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Religious Economy Theory Revisited:

Towards a New Perspective of Religious Dynamics in the East Asian Settings

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Introduction

Originating from the American contexts, the religious economy model has provided new insights to the study of religion in the United States using the market perspectives to explain, interpret, and predict the dynamics of religious suppliers and consumers. And because of its rather successful application in the American settings (i.e. a free market of religion with relative dominance of Christianity), scholars of religions began to adopt this model to study the sociology of religion of various areas from a market perspective. However, this presents both opportunities and challenges to these scholars dedicated to use this approach to study non-American societies where religious cultures and social contexts are very different. On the one hand, it provides a very interesting perspective to understand religious movements as market economies, especially when the secularization theory has failed to respond to the revival of religion in most parts of the world (i.e. Asia, North and South America, and Africa). On the other hand, given the nature of the model, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to apply it to societies where the religious landscape and social and cultural backgrounds are not identical to the American context, though advocates of this model claim that it has the potential to develop into a “dominant theoretical frame of reference with the social scientific study of religion” (Lawrence 1997: xii). As a piece of work dedicated to this ongoing project and debate, this paper first sets out the main tenets of the economic approach to the sociology of religion and the key arguments of its leading critics. Then, by reviewing how scholars of

religion have attempted to improve and modify this theory and applied it on different cultural contexts, it also suggests how this model may be analytically useful in studying religion in the East Asian settings, especially China and Japan, and discusses the modifications that may add value to the model by taking political, economical, social, and cultural factors into consideration.

The Secularization Debate

Prominent thinkers in the nineteenth century such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, all foretell that the importance of religion would gradually fade with the advent of industrialization and technological development that brings about rationalization in social life and governance. Subsequently, until the 1960s, sociologists such as Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Bryan Wilson developed various forms of secularization theories. Religion is losing influence at the societal, the institutional, and the individual level (Wilson, 1982). Religious pluralism also fractures the “sacred canopy” of a society because “multiplication of perspectives greatly increases the problem of establishing a stable symbolic canopy for the entire society” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 86).

Differentiating between levels of analysis in his studies of Western, especially European societies, Dobbelaere (1981) notes that secularization of religion, which, according to him, is the outcome of the conflicts between different social actors, may occur at three basic levels: *Institutional*, *organizational*, and *individual*, and each of them corresponds to the *macro*, *meso*, and *micro* level of society. At the *macro* level, increasing institutional development and differentiation in the modern world results in many of the functions performed by religion in modern society being taken over by secular institutions such as the nation-state. At the *meso* level, or the organizational level, focus is put on changes in religious organizations and practices (Dobbelaere 1981). Some scholars argue there is a decline in the number of religious groups and their religious practices. For example, Bruce (2001) suggests that over the past 100 years in the UK — a period when the general population has doubled — the number of full-time, professional clergy has declined by 25%. Similarly, Brierley (1999) notes weddings in England celebrated in an Anglican church have decline from 67% in 1900 to 20% in 2000. The *micro* level deals with individual religious beliefs (Dobbelaere 1981). As secularization proceeds along

with increasing individualism and declining traditional family values, religious behavior retreats from the public to the private sphere.

Emergence of the Religious Economy Model

The economic perspective to the sociology of religion can be considered as an emerging new paradigm of social scientific studies of religion when the secularization theory is proved to be insufficient in explaining religious revivals, especially that happen at the *meso* and *micro* level, in many societies (Glasner 1977, Berger 1999, Warner 1993, Stark and Finke 2000). Instead of religious degeneration predicted by secularization theorists, religion has just survived and revived in many modern societies. The ongoing debate of the paradigm shift from secularization theory to religious economy model is further stirred up by Stark's provoking work "Secularization, R.I.P." which suggests that secularization doctrine be carried to the "graveyard of failed theories" (1999: 270). However, "talking of burying the secularization theory is premature" (Norris and Inglehart, 2011, 4) and I believe that the world's religious economy show *secularization* and *sacralization* occurring simultaneously as seen from the decline of religious influence in most aspects of social life as well as upsurge of religious participation in many societies.

Nevertheless, the *Religious Economy Theory* or *Rational Choice Theory* advocated by Stark, Finke, Iannaccone, Bainbridge, in my opinion, may provide a new perspective to religion from the perspectives of economics. I argue that the *analogy seeing religious dynamics similar to economic systems and exchange activities* will offer a new perspective to the studies of religion. This approach may offer "a more suitable, more proper, and categorically better set of theoretical tools" to the study of religions across the globe (Yang 2012: 13). This part introduces some of the main ideas of this approach.

Religion and Market

The economic approach to the sociology of religion starts with a rather simple idea: religion consists of an economy much like commercial and other economies. In their work *Act of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Stark and Finke define the term in this way: A religious economy consists of all of the religious activity going on in any society: a "market" of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents, and the religious culture offered by the organizations (2000: 193). In other words, religion can be perceived as a market in

which different religious groups provide a wide range of “goods and services” in terms of religious doctrines and activities based on which religious organizations attract or maintain adherents. The “goods and services” they offer are “explanations” (i.e. meaning of life, existence of after-life, and reasons for suffering) and “otherworldly rewards” (i.e. promises of future rewards, salvation) (Stark 2004, 14).

Exchange Theory

The economic approach to religion also relies heavily on exchange theory that sees most, if not all, human interaction as a form of exchange and can therefore be studied economically. Based on rational choice theory, Stark and Finke further elaborated and clarified that “within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices” (2000: 65). Iannaccone, another rational choice theorist, holds that “people approach all actions in the same way, evaluating costs and benefits and act to maximize their net benefits”, and therefore “choose what religion, if any, they will accept and how extensively they will participate in it” (1997: 27).

Religions as Explanations

In their co-authored publication *Act of Faith*, Stark and Bainbridge argue that the persistent appeal of religion is due to religion’s ability to provide “explanations” (i.e. meaning of life, existence of after-life, and reasons for suffering) and “otherworldly rewards” (i.e. promises of future rewards, salvation). They maintain that the desire for peace, happiness, and salvation is the very core nature of human beings, but the fact that these rewards are very limited in supply or practically unobtainable in this world has made human beings turn to supernatural forces. Accordingly, religion consists of “explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions and including statements about the nature of supernatural and about ultimate meaning” (Stark 2004, 14). The function of religion as a system of explanations that promises this or otherworldly rewards may underlie the constant and universal demand for religion across the globe and throughout history.

Pluralism and Religious Participation

Religious practice is strongly and positively associated with pluralism (Finke and Stark 1998: 762). To what extent a religious market is pluralistic may further depend on

two criteria: availability of religious goods and diversity of religious choices. In general, a liberal society that promises an unregulated religious market and promotes cultural plurality through policies and education is essential for religious pluralism to flourish. Very interestingly, the secularization theorists and religious economy scholars view the relation between pluralism and participation very differently. Peter Berger, for example, argues in his early work *The Sacred Canopy* (1966) that pluralism relativizes the taken-for-grantedness of religious meaning systems, challenging the authority of church, and fostering indifference to religion, thereby encouraging secularization. However, some empirical studies conducted by scholars of religious economy have shown the close and positive correlation between religious pluralism and religious participation. Finke and Stark (1988), for example, found higher church participation rate in cities in US that are more religiously diverse; Zaleski and Zech's (1995) study found higher religious contributions (time and money) in areas where religious market is more differentiated. These phenomena can be explained by using the market logic: the more pluralistic the market, the greater is the competition among different firms; competition provides the incentives for suppliers to improve their goods and services, actively seek to recruit members by adopting different strategies.

Main arguments to the economic approach to religion

Scholarly criticisms against the religious economy model can be categorized into three levels: *micro*, *meso*, and *macro*.

Micro-level

The first critique concerns about the very fundamental question of the theory, that is, can religious market really be compared to commercial market? Is choosing a religion really the same as buying commodity goods? From a *micro* level, Bruce (1993), for instance, argues the essential difference between religion and consumer products, as one may buy a new product of a different brand but may not easily change his/her religious affiliation simply because there is something new and better available. Arguably, at the individual level, there are much more factors to consider when we are talking about abandoning an old faith and embracing a new one, such as how strong one's sense of loyalty is to the old group, and how one interprets the existing social networks formed with old members. The latter question is especially significant in the Japanese case

where the idea of collectivism emphasizing the interdependency of individuals in society is solidly planted in most Japanese minds through socialization. For them, converting to another religion seems more difficult, if not impossible, especially in the case of new religion. Believing in a religion carries a sense of commitment to the truth that one pursues and to the community that one belongs to, which is something consumption behaviour seldom incurs.

Also at the *micro* level, some critics point to the problem of overemphasizing the notion of individual decision in choosing religion. As discussed above, Stark and Finke argue that in the consumption of religion, human beings adopt the same type of reasoning, of weighing costs and benefits as in the consumption of “secular commodities” (2000: 36). If what they say is true, then we expect people will shop in the marketplace of religion based on only one form of rationality close to *zweckrational*, a term invented by Weber meaning weighing the relative desirability of “ends” in relationship to “costs” (1968). But Sharot reminds us that when we are talking about making rational choices, there is always other form of rationalities operating simultaneously, one of which is known as *wertrational* based on which people pursue a value regardless of the costs (2002: 430). In other word, human being may rather just stick their preferences that are shaped by their own biography or other social, cultural, political institutions as religions are embedded in society where many forces may act upon us and determine our attitudes (Sherkat 1997).

Meso-level

From a *meso* perspective, some critics points to the problem of the definition of religion/religious organization made by these rational choice theorists who argue that the notion of “supernatural” is an indispensable elements of religion. However, as critically argued by many scholars, this is a “remarkably ethnocentric conception” (Hamilton 2009: 125). For example, this definition may apply well on those religions which worship god or gods who are omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent in nature, like Christianity or Islam. But what about Buddhism? In its most original form, Buddhism emphasizes the attainment of enlightenment of oneself as the ultimate way to salvation instead of forming an exchange relationship with a supernatural being that promises otherworldly awards. Then Buddhism may not be regarded as religion under this definition.

In addition, this model may only work well on religions that are of exclusivist and congregational type because it assumes affiliation to any religion is exclusivist in charac-

ter and a strict membership system is always required. In other words, popular religion and folk religion embedded in local communities (such as worship of ancestors or local deities) which is normally non-congregational, diffused, and unorganized in character, or religions that do not demand strict loyalty and allow multiple affiliation, may not fall within the scope of this model. For instance, the sociologist C. K. Yang (1961) first coined the term “diffused religion” to describe religious beliefs and practices expressed in family and community contexts rather than within an organized or institutional religion framework. We should note that these types of religions are in fact very common in Asian societies. Excluding them from the definition of religion simply proclaims that this model is not useful in the Asian context.

Macro-level

In the debate of secularization, some argued that pluralism may destroy the hegemonic power of single pervasive theological faith (Durkheim 1995: 159) or the sacred canopy (Berger 1967), and thereby eroding religious faith at a *macro* level. Conversely, religions economy theorists contend that pluralism is significantly and positively related to religious participation. For example, it is found that the continued vitality of religious beliefs and practices in the United States is attributed to the sheer diversity of American faith-based organizations, strong competition among religious groups and freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state enforced by the constitutions (Finke and Stark 1992; Finke and Iannaccone 1993). Other argue, in Scandinavia, low religious participation is due to state regulations that favour established churches through subsidies or restrictions on others, reinforce religious monopolies and thereby breeding complacent and apathetic clergy (Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Finke and Stark 2000). However, Chaves and Gorski found that the positive relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation is not always true and can only be found in a limited number of contexts (2001). Apart from pluralism, ethnic or national identity, theology (Bruce 1999), class and status (Martin 1978), other social, cultural, and historical factors (Ammerman 1997; Neitz and Mueser 1997) also play important roles in shaping religious participation and patterns of religious activities across communities.

Last but not least, critics also argue that religious organizations are not necessarily in a state of competition. We may consider the case of popular religion, folk religion, or any religions that are unorganized in character. These religions normally allow multiple-affiliation and sometimes even do not implement a registration scheme for

membership. In Japan, people tend to visit different temples or shrines on various occasions for various purposes. From a functionalistic point of view, religion may only specialize in particular functions and the kinds of service they can provide are also limited to their specialities. For example, Buddhism in Japan is sometimes called “Funeral Buddhism” because it mainly focuses on the provision of burial services or ceremonies comforting the dead, while Shinto and Christianity are more specialized in the celebration of life and marriage respectively. As a result, people may be encouraged to attend all these religions to receive different services in order to maximize their net benefits. In this sense, competition does not always exist among religions. Instead, the division of functions among religions may actually be viewed as some form of cooperation, and this cooperation plays an important role in maintaining stability and proper operation of the religious market.

After reviewing some of the major critiques of the economic approach to religion, it becomes clear that the original form of this model may only work well on particular religions in particular societies (where personal preference plays stronger role in choosing religion and congregational-type religions are more popular) and cannot capture the characteristics of all religions and societies (where individual choice is weaker and non-institutionalized religiosity is strong). Despite some of these limitations, this paper argues that religion is *analogous* to a market in which a certain degree of exchange activities exists and people choose to/ choose not to engage in these activities based on various factors. And I further argue that the factors affecting religion can be *political, economical, social, and cultural* in nature and their influence can be seen at *macro, meso, and micro* level. The next section attempts to apply this model to study religion in the East Asian context, with particular references to and modifications based on the political transition, economic development, social changes, and cultural dynamics at social, organizational, and individual levels.

Characteristics of the Religious Economy in East Asia

As religious market is embedded in society, the study of religion is impossible if we do not take into account the effect of political, economic, social, and cultural factors of any given society. This part first reviews how sociologists of religion have engaged in this project by incorporating these factors into the model, then by integrating their new ideas and suggesting my own, I try to offer some new perspectives to the studies of religion in

the East Asian context.

Political Transition

János Kornai argued in his book *Economics of Shortage* (1980) that shortage economy seen through Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1970s was a result of government policy during which the supply of consumer goods and services was extremely limited. If religion can also be conceived as a market and rests on similar market logic, then we expect political change will also have strong impact on religious market as it does in Kornai's case studies of commercial economy. Consequently, to capture the religious economy, we need to know how political transition and religion are interrelated.

One of the leading scholars in China dedicated to this project is the Chinese sociologist Yang Fenggang, who has been actively applying the economy model to the study of Chinese religion, especially the survival and revival of religion under the communist rule in post-1949 China. The most significant contribution of Yang is his attempt to develop linkages between the dynamic changes of the religious market to the political transition in China. From a *macro* perspective relating *state* and *religion*, Yang suggested that strict regulation on religion under the communist rule has suppressed both the demand and supply of religion. In the early communist rule since 1949, practicing religions was against the atheist ideology (militant atheism, enlightenment atheism, and mild atheism) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and was strictly prohibited (Yang 2011: 46). Believers were forced to renounce their beliefs; people who refused to do so were sent to jail or even executed. Practicing foreign religions was even regarded as colluding with foreign forces and espousing capitalistic ideology. The Communist attack on popular religion was also great during the periods of land reform (1950–1954) and collectivization (1954–1979) for it reinforced traditional social alignments by emphasizing community solidarity and autonomy, values the Communists wished to replace with class consciousness and the integration of collectivized communities into a socialist economy and polity. Since the 1980s, the loosening of control over religion after the economic reform has opened up more space for both religious demand and supply to grow. Official statistics shows that, from 1956 to 2009, the numbers of Catholics and Protestant have increased from 2.7 to 5.3 million and 0.7 to 16 million respectively (2012: 93–5). The numbers of clergies and religious facilities are also increasing steadily (2012: 93–5). It indicates that religion in China (after “reform and opening up”) supports the hypothesis made by those religious economy theorists that along with the deregulation of state control, the religious

market becomes more pluralistic in the diverse offerings of religion. Religious sentiment of Chinese people, which is long suppressed by a series of ideological campaigns in the 1950s to 1970s, is looking for a vent to release. Such process is visible at the *meso* and *micro* level of the religious market, and is further catalysed by the rapid economic reforms in China where many Chinese people, who are struggling in “the wild market with existential anxieties” and begin to seek “peace, security, and meaning in religion” (2005: 432).

In the case of Japan, democratization and demilitarization have brought post-war Japan a freer religious market by abolishing prewar state-Shinto (national religion aimed at cultivating absolute loyalty of all subjects to the Emperor and state) and introducing more religious diversity. Japan witnessed a five-year period known as “The Rush-Hour of the Gods” during which some 2,000 new sects and cults were formed (Iannaccone 1998: 1488). Similarly, Taiwan has also gone through similar democratization process in the past few decades and religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitutions and solidly implemented by the law nowadays. The emergence of religious organizations and religious seekers is a response to these political changes (Lu, Johnson, and Stark 2008).

Moreover, political factors not only affect the overall religious demand of any society (vertical dimension), but also shape the types of demand, or preferences, of any population (horizontal dimension). Using China as example, political ideologies and institutional regulations may favor Chinese people to participate in those religions with more Chinese colors, such as Buddhism and Taoism. Christianity may be seen less favorable choices because government sanctions on these religions appear to be stronger due to their “foreign color”. In the case of Hong Kong, while religious freedom has long been granted by the colonial government as an important notion of basic human rights, administrative means and educational and cultural policies that favored the church at that time did provide more convenience to the spread of Christianity, resulting in nowadays a large proportion of social elites being Christians.

In the example of China, Taiwan, and Japan, religion has revived at the *meso* and *micro* level in these societies with the deregulation of religious market (though in various degrees) during political transitions, thereby supporting the main idea of the religious economy model that relates religious deregulation to religious vitality. However, we should note that the effect of politics on religious dynamics could be twofold. First, it affects the supply-side of the religious market, i.e. the availability and diversity of choices. Second, it shapes the demand-side, i.e. magnitude and diversity of religious demand.

Economic Development

The impact of politics on religion is obvious because it usually induces policies changes directly affecting to what extent religious freedom is protected and how religious demand and supply is permitted in a society. Equally significant is also the influence of economic transitions on religion. In many Asian societies, such as China, Korea, and Japan, rapid modernization and urbanization at a *macro* level have challenged traditional values and community ties, engendering acute feelings of despair and alienation among individuals (Yang 2005; Kim 2000; Arai 1972). Many of them resort to religions to seek for identity, comfort, and fellowship, increasing the *magnitude* of religious demand of a given society and setting the background for religious revival.

Apart from the relations between economic development and magnitude of religious demand (how much a population may seek for religion), what we should not ignore is also the potential effects exerted by economic changes in shaping the *type* of demand of individual in a given society. In other words, what kind of religions may tend to gain more popularity in different economic periods. In his study of Japanese religiosity, Sakurai found that demand for religions in Japan significantly changes along with the decrease of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the past few decades (2012: 196–202). He argues, while Japan experienced rapid recovery and high economy growth after WWII (1950s to 70s), Japanese were interested in new religious movement that promotes the attainment of this-worldly benefit through chanting and ancestral worship. The bubble period (1970s to 90s) witnessed an increase in religious groups that focused on magic. From the 1990s onwards, more people began to pursue happiness and salvation from the spiritual world because they were disappointed by the reality, i.e, economic stagnation, unemployment, and increasing alienation, leading to spiritualism boom until today. In other words, economic changes also affect the *meso* (religious organization) and *micro* (individual preference) level of religious market. His finding is very interesting and provoking because it shows how economic transition may actually exert some significant effects on the overall “religious tastes” of a given society, and how these effects are scientifically measurable through survey.

China is also an interesting case in this regard. Economic reforms and open market policy since the 1980s have introduced many Western products and ideas into Mainland China in a way unimaginable a few decades ago. In such contexts, Yang found that Christianity, despite strict regulations imposed by the government, is becoming more and more popular among young people because of the modern and western image associated

with it (Yang 2005). On some occasions, atheist ideology may also give way to economic benefits. For example, Yiguan Dao, which was banned by the Chinese government in the 1950s, began to spread in the East coast of China, building temples, networks, and factories (Lu 2008: 166). It also appears that the PRC government has become curious about the development of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan and adopted less a hostile attitude to the organization. For instance, in 2009, representatives from the State Administration of Religious Affairs of PRC attended the “Academic forum on research of modern Chinese folk associations” held in Taiwan by The Republic of China Yiguan Dao Association and Chinese Cultural Exchange Association (Sung 2011: 241). Repressions do still exist, but appear to be less frequent. The loosening control is arguably related to Chinese local officials who want to attract Taiwanese entrepreneurs to invest in China of which many are Yiguan Dao practitioners.

In short, economic development may affect the religious market at many levels. It may increase religious demand of a given population when people feel lost in the rapidly changing market as in the case of modern China. The case studies of Japan and China indicate that the pace of economic development may also have some implicit effects on religious preference.

Social Changes

Social changes can be defined as any changes that may lead to the alternation of social order. Some of the most discussed issues include demographic changes and transformation of family system as a result of ageing population and rise of individualism characterized by rapid modernization in most developed societies. For many sociologists, understanding the ties between social changes and religion is a difficult task because most of the time they do not show a simple causal linkage. For example, how can we articulate the impacts of ageing on religion properly? The effect of ageing on religion seems to be two-dimensional. According to rational choice theorists, ageing may lead to higher religious participation and demand at the *micro* level in two ways. Firstly, old people tend to be more concerned about the issue of life-after-death than young people, thereby attending church more frequently. Secondly, the amount of time and physical work individuals invest in their religious faiths and practice tend to increase along with the age. According to the theory, the elderly tend to have accumulated more “religious capital” than young people which engenders, directly or indirectly, a higher level of satisfaction they gain through religious activities. That is to say, devotion to religion

tends to increase with age. In terms of social life, religious organization may also become a popular gathering place for the silver population to sustain their community life. On the contrary, ageing may lead to decline of religious participation at a *macro* level. Similar to most developed countries, many Asian societies have experienced declining fertility rates over the past few decades. Decrease in the number of new-born substantially reduces the number of religious consumer available in a market and may diminish the overall religious demand of a society. The practice of ancestral worship, if we also consider it as a form of religion, may be doomed to decline if the number of next generation obligated to do so are actually decreasing plus the fact that less people are willing to take up this responsibility. It seems that whether ageing would increase or decrease religious participation depends on the particular perspectives we adopt.

Increasingly, individualism may also present both challenge and opportunity to religion. Many sociologists agreed that industrialization and urbanization were transforming social relationship in an irreversible way. Traditional bonds are being broken down by prevailing individualistic cultures, leading to a progressive development of anomie and alienation in society (Wilmott, 1986). While religious participation may not decline in the way secularization theorists have predicted, the idea that faith is a private matter and should be kept to oneself is becoming more accepted. People may still adhere to churches for a sense of community, but religions that are less community-based and focus more on individual religious practices, such as meditation and self-study, are also gaining popularity. On the other hand, the privatization of religion means that religion may be perceived as a private matter that individuals can decide for themselves. It is true that socialization (e.g. effect of parents, schooling etc) is still significantly shaping the religious life of many people, but its effect may diminish (but not disappear) along with the progressive development of individualism. When a society becomes more individualistic and effects of socialization are to some extent being weakened, the rationale hold by consumers is becoming closer and closer to the assumption made by the religious economy theorists: consumers choose their religions based on individual preferences.

An expert in the study of Japanese funeral Buddhism Mark Rowe also argues that: "...urbanization, depopulation in rural areas, smaller family sizes, and increasing number of people who do not marry, a rising divorce rate, the aging of the baby boomers, and a growing number of women who are no longer satisfied with the partilineal-burial status quo have all created a demand for new burial forms..." (2011: 4) has given rise to new types of relationships with temple that is based on *individual choice* rather than inherited

obligation.

Cultural Dynamics

Cultural elements specific to a society also exert significant influence on the behaviour and mindset of the people involved in that culture. Culture may be considered a form of institution (North 1990) that construct and reproduce the everyday life activities of all folks and imposes constraints on individual behaviour living in the specific cultural context. This part discusses how cultural factors, such as traditions, values, and beliefs play their roles in shaping the religious market especially in the East Asian context.

Many East Asian societies are characterized by the popularity of non-institutionalized religiosity. It is similar to institutional religion in the sense that both of them deal with the supernatural or spiritual dimension of life. However, while institutionalized religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, have highly-developed beliefs system, practices, and organization, non-institutionalized religions tend to be unorganized or at least less organized structurally, non-congregational, and underdeveloped in doctrines and belief. Examples include folk religion or popular religion, magic, and spiritualities. In many East Asian societies, on the *micro* and *meso* level, the market size of non-institutional religion appears to be bigger than institutionalized religions. In China, for example, government reported that there are 100 million religious believers in institutionalized religion (less than 9 percent of the total population), but another survey conducted by the Shanghai Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) shows 85 percent of the Chinese population is at least open toward supernatural beliefs or participating in religious practices (Yang 2012: 119–120). The Japanese society also shows similar patterns. Despite the fact that 70% Japanese claim themselves to be *mushūkyō* (no religion) (Reischauer and Jansen 1988: 215), or only around 35% believe in some kinds of religion, a survey conducted by NHK reported that over 60% of Japanese aged 16 to 49 believe in some supernatural power or existence such as “spiritual or magic power of ancestors”, “life after death”, and “reincarnation” (Nishi 2009). In Hong Kong, while around 30% people claim to be Christian and Buddhist, nearly 60% are in the category “Chinese Universalist”.¹ These surveys reflect a strong tendency of non-institutional religiosity in many East Asian societies. This religious phenomenon, as discussed in the second part of this paper, has challenged the very basic assumption made by the religious

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_48_1.asp

economy theorists: consumers of religion do not necessarily affiliate to one single religion; they may affiliate to more than one, or simply none. However, in many East Asian societies, many people are engaged in religious practices that lack a formal membership scheme and organizational structure. For this reason, we may have to abandon the thinking that one must affiliate to a religious group in order to practice religion. The concept “affiliation” or “conversion” should be put aside if we are not dealing with institutionalized religion. Secondly, it may be helpful to assume a higher degree of flexibility in their religious practices as a result of not strictly affiliating to a single religion. For people living in such cultural context, they would find it acceptable to visit a new temple, or seek services from different deities depending on their own needs. Such logic is especially ingrained in Chinese culture. People who practice folk or local religion visit different temples for different wishes (Liu 2003: 67). They may stop visiting a temple if they believe the “god” worshiped there is not answering their demand, and then turn to other deities. This “god-seeking” journey stops when people find a temple that is efficacious and restarts again if it fails to respond to their needs.

The Japan case is also worthy of discussion here. The Agency for Cultural Affairs, which is under the Japanese Ministry Education, publishes *the Japanese Religious Yearbook* annually which includes statistics relating to Japanese religions. As of 2008, the Agency reported that membership claims by religious groups totaled 207 million. This number, substantially more than the country’s population of 127.4 million, reflects the fact that many citizens affiliate with multiple religions, especially Shinto and Buddhism, the two biggest institutionalized religions in Japan. The amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism throughout Japanese history contributed to this interesting phenomenon. The syncretism of religion in Japan is best described by the saying “born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist” (Kisala 2006: 3). The seemingly syncretism of religion *de facto* reflects Japanese practical approach to religion: Shinto rituals go with birth; Christian marriage ceremony conducted in church; and Buddhist rituals for funerals. Cultural institution in the form of traditions and customs also shape Japanese religious behavior. For instance, before the university entrance exam each year, shrines worshipping “the god of knowledge” such as Yujima Shrine in Tokyo and Tenmangu Shrines located in Kyoto, Osaka and Fukuoka attract students to pray for success in their exams. The same people may visit another temple or shrine for entirely different purposes such as praying for good luck in job hunting or marriage. We see a strong consumer mentality at work here (Miller, 1995). Japanese religious cultures, traditions,

and belief systems tend to strengthen, “institutionalize”, and normalize such a “consumer mindset”.

In short, the religious market in East Asian societies is composed of both institutional religions and many non-institutional religions or spiritualities. The non-institutional religious market forms a very different dynamics compared to institutionalized one. The former has higher frequency of switching religions and stronger consumer mentality among consumers because the cultural institutions allow and legitimize such behavior and mindset. This leads us to rethink the following issues: first, exchanges appear to be more vibrant in the non-institutional level of the religious market; second, exclusive membership is less important for the discussion of many non-institutional religions.

Conclusion

In the study of East Asian religious economy, it requires a good understanding of the political transitions, economic development, social changes, and cultural dynamics of East Asian societies through careful historical studies. We have to understand how *political transitions* have deregulated the market but political ideologies and agenda may still maintain their influence on religious demand and supply. We also need to ask how *economic development* may lead to collapse of community bonds and increase of religious demand, and how it may shape the religious preference of people. *Social changes* affect the demography of a society and its effects on religious participation should also be clarified. *Cultural factors* provide directions or constrains for a particular population, affecting the ways they perceive and practice religion. Institutionalized religion may be popular only in some societies but not in others because cultural forces in the form of traditions, habits, and mindsets can vary a lot.

One of such studies similar to the approach I discussed here is Norris and Inglehart’s macro and comparative analysis of religious economies in three different types of societies: agrarian, industrial, and post-industrial societies. Based on macro-level data from 191 nations and survey data from almost 80 societies, they argue that economic, cultural, and political changes *go together in coherent ways* and *affect the levels of existential security* among a population. According to them, “feelings of vulnerability to physical, societal, and personal risks are a key factor driving religiosity” (2011: 4). Religiosity persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially those in poorer nations and in failed states, facing personal survival-threatening risks. Exposure to physical,

societal and personal risks drives religiosity. Conversely, a systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred among the more prosperous strata in rich nations. Their profound study indicates that the more we know about the correlation between the different aspects of society and religion, the more we can understand the market dynamics of religion.

This paper agrees with the analytical power of the religious economy model but is also aware of its limitations as argued by many critics. In view of this, I argue the importance to include the four important elements into the model in the studies of religious markets of any society. However, it does not claim to be comprehensive in nature. The main idea of developing this agenda is to emphasize the complexity of the relationships between religion and social change, and the difficulties we encounter in our research as a result of this complexity. I believe that any attempts to reduce religious dynamics merely to the results of economical activities or cultural norms are not realistic. While the agenda is still immature in many ways, it may be considered as an attempt to develop a more comprehensive approach to the studies of religion.

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