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James V. Spickard
University of Redlands

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RETHINKING RELIGIOUS SOCIAL ACTION:
WHAT IS 'RATIONAL' ABOUT RATIONAL-CHOICE THEORY?

James V. Spickard
Department of Sociology
University of Redlands
Redlands, California 92373

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Abstract: The rational-choice/market-model of religions really consists of two, separable parts: a model of religious behavior plus a rational-choice explanation of why that behavior occurs. This article examines three key theoretical assumptions of the latter explanation. It shows two of these to be false and the third to be so vague as to be useless. This undercuts a rational-choice psychology as an explanation for religious actions. It undercuts, however, neither the utility of the market-model itself nor of a rational-choice model of human behavior (as opposed to action). Together these can describe the overall structure of the religious marketplace, but cannot-and need not-describe the subjective actions of religious persons.

Though there has been much talk of late of a "new paradigm" in the sociology of religion (Warner 1993; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Young 1997; Stark 1997), there seems to be some disagreement about just what it is—even among its proponents. On the one hand we have authors like R. Stephen Warner (1993), Roger Finke (Finke 1989, 1990, 1997; Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996), and Rodney Stark (Finke and Stark 1988, 1992), who present a model of religious "economies" and "markets":

At the level of entire communities and societies, models of religious markets and religious regulation challenge the predictions of secularization theory, asserting instead the vitality of religion in pluralistic settings. (Iannaccone 1995a: 78)

On the other hand we have authors like Laurence Iannaccone (1988, 1990,
1995a, 1995b, 1997) and Rodney Stark (again) (Stark 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Stark and Finke 1993; Stark and Iannaccone 1993) who emphasize a rational-choice theory of human action that they claim explains why religious markets work as they do. These scholars argue that the rules that explain individual religious actions, if taken in the aggregate, explain the behavior of religious markets. The rational-choice approach "seeks to ... integrate numerous predictions within a single conceptual framework and provide theoretical explanations for observed empirical regularities" (Iannaccone 1995a: 78).

Both approaches use economic metaphors, and both agree on the notion of a religious economy. They agree that churches may be thought of as religious 'firms' competing for adherents in a structured marketplace. Market "regulation restricts competition by changing the incentives and opportunities of religious producers and the options of religious consumers" (Finke 1997: 46). In this view, so-called 'secularization' is just the natural consequence of religious monopolies-state-sponsored churches-which, like all monopolies (say proponents), fail to meet "consumers" needs. In closed markets, churches lose out to their cultural competition: sports, rock concerts, and television. "Religious institutions in the United States," on the other hand, "operate within an open market ... [and are] constitutively pluralistic ... [and] structurally flexible" (Warner 1993: 1045). And-not incidentally-they are well-attended, because they work to attract customers.

It may well be that this critique of the secularization thesis is circular. By measuring religion by church attendance, changes in life-orientation and worldview are obscured (Riis 1992; Buckser 1995; Demerath 1995). Likewise religions that favor church attendance over other forms of devotion will appear more vital, no matter what the market structure (Carroll 1996: 227-8). Yet there is little doubt that churches remain
important parts of the American social landscape, even if religious discourse has become less prominent (Carter 1993). Discourse may be secularized, but the market model highlights the continuing vitality of religious institutions.

The advocates of rational-choice theory go further, however. Besides supporting the notion of a religious marketplace, they propose a way to connect market behavior with individual religious action (Finke and Stark 1992: 250-255; Stark and Finke 1993; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Stark and Iannaccone 1993). Economists have argued for decades that markets work the way they do because of the millions of decisions made daily by consumers and producers, each rationally calculating profit and loss. Rational-choice theorists of religion import this model, arguing that its success at predicting market-level behavior tells us how religious consumers act.

Specifically, we can throw out old notions about religious irrationality. Religious people are not loony or deluded; they use the same reasoning processes as everyone else to gain the goods they seek. The European philosophical bias against religion, which variously degraded it as 'false consciousness' (Marx), 'neurosis' (Freud), or 'masochism' (Nietzsche) need not rule (see Finke and Stark 1992: 250); Stark 1996: 170).

Yet as Fireman and Gamson (1979: 8) warned us about rational-choice approaches to social movements, "Beware of economists bearing gifts." Few sociologists today equate religion with irrationality, as the almost uniform rejection of the "brainwashing" explanation for conversion to new religions reveals (see Bromley and Richardson 1983). Assuming that rational-choice theorists are not just debating a straw man, what kind of religious "rationality" do they advocate? Do their assumptions hold up to intellectual scrutiny? Using one particularly clear version of these assumption, this article will attempt to see where the rational-choice approach's rationality really lies.

There is no point in being coy about it: I shall find these assumptions
wanting. But this need not force us to suppose religious irrationality, nor does it imperil the market model of religious behavior. In the first case rationality comes in more than one kind; in the second, the market model's ties to rational-choice theory are adventitious, not essential.

THE POSTULATES OF RATIONAL CHOICE

Laurence Iannaccone (1988, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1997) is, arguably, the most systematic theorist to apply the rational-choice paradigm to the sociology of religion. He presents a unified theory that deduces market behavior from a limited set of assumptions about individual action. In a particularly revealing passage, he writes:

Gary Becker has aptly characterized the "heart" of the rational choice approach as "the combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly." ... Frankly, I cannot imagine a meaningful rational choice model of religion that does not ultimately rest upon these three assumptions:

Assumption #1: Individuals act rationally, weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits.

Assumption #2: The ultimate preferences (or "needs") that individuals use to assess costs and benefits tend not to vary much from person to person or time to time.

Assumption #3: Social outcomes constitute the equilibria that emerge from the aggregation and interaction of individual actions. (Iannaccone 1997: 26; cf. Iannaccone 1995a: 77).

From these admittedly simplifying assumptions, Iannaccone builds a coherent model of
the religious marketplace, one which shows individuals choosing their religious (and other) activities based on their own assessments of their needs. In his most famous and powerful example (Iannaccone 1994, 1996; Marwell 1996), he shows how a rational-choice model predicts the strength of religions that ask much of their adherents, where secularization theory would have predicted their decline. By erecting barriers to easy converts, he says, actors rationally protect themselves against free-riders and improve their own actions' cost-benefit ratio.

Iannaccone has come in for criticism on several fronts. Bruce (1993; see also 1995a, 1995b) has argued that the data he uses to support rational-choice theory's predictions also support other explanations. Iannaccone responds that these explanations are ad hoc, and only rational-choice theory "integrate[s] numerous predictions within a single conceptual framework" (Iannaccone 1995a: 79). Bruce and others (Etzioni 1988; Ferree 1992) have argued that people do not always maximize their benefits and minimize their costs as the theory demands; Bruce claims that people especially do not do so in religious settings. Perhaps, says Iannaccone, but even the Bible contains utilitarian admonitions; "instrumental, utilitarian language [is] a natural way people describe and defend their behavior" Iannaccone (1995a: 82). Robertson (1992) has suggested that the "economization" of religious language is an artifact of late modernity, an era in which everything-even religion-has become a commodity. Iannaccone (1995a: 84) notes that the evidence suggests otherwise: late antiquity was much like the modern world, and even medieval Catholicism was not as religiously uncompetitive as many seem to believe (see Stark 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 111-122). On each point, Iannaccone has a ready response, though perhaps not an indisputably a correct one.

Before developing my own critique, let me note the theory’s positive side. It is, to use Mary Douglas's (1979) terms, an "active-voice sociology". It presents people
making decisions for themselves, not as unthinking automata. It emphasizes agency, rather than structure, and portrays people as active participants in their own lives. Unlike some kinds of social theory—which treat people as if they were produced by their institutions (Homans 1964; Holton 1996:35; cf. Wrong 1961)—this approach emphasizes people's influence over those institutions. They choose between them with considerable fluidity.

Note the implications of this approach for understanding religions. Classical socialization theory presented beliefs and values as the outcome of social processes: the result of people's internalizations of what they are taught (Parsons 1955; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Alexander and Giesen 1987: 22-25; Alexander 1988: 312ff). "Culture"—the sum of a society's beliefs and values (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952)—was thought to vary from place to place because people in different societies were taught to believe and value different things (Benedict 1934; Geertz 1973: ch. 1). This accounted well for the Trobriand Islanders' notion that men have nothing to do with making babies (Malinowski 1961); it also accounted for our surprise that they could think any such thing. It accounted for Ilongot head-hunting beliefs (Rosaldo 1980), for atheism as well as for Christian fundamentalism (Balmer 1993): people believe what those they respect tell them is true.

But the traditional approach has a problem understanding social change, except as the result of diffusion and culture contact (Ulin 1984; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989). Margaret Mead (1953) could not explain the exchange of "new lives for old" on pre- and post-WWII Manus Island except as the result of outside influence. She could portray islanders' beliefs 'before' and 'after' the change, but could not say why the change occurred. Nor could a socialization model of culture explain Ilongot head-hunters' wholesale conversion to fundamentalist Christianity in the 1970s. As Worsley
(1968) and Rosaldo (1989) show for these cases respectively, internal cultural dynamics explain the changes if and only if one lets go of an over-socialized notion of culture. The established model could not explain these cases because it left no room for individual people to choose their world views.

Rational-choice theory meets Rosaldo’s demand for a better approach (though he, himself, takes an ethnomethodological turn). According to rational-choice, people are not trapped by their beliefs, nor do their beliefs prevent them from changing. Instead, change is normal and theological fluidity is the accustomed state of affairs. People chose even their beliefs based on their rational consideration of costs and benefits. Such events as mass religious conversions can make sense; they are not symptoms of the breakdown of any 'traditional world' but are strategic acts on the part of individuals and groups seeking to attain their ends. Head-hunters-to-Christians is thus the norm, not the exception: the Ilongot converted to help them stem their grief, which they formerly overcame with head-hunting—now banned by Philippine authorities. Christianity met their needs, and they changed their beliefs accordingly (Rosaldo 1989). Much to the chagrin of popes and theologians, people are not ruled by their world views; they use these world views as tools for living.

DISSECTING THE ASSUMPTIONS

Enough praise. Whether or not rational-choice theory is right, it at least does not commit the same sins as the theory it tries to replace. The problem is, the first two of Iannaccone's assumptions are demonstrably false and the third is so vague as to be nearly useless. Let us take these one at a time.

Maximization

First, people do not actually act only according to a means-ends rationality.
There are, at least, three ideal-typical modes of rational action, only one of them "weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits" (Iannaccone 1997:26. Stealing terms from philosophical ethics, we can refer to these as teleological, deontological, and cathekontic actions (Taylor 1975; Niebuhr 1963).

Teleological action is typified by means-ends rationality; utilitarianism is the best known example. This is the rationality Iannaccone favors, and it needs little elaboration here. It is a rationality of means. Ends are given, and thus are potentially irrational; rationality involves the careful calculation of the most efficient means to reach them. Max Weber named this "zweck-rationalität": "goal-rational action", to use one of the most common translations (Weber 1922: 26). ("Instrumental rationality" is another favored term.)

Deontological action is also rational, however, and is what Weber called "wert-rationalität". "Value-rationality" grounds action in some transcendent value or ideal, which it claims must be followed without regard to benefit or cost. In Weber's action-schema, any action that was undertaken for the sake of rules was value-rational:

Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call ... In our terminology, value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him. (Weber 1922, pp. 24-25)

At first blush, this seems to be much like teleological action, with "values" substituting for "goals". Indeed, some rational choice advocates (e.g.: Stark 1997: 6-7; Iannaccone 1995a: 82) have explicitly argued that deontology is just teleology in
disguise. But two traits render this equation false. First, as Weber pointed out, value-rationality is consistent, where goal-rationality is merely calculating: the former will pursue its goal no matter what, while the latter will do so only so long as benefits outweigh costs. Though both are rational, in some situations they would generate different results.

Second, values can themselves be rational, where goals are not. Kant (1785) grounded his supreme value-the categorical imperative-in Reason itself. He showed that all rational beings must agree to be treated as they wish to treat others: not because they benefit from doing so but because their very rationality demands it. Thus teleological action-the weighing of costs and benefits-is for Kant irrational because it lacks rational goals. Only deontological action is rational through and through (see Taylor 1975; Rachels 1986; Paton 1967).

Any attempt to reformulate deontology as teleology must therefore combat both Kant's careful argument and Weber's typological distinction. Demerath (1995: 107) makes a similar point when he accuses rational-choice theory of ignoring normative inputs. Norms and goals are not the same thing: one follows the first but maximizes the second. Both involve rational action, but of different kinds.

I have called a third form of rational action "cathekontic". This form is based on the relational ethics pioneered by H. Richard Niebuhr (1963; see Hoedemaker 1970; Malloy 1977; Gardner 1979; Irish 1983) and by various feminist scholars (Gilligan 1979, 1982; Maguire 1982; Noddings 1984, 1988). Rooted in the metaphor of dialogue, this ethics emphasizes the social relations people have with one another and the rational consideration of the responsibilities that grow from these relationships. As Nell Noddings puts it,

Ethical agents adopting this perspective do not judge their own acts solely by
their conformity to rule or principle, nor do they judge them only by the likely production of preassessed nonmoral goods such as happiness. While such agents may certainly consider both principles and utilities, their primary concern is the relation itself—not only what happens physically to others involved in the relation and in connected relations but what they may feel and how they may respond to the act under consideration. (Noddings 1988: 219)

Like deontological action, cathekontic action is neither calculating nor 'irrational'. It asks neither "what can I gain?" nor "what is my duty?" but "what are my responsibilities?". A father might lose his life to save his child, not out of emotion but because he feels that it is his responsibility to do so—not just to the child but to the community of which he is a part. A deontologist might do the same, but would do it for duty to an ideal, not responsibility to others; a teleologist might do it to maximize the group's happiness. All three acts have the same outcome, but their inner logic—and thus their rationality—is different. Weber's classic insight that the same objective act can be reached by any one of several subjective motives underscores the falsity of Iannaccone's first assumption. 2

Rational-choice theorists could respond that Iannaccone's first assumption refers not to people's subjective motives but to their objective ones. That is, it doesn't matter what people think they are doing, only what they are really doing. This is a reasonable answer, but it has consequences for the theory. Specifically it recasts Iannaccone's first assumption in the following form:

Individuals act as if they were rationally weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and as if they were choosing those actions that maximize their net benefits.

This is a very different statement than the one with which we began. Baring some
epistemological heavy lifting, this is no longer a statement about empirical individuals but a statement about the constituent elements of a model of social life. Whether or not individuals use means-ends calculations subjectively, Iannaccone's model of religion is built on the assumption that they do. And it is the model that is important, not the elements out of which it is built. As I shall show below, this is fruitful, as long as one remembers not to argue from the success of the model to the reality of its constituent elements.

Stable Preferences

Iannaccone's second assumption is that "the ultimate preferences (or 'needs') that individuals use to assess costs and benefits tend not to vary much from person to person or time to time." This, too, is untrue. Needs vary from time to time and place to place, and not all of the people in each particular time and place have the same spectrum of needs. The examples are endless, even without using socialization theory to explain their variation.

Let me cite just two cases from the ethnographies on my office shelves. Mbuti pygmies and their Bantu neighbors have different notions of the meaning of life and of how people should act toward the gods and toward one another (Turnbull 1961; see Douglas 1970). Where the former are religiously personalistic and intuitive, the latter are magical and ritualistic. Neither understands the other's goals nor even their sensibilities.

Similarly, the Menomini Indians, descendents of the aboriginal inhabitants of Wisconsin, are culturally split (Spindler and Spindler 1971). Tradition-oriented Menomini value personal autonomy, spirit visions, and a sense of common peoplehood apart from American society. Modern-oriented Menomini, on the other hand, value clear lines of social authority, consumer goods, and participation in the social mainstream.
These divisions are cultural, not personal; that is, the needs are not evenly distributed across all Menomini cultural groups, but are divided between them. Psychometric research clearly shows that these differences track socialization networks and are not a result of the analysts' model. If tradition-oriented and modern-oriented Menomini have such different need-structures, it is hard to imagine how Iannaccone's assumption can hold. By ranging so much between kindred groups, they must vary more widely when the cultural distances are greater. When one also notes that tradition-oriented Menomini make their major life-decisions based on dreams, while their modern-oriented co-tribalists base theirs on economics, the assumption of universal goal-rational action based on universally shared needs falls apart.

Despite Iannaccone's insistence on the centrality of stable preferences for the rational-choice approach, not all those who advocate that approach agree with him. Darren Sherkat and various of his collaborators (Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Ellison 1995) have argued for the re-inclusion of cultural notions in the rational-choice schema. By distinguishing between "preferences" and "choice", Sherkat points out that people may prefer one thing but actually choose something else. Southern Blacks, for example, often do not feel free to express their personal religious preferences because to do so might upset their social ties (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Thus individual preferences do not always motivate religious choice; the constellation of culturally available choices may vary over time and space even if preferences are stable; and a rational-choice model that leaves room for these possibilities will be stronger than one without it.

Iannaccone (1995b: 118-19) has responded that this insight is mathematically indistinguishable from his favored "human capital" approach. He admits that people's actual choices do vary over time, but claims that this is only to the degree that they have
"invested" in one or another form of religious activity. Time spent in one variety of religion leads people to stay with it, if only because learning a new set of rituals, prayers, and theologies takes so much effort. Thus religious switching occurs when people have not yet built up too much religious capital in a particular faith—e.g., when they are young adults. And they usually switch to a faith that does not cost them too much of their prior investment—e.g. from Presbyterian to Methodist rather than to Catholic or to Jehovah's Witness. Differential religious capital explains religious choices while letting underlying preferences endure.

Yet this salvages Iannaccone's second assumption if and only if it is reframed to talk about abstract preferences rather than concrete actions. To use Ellison and Sherkat's (1995) example: a Southern Black may personally prefer religious mysticism but may attend the local shouting church because of social constraints. We can talk about stable preferences, but we cannot measure them because we cannot observe them; we can only measure choices, as Sherkat suggests. Furthermore, we can only talk about preferences in the aggregate, not in each individual case. One might assume, for example, that X percent of any given population are mystics, Y percent are ritualists, and Z percent are religious sluggards—among other possibilities. The choices that any given social milieu manifests, however, will depend on the interaction between this range of preferences and the local structure of religious and social constraints. Put more simply, culture matters more to the religious landscape than do personal religious leanings.

But note what we have done. By making this move, we have ceased talking about individuals and are now talking about the religious marketplace. We have, in effect, reconstituted Iannaccone's second assumption as follows:

We should assume that the ultimate religious preferences (or "needs") of a population do not vary much from time to time or society to society.
Again, this is a very different assumption than the one with which we began. It is a statement about population patterns, not individuals, and a statement about religious preferences, not religious choices. And again, it might be fruitful, but not if we try to argue backward from populations to individuals and not if we try to describe people's choices, which observably vary across time and space. (I am not sure how a sociologist can observe "preferences", but I shall not delve into that question here.)

Equilibrium

Unlike Iannaccone's first two assumptions, the third is not so easily testable. Indeed, as it stands it is not testable at all. The statement has two parts. First, it equates social outcomes with "equilibria"; second, these outcomes are said to "emerge from the aggregation and interaction of individual actions."

To take the second part first: short of a mystical Hegelianism I cannot even imagine anything else being the case. Individuals act; the sum and product of their actions produce social life. This is hardly controversial, but it also does not say much. The conclusions one draws from it, however, will depend on the metaphysical weight one gives individuals. If one sees them as independent of and relatively immune from social influences-as the rational, independent actors that populate most economists' models-then one will treat their choices as the primary determinants of social life. If, on the other hand, one thinks of people as influenced, even shaped by their surroundings, one will emphasize the cultures, social structures, and so on that are sociology's traditional province. The relevant rational-choice "assumption" is not that "social outcomes ... emerge from ... individual actions," but an unspecified assumption about the nature of individuals and their relationship to society.

The problem with the first part of the statement is similar. Social outcomes are or are not equilibria depending on how one specifies that term within its overall
meaning of a state of balance between opposing forces. "Equilibrium, say traditional
economic theorists, is the state towards which all economic activity naturally tends"
(Perlstein 1997:61). With a broad definition, most "outcomes" are equilibria in so far as
they exist in balance for at least some period of time. With a narrow definition, however,
there are few outcomes that would pass muster. Does Iannaccone mean that all social
outcomes lead to relative balance and stability? How does this fit with the claim that
religious monopolies lead to religious decline and religious free-markets lead to growth-
neither producing an equilibrium-state in the strictest sense. The assumption thus
depends on a more precise specification of "equilibrium"; any testable statements arise
from that, not from the assumption as it is now phrased.

We thus have two false assumptions and a vague one. 1): At the subjective
level, individuals do not really weigh the costs and benefits of potential actions; at best,
their actions can be reconstructed "as if" they were doing so, but at the cost of losing any
reference to their empirical motives and shifting the level of discussion from individuals
to models of communal life. 2): We can similarly only speak of needs as being constant
at the level of populations, not individuals, and then only if we talk about preferences, not
observable choices or actions. And 3): the dependence of social outcomes on the
equilibria of individual actions is such a general statement as to be nearly useless. Taken
at face value, all three assumptions appear to offer the sociology of religion little.

A SYSTEMS MODEL

What do we do with such a theory? What do we do with any theory whose
root assumptions fail the test of truth and clarity? By some lights, we should discard it,
recognizing its inutility as a description of social life and rejecting any claims it makes.
By doing so, we would be forced to reject Iannaccone's (1994) explanation of the strength
of strict churches and Finke and Stark's (1992) analysis of American religious growth and
decline. After all, they are built upon conceptual sand.

But this would be a poor move. Both Iannaccone's explanation and Finke and Stark's analysis have proved useful to the sociology of religion. They have provided interesting and controversial accounts of neglected aspects of American (and other) religious life and have generated much empirical research. They continue to do so. Why let their false assumptions stand in their way?

This sounds catty, but I do not mean it so. At stake are two contrasting notions of the meta-logic of social theorizing—only one of which requires that we reject a theory because of its assumptions' demonstrable falsehood. The other allows theorizing to continue as if the assumptions were true, as long as we recognize that they are not and we properly limit the conclusions that we draw from the thinking they produce.

The first meta-logic is found in the hypothetico-deductive demeanor of Stark's abstract theoretical work, most notably Stark and Bainbridge's *A Theory of Religion* (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). That work's quasi-mathematical formulation of assumptions, hypotheses, and proofs presents itself as testable theorizing. If its assumptions are true and its logic proper, its deductions are supposed to be secure. Conversely, the accuracy of its predictions is claimed to confirm its assumptions' truth, assuming that its logic is clean and that all factors have been accounted for. If I am right about the inadequacy of Iannaccone's three rational-choice assumptions, this meta-logic would require the rejection of Stark's own theory of the religious marketplace, to the degree that his theory really depends on them.

Stark (1997) makes a strong counter-case for his kind of social theorizing. He claims that scientific theories must be empirically testable, and that one always tests predictions, not assumptions. He contrasts this deductive approach with inductive theorizing, which he claims is not secure on Humean grounds (p. 4). As Peirce (1877,
1878, 1901) showed, however, scientific thinking is neither inductive nor deductive but abductive: scientific inquiry doubts both predictions and assumptions, progressively developing replacements in a non-linear yet productive mode. Scientific progress depends on a willingness to discard theories that fail on both grounds, not just one. True, abductive reasoning is only secure eschatologically; but Peirce demonstrated that this is the best that can be humanly managed (see Ayer 1968: 63-99; Habermas 1968: pt 1).

But there is another meta-logic, which speaks not of theories but of models. Where a theory describes the specific internal mechanisms that produce a given phenomenon, a model describes that phenomenon's general shape and predicts its working. Yet the constituent elements of the model need bear no relationship to the constituent elements of the phenomenon under consideration.

In this view, the market model of religion is like a chess-playing computer—much in the news as I type these lines. A sufficiently powerful computer and program can model chess-playing extremely well. It can beat any human player, but it does not do so by imitating human beings. It follows its own path. Several years ago Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1987) outlined the differences between human and mechanical 'thought processes'. "Deep Blue"s 1997 victory over Gary Kasparov undermined their prediction that human expertise will always triumph, but not their claim that its success tells us a lot about computers and chess, but not much about human beings. Similarly, the rational-choice underpinnings of the market model of religion tell us a lot about religious markets, but they do not tell us much about how individuals act in religious or other settings.

It is precisely this kind of modeling that has proved so successful in economics. As Abell (1996: 254ff) points out,

the intellectual elegance and deductive tightness of general equilibrium analysis in neo-classical economics are achieved only by adopting, among its
micro assumptions, the most sparse model of the individual. Parsons' (1950) attempt to generate an equilibrium analysis for sociology ran afoul of his own richer notion of the individual (Parsons 1937)—generating the so-called "micro-macro problem" that has bedeviled theorists ever since (Alexander et al 1987). Abell argues that a less accurate theory of the individual actor paradoxically produces a more accurate model of the social system. It is the latter, he contends, not the former that is the rational-choice approach's appeal.

I believe that we can save the market model of religions from its putative assumptions by seeing it as a model, not a theory. Rational-choice theorists cannot argue that real, empirical people are goal-rational at the subjective level. Nor can they claim that all people have the same needs. Instead, they must argue that if we assume that both are the case, the model that emerges corresponds to reality quite well. An analogy with quantum mechanics is apropos here. Any given individual will behave in an unpredictable way, but the aggregate behavior of all individuals can be specified with some accuracy. But this is behavior, not action. Action implies subjectivity, of which the model can give no account. A rational-choice model can duplicate the overall structure of a religious marketplace, but it cannot demonstrate that individual people think in market terms. So long as its advocates recognize this restriction, they are on solid ground.

Here, then, is the answer to the question posed in my title: "What is 'rational' about rational-choice theory?" It is a rational model of the operation of religious markets. It is rational not because it posits rational social actors—it cannot—but because it provides a clear and rational picture of aggregate market processes. To use Abell's (1996: 253, 252) words, a rational-choice model may be simply "the least bad theoretical framework" for "deal[ing] with explanations of macro or system-level phenomena".
Yet the approach makes it impossible to investigate some of the most interesting questions that the sociology of religion can pose. By assuming that individuals act rationally—even if for the sake of macro-level analysis—one is blocked from investigating people's empirical thought processes: they simply do not enter in. Likewise by assuming that needs do not change, one cannot investigate the psycho-social transformations wrought by modernity. Do moderns think differently than traditional peoples? Do Confucianists think differently than Calvinists? And what effect does this have on their social life? What is the relationship between religion and rational action? Under what circumstances do people become goal-rational as opposed to tradition-oriented? What is the role of religion in late modernity? These are Weberian questions, and are still vital. By reducing religion to behavior, the rational-choice approach rules a sociology of culture out of court.4

None of this makes the market model of religion wrong, though I personally find it theoretically limited. It has brought us new questions, new data, and a new image of the role of religion in social life; all these deserve praise. Sooner or later its limitations will become apparent and, like past approaches, it will become stale. Until then, it is worth pursuing—as long as we remember the level on which it works.
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NOTES

1 Abell (1996) notes that rational-choice theory in mainstream sociology is considerably more complex than the classic economic model. When I refer to rational-choice theory in the present article, I mean only its recent use by sociologists of religion, not its use in general.

2 This tri-partite typology is practical as well as theoretical. Over the past several years, I have carried out a series of in-depth interviews with religious social activists exploring their motives for working for social change (Spickard 1991, 1996). These interviews show that deontological and cathekontic styles of reasoning are central to people's concrete social motives. None of my interviewees used means-ends calculation as a master motivational style, though each used them subsidiarily. It is impossible to affirm Iannaccone's assumption of the hegemony of such calculations in the light of this data.

3 Perlstein (1997) notes that experimental economics also questions the supremacy of individual means-ends reasoning, even in the realm of cash transactions. This, too, need not upset economic modeling, but it does throw doubt on economists' root assumptions.

4 One does not need to posit a Weberian action theory to recognize the need for a sociology of culture. Yet each approach to culture will have its own blinders. Habermas (1968: pt 3) has explored Freudian theories, for example, showing the particular ways in which the unprovable assumptions of that school both aid and impede research.