

Religious Change in Market and Consumer Society: The Current State of the Field and New Ways Forward

Abstract

This article provides a critical appraisal of how the concept of the ‘market’ has been understood and employed in previous scholarship on religion and religious change in market society. The discussion focuses on the respective virtues and weaknesses of approaches that view ‘religious markets’ in terms of a de facto empirical entity on the one hand, and approaches that instead employ the ‘market’ as a metaphor for how the religious field is structured and organized on the other hand. The article then proceeds to outline and argue for the adoption of a broader marketization-focused perspective that views ongoing changes in the religious field against the backdrop of wider neoliberal socio-economic restructurings of the global political economy and social institutional fields.

Key words: religious change, marketization of religion, religion and consumer culture, religious market, religious marketing, religious branding

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Introduction: from markets to market and consumer society

The study of religion and religious change in market and consumer society has evolved into a diverse and constantly expanding field of study (e.g. Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). Primarily situated within the sociological study of religion, this scholarship has mainly been focused on the various ways in which the social and cultural conditions of neoliberal market society and consumer culture has worked to affect changes and transformations in the religious field. Notwithstanding some significant areas of overlap, the main focus of this scholarship thus differs substantially from much previous work in the broader ‘economics of religion’ (e.g. McCleary 2011) tradition that has primarily utilized market and economic theory for the purposes of providing explanations for the assumed ‘fundamental’ logics and dynamics of collective and/or individual religious behavior. The key terminology and conceptual apparatus commonly employed in the scholarship on religious change in market and consumer society is, however, still in need of further refinement (cf. Stolz and Usunier 2018, 2). This applies in particular to the multitude of diverging and often unspecified understandings of the very concept of the ‘market’ that continues to characterize much of the work in the area. Maintaining that a reasonable degree of conceptual clarity constitutes a key prerequisite for the proper consolidation and further development of any field of research, this article provides a critical appraisal of how the concept of the ‘market’ (along with closely related terms and concepts such as ‘product’ and ‘consumer’) has been understood and employed in previous scholarship on religion and religious change in market and consumer society. In light of our critical assessment of the current state of the field, we proceed to outline and argue for the benefits of adopting a broader approach that views ongoing changes in the religious field against the backdrop of wider global socio-economic changes that have followed in the wake of the proliferation and implementation of neoliberal ideology and an accelerating general marketization of ever more social and cultural domains.

Throughout history, the various meanings attached to the concept of the ‘market’ have undergone a range of notable shifts and transformations. In pre-modern times, the ‘market’ denoted a more specific mode, physical space, and event for the actual exchange of goods. Since the advent of the modern era, however, the concept of the market gradually took on much broader meanings as a primary organizing principle for economic, and to varying extents, social life on the whole. As Slater and Tonkiss point out, although this understanding of the market has gained increasing prominence through the global spread of neoliberal ideology since the early 1980s, its origins can nevertheless be traced back to the early liberalism and classical economics of thinkers such as Smith, Mill, and Ricardo in the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, early modern social thought gave rise to several different understandings of the market, all of which were intimately ‘bound up with competing modern projects – both intellectual and political – aiming to explain and govern the social’ (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 2). Early modern social thought thus lay the foundations for the subsequently much further developed notion of a ‘market society’ and its eventual full actual realization in the post-World War II era.

The first decades of the post-war era were largely governed by the corporatist ideology and “managed capitalism” of Keynesian political economy. This period also witnessed a gradual transition from an industrialized and standardized mass-production focused ‘Fordist’ economy towards a more flexible, specialized, and services-oriented ‘post-Fordist’ economy – a development that also played a central role in propelling the rise of consumerism and the establishment of consumer culture throughout the Western world, and beyond (e.g. Lury 2011, 1–3). By the early 1970s, however, corporatist structures were facing new and mounting challenges, most notably due to the accelerating general financialization of the

global economic system and the re-configuring of previous structures of competition and global trade following the rise of new economic powers, particularly in South East Asia (e.g. Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 135). These developments helped spur a new renaissance for liberal and freer market ideologies along with their visions for the proper organization of society. Indeed, as already hinted at, market ideologies are not adequately understood as pertaining merely to the economic sphere proper; typically, they also comprise broader visions about the 'good' society, its organization, the proper role of its citizens, and so on. Following Slater and Tonkiss (2001, 3) it is therefore crucial to note that there are always important distinctions to be made 'between the complex range of transactions that take place in actual market settings and the market ideal'. As they highlight in connection to Carrier's (1997) notion of 'the Market Idea', a set of more particular conceptualizations of the market and its meaning have played 'a central role in organizing the modern West's conceptual and normative universe' through the erection of 'modern social myths', the persuasive power of which have been particularly 'evident in the neoliberal restructuring of advanced capitalist and transitional economies since the 1980s' (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 9).

The currently globally dominant political economic ideology of neoliberalism is based on a very particular type of 'Market Idea': an unwavering belief in the power, efficiency, and rationality of the free, non-regulated market. In the neoliberal vision, individual freedom and flourishing is best supported and realized when as many social functions and spheres as possible are subsumed under an all-encompassing market logic. In this vision, the primary task of the state therefore becomes to actively facilitate the creation of markets where these do not already exist. In order for this to be achieved, state controlled social functions and sectors are to be deregulated, subjected to conditions of enterprising and competition, and, wherever possible, be either outsourced or privatized. In theory, neoliberal ideology thus promotes a minimalist 'night watchman' model of the state according to which the state is supposed to maintain control only over those social functions and institutions that are required for the maintenance and facilitation of *laissez-faire* capitalism. Following the enthusiastic adoption of neoliberal ideology by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in the United Kingdom and the United States as well as transnational financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the early 1980s, neoliberal ideology and policy has since spread and become widely adopted in a variety of state and other institutional settings on a worldwide scale (e.g. Harvey 2007, 1–2).

Beginning in the early 1980s and continuing to this day, the study of religion in market and consumer society has thus largely emerged and evolved during a time period that has been particularly characterized by an accelerating spread and increasing perpetuation and normalization of neoliberal ideology, along with its language and terminology, across ever more social and cultural domains, including academia. This time period has also witnessed a range of highly significant actual global socio-economic structural changes following the emergence of the so-called 'new economy' in the late 1990s (i.e. marking a general transition from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy) followed by the so-called 'knowledge economy' and the exponential growth of the financial sector in the first years of 21st century. As expressed by (the expressly critical and arguably more contentious) Sennett, these developments 'left an enduring trace on non-business institutions, particularly institutions of the welfare state' as 'the values of the new economy have become a reference point for how government thinks' (Sennett 2006, 7–8).

As such, these developments have greatly affected the basic structure and organization of contemporary societies across the globe. As Gauthier points out, mirroring similar developments in the sphere of industry, business, and commerce proper, the post-war, post-industrial period has witnessed a gradual transformation of previous hierarchical, bureaucratic, and centralized national-statist models of social organization and regulation

towards a market model that foregrounds horizontal and decentralized network-types of organization (Gauthier 2015, 72). These thoughts are echoed by Sennett (2006, 45–46) who makes the observation that ‘Big government and civic institutions have tried to dismantle their institutional past following this model’. The above developments have thus come to propel a set of ‘complex and multifarious set of processes through which economics has dislodged politics as a structuring and embedding force’ (Gauthier 2015, 71–72). As part of these developments, consumerism has also emerged as the principal, both social and cultural, ethos of contemporary societies (e.g. Slater 1997, 24–25), along with the consumer as ‘master category of collective and individual identity’ (Trentmann 2006, 2). No longer considered a ‘passive dupe’ the consumer has ‘reappeared as a “co-actor” or “citizen consumer” in a variety of settings in state, civil society and market’ (Trentmann 2006, 3). As is discussed in more detail in the Introduction to this special issue, the consequences of these developments for contemporary religion, religious life, and organization have been manifold. To name just a few of the most notable ones, the rise of market and consumer society has coincided with a set of major transformations in the global religious field, including a sharp decline in institutional forms of religion, an increasing elevation of the subjective over the collective, and a growing emphasis on the experiential over reason across different types of religions and religious traditions (Gauthier, Woodhead, and Martikainen 2013, 4).

In light of these observations, we take as our point of departure that the ‘market’, in the sense described above, already clearly has come to constitute a defining feature of many current religious developments. The changes that are occurring within the religious field today both challenge previous religious understandings, forms of organization, preferred ways of action, etc., as well as create novel forms of social thought, identities and activities that cannot be path-dependently understood as mere modifications of the ‘historical’, but rather in the context of market and consumer society. Even challenges to the broader contemporary social and economic order can be expected to be deeply related to the operational logic of the ‘market’.

The study of religion and religious change in market and consumer society: a brief general overview

Scholarly inquiry into the relationship between religion and markets, capitalism, and consumer culture come in many different shapes and forms. As religions and religious communities have historically often formed integral components of the very fabric of societies and cultures on the whole, they have obviously also always been deeply implicated in various types of economic affairs and practices. In this sense, as Passas (1994, 225) observes, ‘It appears that there is no clear-cut distinction separating religious organizations from commercial ones and the two are best conceived as the ideal-type ends of a continuum’ (cf. Martikainen 2012, 178). Although historical and contemporary relationships between religion and wider socio-economical arrangements long remained a somewhat under-researched area within the study of religion in general, a substantial and constantly growing scholarly literature is now coalescing around the subject. Based on a general, although by no means comprehensive, review of this literature it is possible to identify at least five main strands or categories of studies. We want to point out, though, that what follows is a general categorization of work that primarily focuses on the various ways in which the social conditions of market and consumer society works to affect changes and transformations in the religious field. We have therefore deliberately excluded the (by now quite extensive) body of work in the Rational Choice approach (e.g. Stark and Finke 2000) which would, in the broadest of categorizations, certainly qualify as a category in its own right.

A first main category would include studies that focus on various types of historical relationships between religion, markets, and economic arrangements, usually those of Christian churches in Europe and the United States (e.g. Moore 2001; Noll 2001; Giggie and Winston 2002).

A second and fast-growing diverse main category includes studies primarily focused on various types of cases of the general ‘commodification’ of religion (or certain forms of religion) in contemporary (mostly Western) consumer-capitalist societies (e.g. Passas 1994; Martikainen 2001; Luhr 2009 Twitchell 2004, 2007; Kale 2004; Clark 2007; Mottner 2008; Kitiarsa 2010). This category also contains studies with a more specific focus on religion, marketing, branding, and advertising (e.g. McDaniel 1986; Frankl 1987; Percy 2000; Keenan and Yeni 2003; Martikainen 2006; Einstein 2008; Sengers 2010; Muskett 2015), including studies of the ‘textual poaching’ (Johnstone 2009) of religion/spirituality *in* advertising (e.g. Rice and Al-Mossawi 2002; Marmor-Lavie, Stout, and Lee 2009). Interestingly, as many of these latter contributions stem from fields such as consumer, advertising, and marketing research, they are frequently aimed at offering suggestions for advertisers and marketers interested in catering to various ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ markets and niche publics. For example, as Marmor-Lavie, Stout, and Lee (2009, 2) state: ‘As a core value in society, spirituality becomes a central concern for marketers and consumer researchers attempting to determine how the “needs” /.../ and characteristics of spiritually inclined customers should be addressed through advertising messages’. These studies thus highlight an increasing, albeit mostly instrumental, interest in religiously or spiritually ‘inclined’ customers or consumers on the part of advertisers and marketers themselves.

Explorations of the impact of consumer culture on contemporary Christian life and practice from a theological perspective could be viewed in terms of a separate third category of studies. While the majority of these explorations principally have been aimed at presenting normative theological critiques of the (usually detrimentally seen) impact of consumer culture on religious life and tradition (e.g. Budde and Brimlow 2002; Stevenson 2007), others have instead been more interested in offering critical reflections on consumer culture deemed relevant for modern theology (e.g. Beaudoin 2004; Miller 2008).

A fourth and significant main category is composed of studies dealing with various instances of the commodification of various forms of alternative spirituality in general (e.g. Heelas 2008) or in relation to more specific phenomena such as so-called Complementary and Alternative Medicine (e.g. Partridge 2005, 40-41) or alternative spiritual practices in the workplace (e.g. Williams 2003; Nandram and Borden 2010). Many studies in this category have been strongly critical in tone, often portraying alternative spirituality or ‘New Age’ related products as heavily commodified consumer-capitalist ‘colonizations’ or ‘co-optations’ of various ‘Eastern’ beliefs (e.g. Lau 2000; York 2001, 367; Carrette and King 2005). Indeed, as Heelas (2008, 6) reflects: ‘Of all the controversies surrounding contemporary inner-life spiritualities, by far and away the most significant within the academy and beyond revolves around the criticism that the great majority (or virtually all) of provisions and activities serve as consumer products’. However, as Taira (2008, 231) has rightly observed, as studies focusing on the commodification of alternative spirituality seldom theorize capitalism as such, the arguments they present rarely amount to much more than ideological critiques in which ‘the problem of capitalism itself remains in the background’.

A final fifth main category consists of studies focusing on the impact of market imperatives and consumer culture ideologies and practices in various Islamic contexts and the global proliferation of halal and ‘sharia-friendly’ products and provisions worldwide (e.g. Sandikci 2011; Shirazi 2016). The establishment of scholarly journals such as the *Journal of Islamic Marketing* and the publication of reference works such as the *Handbook of Islamic Marketing* (Sandikci and Rise 2012) attests to the growing scholarly interest in this area.

This general review of the field of religions, markets and consumer culture research clearly reveals notable differences in how central notions, terms, and concepts such as the ‘market’, ‘economy’, ‘product’, and ‘consumer’ are approached and understood (cf. Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead 2013, 5–6; the Introduction to this special issue). Among these, the perhaps most significant respects in which studies in the area differ from one another is in their various approaches and understandings of the meaning of the ‘market’. Partly, this discrepancy results from differences in disciplinary anchoring and the empirical case study focused nature of much of this work. But it is likely also partly a consequence of the ways in which previous studies have differed considerably when it comes to their respective theorizations of the ‘market’, or lack thereof, and it is to this issue that we now turn.

‘Religious markets’ and ‘markets for religion’ - factual or metaphorical?

As noted, the scholarship on religion and religious change in market and consumer society generally remains marked by a high degree of ambiguity when it comes to how the concept of the ‘market’ is approached and understood. Looking at the field as a whole, it is possible to identify a general dividing line between studies that argue for or assume the existence of a ‘religious market’ or ‘market for religion’ as an *actual empirical entity* on the one hand, and studies that instead primarily employ the concept of the market as a heuristic device, analogy, or *metaphor* for how the religious field appears to be organized on the other hand. In the following, we move to discuss the respective virtues and weaknesses of these two approaches in relation to a few concrete examples.

The market as an organizing principle of the social: the ‘religious market’/‘market of religion’ as a de facto empirical entity

In line with the general understanding of the market initially introduced through early modern social thought, many studies of religion in market and consumer society have been based on an understanding of the market as a general, and indeed principal, organizing principle for social life on the whole. Especially following Warner’s (1993) widely debated assertion that a ‘new paradigm’ was emerging in the United States in the early 1990s, spearheaded by early studies that viewed changes and developments in the religious field within a framework for an ‘open market system’ for religion (e.g. Bilhartz 1986, Hatch 1989), this approach has become firmly established in the sociological study of religion in the United States.

Since new paradigm research tends to be based on an understanding of the market as an organizing principle of the social as a whole, it follows that the religious field often is viewed as forming a *de facto* market that comprises actual religious ‘products’, ‘-goods’, ‘-services’, and other provisions and is essentially governed by market logics and imperatives such as competition, supply, and demand. Consequently, changes and developments in the field of religion is viewed as being best studied using theoretical perspectives derived from economic and market theory (e.g. McCleary 2011, 7–8). Inspired in particular by theoretical perspectives on so-called ‘Supply-Side’ economics, the new paradigm approach seeks to disprove the secularization thesis through demonstrating that free ‘market competition’ in the religious field (as is argued to largely be the case in the United States) is conducive of religious vitality, whereas the enduring presence of national religious ‘monopolies’ (as is argued to largely be the case throughout much of Europe) instead works to constrain religious innovation and vitality, thus serving to further religious stagnation and decline (for a critical discussion of the Supply-Side approach see for example Bruce 2014).

Studies in this tradition nevertheless tend to vary when it comes to the extent to which they *expressly* employ and theorize the concept of the market as an actual empirical entity. While some studies are indeed expressly based on the premise that the religious field constitutes and operates as a de facto market in the same sense as, for example, the market for leisure activities, others are much more ambiguous in their understandings and articulations and instead tend to balance between viewing the market as a de facto empirical entity on the one hand and as an analogy for the ways in which the religious field operates and develops on the other hand.

An earlier and widely read example of a study that assumes the existence of a ‘religious market’ as an actual empirical entity would be Roof’s *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999), which is based on the general premise that ‘An open, competitive religious economy makes possible an expanded spiritual marketplace which, like any marketplace, must be understood in terms both of “demand” and “supply”’ (Roof 1999, 78). Aiming to understand notable transformations in the religious landscape of the United States since the beginning of the post-war era Roof contended that ‘Religion in any age exists in a dynamic and interactive relationship with its cultural environment; and, in our time [the mid- and latter part of 1990s] we witness an expansion and elaboration of spiritual themes that amounts to a major restructuring of religious market dynamics’ (Roof 1999, 78). *Spiritual Marketplace* thus provides an early example of a study that takes inspiration from economic and market theory for the purposes of constructing a general analytic and interpretive framework for making sense of broader developments in the religious field of the United States in the post-war era. But since the study does not contain any theorization of the concept of the market, nor any type of deeper substantial theoretical discussion of other closely related concepts such as ‘economy’, ‘product’, or ‘consumer’, its engagement with economics and market theory really amounts to little more than a selective and rather shallow employment of its language and terminology.

An example of a frequently referenced study that balance between a de facto market- and market analogy approach can be found in Einstein’s *Brands of Faith* (2008), which provides a detailed analysis of how market imperatives and consumer culture has affected the general character of the religious landscape in the United States and served to propel a rapid increase in marketing and branding practices among religious communities themselves. Expressly situating her study in the new paradigm and Supply-Side tradition, Einstein (2008, 19) maintains that ‘Viewing religion as a product, rather than as a social mandate’ provides many clues as to why religion has remained vital in the United States while it has declined throughout much of Europe. She ultimately comes to conclude that ‘faith brands’ exist for three principal reasons: first, in contemporary society, religion is compelled ‘compete against other discretionary activities’. Second, religious communities and groups increasingly find themselves in a situation in which they also have to ‘compete against the constant barrage of images and information in today’s culture’. And, third, generational and cultural shifts have brought about a situation in which younger generations are less attracted to religion than previous generations (Einstein 2008, 193). Similar to Roof’s *Spiritual Marketplace*, the focus of *Brands of Faith* can likewise be characterized as broad as it aims to highlight how the proliferation of marketing and banding practices has brought about notable changes in the religious field and served to facilitate the emergence of new religious ‘products’ and ‘faith brands’. But with the exception of the concept of ‘brands’ (and to some extent the concept of ‘marketing’) *Brands of Faith* does not contain any theorization of the concept of the market or other concepts central to the study such as ‘product’ and ‘consumer’. While there is certainly merit to many of the observations presented in the book, it still remains unclear whether the ‘market’ in Einstein’s account is to be understood as a *de facto* empirical entity or more as an analogy for the ways in which the religious field appears to be organized in the

context of the United States. Although the study does indeed primarily focus on religious ‘products’ and ‘brands’, both of these concepts nevertheless ultimately derive their analytic and heuristic value (or lack thereof) from the particular ways in which they are situated and positioned within particular theorizations and understandings of the market.

In sum, Roof’s and Einstein’s accounts thus both provide examples of studies that employ terms and concepts such as ‘religious market’, ‘markets for religion’, religious ‘market share’, ‘-monopoly’, ‘-competition’, ‘-product’, ‘-suppliers’, ‘-customers’, ‘-consumers’ ‘-demand’ etc. as central parts of their analytic apparatus without adequately specifying the precise meaning of most of these terms and concepts.

When it comes to how the term ‘market’ is employed, studies that argue for, or just simply assume, the actual existence of ‘religious markets’ as actual de facto empirical entities need to be able to convincingly demonstrate the factuality of at least two closely related things. First, they need to show that (at least some, if not all) religious communities actually, at least to some extent, *view themselves* as being situated within a ‘market’ and that they therefore have become more open to adopt marketing practices; become more prepared to understand their services or provisions in terms of ‘products’ that can be marketed and branded; and become more prone to view their members and potential members in terms of ‘customers’ or ‘religious consumers’. Indeed, the mere existence of publications such as *Church Executive* and the more recent rise of the ‘church consultant’ (Einstein 2008, 60–62) provide good grounds for arguing that this is at least the case with respect to certain types of Christian churches in the United States. Nearly two decades ago already, Roof (1999, 78) also touched upon this question, although more vaguely, when he wrote that: ‘in recent times especially, religious messages and practices have come to be frequently restylized, made to fit a targeted social clientele, often on the basis of market analysis, and carefully monitored to determine if programmatic emphases should be adjusted to meet particular needs’.

Second, studies arguing for the actual existence of ‘religious markets’ as actual de facto empirical entities also need to be able to move beyond merely highlighting ‘similarities between religion and marketing’ (Einstein 2008, 74) and demonstrate that (at least some, if not all) religious communities *purposefully* create religious ‘products’ and ‘services’ and that they *purposefully* engage in practices that would generally be considered marketing from the perspective of the fields of economics and marketing themselves (as opposed to, for example, merely spreading information about their activities). While it is certainly possible to approach religious communities through theoretical lenses that view all forms of social life and action in economic terms, it is still well worth considering the expressed intentions and motivations of religious actors themselves (many of who might outright reject any association with ‘market’ associated practices). This is not least because religion has, at least traditionally, been understood to promote moral altruism and to be characterized by an ‘other-regarding orientation’ rather than the type ‘self-interest and egoistic motivation’ that is characteristic of consumerist values (Usunier 2014, 42). Further, as Usunier points out, as ‘religion often implies non-choice (i.e. converting is considered evil and becoming an infidel), it violates the fundamental belief of commoditization in free choice and rationality’ (Usunier 2014, 42; cf. Bruce 2014, 197).

These observations highlight the need for future studies to take more seriously the ‘symbolic rivalry’ that exists between economic and market meanings and (traditionally considered non-economic) religious meanings (Usunier 2014, 43). Future studies in the area could therefore usefully align more closely with cultural approaches to markets that emphasize ‘market enculturation’ and the ways in which ‘the economy seems increasingly made up of informational and symbolic work on goods that are themselves increasingly “non-material”’ (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 176). The two books discussed above both constitute examples of previous studies that have indeed gone some way in bringing our attention to

these types of questions. While their agenda-setting efforts and contributions should be commended, their shortcomings with regard to conceptual clarity nevertheless point to a need for future work in the area to be more specific in its usage of key terms and concepts such as ‘market’, ‘product’, and ‘consumer’. This should by no means be taken to suggest that future work should be grounded in any one type, or any particular set of, theorizations of the concept of the market. Future work should be especially wary of adopting rigid and essentialist theoretical models that purport to explain what a market or product ‘really is’. This is not least since such approaches will likely only serve to theoretically predetermine that which should be explained. We are therefore simply highlighting the need for future work to provide clearer articulations and explanations of their respective approaches and understandings of the concept of the market, as well as the precise meaning of associated concepts such as product, consumer, etc. (whatever they may be).

The ‘market’ as a metaphor for the religious field

Apart from new paradigm research, market *metaphors* have more recently also started to be employed in a broader sense to capture the changing and diversifying character of the religious landscape in the West as a whole. The decidedly more diverse and entrepreneurial character of the religious landscape of the United States when compared to that of Europe is routinely noted in work of this type. For example, as Davie has more recently (2015, 135) observed, whereas the religious landscape of the United States ‘is made up of tens of thousands of free-standing congregations that aggregate themselves into denominations, none of which has, or has had, a legally privileged position in the federal state’, the ‘increasing range of choices’ currently available on the religious field in Europe is largely emerging ‘over the top of a historically dominant church with (more or less) a comprehensive network of parishes across the country’ (Davie 2015, 135). While the market-approach constitutes but one aspect of the much broader debate on European/American exceptionalism (e.g. Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008), as Davie notes, it has nevertheless become ‘increasingly present in analyses of religion in Europe’ (Davie 2015, 135).

Similar to the arguments of many new paradigm theorists, in Davie’s recent account, the different trajectories along which the religious field has developed in the United States and Europe may thus be explained by notable differences in the ‘religious economies’ or ‘religious markets’ of these respective two regions. When applied to the specific case of Britain, Davie (2015, 135) contends that the contemporary British religious field can be thought of as being organized along the lines of ‘two religious economies that run side by side’. While one can be considered a ‘market of active churchgoers who choose their preferred form of religious activity and join the religious organization which expresses this most effectively’, the other largely ‘retains the features of a public utility and exists, for the most part, for those who prefer not to choose, but who are nonetheless grateful for a form of religion which they can access as the need arises’ (Davie 2015, 135). As Davie goes on to argue, while the British religious market remains divided along these two main lines, there has more recently occurred a ‘degree of rebalancing as the concept of choice begins to outweigh a sense of obligation in the religious lives of most British people’ (Davie 2015, 135).

In this account, however, the type of ‘choice’ intended is significantly different from that of many ‘economics of religion’ (and especially Rational Choice) approaches in that it is juxtaposed with a ‘sense of obligation’ rather than being viewed as a central component of human behavior as such. Nor does the ‘market’ automatically emerge as a general organizing principle in the field of religion in this account. Rather, in what might perhaps be seen as an

illustration of the general permeation of market-related language and terminology across social fields as a whole, including the work of academics, the concepts of the ‘economy’ and ‘market’ are instead primarily used in a metaphorical sense as heuristic devices.

This, however, does not detract from the fact that the precise meaning of these concepts, as well as their relation to each another, remains highly elusive and ambiguous in this account. Given this lack of explanation and specification, we might certainly ask what their heuristic value actually amounts to. For example, to assume that the religious field (or some part of it) is organized on the basis of market logic just because some religious communities can be shown to engage in market and consumer society associated practices such as marketing or branding, or because people increasingly can be shown to exercise individual choice in matters of religious engagement and affiliation, amounts to a ‘conceptual leap’ that is possible only if one also assumes that the categories of the ‘economy’ and the ‘market’ are one and the same (Usunier 2014, 33). It seems clear, therefore, that future studies that wish to employ the concepts of the ‘market’ or ‘economy’ in a metaphorical sense would need to more clearly spell out their reasons for doing so and provide more detailed explanations of what added analytic value the employment of such concepts actually brings.

Religious marketing, products, and consumers

As we hope to have been able to illustrate through our discussion so far, to speak of various types of *relationships* or *associations* (e.g. in terms of ‘similarities’, ‘shared elements’ etc.) between religion, markets, and consumer culture practices is one thing. But to speak of, and thereby at least implicitly assume, the *factuality* of ‘religious markets’ or ‘markets for religion’ (e.g. in terms of ‘religious market dynamics’, ‘religious supply and demand’ etc.) in and of themselves is an entirely different thing. We believe it is important to recognize, at the very least, that the two should not be confused, and certainly not be equated nor conflated, with one another. The key point to note is that each and every particular theorization of the ‘market’ will always serve to determine how other related key terms and concepts such as ‘religious marketing’, ‘religious products’, and ‘religious consumers’ are approached and understood. In a way that reflects the sometimes highly ambiguous ways in which the concept of the ‘market’ has been employed and understood, these latter terms and notions have also typically been employed in unspecified and sometimes highly ambiguous ways in previous scholarship on religious change in market society.

These issues have recently been explored by Usunier (2014), who offers a critical assessment of the degrees to which it makes sense to talk about similarities between religion and religious communities vis-à-vis religious products, services, and the marketing of religion. He starts out by highlighting that the mere establishment of product category 9591 on ‘religious services’ in the Central Product Classification (CPC) scheme of the General Agreement on Trade Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 might certainly be taken as a good a sign as any of the actual contemporary ‘commoditization’ of religious products and services. Usunier views commoditization as being ‘based on an object-centered view of economic exchange whereby subjects exchange a wide range of tangible and intangible commodities (*latissimo sensu*, i.e. products, services, rights, institutions, and social behaviors), on markets’ (Usunier 2014, 29–30). As such,

Commoditization occurs when a previously non-market object (e.g. religion, blood, adoption, etc.) enters the market. The commodity itself is at the very center of the market process in which price, volume, and competition between suppliers to capture

consumers are viewed as the central elements of market dynamics guided by unlimited free and rational choice (Usunier 2014, 30).

The crux is that, in a traditional marketing perspective, commodities need to be as standardized as possible so as to be able to, as far as possible, remove any obstacles that would make it more difficult for potential consumers to make comparisons between similar products and to be able to exercise free choice (Usunier 2014, 30). Similar to our discussion of the ideational dimensions of market society, consumerism, and the category of the consumer above, Usunier (2014, 33) highlights commoditization as involving a complex ‘communication task’ characterized by ‘the systematic use of vocabulary and discourse to acquaint people with a newly commoditized (or a to-be-commoditized-in-the-near-future) object’. However, the mere fact that religious services have gained legal inscription through inclusion in the WTO-GATS framework does not automatically produce religious markets but ‘needs the additional legitimizing power of practices and words’ as provided by politics, media, business, and academia. (Usunier 2014, 33). Similarly, Muniesa, Millo, and Callon (2007, 3) underline how any conception of the market, older or more recent, is always and ‘precisely the outcome of a [social] process of “economization”, the aim of which is to render ‘things more “economic” or, more precisely, at enacting particular versions of what it is to be economic’ (cf. Usunier 2014, 33). In other words, before any notion of a religious economy or market can take on currency as a specific economy or market in and of itself, and before products and services can take on meaning as specifically *religious* products or services, they first need to be rendered and ‘made’ so through active and conscious efforts of construction by ‘religious entrepreneurs’, academics, or both. Put another way, like any type of market, product, or service, ‘religious markets’, ‘product’, or ‘services’ do not simply come into being by and of themselves; they too have to be actively constructed as such.

Concerning religious communities and marketing, Usunier (2014, 40) examines how well the classic four ‘Ps’ of marketing (i.e. Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) apply to the supposed similarities between marketing practices and religion. He arrives at the conclusion that, while ‘2 Ps (place and promotion) readily apply to the marketing of religions (as quasi-firms) and religious products and services’, this is less the case with both product and price policy. As Usunier points out, while ‘there is certainly utility in several religious services /.../ marketing makes a difference between religion and religious services. While the latter may, to a certain extent be commoditized, this does not imply that religion itself should be considered a commodity’ (Usunier 2014, 31).

To the above we could also add several additional and closely related questions having to do with the supposed subjects of religious marketing and the supposed ‘consumers’ of religious products and/or services. For example, we might want to ask who exactly should be viewed as a consumer of a ‘religious product’ and under what circumstances. As Trentmann (2006, 6) reminds us, when considering such questions, ‘the starting point is not how people have certain bits of information about goods, prices, etc. but when information is processed and systematized in such a way that it creates a sense of being a consumer’. So, similar to the ways in which economies, markets, and products have to be constructed *as such*, so, too, do ‘consumers of religion’ have to be ‘made’ so through different types of legitimizing language. This is not least since people who some academics would consider ‘consumers of religion’ are unlikely to consider themselves in that way. Problematic issues of the kind discussed above become even more accentuated in Rational Choice and Supply-Side approaches to religion, as is discussed in more detail in the Introduction to this special issue.

Religion in an era of marketization

In light of the critical discussion above, we now turn to the concept of marketization, which occupies an increasingly central position in various types of scholarship on political economy, politics, consumer-capitalism, and consumer culture. The concept has, however, been utilized in a range of different, and sometimes contrasting, both evocative and heuristic capacities (e.g. as a general umbrella term for coupling together the values promoted by neoliberal ideology). Although the concept of marketization retains many connections to other related concepts such as ‘commodification’, ‘commoditization’, or ‘commercialization’, it is most usefully taken to denote the more general and extended historical process whereby ‘a market logic has come to provide a means of *thinking about* social institutions and individuals more generally, such that notions of competition, enterprise, utility and choice can be applied to various aspects of people’s working lives, access to public services and even private pursuits’ (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 1, emphasis added). In this approach, marketization is thus conceived of as a primarily *ideational* process that chiefly involves the ‘the permeation of market exchange as a social principle’ (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 25) across different social and cultural domains and sub-systems, which are gradually but increasingly visibly ‘subjected to a deliberate policy of economizing’ (Schimank and Volkmann 2012, 37).

Although not always conceptualized in terms of marketization, some very similar observations on the ideational dimensions of these developments have also been presented by commentators such as Thrift (2005) who has highlighted the ways in which capitalism and its associated values and imperatives has become a ‘theoretical enterprise in which various essentially virtual notions (network, the knowledge economy, the new economy, community of practice) are able to take on flesh as, increasingly, the world is made in these notions’ likeness’ (Thrift 2005, 6; cf. Mautner 2010, 4). The concept of marketization is thus most usefully taken to denote the historical, both ideational and actual, process whereby economic thinking gradually comes to permeate society and culture on the whole, including in particular spheres traditionally considered non-economic such as the educational, healthcare, and religious spheres (e.g. Moberg 2017). In this understanding, marketization is consequently primarily intended to capture the process whereby economic thinking impinges on social and cultural spheres from the ‘outside’ in ways that have tangible both ideational and actual empirical effects and consequences (cf. Moberg 2017). As Gauthier points out, viewing ongoing developments in the present-day religious field within such a broader interpretative framework does not amount to an argument for the reduction of social realities to economic determinants but should rather be understood as an attempt at drawing our attention to ‘the *noneconomic* [i.e. the ideological, ideational, and discursive] dimensions and effects of market economics and their correlates in globalizing societies’ (Gauthier 2015, 72, emphasis added).

In this understanding, marketization is therefore not adequately understood as a phenomenon that affects social spheres or sub-systems in isolation from one another. So, rather than talking about the marketization *of* religion specifically as if ‘religion’ constituted a sphere that could be approached and analyzed separately from other social spheres, it is much more fruitful to view ongoing changes and transformations in the religious field within a broader context of an increasingly marketized social and cultural environment on the whole. Such an approach would strive to avoid reducing changes in the religious field ‘to historical, path-dependent explanations as in the modernisation paradigm’ in favor of a more sustained focus on the ‘new opportunity structure in which religions now operate’ (Martikainen 2012, 180). This, then, provides an alternative framework for approaching the changing modes of religious organization and agency in market and consumer society. For the fact remains that

even though most religious communities and organizations do not identify as businesses or firms, they have clearly become ever more willing to discursively present their activities and services through a market-idiom in terms of ‘products’ and to engage with their members or adherents in terms of ‘customers’ and/or ‘consumers’ (c.f. Moberg 2017). Part of the explanation for this undoubtedly relates to how market and economics related terminology has developed into a central trait of the language of modern social institutions and organizations more generally, especially following the proliferation of new public management in the 1990s. The fact that traditional institutional Christian churches with long-standing historical and structural relationships to nation states and core social establishments have been particularly prone to adopt such languages lends further support to this view (Moberg 2017).

This (emergent) approach to the character and fate of religion in market and consumer society is thus one that strives to highlight the role of ‘market Ideas’ (Carrier 1997) – in the sense of market economics-inspired ideologies and discourses – as prime vectors of contemporary social and cultural change on the whole, including religious change. In its broader emphasis on religion *in* market and consumer society, this approach to the concept of marketization thus closely relates to, but also extends significantly beyond, the understanding presented in the Introduction to this special issue.

Concluding remarks

This article has provided an overview and critical appraisal of the current state of the scholarship religion and religious change market and consumer society. Our discussion aimed to highlight in particular how the field would benefit from a firmer consolidation of its conceptual language, and especially when it comes to how central, both heuristic and analytic, terms and notions such as ‘market’, ‘product’, ‘service’, ‘consumer’, etc. are approached and understood. In our discussion we made a general distinction between work that approaches ‘religious markets’/‘markets for religion’ in terms of a *de facto* empirical entity on the one hand, and work that employs the notion of the ‘market’ as an analogy or metaphor for how the religious field appears to be structured and organized on the other hand. We argued that work with the former approach would need to be more specific in their theorizations of the concept of the ‘market’ and closely associated concepts such as ‘product’ and ‘consumer’. Work with the latter approach would also need to be more specific about what new insights can actually be gleaned by viewing the religious field through a market analogy or metaphor. Again, if the precise meaning of concept of the ‘market’ itself remains elusive in such work, then what does its heuristic value actually amount to?

Lastly, we outlined and argued for the benefits of adopting a broader marketization-focused perspective that views currently ongoing changes in the religious field against the wider backdrop of neoliberal restructurings of the global political economy. This broader approach does not by and of itself solve the problem of conceptual ambiguity that currently still haunts the field. But it does point to the need for future studies of religion in market and consumer society to align more closely with the perspectives and theories of the fields of economics, marketing, political economy, and economic sociology.

Viewing marketization as an outcome of global processes of neoliberal change, though embedded in numerous local variants, makes it possible to see processes of religious marketization around the world as a direct result of politico-economic changes that have taken place since the 1980s. This has been a challenge for Western-centric sociology of religion, which is why we have seen an increasing amount of new studies springing from anthropology, marketing, consumer research etc. focusing on non-Western societies and

religions in unexpected places, and often with limited engagement with the main body of Western sociology of religion, as referred to earlier in this article. Ultimately, in order to test the suggestions of this article and special issue, we need to turn our gaze beyond Western contexts in order to be able to appreciate the full magnitude of the religious changes that are now taking place as a consequence of broader socio-economic and cultural developments.

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