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# Gods and social mechanisms. New perspectives for an explanatory sociology of religion

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Observatoire des religions en Suisse (ORS)

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

When I was a doctoral student, I tried to brush up my French by reading French thrillers on the way to the office. After a year I seemed to run out of interesting thrillers and in the bookstore my eyes fell on "*La place du désordre*" by Raymond Boudon, a sociologist of whom I had never heard. I still remember how I started reading - increasingly fascinated - on the bus and missed the bus stop to get off. Up until then, I had been a firm adherent of Luhmanian "systems theory", an approach that excludes individuals from sociological analysis. What had always bothered me, though, was that I just could not seem to use the theory for my empirical investigations. Reading Boudon, everything that I had taken for granted was shattered and yet all the pieces of evidence that had worried me fell into place. At last, somebody showed me how one should explain social phenomena with concrete examples and not just describe them with interrelated definitions. When I arrived at page 50, I had decided to go study with Boudon in Paris. Two years later - a grant and a letter of invitation in my pocket - I arrived at the *gare de Lyon*.

Sociologists of religion will recognize that the story I have just told looks a bit like a *conversion* story (although, to be sure, in religious conversion stories, it would have been *God* wanting me to take Boudon's book from the shelf). Sociologists using methodological individualism will recognize the story to be one showing the *unintended consequences of rational action* (After all, I just wanted to brush up my French). For my purposes, however, the story has a third meaning. In fact, since I got introduced to methodological individualism and explanatory sociology by Raymond Boudon, I have made it my goal to apply this kind of approach to my substantive field, the sociology of religion. Drawing on Boudon as well as on like-minded sociologists such as Hartmut

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Christine Rhone for correcting my English.

Esser, Siegwart Lindenberg, James Coleman or Peter Hedström, I have tried to introduce ideas from general explanatory sociology into my specific realm of sociology of religion, where these ideas and tools are often not yet known. Or to say it another way: I have tried to use social mechanism in order to explain why, when and how individuals deal with the gods.

The purpose of this contribution is to present four such ideas. In the first part of the paper, I briefly sketch the model of rational choice as it has been applied to the field of sociology of religion. In the second part, I describe the four ideas that may solve existing problems of "rational choice of religion". To a great extent, these solutions already appear in the sociological and economic literature; however, to date they have not been integrated into research in the sociology of religion. For lack of space, I can only sketch the new tools and ideas and must point to more specialized literature for further reference.

## **THE THEORY OF "RATIONAL CHOICE OF RELIGION"**

It is noteworthy that sociology of religion is not new to explanatory sociology. In fact, since the 1980s - and almost exclusively in the USA - adherents of "rational choice of religion", especially Rodney Stark, Laurence R. Iannaccone, William S. Bainbridge and Roger Finke have played a major role, producing some of the most innovative and original theorizing and empirical work in the field (Warner 1993, Young 1997, Jelen 2002). Their publications, however, have also been the target of a very marked and trenchant criticism that often disputed the model as a whole (Bruce 1999).

While there are certainly differences between the different authors<sup>2</sup> and their theories cover a very wide range of different subjects, the following ideas are among the most important for all the authors mentioned: First, the religious is seen as a societal field among others; it has no specific ontological status and does not require different analytical tools. Thus, the same basic suppositions can be made as in any other social field. Second, individuals are rational, they are endowed with (at least relatively) stable preferences, and they choose what pleases them the most in a religious market. Third, religious groups may be seen as "religious firms", which supply a product that is more or less attractive. Fourth, the economic laws of supply and demand are applicable,

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<sup>2</sup> *Two trends inside rational choice of religion may be distinguished. Stark, Bainbridge and Finke are sociologists strongly influenced by sociological classics. They also use weak suppositions concerning rationality. Iannaccone, on the other hand, a student of Gary Becker, proposes a "pure" approach, using the original Beckerian assumptions.*

and the most efficient entrepreneurs will survive in the market. Iannaccone describes it like this:

*Religious 'consumers' are said to 'shop' for churches much as they shop for cars; weighing costs and benefits, and seeking the highest return on their spiritual investment. Religious 'producers', erstwhile clergy, struggle to provide a 'commodity' at least as attractive as their competitors'. Religion is advertised and marketed, produced and consumed, demanded and supplied. (Iannaccone 1992: 123)*

The supporters of the theory of rational choice of religion have applied their model to a host of phenomena. They have used it to explain, notably, the fact that conservative churches seemed more successful than moderate churches (Iannaccone 1994), the emergence of new religious groups in the United States and Europe (Stark/Bainbridge 1985), the success of first-century Christianity (Stark 1997), the history of religious groups in the United States (Finke/Stark 1992), secularization in Europe (Stark/Iannaccone 1994), or again the religious behavior of households (Iannaccone 1990).

### ***A prominent example and its problems***

Better to apprehend the way in which the theoreticians of rational choice explain religious phenomena, I here present a more detailed example: the explanation of the different levels of religiosity by Iannaccone (1991). The latter took on the task of explaining why we found different levels of religiosity (measured by the frequency of attendance of religious services) in different Western countries. In the United States, for example, this religiosity is on average very high; in Switzerland and Germany it is lower, and in Sweden and Norway, people go to church even less often. In his analysis, Iannaccone starts with standard micro-economic assumptions (maximization, stable preferences, and market equilibrium). The explanation found is then the following: in all the countries, we find a religious market in which supply (the religious groups) and demand (the believers) meet. It so happens that the various national markets are differently regulated as to State intervention (whether it intervenes and to what extent) and as to the very form of the market (monopoly, oligopoly, mixed systems, free competition). Now, according to economic laws, regulated markets function less well than free markets. This is exactly what should also happen – according to Iannaccone – in the religious field. In a market where only a few religious groups (or even a single one) operate, which in addition benefit from State support, the “providers” have little motivation to center their “products” on the needs of the “consumers”. The bishops, priests, pastors, and deacons become less and less enterprising; the faithful do not find

any religious products that they like, and therefore they withdraw. This results in a weak aggregate religiosity. Exactly the opposite happens in the markets that have free competition. In this case, no religious group is favoured or supported by the State, and thus all the groups find themselves in competition and try to supply products at least as good as those of their competitors. The faithful encounter a wide choice of religious goods and, almost certainly, find a supply to their liking. The aggregate religiosity proves high. Empirically, we observe (concerning the data used by Iannaccone) that the theory seems pertinent to the traditionally Protestant countries. Indeed, in these countries a strong religious plurality coincides with a strong religiosity (United States), a middle plurality with a middle religiosity (Switzerland, Germany), and a low plurality with a low religiosity (Sweden, Norway). However, the same theory fails in the traditionally Catholic countries (Belgium, Spain, and Italy). In these countries, we discover, in fact, that a low level of religious plurality is linked to strong religiosity. Iannaccone tries to save his theory by introducing ad hoc explanations that do not interest us in this context (See on this point Chaves/Cann 1992).

While the paper by Iannaccone is clearly one of the most original and influential works produced in recent years, it also presents quite a number of problems, some of which will be addressed below. The most important one, of course, is that the theory does not account for an important part of the data (the Catholic countries). Clearly, then, other mechanisms must also be at work. But there are further, theoretical problems we might note. For example, Iannaccone assumes religious groups to be "firms" that "produce" religion which is then "consumed" by individuals. Below we will see a - in my view - more satisfactory way of conceptualizing religious groups. Furthermore, Iannaccone sees "religion" as a "good" (measuring it by weekly church attendance). Below we will see that a much differentiated view on what may count as "religious goods" may be useful to sociologists of religion in the future.<sup>3</sup> Also, Iannaccone assumes a "closed religious market". Below we will see that much can be gained by discarding this notion and by looking at the competition between the religious and the secular.

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<sup>3</sup> As will become clear, my view on this is strongly based on ideas by Iannaccone. In general, while some of my work stands in contrast to the ideas of Iannaccone and Stark, they are also among my most important sources of inspiration.

## **NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR AN EXPLANATORY SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION**

In what follows, I present four ideas that may solve certain problems "rational choice of religion" has encountered to this day. These are most certainly not the only problems of rational choice of religion that have been mentioned in the literature; I would, however, argue that they are among the most important ones.

### ***Accounting for religious beliefs and actions***

Former rational choice versions have just posited the rationality principle, without bothering much to defend it (e.g. Iannaccone 1992: 124). However, only a short moment of reflection will show that the rationality assumption seems to be more vulnerable in religious matters than (probably) anywhere else in the social world. Many religious *beliefs* seem to be - at least to the outside observer - "weird" and either based on very biased evidence or on no evidence at all. Thus, Christians believe that God is a transcendent being that has reincarnated himself by fathering a child with a woman (Mary) and to have sacrificed his own son Jesus (thus, in a way, himself) in order to wash away all of human sins. Raelians believe that their leader has been contacted by an extraterrestrial (Yahwe) and has visited a planet where he has met with all the past prophets (Mohammed, Jesus, Buddha etc.). Buddhists believe that, although the "self" is an illusion, it is nevertheless reincarnated in an endless stream of reincarnations, subject to the good or bad karma accumulated through one's actions. The adherents of Father Divine believed that he was God and could not die (they had to revise at least the latter belief in 1965, when he did, in fact, die). One could go on with "weird" beliefs, seen from the outside perspective, for many pages.

Many religious *actions* will seem just as irrational and bizarre to an external observer as the beliefs we have just mentioned. Spiritists talk to the deceased, Pentecostals heal each other by laying on their hands, Scientologists will interrogate each other for hundreds of hours with some kind of lie-detector (the "E-meter"), adepts of the esoteric leader Jasmuheen will eat only light instead of food. But these and other religious actions are not just "extraordinary". They often also have inherent qualities that seem to defy individual rationality from the start. Thus, many religious actions are clearly *not* centered on "individual profit", but rather on the well-being of others (e.g. charitable actions like *caritas* for the Christians or *zakat* for the Muslims). Furthermore, the religious goals of ultimate salvation are sometimes attainable only if

believers do *not* seek them actively (Rajneeshism) or are thought to be simply unattainable by individual efforts and dependent only on divine grace (Protestantism). Finally, many religious actions are clearly not based on choices, but are rather guided by ritual and traditional "recipes".

It might therefore seem that we could hardly pick a more inappropriate field for a sociological research programme building on rationality assumptions. However, I am still convinced that rational explanations are methodologically the most promising option. To put it very shortly, we have a host of first-rate rationalist explanations in the field of religion that show how fruitful this methodology is (the best example is the research program of Max Weber, see Stolz 2006) and the alternatives are quite simply not very convincing, be they Lévy-Bruhl type theories that assume that religious people use a different "logic" than the scientific observer or be they of the "symbolist" type, assuming that religious individuals do not really believe in the existence or effectiveness of their gods, prayers or magical techniques, but attach only a "symbolic meaning" to them (Boudon 1990). Let me add that what I propose is just methodological advice, not an axiom. It would be foolish to believe that religious individuals are in all circumstances rational. Examples of irrational belief and behaviour are frequent. But it is useful - when confronted with seemingly bizarre religious beliefs and behaviour - to start out with the rationality assumption and to see how far we get. How then should we proceed? The idea that I would like to offer is the following.

For *beliefs*, we should build on a very simple, abstract psychological model. A good starting point would be the assumption that individuals in general will entertain beliefs that have "a maximal degree of inductive plausibility, given the evidence (Elster, 1986: 13).<sup>4</sup> Individuals can thus be said to have "good reasons" for their beliefs (Boudon 1990, 2000), the reasons being at the same time the causes for the beliefs. Starting from such an assumption - how can we then explain their "strange" beliefs? I would suggest that the most promising avenue for sociologists (who want to explain the beliefs of large numbers of people and social groups) is to search explanatory variables in what has been called the "information environments" of the individuals and groups (Goldthorpe 1998).<sup>5</sup> The information environments can be divided into:

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<sup>4</sup> Elster notes two additional points that seem less important for my present purposes.

<sup>5</sup> *In my view - and contrary to Boudon - we should not put much emphasis on cognitive errors and biases (even though they may be important in specific instances), since such errors are more likely to cancel out in large groups and may more easily be corrected through social learning.*

1. *Information opportunities*. This is all the information that is available or that may be available if one goes to the trouble of looking for it. It also includes the information that allows us not to look elsewhere (e.g. whether or not knowledge about causal or statistical inference is available or not; whether or not evolution theory has already been found or not).
2. *Information institutions*. These are conventions, norms, laws as well as organizations that regulate and organize the search, the production and the distribution of information (e.g. when the Catholic Church sets up a list of "forbidden books" or when school children are required to attend religion classes)
3. *Information culture*. These are knowledge and theories that may be used to capture, legitimize, explain or compete with new knowledge (e.g. classifying systems, ways of explaining why black magic might or might not work etc.).

Types, strength, distributions, loss and maintenance of beliefs can then be explained by the presence or absence of information opportunities, institutions and culture. To give just two sketchy examples: Pentecostals who firmly believe in the power of divine healing are surrounded by individuals who will "testify" that such healing has worked innumerable times. In their healing workshops, well organized techniques produce the effect that many healings apparently take place (Stolz 2007). It is therefore quite rational to continue to believe in healings, even if individuals themselves have perhaps not (yet?) been healed. If in the Middle Ages so many more people believed in the biblical creation account than today, it is not that they were more "irrational" than we are. Rather the concept of evolution theory did not exist and the biblical account did not have reasonable alternatives. In addition, of course, powerful information institutions forbade questioning the creation belief (different from today).

When it comes to *actions*, we should again assume an "abstract psychology". Here, it would be a good idea to just assume that individuals (usually, but not always) act rationally, on the basis of beliefs and preferences and being influenced by opportunities, institutions and culture.<sup>6</sup> Often, we therefore have external opportunities (such as the existence of a newly built church with much parking space), institutions (e.g. presence or absence of norms concerning church attendance) or culture (e.g. presence or absence of religious imagery in public discourse) that may be used as explanatory concepts. In other cases (or in conjunction with the above), we will explain actions through beliefs and preferences.

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<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting that actions are always rational. Quite evidently, we also have cases of "wishful thinking", "sour grapes" etc. in the field of religion. My point is rather that - as a methodological rule - we should stay with the idea that individuals are rational in the sense used above for as long as possible.



Evidently, many "strange religious actions" are caused by the beliefs entertained by the respective individuals and we therefore have to go back and first explain those. In other cases, however, the preferences of individuals are decisive. In our model (following Esser 1999 and Lindenberg 1990) even preferences can sometimes be rationally explained. This is the case when it is believed that certain actions are means in order to achieve certain ends (social production functions, see Stolz 2009a). When individuals see that they can obtain certain ends only with certain means, the preferences for the means are rational and will change rationally if the means-ends relationships change.

Let us again look at some examples. When a sixteen-year-old member of the *Evangelischer Brüderverein EBV* sends a letter of apology to a store where he stole a candy 10 years earlier this may seem bizarre to an outside observer. It can be explained as a rational action, however, if we know that in the EBV, this is a means of repenting and thus accomplishing the end of one's personal conversion (social production function). A journalist who had visited a Pentecostal service recently came to me - completely bewildered - and told me how she had observed that various individuals had "broken down psychologically", stammering unintelligible words. She was quite astounded when I told her that what she had observed was just the "speaking in tongues", a common practice in Pentecostalism, that individuals rationally aspire to. Or, to take a final example, at first it may seem completely irrational when a small group of people waits for several cold nights in the garden of a small suburban house for the arrival of "extra-terrestrials". It becomes understandable, however, if we take into consideration that this group firmly believes in the fact that "Mrs. Keech", their leader, is in fact in contact with the extra-terrestrial Sananda who has given them the date of his arrival in a very clear message (received through automatic writing by Mrs. Keech) (Festinger et al. 1964). Similarly, it was quite rational for South Sea islanders to build docks and landing strips since they were sure that a wonderful ship would soon arrive, in which their ancestors would bring them all the valued goods - the "cargo"(Jarvie 1970).

In conclusion to this first point, I suggest that in future work much could be gained by not just assuming rationality, but by analyzing much more in detail how far we can get in explaining religious beliefs and actions as rational, looking both at opportunities, institutions and culture as well as beliefs and preferences.

### ***The explanation of religiosity: a mechanism-based approach***

As we have seen in the example by Iannaccone above, rational choicers have provided an interesting, actor-based and causal mechanism that may explain variation of religiosity in different countries or regions. The central explanatory variable is regulation of religious supply. There is a problem, however. For, believing that "religious demand is stable", rational choicers think that the mechanism described is the only one at work and exclude other possible mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of these beliefs, rational choicers have then started a sort of "theoretical war" against what is called the "orthodox theory of secularization", which argues that modernization leads (through rationalization and differentiation) to secularization. The debate between rational choicers and secularization theorists became very lively, to say the least, with theorists starting to wish for the death - not of their colleagues, fortunately, - but of their respective theoretical constructs.<sup>8</sup> The debate among these two approaches was such that researchers forgot to ask if the proposed mechanisms were perhaps completely compatible; also, alternative theories such as socialization theory did often not get the attention they deserve.

The idea that I propose here is a simple one. In my view, we have to give up the idea that one mechanism can explain all the variation of religiosity. Rather, we have to suppose a number of important mechanisms that may or may not be at work in different socio-historic settings. I define mechanisms with Hedström (2005: 25) as "a precise, abstract, and action-based explanation which shows how the occurrence of a triggering event regularly generates the type of outcome to be explained". What I have tried to do in a recent paper is therefore to extract the most important mechanisms proposed by different theories (rational choice, secularization, socialization etc.) and to reformulate them as complementary, rational-action based, macro-micro-macro mechanisms in an integrated theoretical framework (the model by Hartmut Esser, 1999<sup>9</sup>). Put as succinctly as possible, the model states that individuals will have a higher probability of choosing a religious action:

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<sup>7</sup> More recently, Stark and Iannaccone (1996) have allowed for a second mechanism: conflict, that might further religiosity as a substitute for deregulation.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, Rodney Stark (Stark/Finke 2000) wished that secularization theory might "rest in peace", while Steve Bruce (2002) saw his book as the stake that would be driven through the chest of the vampire (representing rational choice).

<sup>9</sup> *The Esser (1999) model supposes that individuals react (in a limited sense) rationally to opportunities, institutions and culture based on their beliefs and preferences. Beliefs and preferences are in part influenced through socialization. Preferences are strongly dependent on social production functions.*

1. the more they are deprived (and the poorer the available secular coping strategies (Deprivation)
2. the more they are forced to exhibit or to refrain from exhibiting unbelief by norms and sanctions (Regulation of demand)
3. the freer they are to organize religious supply that is exactly to the liking of the individuals (Regulation of supply)
4. the lower the secular production of culture (e.g. in the media, science, leisure possibilities) (Production of religious or secular culture)
5. the more they feel their ethnic or cultural identity threatened by social or cultural change (Ethnicity)
6. the more they have been socialized religiously. Furthermore, individuals will have a higher probability of giving their children a religious socialization, the more religion is seen to be an important 'cultural capital' in society. (Socialization)

Note that all of these mechanisms are actor-based and assume individual rationality. Given their knowledge and their preferences and based on their evaluation of opportunities, institutions and cultural frames, individuals will choose the action that seems - from their subjective point of view - to provide the greatest utility (Elster 1986). Thus - if individuals pray to God for healing or alleviation of poverty, as may be the case in many current agrarian societies, if they fulfill their religious duties in order to be seen as respected members of the community, as in many European societies until the end of the nineteenth century, if they go to Mass as a sign of protest against a political regime, as in Poland before 1989, or if they take their children out of religious instruction courses at school because they deem religious knowledge 'not important' - in every one of these cases they use (bounded) rationality, in the above sense, in order to decide. I have tried to show that there are both theoretical and empirical pay-offs when using this approach (Stolz 2009b). Theoretically, harmful assumptions are discarded and formerly abstract theories are rendered explanatory. Empirically, research is conducted closer to theory and in a much more systematic fashion. In an application to Switzerland, for example, the most important factors explaining both Christian and alternative religiosity were found only when using this approach, and had formerly not been noted.

## ***Religious groups as non-profit organizations***

In rational choice of religion, there have been different attempts to conceptualize religious groups.<sup>10</sup> Especially in recent years, the idea of "religious firms" has gained ground. It is believed that groups will somehow behave like economic firms on economic markets: maximize their profits, minimize their costs, and change their products in order to satisfy new customer needs etc. But it does not take long reflection to see that religious groups and economic firms are very different in many ways and that the average congregation finds itself in a completely different situation than any firm producing, say, cars or washing powder. Theories that operate with a "religious firms" approach may therefore lead to highly misleading conclusions.

The idea that I would therefore like to advance and that - I hope - holds much promise for future rational choice of religion is to see religious groups not so much as "religious firms", but as "non-profit organizations" (NPO) (Harris 1998a,b). In several respects, non-profit organizations are distinguishable from firms oriented to profit (Schwarz 1986):

1. They have members and their main goal does not reside in the profit of the firm, but in the satisfaction of the needs of their members or other specified social groups.
2. Often, their members democratically govern them; the needs of the members are not discovered through the market but through democracy.<sup>11</sup>
3. Most often, they are strongly based on volunteer work; in the case of larger NPOs, there is in addition some remunerated work.
4. They do not finance themselves principally by the sale of products, but by members' contributions or donations.
5. They do not produce private goods, but "affiliation", "services", "collective activities", and "public goods".

While there have been excellent qualitative studies by Margeret Harris (1998), the overall theoretical and empirical pay-offs of reconceptualizing religious groups in the proposed manner have yet to be demonstrated. I suspect that if this idea is used, we will find many important applications of rational choice, leading us to much better explanations. For example, I would conjecture that the

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<sup>10</sup> Stark/Bainbridge (1985) and Stark/Finke (2000) propose a church/sect/cult typology. Iannaccone (1994) talks about "churches", when analyzing problems of "freeriders".

<sup>11</sup> Among the religious groups, there are cases in which one or several charismatic directors govern the group. Frequently, we find mixed cases that blend "democracy" and "theocracy".

"free-rider mechanism" - for all its interest - is only one causal link that may help to explain the growth or decline of religious groups. Let me give just two examples of what might affect churches seen as non-profit organizations. First, a central variable is the extent to which individuals have non-religious opportunities for leisure time and volunteer work. The more attractive such secular opportunities in the surrounding society, the more difficult it will be for the churches to keep their members interested, make them "consume" the goods provided for members and take up volunteer positions. A second point suggested by the model is that current members' interests may be important obstacles when trying to reach out to their surrounding society. If your congregation consists of elderly people, and if these elderly have a strong influence through the council and their volunteer position, it might be very difficult to change the congregation in order to make it attractive to younger people (or people with other socio-demographic backgrounds).

***The explanation of secularization and resacralization : looking at the competition between the religious and the secular***

The fourth and last problem that I would like to identify resides in the fact that "rational choice of religion" has hitherto rather neglected the competition existing between religious goods and secular goods. The reason for this neglect resides in two suppositions that are firmly linked. A first supposition (explicit) states that, historically and geographically, the demand for religion is constant (Stark/Bainbridge 1985: 2; Stark/Iannaccone 1994). A second supposition requires that the religious market be limited to religious products. Secular supplies could therefore not substitute for religious supplies. This supposition is found implicitly in most of the writings of the authors of religious "rational choice". These two basic suppositions have functioned as "epistemological obstacles", having as a consequence that a satisfactory theory of the "rational choice" type on secularization has been lacking to our day.

The idea I would like to present is therefore the following: We may construct a theory of religious and secular competition, built on an explanatory (rational-action based) framework and using the notion of "social production functions".<sup>12</sup> Christian churches can be understood as non-profit organizations that produce *intermediate church* goods (affiliation, services, collective activities, public goods, and individual positions). Intermediate goods offered by churches provide individuals with the opportunity to produce *final goods* that may be transcendent (e.g. afterlife, life in Christ, gifts of the spirit, etc.) or immanent (e.g. comfort in case of deprivation, meaning and

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<sup>12</sup> Social productions functions are institutionalized chains of means-ends relationships. They link intermediate goods and final goods (Lindenberg 1990).

interpretation, social integration, life-cycle structuring etc.). While churches and other religious institutions are without competition when it comes to producing transcendent final goods, they have to face very tough competition concerning immanent final goods. A host of secular institutions (the family, work, the education and leisure sector, psychotherapy, medicine, insurances, the welfare state, etc.) all produce intermediate goods that allow individuals to produce immanent final goods, such as compensation when deprived, security, hope for the future, values and guidance, interpretation of the world and others. Two types of competition can be identified. A first type concerns "functionally close" competition between religious and secular means in order to produce a given immanent final good, such as "compensation when deprived". Individuals may have to choose, say, between going to a pastor or a psychotherapist if they feel psychologically challenged. A second, "functionally distant" type involves a choice between transcendent or immanent final goods. For example, individuals may have to choose if they would rather strive for spiritual growth or a career. The theory assumes that individuals, based on beliefs and preferences, choose their actions in a rational way and that many social outcomes are thus to be explained as following from aggregations of individual adaptations to given states of competition between the religious and the secular. In a recent paper (Stolz 2009a), I have argued that this framework can account for a wide variety of empirical findings.

To take just three examples: As Gruber and Hungerman (2008) showed, the repealing of the so-called "blue-laws" (laws that prohibit "labor" and "selling" on Sundays) in various states in the US led to a drop in church attendance. Our theory accounts for this by pointing to the fact that due to the repealing of the law the opportunity cost of church-going rises: many individuals will thus switch to the more attractive shopping on a Sunday. Norris and Inglehart (2004) show that in agrarian countries religiosity is much higher than in industrialized countries. Our theory explains this with the insight that in agrarian countries important final goods like "security", "interpretation of the world", "compensation when deprived", and "health" can for many individuals only be produced with religious intermediate goods, since secular alternatives (like welfare states, insurances, modern medicine, modern media) are normally lacking or unaffordable. In France (Alsace), the churches report that the numbers of church funerals have been decreasing since funeral entrepreneurs and the state cemetery have successfully been offering attractive civil funerals at interesting prices (Grellier 2007). Again, we see that an increasing secular competition may "crowd out" religious market share.

## **CONCLUSION : GODS AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS**

This article has presented four ideas by means of which we may explain religious beliefs and actions in a more convincing way in the future. Specifically, I have argued for a model with the following attributes:

1. It distinguishes between the rationality of beliefs and actions and analyzes them separately. Much (but not all) of what seems to be irrational in religious beliefs and actions is then accounted for by either the specific informational surrounding of individuals (accounting for beliefs) or the existence of specific religious "social production functions" (accounting for actions).
2. It introduces the idea of "*social mechanisms*" in order to explain religiosity. The idea of middle-range social mechanisms allows us to transform various "grand theories" (such as secularization or socialization theory) into a series of empirically testable causal links that may or may not operate in different socio-historic settings.
3. It treats religious groups as *non-profit organizations* and not as firms. Seeing religious groups as non-profit organizations helps us to understand why they often do not and cannot "adapt" to possible "markets". It also helps us understand that the "free-rider mechanism" is only one of a host of important mechanisms at work when it comes to explaining the success or failure of religious groups.
4. It classifies intermediate and final religious goods and compares them to secular goods. Great emphasis is then put on the competition between religious and secular. With the help of this insight, many empirical findings can be explained.

While I do believe that these ideas may help us to better explain why, how and under what circumstances individuals deal with the gods, it is true that the ultimate usefulness of this approach can only be shown with concrete empirical studies. While some convincing applications exist, much work remains to be done.

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