

Religion: A Transcendent Motivation Approach

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Abstract

Rational choice theory is the foundation of what has become known as the new paradigm in the sociology of religion (Warner 1993). Although it is presently the dominant theoretical approach, critics have called both its propositions and empirical support into question (Chavez and Gorski 2000). Unfortunately, the critics have not begun to formulate a coherent body of theory to counter the rational choice perspective. The antecedents of a new theory are present in the work of both classical theorists and more recent scholars. Perhaps the loudest objection is that rational choice theory reduces religion to mere self-interest and ignores the collective, cultural, transcendent aspects of the religious form. Tracing a focus on religious motivations from Weber, through Allport, and into today's examinations of religion and activism we hope to generate a new sociological theory of religion that focuses not on self-interest, but rather on that which transcends the self.

Starting with the earliest works in the discipline sociologists have attempted to explain religion. Early work often took the rise of modernity and the declining significance of religion as a given, theorizing that the religious sphere would certainly disappear (Hadden 1987). However, scholars have shown that religion has not faded, and some have in fact argued that religious life has actually flourished in modern times (Butler 1990; Cassanova 1994; Finke and Stark 1992, Hatch 1989,). Given this insight, an effort has been made to improve the sociological theory of religion. In the last two decades, much of the work in this area has been done by a relatively small group of scholars working from a rational choice perspective (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1988, 1990, 1994, 1995; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Warner 1993; Young 1997).

The Enlightenment ideal of rationality that once prophesied the end of religion in the modern world now takes the form of rational choice theory, forcing its assumptions on an arena of human understanding and behavior that is, at best, less than amenable to it. The result is an economic understanding of the religious actor that focuses on only the self-interested part of a dualistic set of motivations. For an accurate sociological understanding of religion it is necessary to allow for religious actors to be influenced by extra-individual, transcendent¹ motivation that compels them to look beyond themselves for sources of guidance in their social activity.

In the following paper, we begin to develop a theoretical approach to counter rational choice theory. It is not our intent to argue that the assumption of rational economic action does not explain any religious behavior, simply that it does not explain all of religious life, and that what is missing is necessary for a full sociological explanation of religion. That rational choice does not fully capture social reality is

certainly not a new claim in the realm of social theory. Fukuyama (1995) suggests that economic rationality usefully describes about 80% of social life, going on to make an often-stated critique of rational choice theory, that culture inhibits the free market (Bruce 1999). From a narrow economic approach, it is self-interest alone that motivates human action. For the rational choice approach to religion, religious life is about producing religious satisfaction, and religious behavior is motivated by self-interest. There is an aspect of religious life not captured by rational choice theory, and this is where we direct our theoretical attention.

Review of literature

Rational choice models of human behavior make three fundamental assumptions (Becker 1976; Iannaccone 1990, 1995; Stark 1999). The first of these is the maximizing assumption, which, as previously alluded to, is the idea that humans will seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. The second assumption is that individual preferences are stable. Therefore, changes in behavior can be assumed to be the result of changes in the external environment and not due to any internal realignment of what is perceived to be a benefit. The third assumption, which focuses on the supply side of the market equation, is that the market will trend toward equilibrium as supply meets demand. These three assumptions taken together represent the foundation of all rational choice/market model approaches to human behavior.

Iannaccone (1988, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1998) has done much of the work establishing and defending the rational choice perspective, and has applied the household production model to individual religious behavior (1990). The household production model postulates that individuals use religious capital to produce religious satisfaction.

Religious capital are essentially skills one has at their disposal. For example, in a Catholic RCIA program, new converts are taught the basics of the ‘genuflect.’ Viewed in the light of the household production model, these converts are being taught skills used to produce Catholic religious satisfaction. While this is a fairly persuasive argument, most of the purely economic approaches have not addressed the main concern of many of their critics: that rational choice does not take into account the cultural, normative side of religious behavior (Bruce 1993, 1999). Why, for example, has our convert chosen to convert to Catholicism in the first place?

Others have attempted to address this concern by investigating the social sources of religious preferences (Ellison 1995; Sherkat 1998; Sherkat and Ellison 1997, 1999; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Sherkat has attempted to embed religious choices within a framework of normative constraints which include status, childhood socialization, and social relationships (Sherkat 1996, Sherkat and Wilson 1995). According to Sherkat and Wilson (1995), some religious choices are made in sympathy with, or perhaps in spite of, the desires of others. For example, a college age student who has begun to doubt his or her religious upbringing may continue to attend church simply to avoid conflict with his or her parents.

Stark (1999) utilizes a different approach when applying rational choice theory to the individual religious actor, beginning with the foundational proposition that humans instinctively desire explanations about the natural world. Some of life’s questions are beyond the scope of empirical observation, and explanations that refer to the supernatural (forces outside of nature that can affect nature) will be attractive. In a hypothetical account of religious evolution, Stark posits that supernatural forces often seemed

intentional and early humans would have concluded that beings controlled these forces (1999). These supernatural beings are gods, and humans develop methods of interacting with the gods – this is religion. Religion, thus, is a standardized approach for rational individuals to maximize benefits and decrease costs in their interactions with gods.

While its proponents have been plentiful, the rational choice approach to religious behavior has certainly not gone without criticism. Althaus (1990), for example, found that instrumental faith; faith that is based upon calculated rational decision-making (i.e. being religious for the social benefits) is less rewarding than ultimate/transcendent faith; faith that is based upon the ethereal compulsion to be religious simply because it is “the right thing to do.” Wildavsky (1994) suggested that rational choice theory downplays the significance of social institutions and effectively divorces the self from its surroundings. In this way, the rational choice conception of the self is incomplete, and in turn its reliance on self-interest becomes untenable.

The most pointed criticism of rational choice theory is that it is reductionist (Bruce 1993, 1999). Bruce asserts that there is a “radical departure at the point of belief” (1993) that cannot be accounted for in a market model approach to religion. Essentially, Bruce is arguing that religious belief constitutes a qualitatively different social reality, which is not amenable to rationalistic explanation. Mellor (2000) rejects rational choice theory on the grounds that it is non-social, and that in its application the sociological significance of religion is ignored. For Mellor, the Durkheimian collective is the fundamental unit of religious analysis, while rational choice theory begins with a methodological individualism that give primacy to self-interest. The Durkheimian approach makes clear the importance of the “experience of transcendence” that is the

“essence of religion” (Mellor 2000: 281). Rational choice theory, according to Mellor, has difficulties explaining cooperation and altruism, two forms of social behavior that are cornerstones of religion. In a similar vein, Shilling and Mellor point to Durkheim’s insight that “individuals are internally divided between their egoistic impulses and their capacity for ‘reaching beyond’ these asocial passions to the realm of conceptual thought and moral activity held in common by a society” (1998: 196). Through the work of Durkheim, Shilling and Mellor (1998) demonstrate that human religious behavior is not necessarily motivated by self-interest, and that, by denying the collective, rational choice limits a full description of religious life.

Developing a new approach

We see a fundamental problem with the market approach in that it forces religion to be useful in an exchange sense - religion is something used to get something else. Religious actors, then, exchange their religious skills in hope of satisfying a personal need. Previous theoretical work has focused on a distinction the rational choice approach ignores, and, by way of introduction to our critique, we review these insights.

Weber (1978) discussed two separate forms of rationality – instrumental and value. Instrumental rationality is teleological, meaning that the actor has a goal in mind and proceeds to calculate and carry out the course of action that will best lead him/her to the achievement of that end. Value rationality, as its name suggests, is based on fundamental values – doing something because it is right. For this type of rationality, the course of action is not chosen relative to some desired end, but rather relative to a moral code that the actor feels should be followed before other considerations. In its purest sense religious behavior would seem to fit much better under the umbrella of value

rationality rather than that of instrumental rationality as rational choice logic would suggest.

For the value rational actor, time and other resources spent engaged in value rational action are the end, in and of themselves, and are not undertaken to achieve a separate end. Moreover, since the valued action is the goal itself, it cannot be framed as a cost as the rational choice model would suggest. Said another way, the costs of the economic approach are not costs because nothing is being sacrificed as far as the individual is concerned. If this conclusion is accepted the idea of costs and benefits becomes a mute point.

Intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity

I venture to assert that *the most important of all distinctions between the immature and the mature religious sentiment lies in this basic difference...* Mature religion is less of a servant, and more of a master, in the economy of life. No longer goaded and steered exclusively by impulse, fear, wish, it tends rather to control and to direct these motives toward a goal that is no longer determined by mere self-interest. (Allport 1950, p. 72)

The concept of motivation is the key to understanding Allport's different types of religious commitment. Based on different motivations for religious devotion, Allport (1950, 1966, Allport and Ross 1967) developed a scale designed to make the distinction between those who "use" their religion and those who "live" their religion. Those who use religion to meet personal psychosocial needs are referred to as extrinsically religious, and those for whom religion is a master motive in their lives are the intrinsically religious. In the former, the individual is thought to be the master of their religion, in the latter, religion is thought to be the master of the individual.

Extrinsic religiosity involves turning toward the supernatural, but doing so without turning away from the needs of self. The needs that one seeks to satisfy through religion can broadly be classified into two categories: social and personal (Gorsuch and McPherson 1989). Religion can satisfy social needs by providing a forum for meeting people and social gatherings for cultivating those relationships. Religion can satisfy personal needs by offering answers to life's unanswerable questions, providing solace in times of pain, and by empowering the individual through direct access to God. It seems clear that the rational choice model of religious behavior addresses this religious orientation well. The intrinsic orientation, however, presents a much tougher challenge to the rational choice conception of individual religiosity.

The concept of intrinsic religiosity takes as its touchstone the idea that individuals live their religion in the sense that religion becomes the meta-narrative of their approach to life. It is the lens through which all else is seen and interpreted. Intrinsic motivation relies on a set of non-malleable truths, which are conceived of as being prior to self-interest. The rational choice idea of weighing costs and benefits becomes mute in that the individual will choose the value-determined "right" course of action as defined by their religious beliefs regardless of any calculation of personal cost or benefit. For the intrinsically religious decisions are often predetermined by the tenets of faith. Of course, the rational choice retort is that this is merely a different set of preferences being played out in exactly the same way as the preferences of the extrinsics. However, we suggest that the logic behind the decision making process relative to intrinsic motivation represents a radical departure from the rational, ends driven, calculations suggested by the rational choice model.

Allport's own conception of intrinsic as a "mature" religious orientation and extrinsic as an "immature" religious orientation has led to the scale's dismissal by some within the sociology of religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). We acknowledge that his theoretical work is loaded with value judgments about the superiority of the intrinsic orientation, however, we feel that to dismiss the distinction simply because its initiator favored one form over the other would be to ignore the potential it holds for yielding a fuller sociological understanding of the religious actor. There is a long history of significant findings in the psychology of religion utilizing this distinction between using and having one's religion. In fact, since its introduction, Allport's conception of religious orientation as a primary distinguishing characteristic has been a dominant paradigm within the psychology of religion, and empirical support has been plentiful (Donahue 1985a, 1985b; Fulton, Maynard and Gorsuch 1999; Gorsuch and McPherson 1989; Hoge 1972; Hood 1985; Kahoe 1985; King and Hunt 1972; Kirkpatrick 1993; Koenig, Parkerson, and Meador 1997; Masters 1991;).

In summary, extrinsically oriented people view their religion as one of a number of influences on their life and tend to use it as a means of social or psychological support. Intrinsically oriented people, on the other hand, view religion as the central guiding principle of life, and make efforts to bring all aspects of their lives into line with their religious beliefs. What implications does this have for the rational choice approach to the sociology of religion?

While it is true that some sociologists have begun to move beyond the basic rational choice model, the shortcomings of the early incarnation still create problems for current understandings. Iannaccone defines religious practice as a self-interested

process of producing “religious satisfaction” (1990). This sentiment continues to pervade the rational choice literature. As outlined above, Sherkat and Wilson (1995) attempted to embed the rational choice framework within a cultural context of institutions and social networks, but in using the rational choice framework they are forced to maintain a self-referential causal mechanism. While this approach begins to overcome the critique that rational choice presents a preference driven actor divorced from the social environment (Wildavsky 1994), it still implies that religious choices are about satisfying mundane individual preferences. Returning to the previous example, the college student is satisfying a selfish non-conflict preference by attending solely to placate his or her parents rather than being truly influenced by their wishes.

While we are in agreement with Stark’s (1999) inclusion of a notion of the supernatural in a theory of religious activity, we feel that his explanation of religion again falls victim to the stricture of the rational choice assumptions. Rational choice theory requires individual religious behavior to be self-centered, that religious activity is an exchange resulting in added value. Stark’s (1999) version of religious behavior takes on the tone of people trying to out wit the gods, to play the game of ‘religion’ successfully. This, we feel, is a necessary result of basing a theory of religion on the rational choice assumptions. Religion as a cultural form, encouraging a collective orientation and providing the resources for socially transformative thinking (such as the social gospel), is imperceptible from the rational actor approach. In the end, it is this necessary aspect of rational choice theory, the pre-eminence of the self, that we feel limits a complete sociological understanding of religious life.

It is our contention that rational choice addresses only one of at least two dimensions of religious devotion. In Allport's (1950) terms, the rational choice approach, with its emphasis on maximization of a cost-benefit equation explains the extrinsic orientation, but falls short when applied to the intrinsically religious. Weber's conception of the separate logics behind the two differing rationalities, instrumental and value, shows a striking parallel to Allport's conception of the motivations behind the two distinct orientations toward religion. Rational choice theory explains Weber's instrumental rationality, but falls short when one tries to understand value rationality. Following the lead of these two theorists, then, we focus our attention on the motivations of religious actors.

Rational choice theorists may argue that the assumption of stable preferences accomplishes this task. It should be noted, however, that refocusing theoretical attention on motivations and away from preferences is more than a semantic argument. Embedded in the idea of preferences is a portrait of a needful being that seeks to satisfy personal desires through participation in religion. A preference oriented approach frames religious action as self-centered, meant to increase personal benefit. A focus on motivations, on the other hand, casts action as a projection of values, which may or may not have anything to do with individual gain. In short, rational choice theory, by ignoring religion's capability to encourage self-less behavior, denies the aspect of religion that distinguishes it from other meaning systems.

Adherence to religion inherently carries with it the impetus to look beyond the self in favor of that which transcends the self. Perhaps the best description of the side of religion rational choice misses is that of Smith (1996a). Smith explains how religion can

encourage political action by providing transcendent motivation. Religion provides “sets of beliefs and practices grounded not in the ordinary, mundane world, but in the divine, the transcendent, the eternal, the holy, the spiritual. Religious meaning-systems operate with reference to supernatural beings, timeless truths, celestial realities. This is what sets religion apart from non-religious cultural meaning systems” (Smith 1996a: 7). In this way, religious life is not about satisfying personal preferences, but it is about living a life in accordance with transcendent ideals. Where rational choice theorists in the style of Becker and Iannaccone see religious behavior as a way to satisfy individual needs, we see a missing piece of the puzzle, that of a transcendent ideal.

The transcendent motivation approach

Our critique of a rational choice understanding of individual religious behavior is best thought of in terms of motivation. Reviewing Allport’s original conception of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction draws attention to the fact that religious behavior can have different motivations. While extrinsic religiosity centers on satisfying selfish needs, intrinsic religiosity is not motivated by a self-satisfying mechanism. Religious actors often understand their own behavior as satisfying a greater, transcendent purpose (Smith 1996a, 1996b; Walzer 1966). This form of religious behavior is not about satisfying personal needs, but rather is about transforming the world to conform to the standards of a transcendent truth. While a rational choice conception forces us to view individual religious behavior as a function of selfish needs, a transcendent motivation perspective allows a religious actor to act on behalf of something greater than him or herself. This is important because it draws attention to a truth that makes religion a unique social reality – religion has the power to make actors sacrifice individual satisfaction in pursuit of a

greater good. A rational choice argument does not easily direct us to this conclusion, and in fact reduces religion to self-oriented teleological pursuit. [Figure 1 About Here]

Figure 1 presents a diagram of the transcendent motivation approach. An oval represents the transcendent, while two rectangles represent the actor, and the goal of religious behavior. The arrow from the transcendent to the actor represents the source of the individual's goal, the arrow from the actor to the goal represents the religious action itself, and the arrow from the goal to the transcendent represents completion of the religious behavior. While the rational choice conception involves an actor producing "religious satisfaction" to gratify personal needs (Iannaccone 1990), the transcendent motivation perspective allows for the end result of the action to be directed toward the satisfaction of a transcendent directive. In the pure form of the transcendent motivation approach, the self is only a minor player in the act, and certainly not the center of activity it is in the rational choice conception.

The primary sociological advantage of a theoretical focus on the transcendent nature of religion is that the individual is no longer the driving force of religious life. The transcendent is above and beyond the individual, a subject matter well suited to sociological analysis. While the methodological individualism of rational choice theory forces us to understand religious behavior as an aggregate of individual behavior (Mellor 2000), a transcendent motivation approach forces us to be aware of that which is beyond the self. The collective nature of religious life, an insight of sociological understandings of religion since Durkheim, is readily explained by reference to the transcendent. As a more specific example, we are able to understand how religious standards can motivate altruistic, cooperative behavior. Since the self is not the source of religious behavior,

behaviors that do not directly result in individual gain are more easily understandable. The best empirical examples may come from the literature on religion and social activism, which suggests that sacred standards can both generate material and political goals and provide commitment to collective action when personal costs are high (Harris 1999; Morris 1984; Smith 1996a 1996b; Walzer 1966;).

Conclusion

Rational choice theory is the foundation of what has become known as the new paradigm in the sociology of religion (Warner 1993). Although it is presently the dominant theoretical approach, critics have called both its propositions and empirical support into question (Chavez and Gorski 2000). Unfortunately, the critics have not begun to formulate a coherent body of theory to counter the rational choice perspective. The antecedents of a new theory are present in the work of both classical theorists and more recent scholars. Perhaps the loudest objection is that rational choice theory reduces religion to mere self-interest and ignores the collective, cultural, transcendent aspects of the religious form. Tracing a focus on religious motivations from Weber, through Allport, and into today's examinations of religion and activism we hope to generate a new sociological theory of religion that focuses not on self-interest, but rather on that which transcends the self.

Notes

1. Transcendent does not refer to any particular entity. The concept of the transcendent is meant to refer to that which is beyond the individual self.

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Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Religious Motivation

