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# **THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN SHANGHAI CONSIDERED THROUGH THE RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY OF RELIGION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The increasing growth of Christianity in Shanghai, China, provides an instructive model for understanding the marketing and economics of religion. The paper employs theoretical analysis as well as an analysis of the results of field study. The theoretical study employed rational choice theory and the field study included visiting religious places and conducting interviews. The major field work took place at Christian churches and other places of worship in Shanghai city during Christmas and New Year time, 2019. This research concludes that Christianity and its competitiveness in comparison to the other faiths in Shanghai, will gain popularity in Shanghai follower will grow in numbers.

**Keywords:** Christianity; China; Rational Choice Theory of Religion; Marketing of Religion

## **Introduction**

Christianity has experienced a significant rise in China since the Economic Reform starting in December 1978, especially in its commercial center, Shanghai. This paper attempts to understand this phenomena according to rational choice theory of religion. At the core of this theory is the basic economic concept of supply and demand and the rational choice of consumers. Other relevant considerations are monopolies, free market, competition, etc. In economic theory at its most basic level, supply increases in proportion to demand, and the demand increases in proportion to needs and consumer satisfaction. Therefore, firstly, the supply of Christianity will be explained by how it successfully meets the religious needs of the population of Shanghai. Secondly, a comparison will be made between the religious supply of Christianity and other faiths and in this regard, the competitive edge of Christianity will be considered.

Many nineteen-century scholars, including Marx, Freud, and Comte, believed that religious belief was irrational. Based on this concept, the “secularization hypothesis” became the trend of religious study in the social science field (Iannaccone, 1998). The main theme of this theory is that with the development of the economy and increasing education and urbanization, religiosity would decrease and all-encompassing secularization of social institutions will happen. However, there has been a resurgence of religion as described by Peter Burger in his famous work *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, which suggests that religious demand has continued to grow. In 2012, the Global Religious Landscape Study measured the religious affiliation around the world, and the result showed that 84 percent of the 2010 world population continued to be religious. And it was believed that the religious population would continue to increase in the future. Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2015)

Remarkably, the number of Christianity believers has increased rapidly in China. Since the Chinese Economic Reform, the number of Christians has grown nearly 4 times larger. The history of Christianity in China can be traced back to 635 ACE. But the missionary activities did

not make significant shifts until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Christianity activities that occurred in China could be divided into three eras. The missionary stage that places the seeds of Christianity; the persecution stage in which under the communist government, all religions were banned; the revival stage that comes after the Economic Reform in 1978, in which Christianity increased dramatically when the policy was softened for religions (Wang, 2015). Stauffer Milton in his work *The Christian Occupation of China, 1922*, provided specific data on Chinese Christians in 1919. By using the number estimated by Daniel Bates, the total number of Chinese Christians in 1936 is approximately 0.79% of the population. Combining the total Protestants number estimated by Ying (2009) and the number of Catholics reported by the Vatican, the total number of Christians is about 0.91% of the total population. Data between 1949 and 1978 was not recorded because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. However, the official number of registered Christians was zero at that time. The softened policy of religion after the Economic Reform brought about the religious boom. In 1983, the Chinese Three-self Church estimated the official number of Christians was about six million, which accounts for 0.59% of the population. Later, by 2000, the total number of Christians was about 2.2% with the Protestant number 17 million estimated by Lambert (2003) and the Catholics 11 million estimated by Madisen (2003). Various surveys could be found in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Currently, the number of Christians officially shown on the government website was about 28 million, which was estimated by China Social Science Academy. However, several surveys conducted by scholars estimated a higher number. Wang (2015) argued that the actual number would be higher than the government provided because Chinese citizens usually avoid claiming their true beliefs “due to the sensitivity of Christianity in China”. Taking underground churches and unregistered Christians into consideration, Stark (2011) adjusted the overall Chinese Christian number to 58.9 million, which was 4.4% of the population.

Using the above data that Xiuhua Wang argued and estimated in 2015, the following figure 1 provides an illustration of Christian growth

in China.

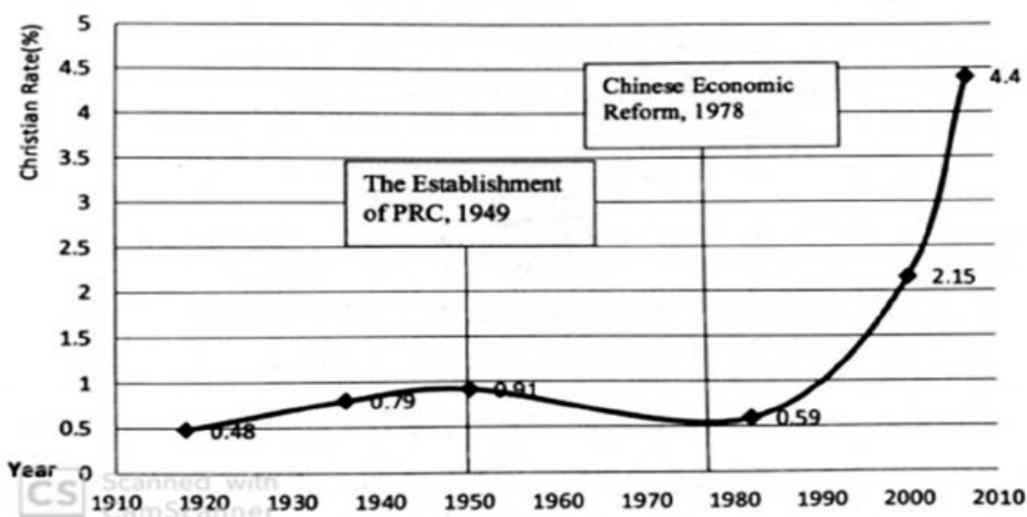


Figure 1. Percentage of Christians in China between 1910 and 2010

The data in Shanghai shows a rising trend as well. According to the calculation and estimation made by Wang (2015) from various resources, the rate of Christianity in Shanghai was 0.95% in 1999, 1.12% in 2004, and 1.95% in 2009. Currently, the number of Protestants and Catholics could be retrieved from the official website of the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Ethnic and Religious Affairs. As updated on September 2019, the total number of Christians in Shanghai was 358,600. In 2021, it was recorded that 187,000 Protestants attended religious activities regularly and frequently. Comparing to the total number of religious believers updated in December 2013, 1.24 million, Christian account for 28.9% of all believers.

As the commercial center of China, Shanghai is famous for its open and multicultural environment. China Daily (2019) reported Shanghai is home to the largest foreign population in China, which accounts for 23.7% of the national total. Following the globalization trend, Western culture has long influenced the local culture. Besides the popularity of Western commercial products, Western festivals are very fashionable to celebrate. During Christmas, churches in Shanghai are filled with people. On the Christmas Eve of 2019, it is reported that Shanghai citizens started to

queue up in front of the Moore Memorial Church (which is located right next to the center of the city, People's Square) at 2 pm, while the formal ceremony started at 5 pm. The length of the queue was about 150 meters from the church gate to the back streets (Shanghai Online, 2019). Inside the church, it is common to see people standing for the whole ceremony since all seats have been taken. Although the audience at the church was not 100 percent Christian believers, during the services the majority of the audience could respond appropriately when the priest requested people to recite and pray together. Not only during the Christmas period, churches are often full of believers on regular Sunday services. As a priest of Shanghai International Chapel claimed in an interview for this study; “There are two services in the morning and another additional one at the night, the seats are all long taken in the main chapel, which contains about 2000 people, the following crowd also fills up the three-floors wing building. When the indoor seats are taken, some believers choose to stand in its outdoor garden area for the entire session. In total, there are about 3000 people in one service.”

In general, no matter the data estimation or the boom in church attendance, signs have shown that Christianity is spreading in China and particularly Shanghai. Behind the phenomena, it is significant to study the reasons. The economic approach to religion is applied to explain it in this research proposal. It is because the preliminary research findings and impressions show that behind the spread of Christianity in Shanghai the economics of religion and its ancillary rational choice theory of religion can shed light on this phenomenon.

In 1776, Adam Smith published his remarkable work *The Wealth of Nations* and found modern economics. In his work, Smith suggested that competition exists among religious groups like any other economic sector. Studies in the United States proved that religious diversity is positively correlated with religious participation (Finke, Roger, and Stark, 1988). Thus, quoting Smith, more religious denominations can diminish the interreligious conflict (Stark and Finke, 2000).

Later in 1903 and 1904, Max Weber also identified the relationship between religion and economics in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He recognized religion as an independent variable to economic outcomes and argued that religious belief affects not only a person's working attitude, business ethics, and consumption behavior but also the labor or other resource cost that occurs in religious activities. Therefore, it could influence economic growth. McCleary and Barro (2006) argued that beliefs about salvation provide economic incentives. The key concept is "salvific merit" which connects the perceived probability of salvation to lifetime activities. This line of thought was further taken up by many researchers and is still relevant and being researched and investigated. In short, it showed how religions matter in any economic activity.

However, another important consideration is the role economics plays in religion. And how economical concepts such as supply, demand, competition, quality, consumers, products, etc. are relevant to religions and most importantly to their spread and decline. Or to their growing and diminishing following.

Iannaccone (1998) defined the economic approach to religion. The doctrine is the research that uses the tools and methods of economics to study religions on other socioeconomic outcomes. Based on the study of the religious market in the United States, Roger Finke, Rodney Stark (1992), and Laurence Iannaccone (1998) further developed the religion market model. The economic approach was not mainly about money or price, although they are relevant. Viewing human behavior (when making religious decisions) is as rational as the behavior when making other decisions. So these writer have been innovative in applying supply and demand method to analyze the competition among religious groups. Their research focused on the supply-side factors. And they argued that in a free religious market like the United States, pluralism of religion is positive to church membership and attendance. Therefore, the economics of religion can only make good sense where nation states do not patronize a particular religion or monopolize any sect or denomination of it.

Like other business markets, competition exists among religious groups. Adam Smith (1776) laid the foundation for the economic analysis of religion. He argued that self-interest motivates religious groups and institutions just as it does secular producers. The market forces constrain churches just as they constrain secular firms. The benefit of competition, the burdens of monopoly, and the hazards of government regulation are as real for religion as for any other sector of the economy. To attract more believers in competition with other religious denominations, the religious group and institutions tend to improve and motivate their products and service to align with the believers' preferences. Economists and sociologists view religious behavior as an instance of rational choice. In a free religious market like the United States, people have access to an immense market of more than 1500 denominational alternatives (Gordon Melton, 1989). They could vary their level of religious involvement or move between congregations or denominations. In other words, they "shopping" for the church that best meets their perceived needs. Although many of these needs might be illusory, many others (in the realm of health, family, and social life) are far more pragmatic to support the theory than those personal judgments (Iannaccone, 1998).

Based on the rational choice theory, the supply-demand model has been considered by many scholars. In terms of demand-side, Marxist scholars raise the "secularization hypothesis". Max Weber (1903 and 1904), Berger (1967), Wilson (1966), Hume (1757), and Freud (1927) believed that religion would decline in response to advances in education and science, and the movements from traditional agriculture toward urbanized economics. However, religious demand has proven to holding steady. In 2012, according to Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a large majority of the world's population continues to be religious. (84 percent of the 2010 world population of 6.9 Billion). However, more recent scholars focus on the supply side of religion. Following Adam Smith (1791), scholars like Finke, Stark, and Iannaccone in the 20th century analyzed the competition among religious groups. According to Adam Smith, religious competition is ultimately good for consumers of religion

and the nature of religious products. When governments impose state religions, people participate less in formal religion. Based on an analysis of the religious market in the United States, Finke and Stark (1992) argued that the US is an example of a religious free market. A variety of religious offerings is well-aligned with the individual preference about the degree of strictness and other characteristics. Therefore, pluralism increases religious participation.

### **The Situation in China**

The main reason behind the rise of Christianity in China is the softened policy after the Chinese Economic Reform. The number of Christians increased from zero during Mao's period to the large population today because people feel more comfortable expressing their religious beliefs. However, as a foreign religion, Christianity grew significantly faster than other religions. This fulfills the first requirement of the economics of religion that it can only happen in an open market space where freedom of religion is possible.

The supply and demand method can be used to explain this. In terms of the demand side, China is considered to be a secular country, most of the population is atheist. Especially during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976), under the control of the Communist government of PRC, all religious believers and leaders were regarded as "ghosts and monsters". The suppression of religious freedom turned the number of believers to zero. Although after the Revolution, religious belief was tolerated, it was not encouraged. Few people reclaimed their religion, but whoever had experienced this period or was born after it mostly became atheists and lived in an atheistic atmosphere. The 2010 census shows that in Shanghai about 90 percent of the population was under the age of 65. In other words, most of the Shanghai citizens were born after 1955. They are not influenced by any state religion, or a family religious tradition. Therefore, when facing religion, Shanghai citizens mostly view it in a secular way. However, Chinese culture is historically connected with Taoism and Buddhism. For example, the Chinese follow the Buddhist way

of the funeral ritual and adopt the Taoist ritual when they meet serious life problems and have to make big decisions. But those activities are usually regarded as following the Chinese tradition. Namely, when Shanghai citizens consider Buddhism or Taoism, they observe the cultural aspects over the religious aspects.

The number of believers in Shanghai has been rising in the last two decades. According to the number published on the website of the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, in 2013, there were about 1.24 million believers in Shanghai, which is about 5.3 percent of the total population. And annually nearly 19.5 million people were attending religious activities at religious venues, which accounts for nearly 83 percent of the total population in 2013. Besides the softened religious policy, the growth of Shanghai's economy is probably one of the reasons behind the religious boom. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, human motivational needs are divided into five levels. At the bottom, there are the foundational physiological needs, and safety needs. The higher the need, Maslow claims, the less selfish human is found to be. After satisfying their basic needs, people start to seek psychological needs and care more about their relationships with others. In the hierarchy of needs, spiritual needs are at the top (Maslow, 1979). At its highest and deepest, it is a reaching out for the ultimate (truth, beauty, goodness, justice, and the like), and the goal of being all that we can be as "God" created us. Such ideas or being-values form the heart of true religion: the human being is naturally religious (Fuller, 1994). Since the Chinese Economic Reform, Shanghai has made significant developments in its modernity and economy. In 2018, the World Bank reported the GDP in China reached 13.6 trillion USD, ranking second in the world. Among all, Shanghai contributed 3.27 trillion Yuan (480 billion US dollars). It is considered the biggest city by GDP. Besides the data, Shanghai is always regarded as a modernist city and the commercial center of China. Issues of safety and well-being are no longer a struggle for most of Shanghai citizens. The pursuit of spiritual life becomes more important. Finke and Stark (2000) believed that science is insufficient to solve the central problems

of humans, which are about human existence, the meaning of life, and the explanation of death. Therefore, religion serves as a “compensator” for humans. Besides the explanation of life, religion is also regarded as a shared set of activities, communities, and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural forces. Evidence shows that there is an increasing number of Christian converts in urban China who are well-educated young people (Yang, 2005).

In terms of the supply side, the officially recognized religions in Shanghai include Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Among all religions, Buddhism has the biggest number of believers, which was about 453,300 in 2014, comprising 36.5 percent of all believers. And Christians hold the second-largest number, which is 358,600, or 28.9 percent of all believers. There were 430 worship places of all religions open to the public in 2013 (Shanghai Municipal Commission of Ethnic and Religious Affairs). According to Chinese religious policy, the State Administration for Religious Affairs regulates all activities of recognized religious organizations. All religions and religious believers are treated equally. And the government does not encourage the propaganda involving discrimination among religious denominations. Yet, different religion provides different religious products and services in Shanghai. Therefore, a comparison of religious suppliers in Shanghai instructive for understanding the rapid growth of Christianity in Shanghai.

## **Religious Competition**

Among all religions in Shanghai, official data shows that Buddhism and Christianity hold the biggest number of believers. The number of Taoists is more difficult to calculate. Taoism was one of China’s traditional religions, but because of the disruptions from the Cultural Revolution, the current generation does not have a clear cognition of it, and sometimes confuses it with Buddhism. For example, inside the well-known landmark, Yu Garden in the center of Shanghai located the Shanghai Temple of the City God (Cheng Huang Miao). If asked by others, most of the local citizens might believe that it is a Buddhist temple. The

number of Muslims in Shanghai is the lowest, which is about 85,000. Its believers are mainly minority, and muslin mosques are usually not open to non-muslims. Therefore, this proposal mainly focuses on the economic competition between the supply of Buddhism and Christianity in Shanghai.

In 2014, there were 119 Buddhist temples and 277 Christian churches in Shanghai. It was found in the field study, that Buddhist temples are operated more like sightseeing places. Most of the time, Buddhist temples charge an entrance fee. The ticket price ranges from less than one dollar to eight dollars per person. The ticket is also used as a coupon which can be exchanged for incense sticks for worshiping. There is no entrance free at Christian churches. Some donation boxes are placed at the church gate and exits, while the donation boxes in the Buddhist temple are placed in front of a statue of Buddha, which can be seen immediately when worshiping.

Both Buddhist temples and Christian churches are open to the public daily, but the frequency of service is different. Most Christian churches hold regular services weekly. Besides the Sunday worship service, churches also organize regular Bible study, beginner's classes, fellowship groups for youth and elderly on weekdays. Buddhist temples plan their major ceremonies annually. The schedules vary from temple to temple. Most of the ceremonies are held according to Chinese traditional festivals and Buddhist festivals. For example, there are prayer meetings for good fortune blessing on Chinese New Year and ancestor worship during the Qingming Festival. Some Buddhist temples also schedule sermons once a month on the weekend. There are official volunteer teams in some big temples. However, there is no sign of believers' fellowship that is organized by Buddhist temples. According to this research, only a few temples in Shanghai provide Buddhist study classes or experience camps for the believers. The dynamics of Christianity as stated above fulfill other requirements of the economics of religion such as religious products, and demonstrate the struggle of a business to become established.

Based on data from 2014, the number of Buddhist clergies was 1182, while the number of Christian clergies was 432. The number of

Buddhist clergies was nearly three times larger than that of Christian clergies. However, a larger number does not equal better availability. From the ticket office to registering a name on the prayer list for blessing by the monk, or adoption of a fish to release in the Free Life Pond, the whole process is conducted by workers in the Buddhist temple. A monk or a nun can be barely seen in the hall, the ones on duty usually stay together with other workers in the office which is not located in the main temple area. In short, more workers can be seen in a Buddhist temple than monks or nuns. In a Christian church, the meetings or services are moderated by the priest. Volunteers are also hired in the church for helping with administration affairs or maintaining order during crowded services. During the mass, the audience could hear the priest's speech through a loudspeaker and watch the worship at the altar through live broadcasts if seated at the wing building. Although the communication is not private, the audiences can receive the information directly from the clergy. The priests are also open to private communication with the attendees. If it's needed, the priest's office is located right beside the chapel, and some Catholic churches provide confessional service for the believers. This fulfills another requirement of market theory related to competitive edge, the efficiency of service, and customer care.

Online access is also provided by both Christianity and Buddhism. Besides the official websites, the social networking method is widely used to communicate with believers. Nowadays, the most popular Chinese social networking application on smartphones is WeChat. The churches and temples, and some Christian and Buddhist groups create their official account on WeChat as well. In these accounts, followers can read articles posted by the account owner and other information provided on the chatting page. The Christian accounts are better maintained and updated than the Buddhist ones. On the Christian official pages, information is classified clearly, and the introduction of the church, the common prayer, the service time, and the activities schedule can be found easily. In a special period under the COVID-19 quarantine policy, any public gatherings were prohibited. The religious places and services were also

closed down. Both temples and churchs provided notifications in their accounts. The Christian churches changed their Sunday service into an online service weekly. Most Buddhist temples posted articles less often than churches. The information from the temples was usually combined into one category. They provided an introduction to the temples' history and information about their opening time and transportation advice. Some temples do not provide schedules of events. For those who did, its event schedules cannot be found as easily as those of the churches. On the other hand, most Buddhist temples opened their online donation channels on WeChat accounts. The believers could access the donation channel on the first page of the temple's account, and make the payment through the online WeChat Pay or Ali Pay. During this research, only one temple in Shanghai was found to provide Buddhist experience courses and programs to the public. The Jade Buddha Temple holds a variety of Buddhist activities, including short-term activities within one day, such as transcribing Buddhist scriptures at the temple; and long-term activities, such as a two-day Zen study camp, which asks students to live following the same discipline as monks, and study Buddhist practice and Zen knowledge. The above-mentioned findings demonstrate how Christianity has the advantage in information dissemination and choices and availability of services. And these concepts have their roots in economics, mostly in the information age in which corporations effectively make their online visibility present.

## **Concluding Observations**

All of China is adjusting itself to a rapid process of development. From the traditional agricultural life to the modern production industry today, the transformation of the labor manner caused the alienation of the workers, and also changed the relationship between people. According to Karl Marx's theory of alienation, modern production creates an estrangement between workers and their production; workers and their selves; workers and other workers. The unemployment rate in Shanghai was 3.6 percent in 2018, and the official working hours are 8 hours per

day. However, working overtime is very common in business companies. The workers barely have private time after an exhausting working day. To pursue more job opportunities and get better pay, people from other cities in China come to Shanghai for urban living. Young people rent apartments and live away from their families in order to save time for going to work. Through the development of social networking, communication among people also changed. Families are often too far away to provide financial and emotional support, fellow workers become competitors, old friends drift apart and friendship is difficult to sustain with limited free time and social media. It was found that loneliness was a major theme when interviewing Christian believers during the field research. The priest also mentioned the problem of loneliness and the seeking of connection among urban citizens in one of his sermons. There exists nostalgia for community life and the need for actual communication.

In terms of communities and activities, Christian churches do provide more opportunities for believers to be able to communicate with each other. Firstly, the churches have more frequency of gathering their believers. Churches follow a weekly schedule to hold community meetings and services, while Buddhist temples only conduct dharma assemblies yearly, or sermon meetings once a month. Secondly, the participants experience more interaction with others followers in a Christian church. During the Christmas Eve worship of 2019, besides chanting with the prayer and choir, the priest also asked the parishioners sitting next to one another to wish each other a peaceful year in Christ. In the process of a regular Sunday worship or a community meeting, one part of the mass is to give one another the sign of peace. Additionally, the fellowship meetings are divided into different groups of people by age, so that the interaction and the sermon could be designed for satisfying the different needs of the youth and the elderly. The Buddhist temples do not organize their official fellowship in this way. The worship process in a temple is more likely to be a personal issue. From the entrance into the temple, getting the incense sticks, to worship in front of the Buddha, there is no interaction with monks or other believers. Everyone could purchase

different offerings to worship Buddha according to their needs in a store inside the temple which is operated by workers. Some posts in the temple advise and remind visitors of worship etiquette. The sermon meeting in the Buddhist temple conducts in the form of a seminar class in school. The monk or nun makes a speech about Buddhism and its relation with daily life, but there is no such interaction with other believers as the Christian church encourages.

Based on the religious marketing theory, the comparison of different religious supplies helped to find out what has satisfied the believers' needs. Christian churches do not put any limitations on the public. People come for a variety of purposes or just occasional curiosity and all are welcomed by churches. The easier online accessibility suits the communication habits of youth nowadays. More frequent activities and community meetings, as well as practical communication with clergies and other believers, helped with the alienation and loneliness of modern citizens. Within the worship services and activities of Christian churches, attendees can know about Christianity. The church atmosphere and the choir help to calm the mind down and focus upon spiritual meanings. On the other hand, the Buddhist temples are some of the popular sightseeing places for tourists in Shanghai. The temples provide a variety of offerings for worship. By following the Buddhist worship ritual, the need for blessing could be satisfied instantly. It is perhaps predictable that Christianity would continue to be attractive for the urban citizens with higher education and income who seek spiritual meaning and workers and the elderly who suffer from alienation and loneliness. Although the personal reason for converting to religion is always personal, the marketing of religion could increase the chance of contact with its potential believers.

Thus, the reason behind the rise of Christianity in Shanghai is the religious free market because of the softening of the Chinese religious policy. And the major reason for the spread of Christianity in Shanghai can be well explained in light and perspective of the rational choice theory of the economics of religion.

## ENDNOTES

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