ‘women’s prayer group’, one of the participants commented that prayer is about ‘handing it over to God rather than clinging onto the problem’. Prayer is asking God to manifest God’s will. This requires trust in God and, therefore, acceptance of God’s will, even when it seems to be against one’s own
perceived interests or what is considered ‘rational’ in the general culture one
inhabits.

When we ask for revelation from God, we need to be prepared to deal with what
comes from it. (3 July 2009, women’s prayer group).

Will: make yourself open to the answer you don’t want. (25 November 2009,
home group evening)

This dependence on God does not mean that the person abdicates any responsibility
over her actions; rather action is seen as evidence of the relationship with God.
Believers are also conscious of finding difficult to understand what God ‘says’ and
of ‘getting it wrong’. More importantly, ‘following Jesus’ does not simply mean
leading a moral life, but listening to God’s voice, doing what one is called to do,
serving even when one does not realise that one is serving, as in the example given
by Dorothea (7 August 2009, interview) recounting how she helped someone in
difficulty ‘just by being there’. At that time, she ‘did not realise’ that she was
serving, and that her being there for her friend was part of God’s plan. She felt
surprised that God could ‘really use someone who is so insignificant in the grand
scheme of things’ and ‘has so little life experience’. In viewing one’s life as
meaningful, even ‘in the grand scheme of things’, one stresses the relationship
with God. This could be interpreted as a hierarchical relationship imposing set
duties and requiring the submission of the believer. However, my informants
suggest a much more volitional approach. One’s behaviour is not the result of a
moral injunction, but it is the response of serving ‘out of love’, rather than looking
to ‘earn points’.

Behind choice and commitment is religiosity. To be able to choose God, one
needs faith. However, religiosity needs to be understood not as a specific belief
or dogma, but as an attitude, a feeling of trust towards God and dependence on
God. This conceptualisation of religiosity cannot be explored here. It suffices to
note that it is not an adjunct or a preference, but an overarching logic, which has
a cognitive and affective dimension. Religiosity is relational, linking the believer
to God and to other believers, and colouring the believers’ relationship with the
world around. Accordingly, religiosity engenders a logic which affects thinking
and behaviour.

Most importantly, religiosity imposes a degree of heteronomy. It does not
necessarily do away with autonomy, but it makes autonomy dependent on a
higher authority and enmeshes it with other believers and other relationships.
Thus, the religious actor is never ‘alone’. In deciding what to do, the religious
actors’ estimation of ‘costs and benefits’ does not simply rely on an ‘objective’ and
external assessment of actions, even if the decision is based on theology rather
than self-interest, but a constant battle within themselves trying to discern what
God requires of them. The role of sacrifice, no matter its degree, is something of
importance in religious life, although, as Nicholas comments, ‘most of us shy away from ultimately carrying around the cross’ (13 December 2010, interview).

In conclusion, the data show that choice is fundamental to the pursuit of a committed religious life. Indeed, it is from choice that commitment arises. Such commitment imposes an element of heteronomy, of an external authority (God) as sovereign over one’s life; or, at least, of a diminished autonomy. God is seen as being in relationship with believers. Thus, God’s authority, whilst supreme, requires believers to exercise their cognitive and affective faculties in order to discern God’s will. It is this committed relationship that is ‘salvation’; ‘that is the eternal life today … the result of the [Holy] Spirit living in your life’ (Nicholas, 13 December 2010, interview).

Conclusions

It has been argued that the marketisation and commodification of religious practices, beliefs, and symbols does not necessarily lead to a loss of their value or ‘authenticity’. It is to be acknowledged that some people will engage in religious practices superficially: however, this is a personal response. It is, by contrast, the application of a narrow utilitarian logic that trivialises and devalues religious life. Thus, the assumption made by rational choice theorists that religious actors choose out of ‘rational self-interest’ to ‘maximise their benefits’ commodifies religion by imposing a utilitarian value-system on actors. RCT seeks to stress the notion of the individual as a free agent, choosing rationally. However, by reducing actors to calculating subjects seeking profit, it embraces the unquestioned mentality of the ‘money economy’.

Paradoxically, RCT can interpret religious action, as the rational pursuit of self-interest by freely choosing actors, only by discounting the actors’ rationales for their choices. It theorises on the ‘product’ in terms of its outside package rather than its content. Judging from ‘the outside’, looking at the package, religious forms might look like commodities. However, the ‘formal commodification’ of religion does not imply ‘substantial commodification’, or loss of value. Miller argues that the marketisation of religion is turning religious forms into products, detached from their original religious meanings. This account of neoliberalism is rather mechanistic and deterministic. It presumers, rather dubiously, that nothing like this ever happened before industrialisation. More importantly it suggests that changes in form affect the substance irremediably and inevitably. Thus, the marketisation

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37 Miller, Consuming Religion.
of religion is bound to devalue substance, making it empty and ‘inauthentic’. This ‘alarmism’ about religious symbols and practices being used and ‘abused’ through the ‘profane’ process of marketisation highlights the assumption that there are ‘authentic’ and inauthentic’ forms for the expression or worship of the ‘sacred’. Should Gregorian chant thus be confined strictly to a religious setting in order for it not to be devalued? Or should we not be asking, instead, whether Gregorian chant is still relevant to the twenty-first century’s religious life?

The distinction proposed between ‘formal commodification’ and ‘substantial commodification’ questions the inevitability of the devaluation of substance by marketisation. Intangible values and human emotions are not quantifiable; they need to be attended to and understood within their framework of values. They will thus give the observer a glimpse into the substance. The attractiveness of rational choice theory lies in the importance that it gives to choice. In liberal Western democracies, choice lies at the basis of religiosity, including traditional religiosity. However, choice is not the simple notion rational choice theorists expound, but a complex, meaning-making process. The case study presented here shows that religious people choose, but they choose commitment. Commitment is not a mere preference, but depends on value. Religion seeks to go to the heart of what it means to be human. Accordingly, salvation is not just about heaven, or reward and punishment; rather it is ‘what life is about’. Religious people seek the ‘meaning of life’, the ‘purpose of life’, something that is ‘authentic’ in the sense of capturing the essence of life and of being human. So, as I walked out of a supermarket, a Muslim man was handing out leaflets and ‘advertising’ his faith inviting the passer-by to ‘know the purpose of life’.

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