

## THE GENERAL POWER THEORY OF RELIGION RELATIVE TO OTHER CURRENT THEORIES

**Paul FUDULU**

*University of Bucharest, Romania*

[paulfudulu@yahoo.com](mailto:paulfudulu@yahoo.com)

This paper compares details of my general power analysis of religion with details of other two strands of analysis that dominate the current orthodox perspective: the Beckerian-inspired and the Stark–Bainbridge theories. With regard to the former, what is unconceivable from my own perspective is the idea that someone could explain differences in human behavior without taking into account differences in the nature of human objectives. Regarding the latter, I find thoroughly wrong placing at the basis of a theory of religion, which is such an old social phenomena, a quite recent human institution: the institution of exchange.

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### 1. Introduction

The model I have employed to analyze the consistency of great religions with economic performance is fundamentally different from the orthodox economic models. The logic of the model is simple and solid: *The level of resources that the believer employs for the purpose of economic performance is dependent on the importance to him of the megagood absolute wealth, and this importance is encoded in the believer's religious dogma through rules and values.* Whatever the nature of the resources the individual has (material, time or rationality), the level of their employment for the purpose of economic performance is determined by the degree of desirability of economic performance. It is not the level of available resources that determines the real level of economic performance—the great flawed idea of orthodox economic theory—but the desirability of economic performance. Resources also may be channeled to achieve the alternative megagood of relative power.

Up to this point, the basic logic of my model was compared to that of the famous Weberian model. This paper compares details of my analysis of religion with details of other two strands of analysis that seem to dominate the current orthodox perspective: the Beckerian-inspired and the Stark–Bainbridge theories.

### 2. The Becker-Inspired Theories

A host of economists, among whom the most prominent seems to be Iannaccone, launched an economic analysis of religion based on the Beckerian standard assumptions of maximizing behavior, stable preferences, and market equilibrium. Before I deal with some of Iannaccone and others' more specific conclusions, I will focus briefly on the basic components of Becker's economic approach to human behavior to examine in what way it is different from my own perspective of general power, and determine whether or not it is fit for an economic understanding of religions.

#### 2.1. A Critique of Becker's Economic Approach

My theory has no quarrel with Becker's assumption of maximizing behavior, as that is perfectly consistent with the anti-entropic direction of the objective phenomenon of life, which seems to be destined to speed up the entropic degradation of the universe and thus is compatible with the most important of the natural laws. What is unconceivable from my own perspective is the idea that someone could explain differences in human behavior without taking into account differences in the nature of human objectives. It is the assessment of the nature of human objectives and their own components that can explain why different objectives entail different-in-nature human interactions, cultures, and institutional settings, which further on conditions the overall economic efficiency of human societies and thus social evolution. And it was the absence of this assessment of human objectives that caused most of the inconsistencies in and the low explanatory power of standard economics. The excuse for ignoring the nature of human ends seems to be the leveling effect of the assumed maximandum of utility, which ignores the nature of life and the fact that satisfaction and preferences are themselves evolutionary-derived means to the larger maximandum of anti-entropic control. It was again the mirage of utility that

set economic theory on the course of unexplainable phenomena, invocation of indeterminateness, and paradoxes, and ultimately drastically limited knowledge in the economic realm.

Without a proper understanding of the nature of human ends and their fundamental role, by rejecting the definition of economics as the study of "the allocation of material goods to satisfy material wants" (Becker, 1976: 4)—which seems to be in full agreement with the classics such as Mill, and by accepting Robbins' definition in terms of means and competing ends, Becker reinforces a previous course in theories with low or irrelevant explanatory power and even logical internal inconsistencies. A move from classical economic theory—which kept centering with good reason on power over the nonhuman world—to an economic theory that covers an individual's entire external world or that also acknowledges the megaobjective of power over other human beings, without a proper change in the maximizing principles (also entailed by adopting that different-in-nature human megaobjective), could be but unfortunate. It is because of this badly executed move that orthodox economic theory has not been able to solve fundamental problems, invented nonexistent facts and, as I shall prove later on, cannot currently engage in the economic decoding of religions.

Without a sound structure and identification of the nature of the maximandum components, even Becker's basic assumptions are stated in a highly contradictory manner. Being determined to launch a *general* economic approach, he could not realize that the assumption of market equilibrium equates to an institution that is possible in a *particular* situation, that is a situation of relative power equality among interacting parties, which has characterized only part of the world (Western societies), and only during its relatively recent history. Furthermore, ironically the institution of a market is only consistent with what Becker has already rejected, namely the megaend of power over nonhuman reality or the material world, which I call absolute wealth. (Unfortunately, Beckerian followers cannot reach such an understanding based on their perspective.) This proves once more that, in spite of his explicit intention, it is impossible for his approach to really take all human objectives into account.

Since humans prove to be ultimately centered on two comprehensive megobjectives, and because central concepts like rules, institutions, and cultural values which imbue all social provinces can be meaningfully defined in terms of the same two human megaobjectives, any economic theory that is based on Becker's economic approach cannot fully grasp the nature and economic consequences of the primordial phenomenon of culture. With only the megaobjective of absolute wealth, in spite of the fact that it is implicit, in a Beckerian approach culture can rank anything except absolute wealth. It is for this reason that in the standard economic approach to religion, comprehensive values or various cultures are, at best, indirect or marginal factors. In other words, a Beckerian approach to religion misses the most characteristic feature of its nature, which consists of a fundamental approximate expression of one community's culture. And given the true nature of culture as the most general guide to human behavior, encoded especially in terms of representative values to a community, this is and must be accepted as a fundamental economic concept.

But the most troubling Beckerian assumption from my perspective, especially in matters that concern or involve aspects of culture such as religion, is that of "stable preferences," which means invariable preferences both across individuals and time. This is troubling because, from my perspective, preferences are adaptively formed to maximize an individual's low entropy absorption in an ever-changing external world. In other words, stability is thoroughly against their nature. This assumption does not seem so misplaced in a standard perspective because it assumes satisfaction (based on which preferences are defined), at least implicitly, is some ultimate reality that must be taken as given. Only after the cause of satisfaction and preferences is revealed—which is an impossible task from the standard perspective—can one assess the unrealistic concept of stable preferences. It is true that Becker tries to account for the change in preferences for the less general objectives, but this is only done based on the assumption of stable preferences for more general objectives.

That the mixing of realism and unrealism cannot go very far in predicting real behavior is easily seen from what Becker could find with his construct. Within his model there are no clear regularities singled out in the formation of preferences, nor clear-cut determinants (personal capital and social capital are kind of fuzzy concepts even for economists). But the technique of adopting an unrealistic assumption about the nature of preferences (Becker makes this assumption because of the lack of knowledge regarding the formation of preferences, not because it is so) with the hope of getting correct predictions about human behavior forces me to note an even more fundamental odd assumption which seems common to many economists. This consists of the idea, which is not explicit but rather indirect, that there are gaps in universal or at least social causality, or that there are uncaused aspects or phenomena. For instance, Mises asserted the indeterminacy of man and Knight talked about paradoxical aspects in human behavior, both of which I found to be wrong. These implications, coupled with the implicit assumption of the normality of inconsistent causes governing various social fields or aspects (this is paralleled by the

fact that economists have no great concern for consistency among their various theories), create what other scholars such as physicists would consider an unacceptable perspective in science.

## 2.2. Iannaccone and Others

The first proof for the inadequacy of Iannaccone and other orthodox economists' Beckerian approach in the study of religion is the "mechanical" modeling of the relationship between religion and the "capitalistic institutions" they use in analyzing Weberian correlation between *the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant religion or ethic* (Iannaccone, 1998). The fact that they jumped from Weber's central concept, "the spirit of capitalism," to their own translation of "the capitalistic institutions" is a very serious error in understanding Weber. In fact, this signals a huge difference in conceiving of the causes of economic growth or economic performance. Weber correctly sees variation in economic performance stemming from variation in individuals' fundamental values (which is tantamount to a variation in the preference for the megaobjective of absolute wealth) and the corresponding variation in the kind of human rationality, a perspective that is based on the reality of huge variations in human cultures or types of human personality. At the same time the orthodox economist, who is wholly immersed in Western culture blindness, can only see the world populated with one single type of human personality obsessed with economic performance or, in an in-depth perspective, focused exclusively on the megaobjective of absolute wealth. This last perspective cannot but imply an orthodox tautological theory of economic development with irrelevant explanatory power.

With one single invariable type of man that is obsessed with the megaobjective of absolute wealth, which corresponds to the unrealistic scenario of a single comprehensive world "culture" of a Western type, all that is needed for good economic performance is one invariable type of proper institution. Consequently, that which further is needed consists of their correct identification and enforcement, and that should be the role of the Protestant church. The nature of culture and the mechanism through which it determines institutional choice and enforcement are completely ignored. It is based on this logic that, for Iannaccone and others that follow him, Weber's thesis could not be checked any other way than by the time precedence of the Protestant church relative to "the capitalistic institutions," because a cause has to precede the effect. The capitalistic institutions were modeled akin to a mechanical external effect caused by a mechanical external cause that was the Protestant church. There cannot be a greater falsehood about Weber's thesis.

Comprehending Weber's thesis requires an in-depth understanding of how various types of culture and man can affect the real actions entailed by capitalistic institutions. That understanding is impossible for an orthodox mind because it assumes a wholly different conception of the nature and formation of rules, institutions, and values, which an orthodox setting does not even make possible. An institution directs human action through attaching unequal opportunity costs to the relevant alternatives available to individuals, and absolute wealth is one of them. But this is not enough for the real human actions to achieve the desired direction. The values carried by individuals' minds are also very powerful in determining the final actions because values rank the same alternatives. These values are formatted by various specific institutions, activities, and departments of social life, of which the church or religion is one very important part. Religion determines, although not by itself, whether those individuals are fit to operate within a specific institution or not.

Weber's point is that the Protestant religion inculcates values that perfectly fit the spirit of capitalism. In other words, Weber might say that the rationality inculcated by the Protestant religion is one and the same with the rationality assumed by the capitalistic system. In terms of my own model, the capitalistic system and the Protestant religion represent the same ranking of the human megaobjectives and naturally entail the same maximizing principles or the same rationality. Having said that, two aspects should be mentioned. First, the specific values inculcated by the Protestant church were also inculcated by other parts of society, although it was not necessary for that inculcation to be simultaneous. Weber specifically acknowledges that "the spirit of capitalism" might have existed, without being prevalent or with approbation, even in ancient times and the Middle Ages (1985[1930]: 56). That situation makes it perfectly possible that the first capitalistic institutions were inspired by consistent values formatted in particular circumstances for a few individuals, with no connection to some religion. Thus, the time precedence logic is made irrelevant. Second, even if the first capitalistic institutions had preceded the Protestant Reformation, the appearance of the masses of managers and workers with rationality and behavior resembling and, respectively, compatible with the spirit of capitalism, still had to play a vital role for the capitalistic system to become dominant and grow. It is hardly imaginable that in the first part of the sixteenth century the advent of the Protestant Reformation found a dominant and mature capitalism.

But even if one accepts the logic of mechanical precedence, which orthodox economists use to reject Weber's thesis, the argument of real historical facts is dubious if not wholly flawed. Many times the

institutional structure of a country, whether economic or the whole of it, is determined by events that overrule the compatible relationship between values and institutions, more specifically between the type of religion and the nature of an economic system. After the Second World War the same Communist economic system was enforced by a foreign power both upon the Catholic countries such as Poland and Hungary and the Orthodox countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. About the same time a Western-inspired constitution and the host of all accompanying institutions, including the economic ones, were enforced on Japan, again by a foreign power, which had been dominated by religions (or religious substitutes) including Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Could we then use the historical sequence of religions and economic systems to prove or reject a certain relationship between them? The answer is: Definitely not. The only way to reveal a certain type of relationship (consistency at various levels) between religions and economic systems is through a method that could equate to an analysis on the basis of the *ceteris paribus* condition. And this is an in-depth economic analysis and decoding of these very religious dogmas. Such an intellectual enterprise is well nigh impossible from an orthodox economic perspective. In the field of religious dogmas, orthodox economics can only mimic scientific analysis and play guessing games. It is simply not fit for such a purpose.

While orthodox economists cannot conceive of the possibility that religious dogmas contain, in an encoded manner, variable preferences for the megaobjective of absolute wealth (relative to the megaobjective of relative power), and thus a mechanism by which they can predetermine the economic performance of believers, they still hope to account for “religious behavior at the individual, group, and market level” because they view “religious behavior as an instance of rational choice” (Iannaccone, 1998: 1478). The main support for such an approach is considered Smith’s insights in *The Wealth of Nations*, while his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is mentioned in a footnote, which seems to make it not at all important relative to rational choice analysis. From my own perspective, rational choice analysis assumes an impossible scientific task. The emphasis is on self-interest and rationality of human action, which are paralleled by completely ignoring the nature of human goals. There cannot be any solid social science aiming at explaining real human actions which is not based on a sound and workable theory on the nature and formation of human ends. And the rational choice analysts have not done that.

To look for support in framing a perspective to approach the study of religion in *The Wealth of Nations* is to look in the wrong direction. Smith’s comprehensive perspective on human nature—and there cannot be a more comprehensive doctrine about human destiny than religion—is contained in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, while *The Wealth of Nations* has a strong normative stance. In the latter most of human action revolves around the megaobjective of absolute wealth, while the main emphasis in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is on all human objectives, more or less directly expressed.

### 3. The Stark and Bainbridge Theory

There are a few fundamental principles that Stark and Bainbridge use in constructing their theory of religion with which I fully agree, but it is in terms of how these are implemented that I, again fully, disagree. I fully agree with Stark and Bainbridge on the pure character of truth that the fundamental statements or axioms upon which a social theory rests must have if we expect the conclusions we derive based on that theory to also be true. In comparison with the Becker-based perspective on religion, at least at this point, Stark and Bainbridge make a sizeable move in the right direction. But at the same time I would be reticent regarding their observations about the exigencies we should meet in defining its concepts. Why should we require that the concepts be adequate to classification as Stark and Bainbridge suggest? Classifications are based on criteria and they have to correspond to real features of the phenomena we study if we aim at theories with full explanatory power. We simply cannot invent criteria just to make classifications possible. Why should we require that concepts facilitate theorizing, as long as we know that theories with full explanatory power have to be based on concepts that isolate relevant components of reality and help discover relevant causal relationships? It seems to me that these sorts of exigencies can make researchers slip back into situations Stark and Bainbridge tried to avoid by seeking true axioms. As long as those exigencies follow naturally from the objective of framing theories with full explanatory power, stating them as independent research objectives can become a dangerous intellectual enterprise.

Again, I fully agree with Stark and Bainbridge on the fact that for a powerful predictive theory we need not only true axioms but also relevant ones in the sense of being capable of supporting theories that can explain “so many other statements about the world” (1996: 319). I would be even more specific: A powerful explanatory theory should not leave anything relevant to the phenomenon in question unexplainable or unpredictable. And again, I fully agree with Stark and Bainbridge on the specific assumption that in constructing a theory of religion we have to “assume that religion is a purely human phenomenon” (1996: 22). Its causes must be found entirely in the earthly world and all of its components,



similarities and differences should be explainable in terms of meaningful similarities and differences among terrestrial human societies.

And now, after such complete agreement in terms of principles that are relevant generally and specifically to a theory of religion, let me move to their application, a field in which, as I shall show, I am in complete disagreement with the authors. Religion is such an old phenomenon that it could be confounded with the long history of organized humanity itself. Judaism has existed for about four millennia, Buddhism for about two and a half millennia, and Christianity for about two millennia. At the same time, religion is such a comprehensive, in-depth social phenomenon and is so intimately connected with humanity's destiny that a theory of religion must start from the most fundamental elements and characteristics about man and human life. And Stark and Bainbridge seem to have fully agreed with this idea when they stated that "To learn what human religion is and does we must consider what humans are and do" (1996: 25).

In conceiving of my model for decoding religious dogmas as most general guides for humans living in various societies, which are depicted in terms of values and rules ultimately ranking the comprehensive human megaobjectives, I started with a scientific perspective on life as defined by the great physicist Schrödinger. I then assumed that life is an objective phenomenon ruled by causalities that are connected or subordinated to the most general laws of the universe. I also assumed that men as biological beings have to be subject to the most general laws of biological beings as stated by biology, and here I especially refer to the principle of considering individuals as units of account or units of selection and not aggregates as groups, societies, or species. These were fundamental principles based on which I had to conclude that humans basically and incessantly pursue two comprehensive megaobjectives, as described by real rules, values, institutions, and, most generally, cultures. Human and social progress is essentially expressed in terms of the weights of importance attached to the two comprehensive megaobjectives and, consequently, through values, rules, institutions, and cultures. As social phenomena religions must have the same nature and must contain, in an encoded manner, rankings of the same two human megaobjectives expressed by the specific religious values, rules, and institutions.

With Stark and Bainbridge the most fundamental elements and characteristics about human life are contained in these statements: "We begin our quest for a theory of religion...with some simple statements about how individuals and small groups operate. In so doing we draw upon principles common to exchange theory" (1996: 26) and "Living is work, the constant exertion of individual action against the environment, including repeated exchanges with other humans" (1996: 58). These two statements are wholly compatible and, in terms of consequences, quite similar. An exchange, which in the strict sense of the word cannot but be voluntary, implies a man sucking the fuel of life from the natural environment only. And inversely, when the natural environment (the nonhuman external world) is the sole source of negentropy, men are induced to cooperate or exchange. The exchange is symmetric giving and taking: Both partners simultaneously give and take and use terms of exchange freely agreed upon, that is, without coercion.

Consequently, placing principles of exchange at the basis of their theory of religion does not equal with taking into account fundamentals of human nature, but instead with using a local and quite recent pattern of *behavior*, more exactly, a quite recent human institution: the institution of exchange. The voluntary or free institution of exchange started to prevail in whole societies in the Western world during its recent history of a few centuries. A free institution is a situation in which either the opportunity cost of the megaobjective of relative power is infinite or the preference for it is zero (the preference for the megaobjective of absolute wealth is infinite). In both cases, the megaobjective of relative power is not visible (only the megaobjective of absolute wealth is visible), and this occurs not because it is against human nature but because it is not worth pursuing in those societies. Of course, for such invisibility to occur, it needs some support on behalf of ideology and the phenomenon of culture blindness because relative power is still exercised, at least by the coercive institution of a state. But if relative power has not been easily available in modern Western-type societies, there was plenty of it during the preceding millennia of human history, including the history of Western societies. And even nowadays plenty of relative power is available and exercised in most of the countries of the world. Even when markets or institutions of exchange dominate economies, as in the case of modern China and many other Asian countries, they are enforced by a sizeable level of coercion which is exercised by elites who control the states of those countries. And even these elites do not act based on their characteristic values when they enforce markets and apparently repel coercion. On the contrary, they are constrained by the threat of losing points in the international relative power competition due to the comparatively rapid economic growth of the Western powers.

Consequently, ignoring relative power equates to an unacceptable falsification of human history which is also a falsification of the history and evolution of religion. How could a science conceal millennia and centuries of cannibalism, savage wars, killings, acts of plunder, rapes, slavery, and barbarian

exploitation? All of these are effects of pursuing the megaobjective of relative power, and the religious values, rules, and institutions have recorded them. A solid theory of religion cannot avoid accepting and decoding the variable importance of this human megaobjective without being irrelevant or wholly false. Stark and Bainbridge talk, for instance, about coercion in connection with the idea that for a religion to become dominant, the institution of a state is required. This talk comes in their book long after the idea of exchange is introduced and defended. Although the phenomenon of coercion is admirably described, it is hard to understand where this kind of behavior is coming from. How can individuals marked so heavily by exchange engage in coercion? Even the authors seem to feel the oddity of the wording "coercive exchange," and I guess this is why they introduced the term gradually, in about three metamorphoses.

In fact, coercion is not at all an exchange. It is not symmetric giving and taking. It is a situation in which one individual, the coercer, only takes and the other individual, the coerced, only gives. Coercion is a more "civilized" form of plunder or trapping, or sucking of man's negentropy by man. And Stark and Bainbridge seem to understand that. But then where is the missing "uncivilized part"? Of course, the uncivilized part of relative power is quite abject from a Western moral perspective. But science should explain moral principles and not substitute them for scientific principles. And I do not believe that good moral principles are well served by a bad social science. By placing the local and temporary institution of exchange at the basis of their theory of religion, Stark and Bainbridge missed the opportunity to launch a solid predictive theory and set out on the course of irrelevance and even falsehood. Their theory predicts little and leaves fundamental components of religious dogmas and much of their variation across time and space untouched or unexplained, as I shall prove later.

The fate of Stark and Bainbridge's theory was in a sizeable degree decided by the definition of the concept of culture they used. My model of general power includes a definition of culture which allows identifying separate societies and groups by the specific ranking of the human megaobjectives they have developed along their history. In my model the various religions are expressions of those cultures, and as such it is no surprise at all that Protestantism appeared in the most representative Western countries like Germany, Switzerland, or Holland, and Buddhism in most representative Asian Countries like India. But the concept of culture used by Stark and Bainbridge is not at all fit to separate groups and societies. Culture is not a uniform ranking but rather a hodgepodge of cultural systems, and only the latter may have an internal coherence. Because to them culture is "that which is learned," it might be fit to classify the living world by the kind of mechanism used to transmit information between generations, and in this way it might be of great support for biologists. At the same time this definition precludes revealing and studying the fundamental differences among the most general models of metamaximization that are fit within various groups and societies, and it is in this sense that solid sociologists and anthropologists (like Hofstede, 2001) use the concept of culture. Because the religion of a group is the expression of the culture of that group, without this latter meaning of culture one will never understand what religion does, and this means that he will never grasp in depth what it is. Much later in their book Stark and Bainbridge use the definition of "religious culture" as "beliefs, values, symbols, and practices of the group" (1996: 126), but although on the right track this time, it is far from a workable definition that is conducive to a sound theory of religion.

Up to this point I have mostly covered the general principles Stark and Bainbridge used to construct their theory of religion and how well they were implemented. Of course, the ultimate test of their theory is its power to explain, so in what follows I shall cover its power to explain dogmas' components and their evolution. This will not only include the accuracy of their explanations for the dogma components they chose to explain, but also the dogma components that were left without any explanation.

The dogma component which seems to be of most interest to them is what they call the scope and number of gods. Before assessing their prediction, I would make the observation that it is hard to count gods if one does not separate the god-being from the god-personality. In some religions the number of god-beings does not signal different-in-kind gods (different personalities) but components of the same kind of god, for instance, in Christianity, components are needed for varying transcendence. It is for this reason that their assessments of both Christianity and Judaism regarding the number of gods are inexact or quite wrong.

But let us assume that we do not have the aforementioned problem. How precise and relevant is this in regard to their prediction, which says "As societies become older, larger, and more cosmopolitan they will worship fewer gods of greater scope" (1996: 86)? Consider Judaism. If one skips the time of Canaanite influence, Judaism had one god-personality and no change for four millennia. The evolution of Judaism consisted of changes in terms of intermediaries and organization, which have their sound logic and corresponding decoding (about which there is not much, at most, in Stark and Bainbridge's book). In regard to Christianity, from the very beginning there was one god-personality and three god-beings,

which continued even when the Western Church separated from Eastern Church, which equals to two “societies” becoming less cosmopolite and smaller. And again, when Protestant Churches separated from the Catholic Church, nothing happened in terms of the number of gods. At the same time there were changes in some dogma components, sometimes remarkable, which signaled changes in the level of divine transcendence—for which Stark and Bainbridge present no reason, unless it is their reassurance that there must be a reason. In the case of Buddhism, first of all Stark and Bainbridge err in assessing the number of gods. Buddhism goes beyond polytheism and when the Buddhist divinity unites with the universe, it actually equals even more gods and in no way only one god. This is the way Buddhism chose to signal the highest concentration of terrestrial relative power. And further, it is not exactly correct that the Buddhist monk does not have any interest in the earthly world. The truth is that he aims at much more than power over the terrestrial world or the relative power of gods. Terrestrial control is too little to him. And once again, time does not change the number of gods in Buddhism. What changed later on in the history of Buddhism was in terms of helpers, which ancient Buddhism did not have. This was Buddhism’s way of signaling the movement toward greater relative power equality or democracy on Earth or, more exactly, the move to the possibility that, with help, the laity can attain states previously reserved only for monks.

This irrelevant level of prediction based on the number of gods results especially from what Stark and Bainbridge say about the “nature” of a society, which later on is conditioned by what they understand by the term “culture.” The nature of a society is defined by its culture in the sense of its specific ranking of megaobjectives as expressed in specific values and rules. As such, time can only be an axis that can record some changes, but it cannot determine culture and the nature of a society. The nature of a culture sets in right at the time it is created and the mechanism is well determined. And I think that the many social scholars cited by Stark and Bainbridge as supporters of the idea “that there is an intimate relationship between the nature of societies and the nature of the gods they worship” (1996: 55) had a different understanding of the “nature” of a society. As I have said before, the definition of culture they chose greatly determined the fate of their theory.

Let me now turn to the way Stark and Bainbridge decode the role of intermediaries in various religions. In my theory intermediaries are related to a divinity’s transcendence and this is then decoded in levels of relative power and preferences for it in the terrestrial societies. Further on, these are translated in terms of preferences for the megaobjective of absolute wealth and levels of consistency with good economic performance. The great religions I analyzed varied greatly in terms of the kind of intermediaries; in some religions (such as Rabbinic Judaism, ancient Buddhism, and most Protestant denominations) there are no intermediaries at all. These differences signal proportional differences in terrestrial societies. Not even tiny differences remained without consequences for terrestrial societies. For instance, the *filioque*, about which Stark and Bainbridge could only say that it had a reason, signals a higher transcendence of the Catholic God and, supported by other apparently small changes in Catholic dogma, led to the separation of the culture of Western Europe from that of Eastern Europe. The great Islamic intermediary Mohammad greatly changed the level of transcendence and, despite the pure monotheism of Islam, greatly changed its nature. Indeed, Islamic dogma justifies the greatest level of relative power for a terrestrial society among all monotheist dogmas I analyzed in my book. But all Stark and Bainbridge had to say about this very richly informative dogma component is that the norms promulgated by intermediaries may serve both their interests and their clients’ interests (meaning the laity). Questions of which interests, how much, and in what way are not even contemplated.

Regarding the afterlife, Stark and Bainbridge only focus on the relationship between belief in it and the age of the believer. What they completely overlook is the great variation of the importance attached to the afterlife across various religions. Moreover, there are religions that do not even contain this concept (such as pre-Rabbinic Judaism) or religions that make it irrelevant (such as Buddhism). About all of these Stark and Bainbridge’s theory says nothing. But there are other very important dogma components that Stark and Bainbridge did not even touch upon, including the type of salvation, the level of transcendence, the level of asceticism and hedonism, the kind of church organization, the relative power relationship between man and woman. All of these are very richly informative dogma components which must be decoded by a powerful theory of religion.

One last comment on Stark and Bainbridge’s theory concerns their idea that different religions might have different levels of rationality. They make this point when they separate gods who hold both good and bad intentions and gods who hold either of the two: “A god holding either of these intentions is more rational than is a god who holds both intentions” (1996: 114). I previously noted in this book that Weber was trapped by the same illusion, although there is a part in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* where his approach was correct.

#### 4. Conclusions

The conclusion of my analysis of religions, without any proof to the contrary, is this: Each religion has a perfect logical structure. In other words, there is no variation in terms of the level of rationality. Religious dogmas contain, in an encoded manner, variable preferences for the megaobjective of absolute wealth relative to the megaobjective of relative power, and thus a mechanism by which they can predetermine the economic performance of believers. Those dogmas were conceived of and repeatedly checked by great human minds, and in this way they could not but have become perfectly encoded descriptions of specific terrestrial social systems or approximations of cultures. Each religion was logically structured such as to describe the most general means that fit specific rankings of human megaobjectives. Each is perfect in terms of its own ranking of megaobjectives.

Unlike my general power analysis of religions, the orthodox Western scholars like Iannaccone, Stark and Bainbridge vary between struggling to prove the rationality of religions (through rather indirect means) and proving that religions have various levels of rationality. In terms of capacity to decode dogmas the two strands of analysis are also different but both remarkably insufficient. Iannaccone and other Becker-inspired social scholars show a much lower ability to decode religious dogma components and compesatorily focus on confusing external aspects like religiosity. Stark and Bainbridge struggle to decode some dogma components but their decoding is inaccurate and wholly ignores across-dogmas consistency. But there are other very important dogma components that Stark and Bainbridge did not even touch upon, including the type of salvation, the level of transcendence, the level of asceticism and hedonism, the kind of church organization, the relative power relationship between man and woman. All of these are very richly informative dogma components which must be decoded by a powerful theory of religion.

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