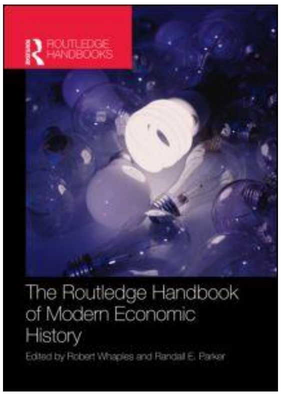

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PART III

Individual economic sectors

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ECONOMIC HISTORY AND RELIGION

John E. Murray

The historical study of economics and religion has been approached in two directions. The first uses economic reasoning to understand religious behavior in the past, and the second seeks to understand how religious beliefs influence the performance of economies over time. This chapter incorporates both approaches in order to make sense of both economic and religious history. It first addresses the audacious notion that economic reasoning might inform the study of religion.

The economic approach to the study of religion

The most fundamental assumption in economics is that of rationality. It is axiomatic that people understand the choices before them and the costs and benefits of each particular option. This is not to say that people hold perfect information about all possible options; obtaining and assessing information is costly, and so people collect as much of it as will yield benefits greater than costs. And then they act on that cost-benefit assessment. The validity of such an approach to religious behavior may not be immediately apparent in the wake of nineteenth-century writers such as Marx, Freud, and Comte, who emphasized the utter irrationality of religion. But that is simply to say that before reaching any conclusions earlier analyses had committed themselves to, in the words of one sociologist, "the positivist view that religion in the modern world is merely a survival from man's primitive past, and doomed to disappear in an era of science and general enlightenment" (Gerhard Lenski, quoted in Iannaccone 1998: 1468).

In a post-Enlightenment era, assuming human rationality in religious behavior would seem anomalous. But of course, independent of the existence of God, the study of theology itself embodies a standard of rationality that dates back to Augustine's engagement with neoplatonism and Aquinas's Aristotelianism. Economists do not employ logic to study the characteristics or activities of God, but rather the characteristics and activities of persons in their search for and response to God. This approach makes no judgments about the likelihood of actual contact with God in religious acts. In that sense, imputing rationality to religious humans is no more unreasonable than imputing rationality to consumers who exchange their time or wealth for goods or services in ordinary markets. Whether the exchange is a "success" by some standard is not of immediate interest, but whether the exchange occurs in the first place, and whether the market participants and others persist in such exchanges, is of great interest. And even in the absence of explicit prices these exchanges are costly. In the case of religion, to participate one must sacrifice time to the religious activity. The process of determining whether the time lost to religious activity repays the participant provides an initial point of entry into the economics of religion.

If participation in religious activities is costly certainly in time terms and in most cases in money terms as well, what exactly are the benefits that participants derive? Different strands of research have posited a variety of possible objective functions: religious activity might lead to a higher probability of passing the final judgment and thus avoiding hell, or it might lead to a deeper relationship with God in the present (Stolz 2006). In a more mundane sense, it might be pursued for its own sake as an element in fellowship with other worshippers or for its aesthetic consequences: an appreciation of beautiful music, ritual, or architecture. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but they serve to illustrate the open-ended nature of the ends of religious activity. Once one has accepted the open-ended nature of both the benefits and costs of religious activity, it is natural to examine such activity from an economic perspective. In this view the choices made by religious actors are as rational as those made by a consumer in a store, and the insights that economic analysis makes available are just as acute.

Debates about the impact of religious beliefs on economic performance

Probably the best-known writer on the interaction of religion and economics, particularly as a way to explain historical processes, was Max Weber. Weber's essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905 [1958]) was a landmark in the analysis of economic history through religious motives. From Luther's foundations into John Calvin's writings, proposed Weber, an indirect line could be drawn thence to modern economic growth. The Lutheran notion of the priesthood of believers had a leveling effect on individual salvation: no longer was one occupation seen as preferable in the eyes of God. In addition, justification by faith alone introduced a further element of uncertainty regarding ultimate salvation. Calvin emphasized that the power of the final judgment was so completely in God's hands that none of man's actions could even slightly influence his final fate; this was the doctrine of total depravity. Mere man, then, had not the slightest inkling of his status in the eyes of God. This lack of knowledge of the most urgent kind then led Reformed Christians to live, not so as to convince God of their righteousness, for that was pointless, but as if they were in fact among the elect. The appearance of election was best presented by, in Weber's words, a worldly asceticism: "the clean and solid comfort of the middle class home as an ideal." The hard work, savings habits, and lack of ostentation among these worldly ascetics identified them as among the elect, or so they hoped. This too was a calling as much as any other particular occupation, but its righteousness required the person – be he a humble manual worker, a skilled tradesman, or a business owner or manager – to execute his daily toil for the greater glory of God. It just so happened that the qualities that led to this ascetic Protestantism happened also to be activities that rising markets for labor, capital, and products rewarded generously as well. And so, it appeared, one reason for economic growth in Northwestern Europe was that much of the land had already been prepared for capitalism by Reformed Christianity.

From the time of its publication, the Weber thesis elicited admiration and criticism. R.H. Tawney, in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926 [1948]), criticized Weber's use of English Puritanism to stand for all of Protestantism, but otherwise expanded on the Weber thesis with approval. Tawney noted that capitalism in a broad sense predated the Reformation, and that the two phenomena developed in parallel. Weber defined capitalism in a relatively narrow sense as the rational organization of formally free labor. Kurt Samuelsson, in *Religion and Economic Action* (1961 [1993]), treated the Weber thesis as explaining economic growth more generally, and this was the version of Weber that he criticized thoroughly. In the Low Countries themselves, he noted, the Netherlands was oriented towards market-based trade long before the Reformation, and predominantly Catholic Belgium industrialized much more rapidly than the Netherlands, or indeed anywhere else on the Continent. The Weber thesis might best be seen as plausible and provocative. In the best scholarly tradition, it has inspired responses that have led to a deeper understanding of religious activity in economic history, despite – or because of – its shortcomings.

A debate closely related to the development of the Weber thesis associated economic growth in Protestant parts of Europe with higher literacy levels. To be sure, from an early date the Lutheran countries, and Sweden in particular, had emphasized near-universal literacy acquisition so that the individual believer could read Scripture on his or her own. Conveniently for the historian, Swedish custom and law required pastors to examine members of their flock on their reading ability and report the results to their bishop. Results of these examinations show that Swedish literacy rates were extraordinarily high not long after the Reformation. Among birth cohorts of the mid-seventeenth century, according to parish registers, some two-thirds were able to read in their adult years (Johansson 1977). While the effect of religion on human capital acquisition is clear in this case, both the consequences for Sweden and the generalizability to the rest of Europe are much less clear. The meaning of literacy acquisition and the uses to which it was put were not always in accord with modern notions of economic growth. Luther, in particular, was as fond of catechism-type primers, recitation, and rote memorization as the Catholic schools against which he rebelled. In the early modern period, confessionally mixed areas of France and Germany often displayed higher literacy rates among Catholics than among Protestants. And while in both Germany and Sweden higher literacy rates were associated with economic growth, the lag time between literacy acquisition and growth dependent on such human capital could be as long as a century (Murray 2000b).

The relationship between a particular kind of Protestantism and the consequences, rather than the causes, of economic growth was the subject of Élie Halévy's *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* (1912–32 [1949]). Here Halévy considered the dire conditions of the working class in England during the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Why was Britain so politically calm when France, which had experienced much less economic dislocation, convulsed with political revolution and made war on its neighbors? Halévy proposed his famous thesis that the difference between the two countries was the rise of evangelical Christianity in England. Methodism grew out of economic distress in the early eighteenth century, but in a conservative direction that led to respect for existing institutions. Although relatively few of the working classes became Methodists, the revivalists such as Wesley and Whitefield carried an importance out of proportion to their numbers, and well beyond Wesley's death in 1791 (Itzkin 1975).

Economic analysis of religious history

Weber, Halévy, and their interlocutors provide ample evidence that religious activity can influence the course of economic history. We now turn this argument around and consider how economic theory might help explain religious history. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, certain Scriptural stories contain tantalizing details of economic life. The exchange by Esau of his birthright for a mess of pottage is an example of a binding contract for sale (Miller 1993). The development of monotheistic cult activity of Yahweh may be explained by theories of monopoly formation (Raskovich 1996). The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) may describe characteristics of spot market labor contracts at the time, and it certainly describes an economy that had been at least partially monetized, because all the workers are paid in coin and not in scrip or promises of future compensation. The economic studies of these narratives tend to be richly theorized but somewhat lacking in empirical support. The a posteriori nature of examining given religious texts through social scientific lenses is inherently *ad hoc*, and perhaps less enlightening than more formally quantitative studies.

The spread of Christianity

These begin – at least, the study of *estimated* quantities – with the onset of the Christian era and the rise of organized Christianity. The sociologist Rodney Stark (1996) provided an excellent example using contemporary records, simple models, and present-day comparisons to address the question: how did Christianity grow from such unprepossessing beginnings? From *Acts* to Eusebius to prominent present-day historians, the standard version attributes rapid growth to mass conversions. Stark proposes that within a decade of Jesus's death (and resurrection, according to tradition) there were about 1,000 believers. Then, just before the conversion of Constantine, this had grown to 5 to 7.5 million Christians, according to a variety of scholarly estimates. Combining the two figures with an exponential growth formula yields an annual growth rate of 3.4 per cent, or about 40 per cent per decade. This rate is not unique in the annals of religious sects; in fact it is very close to the growth rate of the Mormon church over the last century. Of particular interest is the correlation of estimated Christian population levels from both this model and from historians' independent estimates at various times along the way: between 40,000 (model) and 50,000 (Robert Wilken 1984) in the mid-second century; about 1.9 per cent of the population (model) and 2 per cent (Robin Lane Fox 1987) in the mid-third century. The model, as in many historians' accounts, also indicates a sharp increase in the Christian share of the population in the late third century, just before the Constantinian legal changes of the new religion's status.

While adherence to a model implies a certain predictability in behavior, joining a particular new religion need not be interpreted as a rational choice. But in this case there were sound reasons for choosing Christianity that went well beyond a taste for a particular kind of religious activity. Practical arguments also favored Christianity. Stark emphasizes the novelty in antiquity of the command to love your neighbor. Indeed in the first ecclesial communities (i.e. "churches"), charity towards the less fortunate was institutionalized in the position of the deacon, who ensured that the sick, poor, infirm, and disabled were aided and cared for. Such care for those struck down by epidemic disease led to higher survival rates among Christians than pagans. Christian women were respected in their community, not married off to strangers before they had reached menarche, and Christians treated infants with kindness as well, forbidding abortion and infanticide from an early date. Thus, internal relations within Christian communities offered strong incentives for outsiders to join. But those who joined simply to take advantage of Christian welfare benefits would have dragged down the intensity of communal worship, a phenomenon well known to social scientists as free riding. Christian practices of sacrifice and stigma mitigated this free riding, which made the group all the stronger (Iannaccone 1992). Once baptized, or initiated, the Christian was expected to care for the sick, infirm, and dependent, and to forgo convenient but barbarous pagan practices towards infants, children, and women. The willingness of martyrs (Greek for "witnesses") to give their lives on behalf of the church solved two difficult problems of credibility. The earliest martyrs were those who had seen the risen Christ, or at least claimed to have seen him. But if they were misrepresenting their interactions with Jesus then their willingness to die for his sake was strange indeed. Deaths of later martyrs gave credibility to a different but related claim, that they believed in the truth of Christian doctrine and, more precisely, its truth claims that conflicted with those of the state.

Supporting doctrinal and historical claims with the lives of believers made the church more attractive to prospective converts, and membership grew as a result.

Religious monopoly and competition in the United States

The notion that relations within a church could create powerful incentives to join and maintain membership through donations of time and money powered Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's revisionist work in American religious history (1992). Careful quantitative work directed by some basic social scientific theorizing led them to refute a bushelful of chestnuts. Already well known to early American historians if not the general reading public, at the time of the Revolution only about a sixth of Americans belonged to any particular congregation. What was new was Finke and Stark's explanation for this small share: this was a typical result in a monopolized market. Schoolchildren might remember of the Thirteen Colonies that most of New England was Congregationalist, Rhode Island Baptist, New York Dutch Reformed, Maryland Catholic, and the rest Anglican. However, other than Rhode Island and Maryland, these identifications reflected establishment of particular churches as much as chain migration of new Americans who brought their religious loyalties with them. Establishment in early America meant simply that the state (or colony in earlier times) collected taxes through its coercive powers, which it then handed over to the established church. Consequences were, at least retrospectively, predictable: churches that were unresponsive to their congregation's needs for contact with God, and a less than optimal provision of religious services. Indeed, the first amendment to the federal Constitution only prohibited the *federal* government from establishing a church, so that the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut continued to support the Congregational church into the nineteenth century. When that support ended, competing churches flourished, and the overall demand for ministers rose sharply (Olds 1994).

What drove the exceptional level of American religiosity in the nineteenth century was this privatization of religious markets. New denominations grew with great speed into spaces vacated by old-line churches. Over the antebellum period, the share of Americans who belonged to a church more than doubled, from a sixth to over a third, at a time when the overall population level increased elevenfold. It was not the most prominent colonial churches that grew. The share of the population that was Congregationalist dropped from 20 per cent to 4 per cent between 1776 and 1860, and the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches met similar fates. It was new, "upstart" – perhaps better described as start-up – churches that led the way. The share of the population that was Methodist grew from 2.5 per cent to 34 per cent at mid-century, and the share Catholic from less than 2 to nearly 14 per cent. None of this simply happened. The newer churches reached out to members of long standing, and evangelized vigorously. The great Methodist preacher Francis Asbury was only the best known of his brother clergy who travelled many thousands of miles on their circuits to bring the Word to the people. As for the Catholics, the German priest Franz Xavier Weninger travelled almost as many hundreds of thousands of miles as did Asbury, planting churches and conducting parish missions. Meanwhile, the old mainline churches failed to adapt to new market conditions, and settled back into their seminaries, more content with reading and writing than with preaching and teaching.

The idea that a monopolized, established, state church would not minister to its members as energetically as a hustling minority church that lived by donations did not originate with Finke and Stark (1992). Adam Smith discussed this idea in Book V, Chapter 1, of *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. Smith proposed, "The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance." In response to a challenge by outsiders, they were likely to call for the state to crush the newcomers, much as Anglican clergy had done to dissenters. As a result, wrote Smith, "all the arts of gaining proselytes are constantly on the side of … the dissenters and … the methodists (sic)." As for the Catholics, "the voluntary oblations of the people" ensured that priests maintained their "industry and zeal" (Smith 1776 [1937]). The reasonableness of this claim was tested by Iannaccone (1991). Excluding countries that were predominantly Catholic, he showed that the more concentrated that attendance was among just a few churches, the lower the share of overall population that attended. Thus, in the United States and Canada with a variety of churches, over a third of people participated in services weekly, while in Scandinavia, with its established Lutheran churches, attendance rates hovered around 5 per cent. Indeed, even within those Scandinavian countries attendance was much higher in non-established Catholic, Baptist, and other churches than in Lutheran churches. The low attendance rates, high costs associated with unionized, civil service clergy, and excess capacity in Scandinavian Lutheran churches are textbook symptoms of monopoly (Iannaccone *et al.* 1997).

The phenomenon of stabilization of once vibrant churches and their subsequent decline, combined with the simultaneous start-up of new, stricter churches that grew rapidly, marked American church history well into the twentieth century. Over the middle third of the century, the share of the church-going population who were United Methodists declined from 12 per cent to 6 per cent; the Episcopalians declined from 3 to 2 per cent. Meanwhile, Evangelicals gained in relative and absolute terms, with membership in Southern Baptist churches rising from 7.7 to over 10 per cent. Finke and Stark (1992) emphasize that the decline of more familiar churches does not imply a decline in American religiosity altogether; it is part of a cyclic shift in religious activity from staid to lively churches that has been in motion since 1776. Over the course of this cycle, a single church, such as the Methodists, might experience growth in its strict and active phase, to a peak characterized by the establishment of seminaries and a highly educated clergy, and then begin a decline in which it becomes much like other shrinking churches. But then another young and vibrant church – in the Methodist case, those growing out of the Holiness movement – comes along to take its place. Christianity is not in decline in America, but its components are perpetually rising and falling in popularity.

Monasticism

Given the power of incentives and market structure to influence the growth and well-being of churches, it is reasonable to wonder just how strong these incentives are over a very long-term period. For example, throughout Christian history some followers have wanted to observe Jesus's instruction to sell all one's worldly goods, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Him. Forswearing wealth would seem to be the least rational choice economically possible, and yet examples of such action abound, even if the share of Christians who attempt it are few. The history of monastic life resembles the model laid out by Finke and Stark (1992) for the American case. As monastic foundations age and become more set in their ways – indeed, more worldly in their ways – reform movements set out, not to create new forms of monastic life, but to return to the charisms of the founders. In response to decline in observance of the Rule of St. Benedict (early sixth century), the monks of Cluny early in the tenth century reformed their daily lives with an emphasis on more reverent liturgy. This did not last, and another reform movement began in Cîteaux in the late eleventh century, the Cistercians, who aimed for a stricter observance to the rule. But this too, after many centuries, inspired another reform movement from the abbey at La Trappe, which became the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or the Trappists. Thus, monastic history exhibits a certain cycling much like Christianity as a whole. From growth during a time of strict simplicity, monastic orders have moved to stagnation during a time of laxity, thus spawning a reform that re-emphasizes strictness.

The Cistercians, because of their role in building up late medieval Europe, and in particular the pioneer movements of German speakers into the wastes of Northeast Europe, have attracted the attention of economic historians (Roehl 1972). Consistent with Finke and Stark's stress on the fruits of strictness, the immediate consequence of Cistercian efforts was growth throughout Western Europe. The Cistercians practiced an austere Christianity much in line with Jesus's teachings on poverty and prayer. In the eyes of relatively wealthy landholders, Cistercian holiness and industry made the order an attractive candidate for charity, since donations – of land, the primary form of wealth holding at that time – might not only advance the Cistercian project but also provide for posthumous prayers for the donors' souls. While at first the accumulating landholdings seemed to signal Cistercian success, eventually they led to a less intense exercise of their monastic gifts. As their land holdings grew beyond the ability of the monks themselves to work them, the Cistercians sought help from *conversi*, lay brothers who worked the farms but were not full members of the order. Typically within three monastic generations, those monasteries that had received substantial land gifts had retreated to a less strict life. Eventually this opened up the monastic field for the new order of the Trappists.

A similar case that showed the difficulty of maintaining religious strictness over time appeared among the American communal group the Shakers. Begun in the Revolutionary era as an essentially monastic group in the Northeast United States, they followed news of revivals in the West to plant new communes in Ohio and Kentucky. At some point not long before the Civil War – in other words, about the three monastic generations that the Cistercians experienced – the Shakers began to slip away from their unique customs of active dance during prayer (hence their name) and towards practices resembling other Protestant churches of the day. The societies attracted less committed members during economic hard times, and tended to lose educated Shakers to apostasy. As with the Cistercians, they became more dependent on the labor of non-members. By the later nineteenth century, they were sharply declining in numbers and participating in ecumenical exercises with other shrinking churches (Murray 1995a, 1995b, 2000b; Cosgel and Murray 1998).

Judaism and Islam

Although the examples provided so far pertain primarily to varieties of Christianity, it need not be assumed that only Christians behave rationally in making religious decisions. Carmel Chiswick (2008) has documented the changing practices of American Jews and the correlation with the rising value of their time. That is, as Jews assimilated and became more successful materially, the opportunity cost of participation in religious ritual rose. To economize on time that could be spent in other activities, Reform synagogues in particular abbreviated their services and conducted more of them in English rather than Hebrew. Further, interactions of timing of assimilation and educational choices early in the twentieth century influenced such later phenomena as intermarriage rates. Rational choice in Jewish practice and custom appears not only in the United States but Israel as well. Population patterns in kibbutzim suggest an exodus of the more productive members reminiscent of the Shaker situation (Abramitzky 2008).

Nor need we limit our view to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Timur Kuran (2010) has written extensively on the role of Islam in the economic underdevelopment of the Middle East. He finds in particular that nothing inherent in Islamic doctrine held the region back. Rather the fundamental problem stemmed from later institutions developed to be consistent with Islamic teaching, which then took on a life of their own. While they could be replaced or reformed with more modern institutions that would also be in conformity with Koranic and Hadithic doctrine, their longevity implies a necessity that simply is not there in the foundation documents. Among these institutions Kuran emphasizes group inheritance laws that impeded capital accumulation, an emphasis on individualism in Islamic law that discouraged such collective institutions as corporations, and the *waqf* or trust, which tied up resources into organizations that eventually became inefficient (Kuran 2004). These might not have mattered much, except that the West embraced corporations, a variety of ways to accumulate capital, and reasonably efficient and integrated capital markets. As a result, from rough equality in economic development terms at the opening of the second millennium, Western Europe began to outpace the Middle East. Strangely, Kuran (2004: 88) notes, Islamic extremists who want to return the *Dar al Islam* to a golden age of parity with the West hope to restore only parts of the old economy. They seem to accept joint stock corporations, equity markets, and modern accounting techniques, but cannot abide interest and insurance, advertising and consumerism. Kuran concludes on an optimistic note. He distinguishes between (1) what is "inherent" in Islam, which comes from the Koran and Hadithic addenda, and (2) later institutions that developed such as the *waqf*. He sees nothing in the former that would impede economic growth, but plenty of problems in the latter. Should predominantly Islamic countries return to the oldest sources of their religion for economic policy guidance, they might reasonably expect economic development to follow. Such is a recommendation the possible consequences of which Max Weber would recognize.

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