

A Critique of the “Religious Economy”: Ideology and the Market Metaphor in

Rational Choice Theories of Religion

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Abstract

Rational choice theories have been very influential in the sociology over the past twenty years. Despite many criticisms of the empirical and theoretical adequacy of such an approach, the paradigm continues to have considerable influence and appeal in the sociological study of religion. This paper examines the use of the market metaphor and its subsidiary metaphors, with a view to understanding how these metaphors work in rational choice theory, and what this might be able to tell us about its enduring influence. I suggest that the metaphor is a useful one for studying religion in a capitalist, commodity oriented society, but when we forget that the “religious economy” is a metaphor, it comes to serve ideological purposes well suited to the neo-liberal agenda. The market (conceived after a neo-conservative fashion) is thereby naturalised and serves to reinforce the ideology of a one-dimensional society.

Keywords: rational choice theory, sociology of religion, metaphor, ideology, rhetoric, neo-liberalism, Rodney Stark

Sociological thinking, “like any other kind of thinking, cannot be achieved non-metaphorically”— so argues John Urry in his book *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000: 21). Urry shows how new metaphors are foundational for the rise of new paradigms: as sociologists became increasingly disenchanted with functionalism and its organic metaphor, each “denunciation of the organic metaphor was achieved through the development of new metaphors” (23). Thus, theoretical “debate often involves in part the counter-posing of one metaphor against another” (24).

The sociology of religion, like any other discipline, is saturated with metaphor, though some of these play more central roles than others (McKinnon, 2010). Kenneth Burke calls these dominant metaphors “God terms” (1969); these are the masters of a universe of discourse, having the capacity to organize all our thinking about a topic, as well as the ability to create new constellations of subsidiary metaphors. The theologian David Tracy uses a somewhat earthier term for these fundamental metaphors: he argues that every religion has its “root metaphors [that] form a cluster or network in which certain sustained metaphors both organize subsidiary metaphors and diffuse new ones” (1979: 89).

The market is the God metaphor of the “New Paradigm” in the sociology of religion (Warner, 1993; 1997), and its advocates have used to supplant the “old” paradigm which conceived of religion as a “sacred canopy” (Berger, 1969). Within the New Paradigm itself, Rational Choice (RC) has managed to establish itself as the dominant school of thought. It has been able to do so, I argue, in part because of its advocates’ thoroughgoing and effective use of a metaphor in a way that resonates with our contemporary political and cultural context—all the while denying that their fundamental terms are in any way metaphorical. They conceive the market in

decidedly neo-liberal terms, and then naturalize this conception by denying that their conception is in any way natural; rather, it becomes part of human nature. Even if they are unintentional, these are important ideological implications with which critical sociologists ought to concern ourselves.

Given the ever greater role played by the capitalist exchange relations in the constitution and commodification of all forms of social life, the market metaphor gives us an important metaphor to think with, to think about, *and also to think against*. What is most problematic in rational choice thinking is not so much the metaphor itself, which it shares with the New Paradigm more broadly, as the way that they use it, including the denial that the market metaphor is in fact a metaphor. Non-Rational Choice sociologists who see themselves as part of the New Paradigm are not apt to insist on a literal understanding of the market in their work. Thus, Stephen Warner, who named the emerging current in the sociology of religion, says that it is organized by “economic *imagery*” (1993; 1997 emphasis added). Nancy Ammerman (1997) and James Spickard (1997) have both been more specific, and have recognized that rational choice theory is constituted by a market *metaphor*.

Stark and Finke (2000) write that their application of “economic language to things often regarded as ‘sacred’ is meant neither to offend, *nor as mere metaphor*” (36, emphasis added). *Nota bene*, however, that what Stark and Finke deny in the second part of that sentence (their conception is not “mere metaphor”), they have already casually admitted in the first: they are “applying economic language” to something outside of the sphere of the economy. This is, of course, what it means to use metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson explain in their classic work, *Metaphors We Live By*, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in

terms of another” (1980: 5), here, they are encouraging us to understand religion in terms of the market by using the terminology we usually reserve for the market.

Stark and Finke’s assertion about the literal reality of religious markets is typical of rational choice theories; they argue markets are built into the very nature of human groups, in all historical, cultural and economic contexts. This attempt to transform a metaphor into a literal truth, I suggest, involves not the mere forgetting of a metaphors, but rather an attempt—more or less deliberate—to kill the metaphor (Nietzsche, 1995; McKinnon, *forthcoming*). Here we enter fully into the realm of ideology, or, more precisely, that particular form of ideology that Theodor Adorno termed “identity thinking” (1973; Brittain, 2010). In a dead metaphor, the subject *is* its predicate: it is not merely useful to think about religion in the terms we use to think about the market, rather, religion *is* a market. The market metaphor thus becomes the “natural” way of things, a dead metaphor in which there is a perfect correspondence between our concept (the market) and religion.

In this paper I am not concerned with the questions of empirical adequacy or theoretical logic *per se*. Rational Choice theory has already been subjected to more than adequate critique on these grounds by others¹. Nor am I critical of rational choice theorists for using metaphor, which seems to me indispensable for human thought (McKinnon *forthcoming*), nor for using the market metaphor in particular, which seems to me a useful lens for an examination of contemporary religion, particularly for those who work in the spirit of Marx’s dialectics (McKinnon 2005). Rather, my project in this paper is to examine the rhetorical underpinnings of rational choice as a means of ideology-critique. As such, I am critical of *how* RC theorists use the market metaphor, and in particular with the way that they tend to deny that they’re using a metaphor, arguing that they’re using purely ‘literal’ speech. This is not merely a

question of epistemological positions or of a philosophy of social science. Rather, literalism about the market metaphor makes the neo-liberal vision of human nature ‘natural’, and promotes acceptance of a one-dimensional society.

Since the twin revolutions of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, neo-liberal activists have worked insistently (and effectively) at the behest of capital to fundamentally change the basic organisation of capitalist societies, to tip the balance strongly capital’s favour by political, legislative, and by ideological means (Harvey, 2005). Under the rubric of freedom and choice, neo-liberals have set about dismantling the welfare state and creating conditions for renewed capital accumulation (reducing and providing the means of evading corporate tax, re-writing environmental and labour legislation, for example). Perhaps just as important for the success of their structural reforms, they have also worked to create a new “common-sense” (Gramsci, 1971) about human nature, freedom, and the natural efficiencies of the market, particularly over against socialised provision. It is in relation to this new common sense that the rational-choice theories have come to play an important supporting ideological role. Since it plays off of the new common-sense, its popularity is not particularly surprising; in other words its “success” as a theory may have little to do with its scientific method, its empirical adequacy, or its theoretical elegance.

While I think it is problematic to understand the “religious market” in literal terms, I think there are also very good positive reasons for thinking about it in terms of metaphor. Richard Harvey Brown, who is probably the scholar who has contributed most to our understanding of the way that metaphor works in sociology, argues that a live metaphor that we maintain a “stereoscopic vision” in which we keep both frames of reference (religion and the market) in view. It also enables us to treat the relation

between the two frames of reference as an “as if” relation. He writes that whether we maintain a metaphor’s “as if” character is

...a pivotal point, for on it turns the difference between using metaphors and being used by them. Awareness of our use of metaphor provides an escape hatch from the prison house of language, or at least it lets us know we are confined. Such an awareness is two sided: It enables us to see the metaphoric in what is taken as literal and also to make believe that metaphors are literally true (Brown, 1977: 84).

So long as we maintain an ability to examine religion “as if” it were an economy, this keeps the questions open, and allows us to use the metaphor. As soon as we start assuming that religion *is* an economy, we begin to be used by the metaphor; the metaphor begins to think for us.

By examining rational choice’s primary metaphor *as metaphor*, we can assess the ways in which this metaphor provides us with both a helpful *and* a problematic conceptual framework for comprehending religion. We can ask: how is religion like *and* unlike a market... and *why can they be usefully compared?* If we kill the metaphor and take their vision of the market as part of “human nature”, these questions cannot be asked: religion can in no way unlike a market because it *is* a market. Thus, the “axiom”—or dead metaphor—of the market as human nature, *closes off* these potentially fruitful lines of inquiry. By contrast, if we think in terms of the market metaphor, keeping in mind that it is a metaphor, we have much more freedom to clarify the logic of the arguments that flow from the metaphor. We can more readily clarify the relations between the primary metaphor (the market) and its subsidiary metaphors (producers and consumers, products and services, costs and benefits, supply and demand, taxation, regulation and subsidies, and so on).

In the following pages, I will begin with Deirdre McClosky's work on the rhetoric of economics, paying particularly close attention to her arguments about how metaphor structures economic discovery and persuasion. I will then proceed to an examination of a recent summary of rational choice arguments by Rodney Stark, one of the most important rational choice theorists, with particular consideration given to the structure of his argument as it unfolds from the market metaphor, and the ideological implications of this. I will then examine the logic of Stark and Finke's argument about rational consumers, and show how their argument is achieved through by suturing together two different, and even contradictory, notions of what it means to behave rationally. All of this suggests not only significant reason to be critical of rational choice theorising, but also at the same time the usefulness of starting with the market metaphor (stripped of its neo-liberal baggage) as a means of understanding religion in a commodity culture.

The Rhetoric of Economics and Market Metaphors

The study of metaphor, and the way it organizes thought, is typically the domain of students of rhetoric. One of the few economists who has made a point of studying her own discipline rhetorically is, of course, Deirdre McClosky, beginning with her classic book *The Rhetoric of Economics* ([1985] 1998). McClosky uses "rhetoric" largely in the sense of the tradition that begins with Aristotle: she does not mean not to dismiss economics as untruthful. Rather, she examines the structure of economic arguments to better understand the logic of discovery and persuasion within the discipline. Despite her other transgressions, McClosky is a devoted advocate of neo-liberal economics in the tradition of the University of Chicago, where she earned her PhD, and more recently has been promoting herself as a self-styled apologist of

“bourgeois virtues” (2006). She has nonetheless provided some of the most brilliant analyses of the rhetoric of economics, and these are exceedingly useful tools for examining rational choice theories of religion, and its ideological implications.

Economics is “saturated” with metaphor, McClosky argues, though few economists recognize the metaphors they use, except when they are new. She explains:

The more obvious metaphors in economics are those used to convey novel thoughts, one sort of novelty being to compare economic with noneconomic matters. “Elasticity” was once a mind-stretching fancy, “depression” was depressing, “equilibrium” compared an economy to an apple in a bowl, a settling idea; “competition” once induced thoughts of horse races; money’s “velocity” thoughts of swirling bits of paper. Much of the vocabulary of economics consists of dead metaphors taken from non-economic spheres (1998: 41-2).

Gary Becker, from whom much of contemporary rational choice theorizing develops, is an extraordinary metaphorical innovator; he is not so much interested, however, in using non-economic metaphors for thinking about economics, but rather, he uses economic metaphors for understanding non-economic phenomena, like children.

McClosky continues:

Comparing non-economic with economic matters is another sort of novelty, apparent in the imperialism of the new economics of history, politics, crime, and the rest, and most apparent in the work of the Kipling of the economic empire, Gary Becker. Among the less bizarre of his many metaphors, for instance, is that children are durable goods, like refrigerators. The philosopher Max Black points out that “a memorable metaphor has the power to bring two

separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other”. So here: the subject (a child) is viewed through the lens of the modifier (a refrigerator) (1998: 42).

Once a metaphor, like children as durable goods (refrigerators), has been coined, the implications of the metaphor can then be drawn out and translated into literal terms.

According to McClosky,

A beginning at literal translation would say, “A child is costly to acquire initially, lasts for a long time, gives flows of pleasure during that time, is expensive to maintain and repair, and has an imperfect second hand market. Likewise, a durable good, such as a refrigerator...” That the list of similarities could be extended further and further, gradually revealing the differences as well—“children, like durable goods, are *not* objects of affection and concern”; “children, like durable goods do *not* have their own opinions”—is one reason that, as Black says, “metaphorical thought is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought”. The literal translation of an important metaphor is never finished. In this respect and in others an important metaphor in economics has the quality admired in a successful scientific theory, a capacity to astonish us with implications formerly unseen (42).

Like the economists that McClosky discusses, Rational Choice theorists have continually been translating their metaphor into more literal language, typically in the form of propositions and definitions. Regardless of what one may think of the program as a whole (or its ideological implications), it certainly has been fruitful, both in terms of the “literal translations” that can be derived from the god metaphor, and in

terms of the metaphor's capacity for spawning new subsidiary metaphors (costs and benefits, religious capital, religious products, entrepreneurs, etc). The market metaphor and its subsidiaries have provided new ways of looking at questions that have long preoccupied sociologists of religion, and they have generated new questions as well. In this sense, it certainly qualifies as a "successful scientific theory" as McClosky puts it.

If, however, we do not see that children as durable goods is a metaphor, but rather take it as a literal statement about the essence of children (however *that* might be construed), and *if* it does not thereby blind us to the differences between children and refrigerators, it will force us into all sorts of definitional and propositional contortions so that we can harmonize the two terms. We get similar problems when we no longer see that the religious market is a metaphor: we lose the capacity to see differences between a market, and "all the religious activity going on in any society" (Stark, 2005: 198). We can only see the limits of the metaphor (children do indeed have their own opinions, and thankfully they are often are the objects of affection and concern) only when we recognise that we are speaking in metaphor: this, I suggest applies as much to religion as it does to children.

The Market Metaphor in Rational Choice Thinking About Religion

Here I want to turn to Rodney Stark's book, *The Victory of Reason* (2005), wherein we find one of his most concise discussions of religious markets; both the concision and the broader context for this discussion are helpful for making sense of rational choice theories of religion and its ideological resonance. The argument of this book as a whole could have been written without reference either the "religion as market" metaphor or to micro-level assumptions of rationality—it includes little of

either, in fact. While the book's title suggests it is about the victory of reason, "reason" in this account is largely synonymous with capitalism, and the book is basically an extended analysis of the emergence of modern capitalism from a manifestly neo-liberal perspective. If this were a novel, Christianity, Freedom, and Capitalism would be its heroes; Taxes, the State and Regulation its villainsⁱⁱ. These terms translate nicely into the market approach to the study of religion when Stark writes about it towards the end of the book. "Religion", Stark writes,

is not just a matter of individual commitment, nor can it be fully comprehended on the basis of individuals and their membership in various religious groups. Religion is always embedded in societies and is greatly shaped by the conditions imposed on religious expression and organization by the state. To encompass this reality fully, the term "religious economy" was introduced. A religious economy consists of all the religious activity going on in any society: a "market" of current and potential religious adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or retain adherents and the religious culture offered by the organizations (198).

The first thing that we should note is that Stark's discussion of RC theory begins not with the assumption of rationality, but with its master metaphor—the market. Note also that "market" and "religious economy" are bracketed by quotation marks, indicating that these terms are not meant to be conceived in the way we usually use these words; the inverted commas testify to the function of these terms as metaphors.

The passage starts off at the precise point where all sociology of religion begins: religion is not just about individuals and their religious groups. From here, however, Stark diverges, quite suddenly from what we expect to hear from a sociologist of religion. "Religion is always embedded in societies"... so far so

good... “and is greatly shaped by the conditions imposed on religious expression and organization by the state”. Thus, we have individuals, groups, the state and the market. Religion is “embedded in societies”, but it is “greatly shaped by” the state and the regulations it imposes on religion. “Society”, in the classical sociological sense, is absent or at least largely irrelevant—everything will be subsumed into individuals, states, and markets.

Thus, Stark continues: “To encompass this reality fully, the term ‘religious economy’ was introduced” (198). The religious “economy” is thus the whole with which the sociologist of religion should be concerned, encompassing individuals (consumers), producers (firms) of religion (product), all regulated and taxed by the state. It is here that we find “all the religious activity going on in any society”. In this description, “society” figures as no more than the space between borders, over which a particular state has jurisdiction, and within which we find a religious market.

Market equilibrium (McClosky’s apple in a bowl) has been a central notion in liberal and neo-liberal economics, and it plays a role here, too. Stark argues:

Because individual religious tastes always vary considerably within any society, and because no single “firm” can offer both an intense and a lax religious “product,” if left to its own devices the *normal* condition of any religious economy would be *pluralism*, wherein a set of distinctively different religious firms appeal to various market segments...

While preferences may be assumed to be stable, consumers have tastes that differ from one another. Fair enough. Firms cannot offer both lax and intense religious products; if we leave aside firms with strict monastic orders (or other forms of virtuosity) but which make limited demands on the laity, this may be reasonable (even if such “firms” have been historically very common, cf. Riesebrodt, 2009). The result

of this is the “*normal*” condition of the market, which is pluralistic. Even as I am quite sure that I know what “normal” means, I can compare this to the entry in The Concise Oxford English Dictionary which sits on my desk: “normal adj. 1: conforming to a standard; typical or expected”. The other listed meanings derive from geometry, geology or chemistry, and seem far removed from our concerns here.

Stark continues:

But because it requires a high level of religious freedom, *the normal religious economy has not been typical*, at least not within the confines of monotheism. Instead, religious economies usually have been distorted by state regulations that either impose a monopoly firm, or constrain the market by subsidizing a state church and making it difficult for other religious groups to compete (2005: 199 *emphasis added*).

As it turns out, the *OED* notwithstanding, normal “conforms to a standard”, but is not “typical”. This being the case, the question that we need to ask ourselves is “which standard?” or perhaps better, “whose standard?” This is a theoretical ideal, like the neo-liberal utopian fiction of an “undistorted” market, which has never existed historically, except in the imaginations of Adam Smith, Milton Freedman and their followers. The standard that “normal” refers to can be derived from “norms”, and here, like in all neo-liberal fictions, there is a moral to this story:

But religion languishes in a monopolized religious economy, not only because so many find their religious tastes unserved but because, as with commercial monopolies, monopoly religious firms become lazy and inefficient. In contrast, religion thrives in a free market, where many religious groups vie for followers and those firms lacking energy or appeal fall by the wayside. By now there is a very large research literature that supports these conclusions...

Like in the other kind of economy, customers are best “served” by an energetic, pluralistic economy, which only happens under conditions of limited state regulations. Over the past 30 years it has slowly become person-on-the-street-common-sense that monopolies of any kind make people “lazy” and “inefficient” (*nota bene* the implied morality here). “Guess what?” asks Stark. This is also true of religious economies. So, if you want everyone to find their “religious tastes” served, and don’t want to have “lazy” and “inefficient” religion, then a constitutional First Amendment is essential. The American religious economy is thus “normal”, but atypical; the typical religious economy is abnormal. Twenty years ago, John Simpson suggested that the RC theory of religion is “gloriously American” (1990: 370); this still rings true, now more than ever.

The Rational Consumer as a Subsidiary Metaphor

Despite the fact that the rational actor is typically specified as the first axiom of all RC theorizing about religion, this is premised on a metaphor (the consumer weighing costs and rewards) that is subsidiary to the God metaphor: the market. This is relatively easy to establish: Stark’s discussion of religious markets (as above) contains no reference to the first proposition of rational choice theorizing about religion. In other words, it is possible to give a perfectly coherent account of religious markets without any reference to rational actors as a foundational proposition (see also Stark and Finke, 2003).

If the actor is always a consumer, and only secondarily a “rational” consumer, then we can ask why it is that the consumer is configured as a “rational consumer” and what that means. Perhaps the most important factor is that the priority of the market metaphor, the supply-side seems to demand it: if the actor becomes anything

other than an under-socialized rational actor, then we might look elsewhere than to changes in supply for our explanation. As Talcott Parsons noted more than six decades ago ([1940] 1954), the liberal economists' idea of the rational actor was not the result of intensive technical economic observation and analysis in the sense in which the theory of value and of distribution have been, but of finding a plausible formula for filling a logical gap in the closure of a system. This gap had to be filled if a certain order of broad generalization were to be upheld (51).

Iannaccone, for one, acknowledges this explicitly: the rational actor assumption may or may not be true, but it is a useful and productive assumption for “building... formal models” ((1992: 124) read “the explication of the root metaphor”).

Of course it is possible to work with other conceptions of the consumer, but the models will inevitably be more complex and lack the simplicity that is the preferential option of economists (Iannaccone, 1995). Discussing precisely this kind of model, Pierre Bourdieu writes: “[o]ne can say that gymnastics is geometry so long as this is not taken to mean that the gymnast is a geometer” (1990a: 93). However, you end up with a much simpler theory, much removed from the messy complexities of empirical life, by assuming that the gymnast is a geometer.

There is by now an extensive literature which offers critical theoretical appraisals of the rationality assumption in RC theorizing, and in RC theorizing about religion in particularⁱⁱⁱ. This may be why Rodney Stark and Roger Finke are keen to disavow their membership in the RC club. I do not think it likely that many sociologists of religion will believe them—and some of us might well wonder whether they are being disingenuous—when they write:

...in constructing theories of many aspects of religion, we ourselves have rarely mentioned rationality. Consequently, we object to being identified as “Rational Choice Theorists”, as if we were initiates of some theoretical “sect” of crypto-economists unable to deal with the subtleties of religious realities (2000: 41).

This passage occurs at the end of a chapter in which there are 33 references to “rational” (including “irrational” and “rationality”) and a further 5 to “reason” (including reasonable and reasoning). Unlike the other critiques of rationality in RC theorizing, I am not primarily concerned with the theoretical logic or empirical adequacy of the concept of rationality they employ, but rather with the rhetoric of rationality: how do Stark and Finke construct the notion of rationality in their text, and persuade the reader by means of this construction that their account of the world is plausible, or even compelling.

There are two basic concepts of “rational” to be found in *Acts of Faith* (2000); part of the force of Stark and Finke’s argument comes from the way they suture them together as a subsidiary component of the market metaphor. This double conception of “rational” gives their theory considerable resistance against critique because it makes their theory a moving target, slipping from one sense of “rational” to another as a means of evading its critics. Since the first of the two senses is much more plausible than the other, by joining them together, the authors provide more legitimacy for the second than readers might otherwise allow.

The first conception of “rational” (hereafter, Rationality A) is a simple contrast to “irrational” in the sense Stark and Finke caricature as the “old paradigm” assumption about religion. According to Stark and Finke, the old paradigm writers, which includes on their reading, most of the classical social theorists argued that

“religion...impedes rational thought” (28); put in opposite terms, according to Stark and Finke, most of the classical sociologists argued that “religion is irrational”(28). In contrast to this, they suggest that religious believers are knowledgeable about their social world, have generally coherent reasons for what they do, and are not insane or delusional. This last point seems to be of particular importance to Stark and Finke: religion, they argue, is not a psychopathology (2000: 31-2 and 45-6), quite effectively opposing a position that has in any case long fallen out of favour, at least among the sociologists of religion who constitute the primary audience for this book^{iv}. They argue that religious people are reasonable in the same sense that we could describe anyone else. Thus, they suggest, their argument about rationality is in keeping with the basic assumptions of most social science. We could quibble about the details, but the basic case seems a reasonable case for reasonableness: there is no particular reason to treat religious actors in fundamentally different ways than non-religious actors; in both cases, we can assume they have reasons for what they do and aren't certifiably mad.

Stark and Finke are keen to distance themselves from the “sect” of “crypto-economists” (though they are never clear about who they would describe in such terms), and they draw some distinctions between their conception of rationality and that of “Rational Choice Theorists”, which I will call “Rationality B”. On Stark and Finke's account, some

advocates of “Rational Choice Theory”, especially economists, limit their definition of rationality to the elegantly simple proposition that humans attempt to maximize—to gain the most at the least cost (see Becker 1975; 1996; Iannaccone 1995). One of the greatest virtues of this version is that it lends itself so well to inclusion in mathematical models, but that virtue may

also be one of its primary shortcomings, for in their daily lives, humans tend to fall well short of its fulfillment. Of course, being sophisticated theorists, economists fully acknowledge human frailties such as “imperfect memories,” “erroneous calculations”, “and “drugs” (Becker, 1996: 22). But even if these qualifiers are made explicit, the principle of maximization strikes us as too precise (2000: 36-7).

So, in Rationality B, humans attempt to maximize, although such maximization will not be perfect due to certain distortions. The principle of maximization is thus an ideal, but it has nothing to say about the *ends* of such action.

To sum up the two kinds of rationality we have talked about in Stark and Finke’s text:

Rationality A= reasonable, having reasons for doing what they do, sane.

Rationality B= utility maximizing.

How then, do Stark and Finke conceptualise rationality? For them, “rational” is a softer form of Rationality B, which embodies the basic assumption of Rationality A.

Thus, they define the “principle of human rationality” as:

Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices (38).

Further down the same page, they further clarify the last part of that principle in the following way:

[T]he phrase that “humans attempt to make rational choices” means that *they will attempt to follow the dictates of reason in an effort to achieve their goals (38).*

This principle of rationality thus means that people will *try to behave* in a way that is rational in their attempt to achieve their goals, even if their behaviour does not always meet the requirements put to them by the “dictates of reason”. What are these “dictates of reason”? This is clarified in the following sentence: reasonable people “make some effort to maximize the net of rewards over costs” (38). Stark and Finke’s conception of rationality thus bears a strikingly resemblance to that of Rationality B, or perhaps it is rationality B that has taken the long-route through rationality A.

Let us leave aside the tautology of using “reason” and “rational” to define the principle of rationality. What Stark and Finke are doing here is to bridge the gap between two very different notions of rationality—to make rationality as maximization (Rationality B) more reasonable, and to make rationality as reasonableness (Rationality A) more exact. By merging these otherwise distinct notions of rationality, Stark and Finke associate the reasonableness of Rationality A with the calculations of Rationality B: sane people, they suggest, “attempt to maximize the net of rewards over costs” (38).

Does the double-entry book-keeping of Rationality B imply a reasonable (sane) actor? Does the sane actor of Rationality A imply someone who calculates costs and benefits? Stark and Finke’s answers to both of these questions is in the affirmative. Several counter-examples, however, should make us suspicious of their reasoning at this point.

Examples abound of people who we would by no means consider reasonable people (Rationality A) making highly strategic instrumental rational calculations. Few people would claim that Hitler or Stalin were rational people in the terms of reference for Rationality A (which on Stark and Finke’s (2000) terms excludes any form of psychopathology). Yet both were able to use highly rational calculations of cost and

benefit to achieve their goals. Their goals, however, betray them for the arch-types of madmen that they were. One can also take much less extreme examples to make the same point. Neither Howard Hughes the aeronautical entrepreneur, nor John Nash, the game theorists, could be easily characterized as entirely sane individuals (Rationality A), and yet both showed highly developed capacities for the calculation of cost and benefit to the point of genius. Rationality B does not require or imply Rationality A^v.

What about the opposite question? Are reasonable (sane) people necessarily calculating? Stark and Finke “soften and expand” (Stark and Finke 2000: 27) the notion of rationality in order to deal with the suggestion that reasonable people (Rationality A) do not always act in their own best interest (Rationality B). This is where they claim to have produced a different conception of rationality from that of the “crypto-economists”. However, this simply creates new problems. Stark and Finke argue that acts which seem “unselfish” (i.e. people who risk their own lives to save others) or persons whose characters seem to be defined in the same way (i.e. Mother Theresa) only violate “the principle of rationality if only if we adopt a very narrow, materialistic and egocentric definition of rewards and ignore the immense variety of preferences and tastes” (39). By an “Act of Faith”, altruism no longer exists: their formula “leaves no leeway for altruism” (39):

To call [such an act as parents risking their lives to save a child] altruism, and to place it in opposition to rationality is to reduce noble behaviour to crazy, irrational action. In fact the “selfish” premise of rationality is humanistic in the fullest sense (39).

Thus, Rationality B is implied by Rationality A only by virtue of the way that Stark and Finke define rational actors. Although they hope to deal with this problem by a “softer and more expansive” conception of rationality, they simply reproduce the

problem in a softer and more expansive way, like a new pair of trousers after the holidays. True, the picture we get is no longer a society comprised of accountants (with varying degrees of skill). But this soft expansion further contributes to what philosophers refer to as the “fallacy of the suppressed correlative” (Jerolmack and Porpora, 2004). Students of Rhetoric would simply say that if everything is “rational”, then rational means nothing, because it has become impossible for us to conceive of actors behaving “irrationally”. While Stark and Finke admit that not all behaviour is rational, they define all possible examples of behaviour that does not seem to fit within its bounds as nonetheless rational. While they admit to irrationality in theory, in practice they simply do not allow it.

The Consequences of Thinking Metaphorically, About the Market, For Instance

Richard Harvey Brown argues that attentiveness to metaphor is necessary for “*self*- awareness in the construction of sociological reports and the making of sociological theory” (Brown, 1977: 78). There are, it seems to me, several important concrete benefits to thinking about the market metaphor for religion *as metaphor*; I will discuss several inter-related sets of questions briefly and by way of conclusion; these are, of course, only suggestions for further research that are facilitated by the rhetorical and ideological analysis of market metaphors as I have presented them here.

At the beginning of the Twenty-First Century it no longer seems quite so contradictory to talk about a “religious economy” as it would have previously. Once we can recognize that “the religious economy” is a metaphor that draws into comparison two non-identical phenomena, we can begin to ask why it is that these two things have become sufficiently similar that the metaphor works. While thinking in purely literal terms about the “religious economy” rules out this historicising

question altogether, facing up to the rational choice metaphor —as a metaphor— enables us to ask about this change.

Two decades ago Roland Robertson (1992) asked us to consider to the degree to which religion has been re-shaped by a market logic, but so far progress towards answering his question has been limited. In response to the rational choice theorists, he had proposed that we ask: why it is that the rhetoric of the religious market now seems persuasive, and even common-sense? What accounts for the current vitality of the RC approach? Why is it that the market term configured the way that it is by RC theorists? I have begun to address these questions here, in terms of the ideological backdrop of RC theorising about religion, though much work remains to be done. For example, there are many open questions about the degree to which religion has become marketized (Carrette and King, 2005). It is equally worth asking if there been a corresponding “spiritualisation” of the market? (For suggestive beginnings to addressing this question, see Roberts, 2002; Lash 2010).

I have already suggested that the RC approach to the sociology of religion has an overly simplistic and even pre-sociological conception of the consumer. RC theorists have imported the assumptions and models of the economists *in toto* without even taking into account the long and noble history of critiques to which these assumptions have been subjected; they write as if Weber, Simmel, Marx and Durkheim (not to mention Hegel, Horkheimer, Mauss, Elias, Braudel or Polanyi) never did. This, I suspect is the real reason for Stark’s jeremiad against “Ancestor Worship”— his term for taking the classics of sociology seriously (Stark, 2004). When the whole history of sociological theory has had the defence of the social against its reduction to the economic as one of its dominant themes, it is not surprising that Stark is looking to provide an incantation that will keep them away; otherwise,

the ghosts of sociological thought will keep returning to question his apriori economic assumptions.

The rational actor is the logical extension of a very particular view of the market—one largely promoted by Chicago School neo-liberals, a logical stop-gap (Parsons, 1950) to shore up a particular conception of the market. Other visions of the consumer have been developed by historians, anthropologists, and by sociologists. Given recent developments in the sociological theory and empirical research on consumption^{vi}, the cross-fertilization of the market metaphor in sociology of religion and the sociology of consumption seems an extremely promising direction for future research^{vii}. An engagement with these literatures would facilitate more empirical research on *how* religion and consumption are connected, rather than simply assuming that religion is simply a kind of consumption that stems from “human nature”. At the very least, the effort of studying sociologically how consumers of religious “goods” make their decisions could at least spare us from simply making un-sociological *assumptions* about how consumers think, feel, and behave.

Quoting Max Black, McClosky (1998) writes of metaphor as a device for bringing “two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other”(42)—refrigerators as a means of understanding children. But because metaphor compares two things, does this not encourage us and enable us also to ask the questions that the metaphor poses in the opposite direction as well? If refrigerators help us to understand children, how do children help us to understand refrigerators? The stereoscopic logic of the metaphor, especially to the dialectical mind, demands that we ask this second question. Here, I suspect, is another reason that RC theorists often resist understanding the market as metaphor. If we can understand some aspects of religion

by comparison to the market, can we not understand the market (and the terms that the economists use for the market) by means of religion? In other words, do the terms we use for comprehending religion help us to better understand the market, as well? As Richard Harvey Brown puts it: “metaphor drives its points home on a two-way street” (1977: 81).

Following Kenneth Burke’s terminology, I have spoken about the market as the God metaphor for rational choice theories. This is mostly because it is the concept which organizes the whole discourse, but I have another meaning in mind, as well. As both the theologian, Harvey Cox (1999), and the economist Robert Nelson (2001) have argued neo-liberal economic language is thoroughly theological. Although Marx was partly joking when he refers to the liberal economists as the theologians of capitalism, Walter Benjamin argued with absolute seriousness that Capitalism is “an essentially religious phenomenon” (1996: 288).

If we think about how the market is commonly talked about by economists and in the business pages of the newspaper, we find that it is often talked about in terms that Jews, Christians, and Muslims speak of God. The market is not only viewed as a powerful force, but a personified entity: the market acts, reacts, punishes and rewards. The market is often seen as omniscient and omnipotent, and well on its way to becoming omnipresent: who can listen to Adam Smith’s oft repeated turn of phrase about the “invisible hand”, and not hear the echo of god language? When the god makes demands, who are we but to obey?

Here, I suggest, there are important, but thus-far largely forgone opportunities for critical sociologists of religion. As a discipline, we have developed a facility for thinking about how God concepts structure belief, how religious worldviews are constructed and maintained, how those beliefs enter into relation with power—in

other words, we have a developed set of tools and concepts that help us to understand religious ideologies. How can we apply the notions of sacred/profane, sin/guilt/debt, the promise of salvation, ritual, sacrifice, and apocalypse, for example, to re-describe the economy? How can such concepts help us to better understand the “religious” or “spiritual” dimensions of the capitalist market and its ideologies? What kind of traction can sociologists of religion gain in understanding the problems of the capitalist world economy and its ideologues by turning our own distinctive conceptual vocabulary to the analysis of the market?

These questions lie beyond the scope of this paper, but they do suggest a fruitful line of questioning to pursue. What is clear, however, is that the dead metaphors of rational choice have put up a road block on this route; the neo-liberal rhetoric of rational choice theory stands in the way. More troublesome than the intellectual implications are the political ones. Rational choice theory’s literalized market metaphor naturalizes a view of human nature that makes the one-dimensional society of neo-liberal politics seem inevitable: the selfish god of rational choice theory, given the chance, will create human beings in its own image.

Conclusion

For all of its scientific pretence, rational choice theory is premised on a metaphor that it is keen to deny. In this paper, I have examined the implications of the rational choice market metaphor in relation to neo-liberal ideology, and I have suggested that the popularity of rational choice thinking stems in part from its consonance with the “new common sense” neo-liberal politics has created. That the theory reflects this new socio-political reality is not surprising, that its god metaphor threatens to re-create human beings in its image is a good deal more worrying. No longer is there

theoretical scope for human action that is not calculatingly self-serving. Rational choice theory suggests that not only is the capitalist market natural, even the gods are subject to its laws. We, too, must obey.

Notes

ⁱ See in particular: Alexander (1992), Crossley (2002), , Green and Shapiro (1996), Hindess 1991, Simon (1982), Tilly (1997), Bourdieu (2005), Archer and Titter (2002), Zafirovski (2000). For the sociology of religion, see: See Brittain (2006), Bruce (2000), Bryant (2001), Chaves (1995), Demerath (1995), Goldstein (2006) Jerolmack and Porpora (2004), Spickard (1997), Sharot (2002).

ⁱⁱ *The Victory of Reason* (2005) is an interesting and scholarly book; it is also one that brings Stark's neo-liberal commitments wide into the open. The argument I make here is, I believe, coherent regardless of the personal views of the authors whose work I am criticising.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the references in footnote i above.

^{iv} There is admittedly a brisk trade in books on religion by writers who do promote such a view, such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. These would not be writers that are influential among academic sociologists of religion, who find their analyses of religion ham-fisted and misleading at best. What is somewhat more surprising, given their politics (by no means progressive any of them), is that they seem to have found a following on the Left. That, however, is the topic for another paper.

^v On this, see the very fine essay by Christopher C. Brittain (2006).

^{vi} See, for example: Slater (1997) , Baudrillard (1998), Bauman (1998), Bocoock (1993), Bourdieu (2005), Lury (1996), Miller (1998), Schor (1998), Twitchell (1999, 2000,2005), Zukin (2005).

^{vii} There are the beginnings of a literature on religious consumption being done in commerce departments (Belk and O'Guinn 1989, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, Holt 2002), in history (Giggie and Winston 2002; McDannel 1995, Moore 1994, Lambert 1994), in religious studies (Carette and King 2005) but this has yet to take root in sociology (but see Lyon 2000).

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