



# Salvation Goods and Religious Markets

Theory and Applications

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## Introduction: A New Look at the Question of Salvation Goods and Religious Markets

In a widely cited article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Stephen Warner (1993) argues that sociology of religion has moved to a new “paradigm”: rational choice. Since former approaches – Warner tells us – could not explain social and religious reality in a satisfactory manner, the work of scholars like Rodney Stark, William S. Bainbridge, Roger Finke, Laurence R. Iannaccone and others has imposed itself. By depicting churches and sects as “religious firms” that produce “religious goods” in a “religious market”, these authors claim to be able to explain many phenomena that have remained mysterious anomalies in former theories. In a seemingly elegant way, the new paradigm makes us understand why religion is so important in the USA, why many religious groups prescribe seemingly irrational behavior, why “strict churches” are stronger than laxist ones, etc. While not everyone accepts the validity of these explanations, it is nevertheless safe to say that the new paradigm has made a major impact on the entire field of sociology of religion. It has become fashionable to talk about the “religious market”, “selling god”, and the like, even for those who do not consider themselves rational choice adherents at all. However, this very success of the market model also tends to provoke skepticism. Are we facing a scientific model or simply a metaphor? Are there clear limits to, and conditions for, the applicability of the model? What exactly are the “goods” that are assumedly “exchanged”? Are predictions of the theory really borne out by the data? Finally, is the current US-American way of discussing religious goods and markets the only existing possibility? An interesting debate has emerged around all of these questions.

## 1. Goals of the book

The main reason for this book is the insight that the current discussion on salvation goods and religious markets lacks a certain depth regarding two specific domains. First, it is astounding that the works of Max Weber (1978(1920), 1988(1920)) and Pierre Bourdieu (1971a, b, 1987), which are central to the question of “religious goods”, has not yet been really received in this respect in the literature. Second, contributions to the discussion about religious markets often take the applicability of the model for granted or else refute it from the start. Rare are the texts by scholars from the sociology and study of religion that ask whether and how the model is applicable to their specific field of expertise. Because of these shortcomings, certain questions have not yet been answered satisfactorily. What is the nature of “salvation goods”; what types of salvation goods can we distinguish; and how do individuals or communities produce and/or use them? What are the strengths and limits of the concept of the “religious market”, and what are the alternatives to the market concept? In what social structures are “salvation goods” “produced”, “exchanged” or “used”? When drawing on Weberian and Bourdieusian theoretical resources, and when applying these notions to religious phenomena not normally focused on within the rational choice debate, we may expect unusual insights and results. This is why we invited scholars from various backgrounds who were experts on either the social theory or a specific religious area to a conference on “salvation goods and religious markets” in Lausanne.<sup>1</sup> We asked them either to write a theoretical contribution

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1 The international conference organized by the Observatory of Religions in Switzerland (ORS) on “Salvation Goods and Religious Markets: Theoretical Perspectives and Applications in Sociology and Sciences of Religions” took place on 14-15 April, 2005, in Lausanne. All but two of the contributions of this book have been presented at the conference in 2005. Six of the contributions have appeared in *Social Compass* (2006) 53: 1, three in French (Bruce, Bastian, Mayer) three in English (Stolz, Pace, Burger). We thank Sage for permission to include these articles in this volume.

concerning Weber, Bourdieu or rational choice, or to contribute an “application” of either “salvation goods” or “religious markets” (or both). All authors have taken this task very seriously. Additionally, a great deal of work has been put into criticism and rewriting in order to make the book as focused as possible.<sup>2</sup> In short, the purpose of this book is to add to the existing literature by treating the question of salvation goods and religious markets in a different way than other contributions<sup>3</sup> have done, by widening the theoretical horizon that authors draw on Weberian, Bourdieusian and rational choice theories, and by applying the models in new ways.

## 2. Plan of the book

The book is divided into two sections: *theory* and *application*. In the *theory* section, authors reconstruct and evaluate the work on salvation goods and religious markets by Max Weber (Merz-Benz, Stolz), Pierre Bourdieu (Schultheis) and rational choice (Bruce, Stolz, Merz-Benz).

*Peter-Ulrich Merz-Benz* reconstructs the concept of “salvation good” used by Max Weber. He argues that Weberian salvation goods

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- 2 I thank all authors for agreeing to discuss and rewrite their contributions and for working so well together with our team and myself at the Observatory of Religions in Switzerland (ORS). In our team, I would like to thank Joëlle Sanchez and Eric Morier-Genoud for help in organizing the conference, Philippe Gilbert for fund-raising, Deirdre Canning for formatting the book and creating the index, and Christophe Monnot for shooting the cover photograph. I also thank Christine Rhone and Rachel Matthey for various translations and for correcting the english in different texts.
  - 3 Apart from the vast literature on the rational choice of religion debate, other books attempt to give different points of view on the question, especially the very valuable ones edited by Lawrence A. Young (1997) and by Ted G. Jelen (2002). Both, however, focus closely on the current debate between pro-rational choicers and contra-rational choicers.

are not “objects” that may be passed from one person to another, but rather goods of a different kind. By comparing them with the Weberian notion of “culture good”, (which is strongly influenced by the Neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert), Merz-Benz shows that salvation goods are “goals of action”, “presupposed values”, “subjective conditions” and “emotional dispositions”, which may underlie and guide actions. A central Weberian idea is that individuals try to “stabilize” salvation goods – they strive for a “permanent state of grace”. Merz-Benz then describes in detail two salvation goods-dispositions: “asceticism” (in which the believer turns into God’s tool), and “contemplation” (in which the believer turns into a “vessel” of the divine).

*Franz Schultheis* presents the Bourdieusian view on “salvation goods” and “religious fields”. He shows that Bourdieu starts out by reconstructing Weberian ideas of competition between different religious roles (magician, prophet, or priest) and their market and authority relationships with the “laity”. Bourdieu calls the ensemble of these both cooperative and antagonistic relationships a “field”, and it was here – as Schultheis convincingly shows – that the Bourdieusian theory of social fields took off. Schultheis explains the workings and the differentiation of the Bourdieusian religious field. Such fields include market relations (with varying salvation goods, competition between providers and consumers of different social classes), but also important power relations between the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” religious specialists and different kinds of field-specific “habitus”. An interesting part describes Bourdieu’s idea of “dissolution” of the religious field in modern societies.

*Jörg Stolz* argues that it has remained unclear what “religious goods” really are and under what conditions such goods may be exchanged on “religious markets”. To find a solution to this problem, he integrates different concepts from rational choice theorists and Max Weber into a new typology of individual and social religious goods. While individual religious goods are produced or consumed by a single person, social religious goods are produced or consumed jointly by a multitude of social actors, leading to interesting strategic problems of coordination, dilemma and conflict. The typology shows

that markets are one possibility of producing, exchanging and allocating religious goods among others. It therefore suggests that arguing either for or against religious goods and markets in general does not make sense.

In contrast, *Steve Bruce* states, “an interest in religious ‘markets’ is largely pointless because the characteristics necessary for rational choice (in the economist sense) are absent when the goods in question are religious.” He arrives at this conclusion by criticizing three points of rational choice approaches: the assumption of the defective hegemonic religion, the explanations by “religious human capital”, and several general assumptions underlying the approach. As to the third point, Bruce argues that religious groups are not like economic firms, since they cannot (rationally) change products, and that believers are not like consumers, because they are often culturally constrained in their choices and cannot compare religious goods with respect to utility and costs.

In the *application* section, our contributors apply salvation goods and religious markets concepts to a wide range of religious phenomena.

*Pierre-Yves Brandt* compares first-century Christianity with present-day Christianity (in the West), and he asks why Christian salvation goods seem to have been more attractive in antiquity than they seem to be now. In order to do this, he draws on the work of Gerd Theissen and a host of sociological and psychological studies in the sociology and psychology of religion. His answer is that, due to different historical contexts, the salvation goods sought, the salvation means used, and the specific competition with non-Christian means of salvation differ radically in the two cases. In antiquity, individuals found Christian preaching attractive, since it promised a special kind of *integration*, leading to the salvation goods of status, power, wealth, wisdom, and holiness (all defined in transcendent ways). In modern, Western societies, individuals seem to look for *individuation* through Christian preaching, which may lead to salvation goods such as psychological equilibrium, well-being, cognitive control or good health. Modern-day Christianity seems less attractive, since the

competition with other (especially non-religious) institutions promising the same salvation goods is very strong.

Using methods drawn from anthropology and the compared history of religions, *Silvia Mancini* compares two popular cults of southern Italy: the movement following the thaumaturgist Padre Pio and the followers of Giuseppina Gonella who, when possessed, took on the personality of her dead nephew Alberto of Serradarce. Mancini shows convergences and divergences in the types of salvation goods offered by both cults: Padre Pio, who is credited with a wide array of charismata, offers miracles and healings; Giuseppina Gonella (when possessed by Alberto) offers exorcism, healings, and blessings. According to Mancini, in both cases a specific technique of “mythico-ritual dis-historicization” is used in order to create these salvation goods, which can give a certain “psychological unity” to individuals faced with “periods of bereavement, illness, serious trouble and other conditions recurring in these underdeveloped socio-economic strata”. Finally, Mancini explains why the cult of Padre Pio has been canonized, while that of Giuseppina (Alberto) remains unrecognized by the Catholic Church.

*Enzo Pace* argues that at least some religious goods have a side to them that defies the logic of the market. He makes his point by presenting a typology of religious goods, which distinguishes supply-side commodities, demand-side commodities and largely gratuitous commodities. While supply-side commodities may be analyzed with the market model, demand-side commodities and gratuitous commodities are either produced by individuals themselves or given freely. Pace then presents two case studies, one on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the other on the Catholic Neo-Pentecostal movement. The comparison of the two cases shows how religious goods may be transformed from demand-side and gratuitous commodities to supply-side commodities through institutionalization.

*Jean-Pierre Bastian* applies the religious market model to the recent situation in Latin America. He shows that in Latin America a largely monopolistic religious landscape has been transformed into a strongly diversified situation, while the overall level of religiosity has stayed on a high level. Bastian argues that there already was a certain

kind of “internal” religious competition during the times of the Catholic monopoly, but that the logic of religious entrepreneurialism virtually exploded when the monopoly was broken. He shows this with regard to the evolution of “religious products” as well as the use of modern media technologies. The economic perspective, however, does not explain the quest of religious groups to gain social legitimacy and political power. Bastian argues that we therefore have to complement rational choice theories with the Bourdieusian theory of the “religious field”.

*Terry Rey* presents a case study of the Pentecostalist Ronald, a refugee, who “chooses” between a Baptist and a Pentecostal church (L’Armée Céleste) in Miami’s “Little Haiti”. Offering an ethnographic description of the religious landscape of little Haiti, as well as of the two churches in question, and depicting Ronald’s state of mind and career as a refugee, Rey argues that a Weberian/Bourdieusian model, including the notions of “religious capital” and “habitus”, can better explain Ronald’s “choice” than a rational choice model. According to Rey, Ronald had been socialized to look for “worthiness” and “heat” in religion. This is why he “chose” the Pentecostal church instead of the Baptist one - even if there could have been evident social benefits from joining the Baptist church. Again according to Rey, Ronald was “‘embedded’ in his language, class, ethnicity, and race, just as he was ‘situated’ by his religious habitus in ways that in fact greatly limited his religious possibilities”.

*Véronique Altglas* looks at salvation goods and religious markets with respect to Neo-Hinduism in the West by presenting two case studies: Neo-Hindu Siddha Yoga and Sivananda Centers in both France and England. The “salvation goods” offered by these two movements are, according to Altglas, not only transcendent (such as the ultimate awareness of the divine absolute), but very largely immanent. The movements promise success and better performance, individual fulfillment and self-realization in the here and now. Altglas shows that “Indian gurus have adapted their salvation goods to their new audience as they came to the West”, tuning their “offer” strategically to the needs of an interested public, in order to maximize



their market share. Finally, Altglas analyzes why predominantly the middle-classes seem interested in these kinds of Neo-Hinduism. She also discusses the evidence for the claims of deprivation theory, which argues that offers of spiritual growth especially attract the downwardly mobile middle class.

A second application of “salvation goods and religious markets” to the history of modern yoga is presented by *Maya Burger*. She shows that yoga has always included “salvation goods” in a Weberian sense, but that it has become a “good of the world market” only in the last one hundred years. Burger sketches the general renaissance of yoga in India and the world and then concentrates on the case of the yoga tradition established by Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois. She shows that the market model highlights many interesting facets of the yoga tradition in question, for example, the importance of a “trademark” or tradition as a criterion of authority. However, she argues, the market model cannot totally describe or explain what is happening. For example, the ultimate salvation goods promised by yoga cannot be sold or bought; what is sold is only the “path”. As an alternative model, Burger suggests using “pilgrimage” in order to describe and explain the observed phenomena.

Turning to an altogether different field, *Jean-François Mayer* asks if the concept of religious market may be applied to the “cultic milieu” (Campbell). His answer is straightforward. The concept may be applied not only in a metaphorical but also in a very concrete sense. In the cultic milieu, religious or spiritual goods are sold and bought; we find spiritual entrepreneurs and customers as well as the phenomena of standardization, competition, innovation and the like. Mayer makes his point by drawing on a host of concrete examples from the cultic milieu, among them the new “Mystery Park” by Erich von Daeniken, the esoteric fair “Lebenskraft” or the esoteric journal “Recto-Verseau” in Switzerland.

### 3. A new look at salvation goods and religious markets

Taken together, the contributions may well point to a new direction for our thinking about religious goods and religious markets. A Weberian view (Merz-Benz, Stolz, Burger) will direct our attention to the fact that we should distinguish salvation goals and means, that salvation goals/means are embedded in “world-views” and specific life-practices (*habitus*) and that salvation goods may be not only produced and consumed, but also used in power relationships. This view is extended and refined by *Bourdieu* (Schultheis, Bastian, Rey, and Altglas) who gives us the notion of “religious field”, which includes both the idea of a “religious market” and a system of authority relations based on religious claims. These ideas might throw light on much of what has been called the “limits” of the concept of religious markets in the current rational choice versions (Bruce).

While all the authors in our volume would probably subscribe to the notion that “religious goods” in a Weberian sense exist and that at least some religious goods are *not* exchanged on religious markets, they clearly differ concerning the importance and scope attributed to the market concept. Bruce rejects the concept totally: in this view, religious goods are never exchanged on markets. Most other authors, however, opt for a limited use under special circumstances and involving special kinds of religious goods only. The concept clearly seems more easily applicable to the cultic milieu (Mayer), the success of Padre Pio in southern Italy (Mancini) or the competition between religious groups in Latin America (Bastian) than to a charismatic religious service (Pace) or the ultimate goals of yoga (Burger). Two authors try to react to this situation by distinguishing different types of religious goods, some being exchangeable on markets, others not (Stolz, Pace). The future will show if this is a successful way of thinking about religion.

Let me finish this introduction with a word concerning our title. We chose to speak of “salvation goods” (where we could also have talked of “religious goods”) to demonstrate the importance we attribute to the work of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. In addition,

we decided to use the plural “religious markets” (instead of the singular “religious market”) in order to suggest the usefulness of analyzing the *diversity* of religious goods and markets. It turns out that the authors in this volume do just that.<sup>4</sup>

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