

The Miracle of the Religious Divide: An additional argument for the purported distinction between rural and urban religiosity

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There exists a prevailing belief within western society that people living in rural environments are more likely to be religious than those who live in urban environments. This view has a long history; fragments of which can be found within the Bible, with numerous examples of holy men, such as Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus, having intense spiritual experiences in the wilderness, whilst cities such as Sodom, Gomorrah and Babel are depicted as Godless places. This view, that cities are places of corruption, decadence and depravity, whilst the country is a place closer to God, continues to this day. As Orsi (1999) reports, 'Catholic prelates and lay intellectuals from the early republic to the catholic revival in the twentieth century imagined rural life as an antidote to the spiritual decay and physical distress of the cities.' (p. 18) Given the prevalence of this view, this chapter has two aims. The first is to offer a brief outline of previous explanations for the perceived religious divide between rural and urban environments; and the second is to offer an additional argument for the divide.

Before I outline the arguments for the alleged religious divide, it is necessary to comment on how the terms rural and urban are being used. The distinguishing features between rural and urban environments are notoriously hard to pin down. One standard approach is to make this distinction in virtue of a given population density over a predefined area, where if the density is equal to, or greater than, this density it is designated as urban, and, if less, rural. Yet this approach has long been criticised as oversimplistic. As Wirth (1999) contends:

Whether we accept the density of 10,000 persons per square mile as Mark Jefferson proposed, or 1,000, which Willcox preferred, to regard as the criterion of urban settlements, it is clear that unless density is correlated with significant social characteristics it can furnish only an arbitrary basis for differentiating urban from rural communities (p. 5).

In order to furnish a more accurate distinction between rural and urban environments, increasingly sophisticated processes are now being employed by various census bureaus. Isserman (2005) reports that the US Census Bureau takes into account numerous 'commonsense' factors when determining the rural/urban divide.

The logic of the Census system matches commonsense notions of urban and rural, or what airplane passengers looking downward would recognise as built-up area and countryside. The Census computer algorithm builds urban areas a few blocks at a time. Block groups are clusters of blocks and the smallest geographical entity for which the Census Bureau tabulates

sample data from the decennial census long form, which asks about income, education, labour force status, occupation, and more (p. 467).

Although such detailed distinctions between rural and urban environments, such as those employed by the Census system, are available, I need not adopt them in this chapter. This is because, significantly, the arguments presented here are not dependent on the accuracy of any single definition.

It is important to note that I will not argue that people *are* actually more likely to be religious if they reside in rural environments. This is not to say that no research exists suggesting this to be the case. For example, Miller and Luloff (1980) claim that unlike people from urban environments, 'those people who were classified as wholly rural tend to...identify formally with some religion' (p. 12). Rather, I will only be considering what factors might be at play *if* people are more likely to be religious in rural environments.

Given that I am not here asserting that the figures are skewed in such a way, the accuracy of my argument is not dependent on any single distinction between rural and urban environments. This being said, I will rely on one intuitive distinction between rural and urban environments: the notion that people living in rural environments may on the whole feel more directly threatened by the forces of nature.

I use the term 'the forces of nature' to apply to those events, such as floods, locust plagues, and droughts, which are not caused, at least not directly (or intentionally), by people. Now it is obviously the case that events such as floods, locust plagues and droughts can affect people living in urban environments. Yet, unlike some rural communities, it is less likely that an entire city's economy is linked, for example, to the surrounding area's wheat crop.¹ Rather the interests of most cities are more widely dispersed (increasingly so within the global market). As a consequence, those people living in communities where people's livelihoods are more directly dependent on the land around them may feel (perhaps rightly) that they are generally more directly threatened by the forces of nature. It is my assertion that whatever distinction between rural and urban environments one may adopt, the immediacy of the threat of nature, *ceteris paribus*, will be more evident in rural communities.

The most common rationale offered as to why people living in rural environments are allegedly more likely to be religious than those who live in urban environments, concerns the character trait of 'countrymindedness'; that people living in rural environments have a mindset which is far more conducive to being religious. This is often explained in terms of various, often stereotypical, rural character traits. For example, rural people are frequently seen as being more trusting, altruistic and community oriented. As Miller and Luloff (1980) comment:

Although there is not a consensus on the exact form of a rural culture, there are descriptive exemplars that can serve as guiding parameters. Thus, historical (as well as contemporary) sketches portray rural culture

as being provincial, socially conservative, slow changing, traditional...In addition the stereotyped rural value system tends to stress independence, honesty and religiosity (p. 5).

Urban culture on the other hand, as indicated by Knox (1989), is often characterised as being more sceptical, materialistic and individualistic.

A fundamental part of the conventional wisdom about cities in Western societies is that they are necessary evils: places of employment and amenity that inevitably foster economic and social dislocation, materialistic and ego-centred values, and deviant behaviours. Popular literature, for example, tends to propagate the image of cities as arenas of conflict and desolation... and evidence from attitudinal surveys suggest that most people in fact believe city environments to be unsatisfactory from almost every perspective... (p. 32).

Given the assumption that such a cultural divide does exist, and that rural cultural values better complement religiosity, some have argued that people in rural environments are more likely to be religious. As Orsi (1999) points out, 'the story of religion...that historians tell is often a narrative that features and even romanticises rural and small-town values to the exclusion of the urban experience' (p. ix). Others however, have attempted to go deeper and explain this purported difference in cultural values by reference to the nature of the environments themselves.

MacIntyre (1967) argued that rural communities were able to uphold social norms that seemed to such communities to be imbued with significance above and beyond their own interests, whereas urban communities were far too obviously self-serving.

When the working class were gathered from the countryside into the industrial cities, they were finally torn from a form of community in which it could be intelligibly and credibly claimed that the norms which govern social life had universal and cosmic significance, and were God-given. They were planted instead in a form of community in which the officially endorsed norms so clearly are of utility only to certain partial and partisan human interests that it is impossible to clothe them with universal and cosmic significance (pp. 14-15).

Orsi (1999) draws upon Eliade to argue that urban living typically separates people from the very foundations of their spiritual being, as it draws them away from the 'hierophanies' inherent in nature.

Modern men and women, whose lives are governed by function, speed, efficiency, and novelty, have been alienated from the ontological grounds of human experience...from being itself, as being is disclosed and experience in the hierophanies (or self-disclosures) of the sacred in nature: in the rhythms of the moon, for example, or the pulse of the oceans. The modern city, by the account, is the end product of a long

history of spiritual alienation and decline, the outcome of the processes of secularization (p. 42).

It seems unlikely that either theory constitutes a full explanation of the alleged religious divide between urban and rural communities. Each, however, either together or separately, may offer a partial explanation of the phenomenon. I will now offer a further theory for the divide. It seems equally unlikely that this new theory will itself constitute a full explanation of the purported phenomenon, however it is hoped, at the very least, it may constitute an additional partial explanation.

My theory concerns the relationship between 'magic' and factors which are outside the control of humanity; namely that there is both historical and anthropological evidence to suggest that people rely on magic to a greater degree in those contexts where they feel their environment is less amenable to their control; and as a consequence more dangerous. As Thomas (1971) notes, the decline of magic in much of Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'coincided with a marked improvement in the extent to which this environment became amenable to control' (p. 650). A similar point was made by Malinowski (1948), who stated that when the Trobriander fishermen of north-west Melanesia fish in the local lagoon they never resort to fishing magic. However, when they venture out into open seas they do employ magic as protection from the dangers of wind and rain. Malinowski asserts that this is because the lagoon waters are calm, therefore as the fishermen are able to 'completely rely on their knowledge and skill, magic does not exist' (p. 31). In addition, Hill (1980, p. 65) argues it was partly because of increased availability of medical texts, made possible by the proliferation of publishing houses during the English Revolution, that the reliance on the magical healing power of 'white witches' were reduced. The underlying thought behind Thomas, Malinowski and Hill's observations is that there is some basic need for humans to feel in some way in control of their environment.

The mechanisms which allow people to exert control over the world are of course varied. However, it is possible to divide them into two sub-classes: mundane and magical. It may be difficult at times to distinguish between such mechanisms; for what one person deems to be mundane another may find magical. For example, killing a bison with a rifle may seem a completely mundane task for someone who knows the properties of gunpowder and the science of ballistics. But to someone who has no knowledge of such things, the rifle might appear to them to be a 'thunder stick'; as Clarke (1962) famously remarked, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic' (p. 2). Consequently the terms 'mundane' and 'magic' may be hard to define. Nevertheless, for our purposes we need only consider one type of magic; magic that involves calling upon non-natural agents, agents that are not located in spacetime, to bring about certain natural effects. Note that I am not suggesting all (or even most) magic takes this form, only that this is the type of magic we shall focus on.

The historical and anthropological evidence, illustrated by Thomas, Malinowski and Hill's observations, suggests that if a mundane mechanism is found for exerting control over something that previously could only be 'controlled' by way of a magical mechanism, the use of the magical mechanism will, generally speaking, go into decline. This would presumably be because the mundane mechanism appears to be more reliable, or that magical mechanism seems now superfluous. With this relationship between magical and mundane mechanisms outlined we can examine what impact it might have upon the religious divide between rural and urban communities.

There are, of course, numerous factors which are outside the control of any one person, be that person living in an urban or rural environment. A person living in an urban environment may have little control over, for example, the crime rate. However, this does not exclude the possibility that people together may be able to exert some control over such factors. For example, there exist various mundane means for lowering the crime rate, such as improving the welfare system, or employing more police. Likewise, people living in a rural environment have similar collective means to control such factors. Yet, we have far less control, even as communities, over the forces of nature.

Events, such as floods, locust plagues and droughts are at least, to some significant degree, forces which are presently out of our control. (Obviously factors such as the rate of global warming are often purported to be factors within, to some degree, our control, however even given such factors, nature is still largely untameable.) The threat such forces pose is arguably felt more acutely by those living in rural environments. This is not to say floods, for example, do not occur in urban environments. But, as stated earlier, it is less likely for an entire city's economy to be intricately linked to its geographical location. In addition urban areas can give the impression of being places quite dislocated from nature (even though in actuality they may not be). As Orsi (1999) argued, cities are governed by function, speed, efficiency and novelty. Food appears in supermarkets. Temperature is determined by the thermostat. And nature is pruned and displayed in city parks. The illusion of control runs deep.

Given such factors it does not seem unwarranted to suggest that people living in rural communities might feel less in control of their environment than those in urban areas – be it a conscious or unconscious feeling. What is more, mundane means of controlling the forces of nature, to the extent needed to negate such threats, are not currently available. Consequently, if we can expect magical thinking to be more prevalent in environments which are less under our control, then, *ceteris paribus*, we could expect such thinking to be more prevalent in rural environments.

Although there is a clear distinction between being religious and magical thinking, it is also clearly the case that there are elements to some religions that involve magic, broadly construed; namely the notion that there exists a non-natural agent that is able to bring about certain natural effects. Often, within

a religious context, such acts are referred to as miracles. What is more, such miracles, some believe, can be triggered by our actions, actions such as prayer. As Bettie (2004) reports:

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the practice of calling special prayers like those for rain...enjoyed popularity in England and Scotland among Anglicans and Presbyterians alike. Special prayers addressed many important national issues, from drought and cattle plagues, and cholera outbreaks to the health of the Prince of Wales (p. 96).

Prayer in the face of natural disasters is, as Mitchell (2003) reports, well documented. He claims there exists 'a general belief in some sectors of the population that God or some external force drives disaster', in which case appealing to these non-natural agents to help 'should not be unexpected' (p. 20). Given the place of miracles, providence and divine action in some religions, there is a strong analogy to be drawn between petitionary prayer and the magical thinking reported by Thomas, Malinowski and Hill. For, at the very least, both groups look to the unseen to help control forces which cannot presently be controlled mundanely.

If this analogy holds, then we would predict the decline of religion (or, at the very least, this element of religion) in urban environments. This is because if the threat of nature is greater felt in rural environments, and if this threat is something that cannot presently be negated by mundane means, then magical thinking is expected to be more prevalent in rural environments. In which case, given that many religions contain elements of magical thinking, such as petitionary prayer, then such elements of religion would be expected to be more prevalent in rural environments. Consequently, we would expect people living in rural areas to be more religious in this respect.

In this chapter I have introduced a new theory for the purported religious divide between people living in urban environments and those in rural environments. Note that I am not asserting that this theory will constitute a full explanation of the phenomena. In fact such an outcome seems extremely unlikely. Rather I establish the theory as only a partial explanation. It is now up to others interested in the purported divide to determine to what extent, if any, this theory may contribute.

Endnotes

¹. This is not to suggest all, or even a majority, of rural communities are dependent on local agriculture.

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