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Salvation Goods and Religious Markets: Integrating Rational Choice and Weberian Perspectives

In spite of the tremendous success of the concept of “religious markets”, it has remained unclear just what “religious goods” are and if, and under what conditions, a “religious market” actually exists in a given society. The author integrates different concepts from rational choice theorists and Max Weber into a new typology of individual and social religious goods. The typology shows that markets are only one possibility among others of producing, exchanging and allocating religious goods. It also helps an understanding of the kind of conditions in which markets may or may not be important theoretical tools.

Key words: power · rational choice · religious field · religious goods · religious market

En dépit du succès fulgurant que connaît le concept de “marché religieux”, la signification de ce que l’on entend par “bien religieux” n’en est pas clarifiée pour autant, de même que les conditions qui permettraient de parler de “marché religieux” dans une société donnée. L’auteur revisite différents concepts des théoriciens du choix rationnel ainsi que de Max Weber et les intègre dans une nouvelle typologie des biens religieux individuels et sociaux. Celle-ci montre que les marchés n’offrent qu’une manière parmi d’autres de produire, d’échanger et de distribuer les biens religieux. Elle permet également de mieux comprendre à quelles conditions le marché peut être considéré comme un outil théorique pertinent.

Mots-clés: biens religieux · champ religieux · choix rationnel · domination · marché religieux

Introduction

The concept “religious market” is presently enjoying a tremendous success. Not only sociologists, but also journalists, politicians and, interestingly, some of the religious actors themselves, are beginning to use the term more frequently. Even one of the most prominent critics of the theory of religious markets concedes that modern societies are characterized by “a largely novel

situation in human life: the possibility of choosing a religion” (Bruce, 1999: 3). The theoretical enterprise that has developed and defended the theory of religious markets—rational choice—has, however, been strongly criticized. Just about everything rational choicers have said about religion has been questioned (Ammerman, 1997; Bruce, 1999; Chaves, 1995; Hamilton, 2001; Lechner, 1996). Two of the most important theory-immanent criticisms are that rational choicers have not really worked out their model well enough and have not stated clearly, first, what kind of “goods” we are faced with, and, second, under what conditions such goods might be said to be traded on a “market” (Bruce, 1999: 30ff.; Hamilton, 2001: 220ff.).

This article argues that these two problems concerning the rational choice approach can be solved by distinguishing different types of religious goods and integrating them into a larger rational choice framework. In this framework, markets are only one type of “social system” among others in which religious goods may be produced and allocated. In order to create this new framework, I show, first, that rational choicers have so far—and without really acknowledging it—used at least four different types of concepts of “religious goods”. Second, I go back to the work of Max Weber who is the most important classic author for the concept of “religious goods” (a fact that so far has not been recognized by rational choicers).¹ Weber gives us the important notions of institutionalized salvation goals and salvation means, as well as the idea of religious goods as a means of religious authority, all of which I can integrate into my framework. Finally, I draw on ideas from James S. Coleman, Siegwart Lindenbergh and Hartmut Esser, in order to create a new typology of religious goods. Specifically, I will show the following:

1. Religious goods are only one of the elements of religions (religious symbol systems). Religions institutionalize various types of religious goods, linking them into “chains” of salvation means and salvation ends.
2. There are different types of religious goods. Specifically, we have to distinguish individual religious goods (consumer, membership and personal goods), where individuals find themselves in parametric situations, from social religious goods (communal, collective and positional goods), where individuals produce religious goods interdependently.
3. The type of religious goods determines how they are produced and allocated. Exchange on a “market” is but one possibility. Specifically, religious goods may be transferred by socialization, produced by individuals themselves, produced together with others or used in authority relations.

Religious Goods and Religious Markets: Rational Choice

The concepts “religious goods” and “religious markets” are at the very heart of the theories of “rational choice of religion”. It may therefore come as a surprise that there is some confusion as to what religious goods really are in the rational choice literature.

Religious Goods

In my view, rational choicers have so far given us (but not clearly distinguished) four different versions of what religious goods might be.

Religious goods as compensators and other-worldly rewards In an early version of their theory, Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 1989) define religious goods as supernatural, general and non-verifiable *compensators*. By the term “compensator” Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 6) mean “the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be immediately verified”. Rewards are “anything humans will incur costs to obtain” (1989: 27). Since human beings regularly strive for rewards they cannot immediately have, they often settle for a substitute, a compensator. Compensators may be secular or based on supernatural assumptions. The supernaturally-based compensators can be either specific and falsifiable—which makes them “magic”; or they may be general and non-falsifiable—which makes them “religion”. Examples of magical compensators are promises such as being cured of cancer, getting a good grade at school or winning back one’s unfaithful lover. Examples of religious compensators are the meaning of existence, an afterlife, illumination or the coming of the savior at some unspecified time (1985: 7, 30). It is interesting to note that, in this version of Stark and Bainbridge’s theory, compensators are the sole element of their definition of religions: Religions are “systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1989: 81). Religious firms can then be seen as organizations that produce two things: on the one hand, supernaturally-based compensators, on the other, “secular” goods (rewards) such as friendship, social ties or social identities that may be produced by any kind of social group. In a revised version of his theory Stark drops the term “compensator”, and talks instead about “otherworldly rewards”, which are “those that will be obtained only in a non-empirical (usually posthumous) context” (Stark, 1999: 268). Looking at the examples that Stark and Bainbridge and Stark give in the two versions of their theory, we see that they focus on (at least some) of the *final goals* that religions often propose. Below we will see that Max Weber describes the same phenomenon as “salvation goals”.

Religious goods as religious membership A second version of the “religious good” (like the next two versions) can be found in the work of Laurence R. Iannaccone. Here, *religious membership* and the opportunity to participate in collective religious action are treated as a commodity:

At the heart of any economic theory of religion is the notion of religion as a commodity, an object of choice . . . Consumers *choose* what religion (if any) they will accept and how extensively they will participate in it. Nor are these choices immutable – people can and often do change religions or levels of participation over time. (Iannaccone, 1991: 158, his emphasis)

While the Stark and Bainbridge version suggested that religions were made up of or included religious goods, here the fact of *belonging* to a religious

group itself seems to be the religious good.² Being a Catholic or a Mormon, a Wiccan or a Jehovah's Witness, a Buddhist or a Scientologist seems to be what individuals "choose" on the "market". Iannaccone then gives us two main attributes of the goods thus defined. First, they are linked to the *supernatural* (Iannaccone, 1992: 125), supposing the existence of gods, transcendent forces, and the like. Second (and linked to the first attribute), they are inherently *risky*. This is because individuals cannot evaluate the goods. They have to trust and believe, both as to the means and the promised ends that come with the membership. They cannot have security but are asked to have faith.

Religious goods as collective goods A third definition, also found in the work of Iannaccone, sees religious goods as *collective goods*. This is the case when it comes to "group activities such as listening to sermons, scriptural studies, testimonial meetings, liturgies, worship, hymn singing, and sacramental acts" (Iannaccone, 1994: 1183). In these situations "religion is a 'commodity' that people produce *collectively*" (1994: 1183, his emphasis). The interesting thing about these collective religious goods is, following Iannaccone, that a free-rider problem emerges. Since the religious good (such as a high level of enthusiasm) is produced collectively, all participants can benefit from it, regardless of the degree of their personal involvement. Rational individuals may therefore be tempted to "free-ride", that is, enjoy the public good without contributing personally. This in turn may lead to the non-provision of the collective good. Iannaccone argues that religious groups are routinely endangered by such a collective-good problem and that they often solve this problem by penalizing or prohibiting "alternative activities that compete for members' resources" (1994: 1186). Some religious groups thus forbid involvement in activities such as secular entertainment and education or they "demand of members some distinctive, stigmatizing behaviour that inhibits participation or reduces productivity in alternative contexts—having shaved heads, wearing pink robes, or being in an isolated location does the job quite effectively" (1994: 1188). In this way, participation in the group becomes more costly and free-riders are deterred. Rational individuals will decide either to really join or to leave. According to Iannaccone, this theory explains why conservative and "strict" churches often seem to be doing better than their more liberal competitors. In fact, their strictness allows them to weed out free-riders and thus to create overall a "better" collective religious product.

Religious goods as household commodities Finally, we can find in the work of Iannaccone the idea of religious goods as "household commodities":

Religious commodities are not physical goods like cars or computers that can be manufactured, packaged and sold in stores. Nor are they services like haircuts or banking that we have others do for us. Rather, they fall into a third category that economists call "household commodities" – valued goods and services that families and individuals produce for their own consumption. (Iannaccone, 1992: 124)

Iannaccone takes up the important idea of Becker ([1976] 1990) that households may be seen not only as consumers but also as producers, using market goods, time and human capital in order to produce more basic “household commodities”. These commodities may be “as concrete as meals and laundry or as abstract as relaxation and love” (Iannaccone, 1992: 124) and they are “consumed by family members rather than being sold” (Iannaccone, 1990: 297). The abstract commodity that is thus produced is “religious satisfaction” (1990: 299). For example, a family may decide to produce a certain amount of “religious satisfaction”, by praying before meals, thus using a certain amount of time, human capital (they have to know the prayers) and energy. Evidently, this commodity is not “bought” on a market, but is produced by the family themselves.

Religious Markets

Rational choicers are convinced that it is useful to conceptualize the religious domain of any society as a religious economy (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994: 232). A religious economy consists of all the religious phenomena in a given society and includes a religious market. On this market, religious firms produce and sell “religious goods” in order to satisfy the “religious needs” of the “consumers” (Iannaccone, 1991, 1992, 1995; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). Consumers, on the other hand, choose the religious goods according to their preferences and budget constraints. Rational choicers do not simply treat the market concept as an analogy or even as a metaphor. They are convinced that we can talk just as well about a religious market as of a market for cars or washing powder.

Since religious markets function like other markets, practically all major insights from economics can be used to analyze and explain religious phenomena (Iannaccone, 1991: 159). The laws of supply and demand, for example, apply. *Ceteris paribus*, a religion which is cheaper or which allows us to obtain the other-worldly good more easily has a higher probability of being consumed,³ and if the amount of religious goods on the market rises, prices for religious goods will fall. A second example is the law of the invisible hand: unregulated markets produce more welfare than regulated ones. Thus, religious monopolies, oligopolies or mixed regimes (with state churches and free churches) will not work as efficiently as unregulated religious markets. In the latter we will find higher quality religious products with lower prices, leading to higher aggregated religiosity.

Critique There are many texts that criticize the rational choice approach to religion, its views on religious goods and religious markets (e.g. Bruce, 1999; Chaves, 1995; Hamilton, 2001), but I will not repeat their arguments here. In spite of all the (often) valuable critical points, I am personally convinced that the rational choicers have produced some of the most innovative approaches in recent sociology of religion and that it might well be advisable to build on at least some of their work. Not everything, though, is acceptable. For my purposes, three points of criticism—which I have not yet found in the literature—will suffice. First, rational choicers have, to my knowledge, not yet

acknowledged the fact that they themselves talk about different types of religious goods. Yet, the four types presented above all differ quite sharply. In one version, they are promises of transcendent events, in another, membership, in yet another, participation in a collective enterprise (such as a religious service), and in the final version religious satisfaction. Consequently, rational choicers have not made it clear when to use which concept of the religious good. This is why I venture to give a new typology of religious goods which clarifies the relation between the types as well as the question of application. Second, rational choicers assume religious markets are the main model for the production and consumption of religious goods. But markets are only one type of “social system” and a very special one at that, with various structural conditions. Rational choicers thus overlook the existence of other ways in which production and allocation may take place (e.g. individual production, production in social groups and organizations). This means that, depending on the type of religious good, rational choice models not of markets but of these other types of social systems have to be applied in order to reach a satisfactory description and explanation. Finally, rational choicers have not yet fully taken into account the work of Max Weber, who is, after all, the most important classic author discussing religious goods. This is why we will turn to Weber now.

Salvation Goods and Authority Relations: Max Weber

In his sociology of religion, Weber’s main aim is to compare the world religions (e.g. with regard to their salvation goods or their religious ethics) in order to explain how the specific elements of ascetic Protestantism have helped to produce modern capitalism (Boudon, 1998). It is Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism and Taoism that Weber treats, using his methods of comprehension (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*), ideal-type construction, and historical comparison.

Salvation Goods

The term “salvation good” (*Heilsgut*) is a central one in the works of Max Weber (Weber, [1920b] 1988, [1922] 1985; Schluchter, 1991: 80). The fact that this has gone unnoticed in the Anglo-Saxon world is probably due to translations that did not quite know what to make of the term, translating it by “state of salvation”, “substantively divine salvation”, “highest bliss available” or even “sacred value”.⁴ All these translations lose the sense which interests us here, namely, that Weber talks about “goods”, which can be strived for, supplied and consumed. Instead of salvation goods, Weber also uses the terms “salvation goals” (*Heilsziele*), “salvation means” (*Heilmittel*) and “promises of the religions” (*Verheissungen der Religionen*).

Since Weber does not define the term “salvation good”, I venture to reconstruct the definition he might have given. A salvation good is an end or a means to an end which is offered by a religion, embedded in a specific world-view and a system of life practices, and which may be aspired to or

used by an individual or a social group. Salvation goods may be confined to certain points in time or lasting; set in the future or the present; transcendent or immanent; individual or collective; ascetic or contemplative, aspired to actively or given to the individual by an external power (Weber, 1985: 321ff.; 1988: 237ff., 536ff.). For our purposes, four aspects of Weber's conception of salvation goods are worthy of mention.

Salvation goods are either *goals* or *means*. Weber thinks that religions propagate salvation goals that may be reached through certain "salvation means". This is an important point: individuals can use salvation means in a calculating, rational way in order to reach future salvation goals, thus allowing for sociological explanation. A further point is the fact that the means to an end may become the end in itself. If "belief" is a means of being rewarded later by eternal life, the state of being a true believer may itself become a salvation goal. Salvation means such as rituals, good works, mystic or ascetic self-perfection, sacraments or faith may therefore also all be seen as "salvation goals" themselves. Striving for future goals gives the individual a special "way of living", a "habitus" which gives immediate emotional gratification (and is therefore a "good"). Note that we are not in a market-type situation. The individual is not buying a "product" on a "market", but using culturally embedded means of action in order to reach certain goals.

Salvation goods should not be thought of as isolated entities. Rather, they imply a specific *world-view* and specific *life practices* of the respective religion. As to the world-view, the religious symbol system determines what sad state of affairs the individual or group is to be saved from and, therefore, what the state of salvation looks and feels like. If, for example, the world-view sees the main problem as one of social and political servitude, the salvation goal may well be a promised land and the domination of political enemies; if the world-view constructs the problem as one of an endless stream of reincarnations, the final state may be one of stepping out of this circle (nirvana).

Salvation goods *satisfy different psychological and social needs*. Following Max Weber, psychological needs may be either compensatory, legitimating or intellectual (Weber, 1985: 285ff.). Felt deprivation, misfortune and suffering lead the individual to search for compensation; he or she may look for a salvation good which promises release from misfortune, deliverance from evil, or bodily healing in the near or distant future. Individuals, however, who find themselves in privileged positions will mainly look out for salvation goods that will legitimize their position. They feel the need for justification of their well-being. Finally, Weber tells us, there may arise an inherent intellectual need to make sense of the world and to rationalize existing world-views; this need, too, may lead to the acceptance of a very specific kind of salvation good. All these psychological needs differ depending on the historical situation and the social class in which the individual finds himself. This is why different social classes tend to accept and produce different kinds of religiosity.

Salvation goods may be *this-worldly* or *other-worldly*. Weber tells us that many salvation goods of the different religions were not, and are not, other-worldly (such as an afterlife in paradise), but this-worldly. They may

be formulated positively, as the attainment of good health, long life, happiness, riches, fertility, a large number of descendants, a good name, high social status (for example, caste status), political power, land, and victory in war; or they may be formulated negatively as the liberation from illness and death, unhappiness, poverty, sterility, shame, defeat in war, slavery, exploitation, etc.

In his famous typology of salvation means, Weber focuses mainly on individual possibilities of being saved, distinguishing three “active” and three “passive” types (1985: 321ff.). His idea is then to say that in one of these cases (asceticism in the world), there is a greater chance of modern capitalism emerging.

The Battle for Religious Authority

Although Weber clearly distinguishes between “producers” and “consumers” of religion, analyzing much interaction between “supply” and “demand”, he does not treat salvation goods within the framework of a “market theory” but primarily within that of the sociology of authority relations (*Herrschaftssoziologie*). Religious groups are defined as “authority units” (*Herrschaftsverbände*), controlling their members by providing or withdrawing salvation goods depending on whether or not individuals comply with group demands. A church, for example, is seen by Weber as a “hierocratic organization”, that is “an organization which enforces its order through psychic coercion by distributing or denying religious benefits” ([1920a] 1978: 54).

A church thus enforces its orders on all individuals with specific characteristics (e.g. geographical unit, origin) independent of whether these individuals agree with the teachings and norms or not (Weber, [1922]1985: 28). Churches use “charisma of function” (*Amtscharisma*): the authority of priests lies not in their personal qualification, but in the fact that they occupy certain positions of power within the church hierarchy (1985: 692). State support aside, churches have their own important means of power that enable them to enforce their orders, especially excommunication and economic boycott (1985: 693). However, ruling religious groups like churches are, in Weber’s view, often challenged by other “producers” of religious goods: by prophets and magicians who base their claims on personal charisma. These actors are “deviant”, “heterodox” and are often fiercely attacked by the religious establishment. One of the central features of Weber’s sociology of religion then is the description of this “battle” of orthodox and heterodox religious specialists (priests, prophets, magicians) for religious monopoly (1985: 268 ff.). Bourdieu (1971) has reinterpreted Weber by calling this game of power a “religious field”, suggesting it is one among many other “social fields” with similar power struggles.

Critique Again, I will not go into a detailed critique or appraisal of Weberian salvation goods and authority relations (see, for good critiques, Schluchter, 1991; Tyrell, 1992). For my purposes the following points will suffice. Weber is clearly the most important classic author regarding theory of religious goods. He has not, however, given us a complete sociological

theory of religious goods. His typology of salvation means and ends does not tell us what kinds of goods may be produced in which types of social situations. For a new, integrated theory of religious goods, there are two Weberian points in particular that have to be taken into account. First, Weber indicates that religions give their adherents “chains” of salvation means which eventually lead to “salvation ends”. Religious goods may thus lie on different “planes” of abstraction. Second, Weber shows us that religious goods may be the basis for authority relations, religious authority being itself a “good”, over which ferocious battles may flare up among religious specialists.

Integrating the Approaches into a Larger Framework

In what follows, I will link Weberian and rational choice approaches, showing that they are special cases of a larger, more encompassing approach.

A New Typology of Religious Goods

In order to construct a new typology, I combine different elements: definitions of religion and religious goods, rationality assumptions, the different concepts of religious goods proposed by rational choice authors and Weber, as well as ideas about frames and private and social goods developed by James S. Coleman, Siegwart Lindenberg and Hartmut Esser. All the usual disclaimers concerning typologies apply: empirical cases are often more complex than the typology would suggest and “mixed types” are possible; generally, this typology is only a tool which has to prove its usefulness in future research.

First, in order to be able to distinguish religious goods from other types of goods, I need a definition of *religion*. By this term I denote the ensemble of cultural symbol systems that respond to problems of meaning and contingency by alluding to a transcendent reality. Religious symbol systems normally comprise mythological, ritual and ethical elements which may or may not be presented as salvation ends and means (salvation goods). As can be seen, I opt for a definition where religion does not consist entirely of salvation goods, but includes them. A *religious good* may then be defined as a goal, or a means of reaching a goal, which is proposed by a religion. Religious goods may be transcendent or immanent, future or present, individual or collective. Since religious goods are part of the religious symbol system, they are normally *institutionally and culturally given*. They are a part of the culture and the institutions (roles, norms, scripts) of a given social group or society. The social group—or the whole society—thus teaches the individual, first, which religious goal should be aspire to, and, second, what means should be used to reach that goal.⁵

Second, I accept the assumption of (bounded) *rationality*: I suppose that individuals act rationally, that is, they act in a way that furthers their own interests. However, I specify the model in the following way. Since there

are costs attached to calculating and comparing expected gains, individuals switch between different “frames”, of which the “rational frame” is but one. Often, individuals use a “traditional frame” in which they follow given “everyday recipes”. It is only in unusual situations, in the case of surprises or if special symbols lead to the expectation of important possible losses or gains, that the individual switches to other frames, for example, the rational, the hedonistic or the evaluative frame (Lindenberg, 2000). When individuals switch to a rational frame, this implies calculating the costs and benefits of given religious goods and choosing the best alternative.

Third, furthermore, I make a distinction between *parametric and strategic situations* (Elster, 1986: 7). In parametric situations, individuals “play against nature”. In strategic situations, individuals play “against” (or with) each other, thus having to take into account each others’ actions and interests. Parametric situations can be treated with decision theory; strategic situations have to be explained with the tools of game theory. In parametric situations we find individual religious goals; in strategic situations we find social religious goals. Esser (2000b: 55ff.) distinguishes the three strategic situations of coordination, dilemma and conflict.

Different religious goods have different attributes, the most important ones being: *divisibility, exclusiveness, rivalry and alienability* (Coleman, 1990: 33ff.; Esser, 2000b: 166ff.).

Fourth, since one of the uses of the following typology is to show under what circumstances markets are involved in the production and allocation of salvation goods, I will define the term “market” at this point. *Markets* are an ensemble of bilateral exchange relationships between (individual or collective) actors, who supply and demand goods. From a sociological point of view, markets are a special type of “social system” that may be distinguished from other types, for example, interaction systems, social groups or organizations (Esser, 2000a: 31ff.). Compared to these other social systems, markets are special in that they function in an unplanned and anonymous way. Market participants follow their own interests and are interested in other market participants only insofar as they are potential exchange partners. Since suppliers and consumers have common interests, one may say that markets solve a coordination problem. If conditions allow, a market will produce market equilibrium. I will argue that markets are a useful model only for two of the following six types of religious goods (consumer and membership goods).

The new typology (Figure 1) distinguishes three individual religious goods (consumer, membership and personal goods) as well as three religious social goods (communal, collective and positional goods). In the following, I present them one by one.

Religious consumer goods *Religious consumer goods* assume a parametric situation where the individual normally acquires the good from somebody else and then has the sole rights over its consumption. The goods are transferable, divisible and exclusive and there are no external effects involved. Examples of such goods are religious books, magazines, CDs, DVDs,

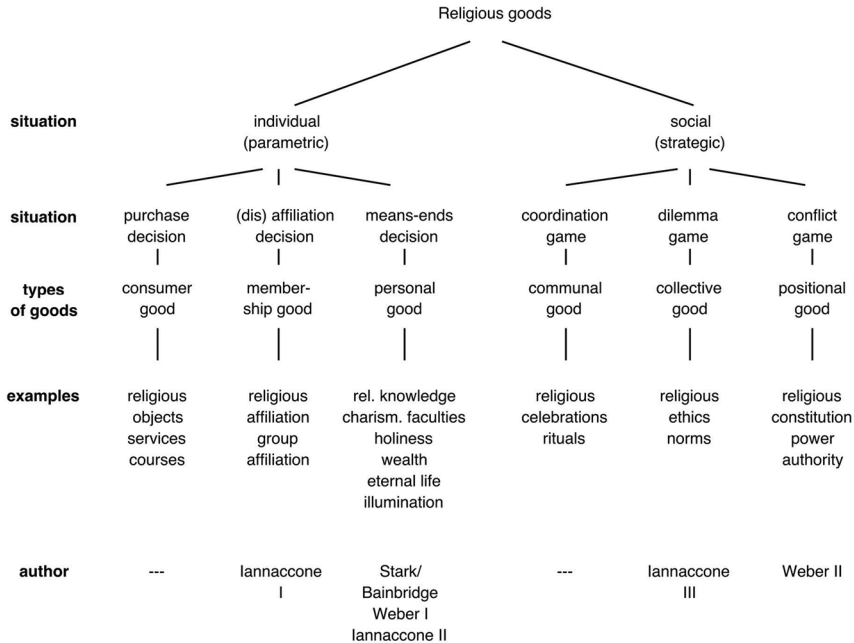


FIGURE 1
A typology of religious goods

devotional objects and the like. Obviously, these goods are transferable, divisible and exclusive: Buddha statues can be bought (transferred), if I buy one, another customer cannot buy the same one at the same time, he may, however, buy another one. These goods are clearly divisible and exclusive, which is why we do not encounter special “strategic” problems. The situation is parametric and the individual may rationally choose and consume the product by maximizing (or satisficing) his or her preferences. As we see from the above examples, often these goods are not directly linked to membership in a group and they may be paid for directly with money. In close proximity to these “perfect” consumer goods we find other goods which are more “social”, but which are still divisible, transferable and exclusive, such as religious courses and therapies (e.g. Alphalive, meditation courses, therapy sessions) where individuals pay for the education or service they demand. Consulting a magician or fortune-teller may, depending on the breadth of one’s definition of religion, also fit in here. Finally, even “religious services” such as marriages or funerals may be acquired with money (often for non-members of a group). These are cases of markets and market behaviour which perfectly resemble the anonymous and unplanned economic market. Surely, nobody would want, in these cases, to speak of an “economic metaphor”.

Religious membership goods The second type of good is the *membership* of a religious group. These goods consist of the fact that the individual may consider him or herself to be a member of a group, giving him or her certain rights to the resources (such as knowledge, rituals, friendship) of the group. Among these resources we normally find “chains” of salvation means leading to salvation ends. In return, the individual normally gives up control over certain actions or resources (e.g. agrees to follow certain rules, subscribe to certain beliefs, support the group financially, etc.). Memberships are normally indivisible, and not alienable. They are often exclusive; the group thus forbids membership of other religious groups. They may also have important externalities. One good example can be seen when individuals convert to “New Religious Movements” which then often leads family members to challenge the religious groups’ demands on their children or spouses (or even to claim that the groups have used “brainwashing”). For our purposes, we may construct the situation of the choosing individual as a “parametric” one. If the group accepts him (which may be seen as a sort of “capital”), the individual can decide rationally if he or she wants to join.

So are religious memberships goods that are “traded” on “religious markets”? In my view, this question cannot be answered generally. The answer depends almost completely on social context. Two variables especially are important in this respect. First, religious membership may be socially institutionalized as a matter of choice or not. In certain historical and geographical contexts, freedom of religion is guaranteed, religious plurality is given, and religious choice is socially well accepted. In such a society, religious membership markets may well exist. In other contexts, however, we have neither freedom of religion nor religious plurality. This is not to say that we have a “regulated market” (which assumes that there always has to be a market, either unregulated or regulated). Religious membership in a certain group may be transmitted from parents to children and be just a matter of fact. Religion may be fused with morality and citizenship and society in general. Here, then, we do not find a “religious market”, although we may well find individuals who rationally use salvation means in order to acquire salvation ends. Second, different levels of choices concerning memberships have to be distinguished. It is a very different thing to choose between being a Catholic or a Muslim or between going to the Reformed Church in one’s hometown or the one in the next town. Choices may thus refer to different religions, different denominations (e.g. in the same religion) or different local churches or groups (e.g. in the same denomination). For empirical work, it is important to clearly see just where the majority of choices actually take place. To give an example, in Switzerland, there are almost no converts from Protestantism to Catholicism or vice versa. On this level, there is no “market”. We do see, however, quite important internal mobility between the Protestant state church and free church youth groups, leading to quite an interesting amount of competition, copying of “methods”, etc.

Religious personal goods *Religious personal goods* are goods that are normally not exchanged on a market. They are (mostly) not divisible but may

be exclusive due to the possibility of excluding individuals from a religious group. We can distinguish:

- *religious human capital* such as religious knowledge, religious techniques (meditation, exercises, etc.) and charismatic and magical faculties (speaking in tongues, gifts of prophecy, levitation, etc.);
- *physical, psychic and social well-being* in the present as well as in the future, such as good health, inner peace, material wealth, a long life, high social status (e.g. being among the “chosen” ones), an eternal life in paradise;
- *ethical faculties and states of being* in the present as well as in the future, such as the fact of being without sin, without “thirst”, without “negative feelings”, in a state of complete accord with religious laws, etc.;
- *religious experiences and states of being* in the present as well as in the future, such as experience of conversion, illumination, union with the divine, states of grace, unshakeable faith, or the “religious habitus” (Weber) in general.

Some of these goods are transferred to the individual by primary or secondary socialization (such as religious human capital), some are produced by the individual him or herself (such as certain magical faculties acquired through asceticism, holiness acquired—partly—through self-control, or nirvana through the practice of yoga), some are administered by religious specialists (such as sacraments), some are “given” by transcendental forces (such as the gift of speaking in tongues, justification in faith or eternal life). While these goods are very often linked to membership of a religious group, this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes an individual may produce them or receive them without membership or discipleship (e.g. the enlightenment of Shree Rajneesh or an individual creating his or her own Wicca rituals). We may in a certain sense say that individuals are rational in that they use “salvation means” efficiently in order to reach “salvation goals”. But they are not “customers” who “buy” something, exchanging it for money or some other valued good.

If membership of a group can give access to salvation means and (ultimately) salvation goals, shouldn’t we say that religious personal goods are “exchanged on markets” too? I think not—for the following reasons. First, individuals often choose religions for reasons other than the primary personal means or ends (e.g. because of friendship with a member, psychological disarray) or for other aspects of the religion which do not touch explicitly on the “religious goods” of the religion’s ideology. Religious goods of the personal or communal type are one reason among others why membership may be attractive and they may be put more or less into the foreground by the group when trying to attract members (if it does). They are, however, not the same thing as membership. Second, individuals often use personal religious means in order to reach religious goals without having consciously chosen their religion (e.g. because they were brought up in it or because everyone else follows this religion).

Religious communal goods I now turn to religious social goods, that is, goods which are in some way or other “produced or consumed in interdependence with other actors or have external effects” (Esser, 2000b: 195). Social goods are either not perfectly divisible or not completely exclusive, and they typically imply some sort of “strategic situation”. Due to their social nature, they are not produced and allocated on markets but in other types of social systems such as interaction systems, social groups, organizations or whole societies. The first type I present is the *religious communal good*; these are defined as religious goods whose production is only possible by being with others. “Communal goods originate in the sociable cooperation of actors. And they originate only and *directly* through this act of cooperation” (Esser, 2000b: 170, his emphasis). In a way, communal goods are a goal in themselves; their performance *is* the product. Thus the actors who produce and consume, who are in control of and who are interested in the goods, are the same. Therefore, these goods are internally neither divisible nor exclusive and normally do not have allocation problems. Where is the “problem” in such situations? It lies in the *coordination* of efforts. To take a non-religious example: when dancing a tango, the problem is not one of “production” or “allocation”—it is one of coordination, of how to bring the dancers’ bodies into synchronicity. The solutions to coordination problems are normally found in culture and institutions: conventions, rules, scripts, roles and the like are used to organize the joint production of the good. Examples in the religious sphere abound. Religious celebrations and customs such as Easter, Dong Zhi or Ramadan, rituals and sacraments like the Shabbat, Wiccan fertility cults, Raëlian “baptism”, ecstatic Pentecostal dancing or the singing in a religious choir may all be seen as communal goods in this sense. They may have the most diverse religious “meanings” and the sociologist may find different functions (e.g. with Durkheim the “integrative” one), but in general there is no doubt that the “product” of the activity lies in the performance itself. We can also easily see how coordination problems with these goods are solved in different cases. Religious celebrations often have liturgies (scripts) which prescribe the sequence of events. Also, there is often someone with a special role who supervises the process, a master of ceremony (e.g. priests). Clearly, communal goods are jointly produced and allocated in *interaction systems* and not exchanged on markets.

Religious collective goods Another type of social good is the *religious collective good*. These goods are again produced and consumed in interdependence with other actors. The difference with communal goods is, however, that cooperation is not the goal in itself, but a means to an end. Also, the “producers” and the “consumers” are not necessarily, as in communal goods, the same individuals. This is because religious collective goods are neither internally nor externally divisible or exclusive. Powerful external effects and important incentives to free-ride result. The problem of these religious goods is, therefore, not one of coordination but of *production*. Everybody would be better off if the good was produced, but equally everybody has an incentive to free-ride, thus endangering the very same production.

A non-religious example is the provision of a strong students' association which defends students' interests. Since the benefits of such an association are available to all the students, regardless of whether they enter and support the association or not, rational individuals will tend to free-ride. The effect may be the non-existence of the association. There are different ways of solving this problem, and important ones are small group size, enforceable norms or selective incentives (Olson, 1977; Esser, 2000b: 199 ff.). In his famous article, Iannaccone (1994) explained why strict churches are strong, by showing that strictness is a public good problem. We can generalize this idea to an even larger array of phenomena by using the concept of religious collective goods. The first example is the sheer material existence of the religious group, which enables the individual to join in celebrations (communal goods) or reach some sort of personal religious good. The group, however, has to be financed, its religious specialists have to be paid, buildings have to be rented or bought, etc. In order to prevent free-riding, many religious groups institutionalize enforceable norms for financial contributions from members (e.g. tithes, church taxes). Individuals who do not honour their obligations may then be excluded from the group. The second example of a religious collective good may be seen in the cultural strength of the religious group. An impressive emotionality, deep conviction and consensus about the existence of gods and high participation of members may all further the possibilities of their members to reach their own personal salvation goods. If the group believes strongly, I myself may believe more easily. Such cultural strength, however, is only to be attained by important contributions from the members in terms of time, energy and deference to the group consensus. Rational individuals may thus try to free-ride. They like to be members of a strong group, but may not necessarily be prepared to "pay" their contributions in terms of time and energy. This is why we often find strong and enforceable norms in terms of participation and belief. Turning to our question of the applicability of the market model, we see that collective religious goods are not "sold" on markets but are jointly produced in *social groups or organizations* (they may, however, have an important effect on the attractiveness of group memberships on religious markets).

Religious positional goods The final type of good I discuss is the *religious positional good*. These are goods and resources that are—for logical or technical reasons—scarce and cannot be multiplied. They are exclusive, that is, they create utility for their user only if other individuals are excluded from their use. The strategic game that results is not one of coordination or dilemma, but of *conflict*. Non-religious examples would be: winning a game of chess, getting the last seat in a lifeboat on a sinking ship or being a member of the ruling social class in a country. The problem with these situations is that they cannot be solved by coordination or cooperation. There is no way the actors can find an agreement. Battles are bound to take place until one of the participants emerges as the winner. In order to solve these conflicts, repressive norms, authority relations and strong sanctions are often the only means possible (Esser, 2000b: 104f.). Important religious positional

goods can be found on different levels. At the individual level, we find the fact that several contestants may fight over high-powered positions in religious groups, such as being the leader of the group, the successor of the prophet, the pope, etc. This is especially so when clear rules of succession are not established. Good examples can be found in the early histories of Islam and the Jehovah's Witnesses. At the societal level, we find the phenomenon that there may be formal or informal "religious constitutions" which state which religious means and ends are legitimate and which are deviant. Some religious consumer, membership, personal and social religious goods are legitimate. Others are deviant and negatively sanctioned. The ruling classes or groups defend the constitution against competitors who offer different salvation means and goods in an effort to gain legitimation. This is the eternal fight of "established" religion against "non-established" religion, of "churches" against "sects", of "priests" against "prophets" and "magicians", which Max Weber shows us in his work (e.g. the conflict between Sadducees or Pharisees and the historical Jesus). Note that positional goods are not produced in markets but in interaction systems, social groups, organizations or even whole societies.

Placing Max Weber and Rational Choice Authors in our Framework

Where do we find the different types of religious goods discussed in the work of Stark and Bainbridge, Iannaccone and Weber? Figure 1 shows that when Iannaccone and Stark (in his newer work) talk about "religious markets", they often seem to mean "membership goods": the fact of choosing a certain religion or religious group. Stark and Bainbridge with their concept of "compensators", as well as Weber with his concept of "salvation good", can be found under the column "personal good". Here, the individual uses institutionally given salvation means in order to reach salvation goals. Religious personal goods are also close to the idea of "household commodities" in Iannaccone's work, since individuals often try to produce these goods themselves, using their own time, energy, and religious capital, as well as institutionally given salvation means. Iannaccone's concept of religious goods as collective goods can be found in the fifth column; we reconstruct these goods as one type of religious social good. Finally, Weber's concept of power conflict between religious specialists is a case of the struggle for religious positional goods in the sixth column. Interestingly, two cases have not been described either by the rational choicers or by Weber (in terms of goods): (1) the case of religious consumer goods where religious goods are exchanged for money; and (2) religious communal goods where the strategic problem lies mainly in the coordination of participants' efforts.

Religious goods and religious symbol systems (religions) Following our definition of religions (or religious symbol systems) it is important to note that religions consist of a lot more than just religious goods. They incorporate a large array of world-views and life practices that may not themselves be seen as religious goods. On the other hand, religions normally do not offer

just one type of the religious goods mentioned. In fact, often, they incorporate all of them in some way or another. In Catholicism, for instance, we find consumer goods such as devotional objects (e.g. pictures of saints), membership goods (the fact of officially being a Catholic), personal goods (e.g. sacraments like baptism, the Eucharist, penitence and reconciliation, grace and justification, a saintly life), communal goods (e.g. the mass), collective goods (e.g. the church in its financial, structural and cultural aspects) and positional goods (e.g. according to whether the Catholic Church is a dominant or marginal group in a given country). Obviously, these different types of goods are often closely intertwined. For example, an individual may acquire personal goods such as a saintly life only by being a member (membership good), taking part in the mass (communal good) and paying the church tax (collective good). He or she may do all this without thinking of him or herself as being on a “market”. The strength of the proposed framework lies in showing that religious goods are not all produced in the same way and that different situations and logics underlie different religious goods.

Religious Goods and Religious Markets: Summary

We have defined markets as an ensemble of bilateral exchange relationships between (individual or collective) actors, who supply and demand goods. Markets function in an unplanned and anonymous way and market participants follow only their own interests. If we start with the proposed typology, where are markets used to exchange religious goods? A market of the ideal-type can be found with regard to *religious consumer goods*. These goods may indeed be exchanged in an unplanned and anonymous way. *Membership goods* are “exchanged” on markets only in a few cases. There may indeed be historical situations where individuals searching for new membership roles are “matched” with groups who offer such roles by what we call the “religious market”. Given other historical contexts, however, membership roles in a religious group may be simply seen as “given”, excluding the usefulness of the market model. *Personal religious goods* are normally acquired by socialization, produced by the individual or “received” from religious specialists or transcendental forces. While their production may include religious goods acquired on markets (e.g. consumer goods and membership goods), they themselves cannot be “bought”. They are often (but not always) produced or received by individuals who are already members of a religious group (by upbringing or joining). *Religious social goods* all involve rational actions, but cannot be described by the market model. Religious communal goods involve not an anonymous and unplanned bilateral exchange of resources, but the joint production of a religious good which is normally well planned (even when there are “improvised” elements, as in Pentecostal religious services) and which involves close personal acquaintance. *Religious collective goods* and *religious positional goods* are by nature indivisible, producing strong external effects. Their special functioning cannot therefore be described by the market model. However, the way the respective problems

of coordination, dilemma or conflict are solved may have effects on the “attractiveness” of the social group on the membership market (if there is one). Groups with impressive meetings, a good infrastructure and high power in the religious field may be more attractive to those searching for a religious group.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how Weberian and rational choice concepts of religious goods, religious markets and religious authority structures may be integrated into a larger theoretical framework. By distinguishing individual religious goods (consumer, membership and personal goods) and social religious goods (communal, conflict and positional goods), a more complex theoretical structure is provided than in previous theories. This structure enables us to understand the circumstances under which the different kinds of religious goods may be produced, the typical problems that may arise and the solutions found. Specifically, it allows us to see that markets are only one of the types of social system which govern the production and allocation of religious goods. Depending on the type of goods, we can ascertain whether or not markets represent a useful explanatory tool for a given religious phenomenon. This model also suggests that positions which argue in a global way “for” or “against” the market model seem to ignore the complexity of the production and allocation of religious goods.

NOTES

¹. This point is missed by Collins (1997) who presents an otherwise very interesting comparison between Stark and Bainbridge, Weber and Durkheim.

². Iannaccone does not make this distinction between membership and personal religious good as I do.

³. It makes the finding all the more interesting that strict or costly religions might have more success than “cheap” ones. But this may be explained equally in rational choice terms, albeit with a more complex model. See Iannaccone (1994).

⁴. All these translations of *Heilsgut* can be found in the same text: Weber ([1920a] 1978).

⁵. It is interesting to note that a group of rational choicers have produced a theory (which has not yet been applied to religion) exactly along these Weberian lines: the theory of social production functions (Lindenberg, 1989, 1990; Esser, 1998, 1999, 2000b). This theory assumes that individuals have some very basic human needs (e.g. physical well-being, social esteem). These needs can, however, be met in extremely varied ways. Cultural and institutional systems therefore provide individuals with goals and legitimate means to reach the goals (and means to reach the means).

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