

'DO YOU WANT TO RECEIVE A MISSIONARY AT HOME?': CONVERSION AND THE RELIGIOUS MARKET

Erik Sengers

Abstract: This paper offers an introduction in religious market theory on the basis of the theme of conversion. Conversions have everything to do with the religious market. Where people are looking for religious satisfaction, they will turn themselves to religious organisations that are willing to give that on certain conditions. Starting from the assumption of the rational actor, the theory makes some strong hypotheses on religious organisations and the religious market. What does the religious market look like, what are the basic characteristics of this market, and how can religious organisations interact with that market? However, when we discuss social-scientific research on conversion in Europe, the limits of religious market theory come to the fore. In the conclusion, the main questions that arise from religious market theory for the project *Conversion Careers and Culture Politics in Pentecostalism* are being discussed.

1. Introduction

The most impressive experience I had concerning conversion was in Salt Lake City, Utah. I skipped some sessions of the conference I attended and took the opportunity to visit the 'Vatican' of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints: the Mormon temple area that is located in the center of the town. I took part in a guided tour, I saw the informative movie, and I walked through the exhibition that showed historical and contemporary aspects of Mormonism. In the exhibition area, I passed two young Mormon girls (mostly Mormon boys are expected to evangelise for the Church in another country, girls are expected to fulfil their religious service in Salt Lake City receiving tourists and guests). The nameplate of one of the girls indicated that she was German, and as I am fluent in German my automatic reaction was '*Gutentag*'. We came into contact and to my surprise she switched into perfect Dutch when she noticed that is my mother tongue. She told me her story, that she was a lawyer, working at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, that she shared an apartment with a Mormon girl, that she was impressed by that faith and then converted from Catholicism to the Mormon Church. Within a

few years she was in Salt Lake City, where she spoke with me. I was impressed by the story and especially the power of an organisation that is able to attract High Potentials like this young woman. Then the talk ended quickly. As I showed so much interest in her story and in Mormonism, she asked me if I would be willing to receive a Mormon missionary at home. As my interest was purely scientific, I declined. She obviously realized that there was no opportunity to gain me for the Mormon Church, we greeted and continued our ways.

Conversions have everything to do with the religious market. Individuals deal with religious organisations before they come to the decision to become a member. Religious organisations offer social and religious products with which they hope to gain new members and retain the existing ones. They see themselves in competition with other suppliers of religious, quasi-religious and/or social goods. Governments impose rules on the religious market or lift them, thus regulating the demand and supply of religion in a certain area under their control. And social and cultural trends and developments can increase or decrease the demand for religion in general or specific religious organisations. So, if you want to gain knowledge about the process of conversion in modern, liberal and democratic societies, it is my opinion that you need some knowledge about the religious market and how it functions. This is not a broadly accepted idea. Some people simply deny there is such a thing like a 'religious market'. It seems to imply that you can exchange religion like other commodities and that religious organisations compete with each other — and do they not work together for the Kingdom of God? But this is exactly the assumption of the market theory of religion: religious markets work like commercial markets, and religious organisations compete together on this market to 'sell' their version of religion to the general public. The goal of this paper therefore is to highlight the structures of the religious market and their implication for conversion processes.

In my description of the religious market, I remain close to the theory as developed by Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Roger Finke and Laurence Iannaccone. Embedded in a more general framework of a rational choice theory on religion, their religious market theory currently is the dominant paradigm in this field. In the first paragraph, I will describe the 'rational actor' that underlies the paradigms of rational choice and religious market theories. It is supposed that individuals always make a rational decision, which is one that benefits them most. In the second and third paragraph, I describe the structure

of the religious market and how religious organisations can interact with this market respectively. In studies about conversion processes the focus is often on the individual, but in religious market theory it are the supply side factors — regulation of the market and the religious organisations — that ultimately explain the religious choices of individuals. Then I will turn to the theme of conversion on the religious market. As some empirical research contradicts some central hypotheses of religious market theory, the theme of this volume also enables me to formulate some critique on a dogmatic view of the religious market. On the basis of this critique, I will formulate some tentative conclusions in the form of questions that can lead further research on religious market and conversions.

2. *The Rational Actor*

Religious market theory starts with the assumption of the rational actor. It is assumed that human beings are rational, that means goal-oriented beings. This, however, does not mean that their actions always are rational in an objective sense: human beings are variously limited in intelligence and they do not possess all available information at any time. But within this limits, it is assumed they base their acts and behaviour on rational, goal-oriented decisions. The goal of these decisions is rewards. People seek for what they perceive as rewards, they weigh what is the best reward for them and what is the best way to get these rewards. At the same time they are assumed to avoid costs. The assumptions of the rational actor go even further, as it is stated that human beings not only strive for rewards and avoid costs, but that they strive for the highest possible reward and the lowest possible costs — in other words that they seek to maximize their profits. The last assumption the theory makes is that people can acquire their rewards through exchange. What is valuable for one person, is not necessarily valuable for another person. Therefore people can exchange rewards that are less valuable for rewards that are more valuable for them, in order to get the rewards they want to have.¹

The assumption of the rational actor has several consequences for an ‘economic’ theory of conversion. First, it is perceived that the individual that goes through a conversion experience always makes the

¹ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1996, 27-28, 32, 113.

right decision. He or she has done what is best for him or her at a certain time, even if we personally think they are not better but worse off in their new environment. Individuals are not weak victims of aggressive religious organisations, they are active actors looking for spiritual well being. Second, conversion has everything to do with costs and rewards. Individuals are looking for spiritual improvement of their lives, and they are willing to take (financial, social, time-intensive) costs on them. They weigh the costs and rewards and are looking for the best net result.² And individuals actively search who can give them these rewards for what price. Third, the assumption of the rational actor means that conversion is a process in which demanders and suppliers of rewards 'wheel and deal', that means that they discuss and explain the rewards and the costs, and their doubts about it. Conversion takes place in a relationship, an exchange relationship in which the individual operates as a self-conscious actor. These consequences of the assumption of the religious actor have been demonstrated in various scholarly research. For example, Stark and Bainbridge have demonstrated that recruiting in a variety of New Religious Movements like the church of The Reverend Moon, in Transcendental Meditation, in the Mormon Church and in two smaller groups, takes place through interpersonal networks.³

3. *The Religious Market*

Rational actors looking for religious satisfaction turn themselves to the religious market. The basic characteristics of the religious market are defined by several actors who are engaged in an exchange process — no market without exchange. In a religious market, there are at least two actors. On the one hand there are people (or 'customers') who have a need for something they call religion, meaning, or spirituality. Religious market theory supposes there always is and will be a need for religion in human societies, and that this need cannot be removed by the modernization process.⁴ On the other hand there are organisations

² Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith. Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press 2000, 118-125.

³ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion. Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press 1985, 307-324.

⁴ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 57-79, 195.

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, 'Beyond church and sect. Dynamics and stability in religious economics', in: Ted G. Jelen (ed.) *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies. Essays on*

that produce and provide or ‘sell’ religion.⁵ Religious organisations, like churches, are social organisations that are specialized in religion, they create and sustain the religious product, they exchange them with those who are in need of it and they give guidelines how to deal with them.⁶ Between religious customers and religious organisations, an exchange process comes up: those with religious needs are willing to give something so that their needs are fulfilled, and religious organisations ask something for their religious goods so that they are able to produce even more of it. This is the basic model of the religious market.⁷

But what is being exchanged on the religious market? What is the ‘product’ of religious organisations? The ‘core products’ of religious organisations are rewards of a religious nature.⁸ These are very general rewards that are supported by supernatural explanations.⁹ Examples are salvation, eternal life, Kingdom of God, resurrection of the dead — to remain in Christian theology. As these rewards are not available in this world, they are very risky¹⁰ and have to be accepted on the basis of faith.¹¹ The real task for a religious organisation thus not is to provide religious rewards, but to decrease their risk and thus to increase the perceived value of the religious rewards. The theory discerns several techniques to do so.¹² But as religious organisations are social organisations, they not only exchange rewards of a religious kind. They are also able to exchange rewards of a social kind. Religious organisations offer childcare, they offer social status, they offer a social network, and much more.¹³ The important thing to remember is that religious organisations not only generate attachment by their religious

Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield 2002, 31-62; cf. Andrew Greely, *God blijft gezocht*, Haarlem: De Toorts 1972, 13.

⁵ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 5th impression 1999, 56.

⁶ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 42, 76. Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 103.

⁷ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 193.

⁸ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 39. Erik Sengers, “*Al zijn we katholiek, we zijn Nederlanders*”. *Opkomst en verval van de katholieke kerk in Nederland sinds 1795 vanuit rational-choice perspectief*, Delft: Eburon 2003, 39.

⁹ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 39.

Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 90.

¹⁰ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 106.

¹¹ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 36-38.

¹² Sengers, 42-43.

¹³ Sengers, 41-42.

rewards, they can also and sometimes solely generate attachment by their social rewards.

Religious market theory assumes that there is a stable need for religion, but that does not mean that every person has this need in the same intensity. It is assumed that in every society there is a low demand for ultra orthodox and ultraliberal religion, and a high demand for moderate progressive or moderate conservative religion. The result is a bell-shaped curve that shows the hypothetical distribution of religion in any given society:¹⁴

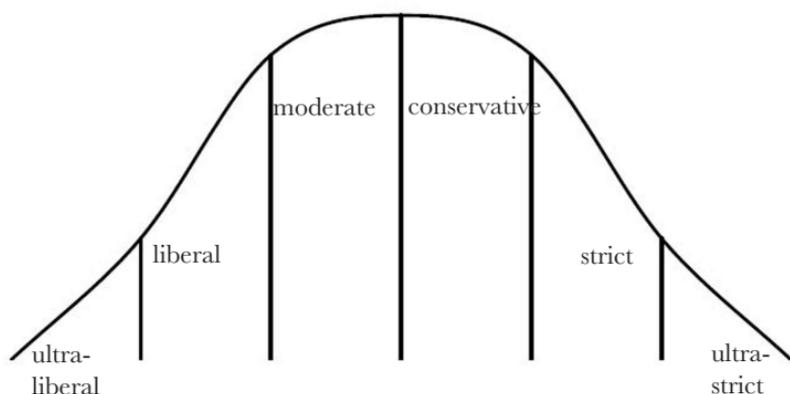


Figure 1: A hypothetical distribution of religious niches

This model is in several ways very helpful for scholarly analysis. First we can discern several target groups by combining the need for religion with other social-scientific characteristics. If it is true, as rational choice theory supposes, that the deprived have a stronger need for religion, is there a connection between the social-economic characteristics of a group and their church membership? Second we can also establish if every niche of the market is filled, or if there are empty niches. In the Netherlands for example, almost every church has moved to the more progressive niches in the last decades.¹⁵ That means that some of the niches are left open and they are filled with new religious

¹⁴ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 196-197.

¹⁵ G. Dekker, *De stille revolutie. De ontwikkeling van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland tussen 1950 en 1990*, Kampen: J.H. Kok 1992. Sengers.

organisations.¹⁶ Finally we can say something about the demand of religion. Although it seems as if religious market theory denies the influence of modernization, they fully acknowledge the destructive power that modernity exercises on the credibility of religious rewards and the abilities of religious organisations.¹⁷ If that is true, we can also assume that modernization enlarges or reduces several market niches, at least temporarily, and that different societies can have different forms of the bell-shaped curve.

4. *Religious Marketing*

Religious market theory does not explicitly say something about religious marketing or the way to 'sell' religion. But this is exactly what religious organisations have to do. Religious organisations exist and continue to exist when they exchange religious rewards for other rewards, therefore they have to adapt to the rules of the game the religious market poses. This means that the organisation has to be conscious about its mission, has to identify relevant target groups, has to do research in the social and religious needs of the surrounding society, has to evaluate its programs in order to make them better suited for the market, and has to think about publicity — in order to interact with the religious market effectively. Some would say that these methods are not suited for churches and indeed religious marketing has some specific characteristics that makes it different from commercial marketing. But in the United States and especially among Evangelical churches, these methods are very common in the planning and realization of the ministries of the churches.¹⁸ In the real world a variety of religious marketing techniques does exist. These depend on the specific theology of the religious organisation and the target group it wants to reach.

Rational choice theory however does say something about the conditions under which it is more plausible a religious message will be accepted¹⁹ and how a religious organisation can increase its efficiency.²⁰ For

¹⁶ Stoffels, Hyme, Kerkelijke vernieuwingsbewegingen in de reformatorische kerken. In Hein Schaeffer (red.) *Handboek godsdienst in Nederland*, Amersfoort: De Horstink 1992 (113-122).

¹⁷ Sengers, 47.

¹⁸ Norman Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations. Choosing to Serve People More Effectively*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1992.

¹⁹ Sengers, 37-38, 42-43.

²⁰ Sengers, 52-53.

example, a religious organisation can use 'similar others' to make the message more credible. If someone like me says he, thanks to Jesus, has been cured from a disease, has overcome his poverty, has restored his marriage, etcetera, why could it not also happen to me? Another way of making the message credible is assigning wonders to the god-head. In wonders, the god of the religious organisation shows he is concerned about human beings and is able to direct the course of history in their favour. Especially the Catholic Church used wonders in its marketing, but it is also common in other Christian and non-Christian religions. The role of the clergy is very important in the marketing of religion. If the clergy itself does not adhere to the standards the god has set, for example when it abuses young boys, this does not favour the credibility of the religion. Some religions are very good in promoting religious experiences, thus giving people the opportunity to make a direct contact with the god. Again others are good in offering social rewards, like youth groups, marriage counselling, education, welfare and much more. Religious marketing is as diverse as the religious market itself.

The functioning of the religious market can be disturbed. This means that there are forces that exhibit pressure on the exchange process. First there are external forces, mostly exercised by the government. We speak then of regulation. There are two forms of regulation: suppression and subsidizing.²¹ Aspects of regulation are:

- if there is a state church
- if only several denominations are recognized
- if the state appoints or approves church officials
- if the state pays the salary of church officials
- if there is a system of church tax
- if the state subsidizes one church and not another.²²

By looking at the forms of regulation, it is possible to discern between regulated markets, free markets and markets with limited competition. But there are also internal factors that limit the working of the exchange

²¹ Roger Finke, 'The consequences of religious competition. Supply-side explanations for religious change', in: Lawrence A. Young (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion. Summary and Assessment*. New York: Routledge 1997, 50-52.

²² Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'A Supply-side Reinterpretation of the "Secularization" of Europe', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33/3 (1994), 230-252; Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'Response to Lechner: Recent Religious Declines in Quebec, Poland and the Netherlands. A theory Vindicated', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35/3 (1996) 265-267.

process. These are sometimes overlooked. Internal factors are at work when churches operating on a market make appointments about how to deal with each other. In the Netherlands for example, the churches closed an ecumenical charter in 2002, in which they recognized some basic principles of faith, obliged themselves to treat each other with respect, promised to work together in charity and mission and agreed not to proselytise among each other's members. If we combine this with the strong ecumenical cooperation on the field of media, fundraising, peace initiatives, and the ecumenical cooperation in hospitals, the army, student-work, charity and in local church communities,²³ we can conclude there is a religious cartel operating in the Netherlands. This cartel comprises about 80% of the church members and thus severely inhibits the working of the religious market.

Religious market theory assumes that on an unregulated or free religious market, the highest possible number of people will be attached to a church or religious organisation.²⁴ Why is that? The answer starts with the definition of a free religious market: in a free religious market, every religious product can be offered by any religious organisation. There are no limits whatsoever on the theology offered, the marketing methods, the ritual praxis of the organisation, the community life or anything else. A pluralistic religious economy with a variation of religious suppliers comes up.²⁵ As people or the religious customers vary and thus have divergent needs, also divergent religious needs, only on a free market they can find the religion and the organisation that answers their needs best, and the general level of participation will rise.²⁶ Moreover, on a free religious market there will be a fierce competition among the suppliers of religion, and only the most efficient religious organisations will survive. That means not alone that all religious products are offered, but also that they are being offered for the best price possible.²⁷ A free, pluralistic and competitive religious economy will thus be heavily customer-oriented. Finally, it is supposed that on a free religious market only those organisations that

²³ Sengers, 158-161.

Theo Schepens, "‘Struggle for life’ op de religieuze markt", in: Ludo van Dun et al. (eds.), *God is dood! Leve God? Beschouwingen over zingeving*, Tilburg: Centrum voor wetenschap en levensbeschouwing 1995, 29-38.

²⁴ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 201.

²⁵ Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 198.

²⁶ Finke, 52; Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 44, 96.

²⁷ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 42.

are more conservative or 'sectarian' will survive,²⁸ because they are best suited to the demands of the free market. These organisations generally have a very precise view of what they believe, they are very convinced about their message and they invest a lot of energy in attracting and retaining their members. In other words, they have a very clear view of their target group and they are willing to serve their needs with all means possible.²⁹

5. *Conversion and Critique*

On the level of the religious market, rational choice theory makes no explicit propositions about conversion. Conversion is when an individual takes over one faith for another, by adhering to one religious organisation instead of another.³⁰ He does so because he finds this other faith or organisation more convincing with respect to religious rewards, or more attractive with respect to social rewards. On the level of the religious market we can however ask some interesting questions about conversion. Therefore we have to look first to the social and economic characteristics of the target groups. What are their values, what are their needs, why do they appeal to certain religious organisations? In the case of Pentecostals, as far as I know, it is clear that especially the rising middle class in developing countries feels attracted to it. Why so? Second, we can look to the religious organisations. What do they offer, both in the religious sense as in the social sense? How do they organize social networks in their target group? How do they appeal to their membership and with what means do they connect them to the organisation? Third, we can ask questions concerning to the regulations on the religious market. How do governments restrict or promote religious organisations? Is it allowed to proselytise and among which groups? Are certain techniques forbidden or not?

But with the theme of conversion, we touch some of the heavily discussed parts of rational choice and religious market theory. As I said, religious market theory supposes that when there are empty niches on the religious market, they will be filled with new organisations that

²⁸ Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing. A Study in the Sociology of Religion*, New York, etc.: Harper & Row 1972.

²⁹ Roger Finke, 'Innovative Returns to Traditions. Using Core Teachings as the Basis for Innovative Accommodation', [*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43/1 \(2004\), 19-34.](#)

³⁰ Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory of Religion*, 195-200; Stark/Finke, *Acts*, 114-138.

will be able to attract those that have been unchurched. This however does not always seem to occur. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP) investigated this thesis.³¹ As secularisation in the Netherlands has been an ongoing process since the 1960s, and the new religious movements drew great attention as well, the thesis that the Dutch en masse joined these new organisations was obvious. The SCP looked at several organisations at the 'counter culture', as it was defined, and measured if there was any sign of increase in membership or attachment. This however did not seem to be the case. The Dutch in general are familiar with the new age groups, the smaller Christian churches or with aspects of folk religion, and sometimes participate in them or use elements from it, but they do not join these organisations. This result denies this central thesis of market theory.

Second, we have to conclude that secularisation in the Netherlands, and in most other Western European countries, continues.³² Although the Netherlands has one of the freest religious markets, and a variety of churches and religious organisations exist, there is no sign of a religious revival at all. Church membership declines, participation decreases, also the immigrant religions like the Muslims complain that their youth is running away. The number of those claiming to be unaffiliated increases and there does not seem to come an end at this process in the near future. Why is that? As religious affiliation seems to increase in other parts of the world, rational choice theorists are eager to lay the burden of prove at the side of the secularists. European scholars have to explain why religion in Europe does not increase, as is expected. This seems unfair to me. Although I think that part of the trend can be explained by looking at the supply-side of religion in Europe, I also think that the continuing of secularisation in Europe points at some weaknesses in religious market theory. As especially the demand-side of rational choice is underdeveloped, I think that here might be the clue to understand the different trends of Europe, America and other parts of the world.

More theoretical critique on the rational choice theory of conversion comes from the Dutch sociologist Durk Hak. He criticizes the theory

³¹ J.W. Becker et al., *Secularisatie en alternatieve zingeving in Nederland*, Rijswijk: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 1997.

³² Jos Becker, *De vaststelling van de kerkelijke gezindte in enquêtes. 40% of 60% buitenkerkelijk?*, Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 2003.

Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization. An Analysis at Three Levels*, Brussels, etc.: P.I.E.-Peter Lang 2002.

on several points. First, they blur mechanisms and goals in the process of conversion: re-affiliation can be instrumental to achieve physical well-being or social approval or the unintended consequence to achieve these goals. Second, he questions the assumption that religious organisations are the only source for certain rewards, and if they cannot be met by other actors. Third, he points to the fact that individuals can be much more creative in dealing with their socio-religious capital: they need not only to preserve it, they can also write it off. On the basis of this critique, he concludes that it is not so much a change in the personal network, but a change in the significant others within the several networks an individual participates in that leads to conversion. This means that — contrary to rational choice statements — individuals may very well first adopt an ideology and then change a network. Later, Hak develops a structural-functionalist theory of conversion on the basis of Durkheim. The core of this theory states that there are several intermediate groupings in society that integrate individuals into shared norms. If individuals are integrated well in these groups, they will not so easily switch from the group, but in certain stages of their life course (e.g. adolescence) they are more apt to do so. In this new theory, the switching is no longer limited to religious groups alone but 'conversion' may take place to other groups as well. The theory he develops is in its conclusions not so much different from rational choice theory, but it can explain more phenomena and is more suited for comparative research between societies. It also explains that conversion is a slow and difficult process because of the violation of group norms, as his extensive discussion of inter-religious marriage shows.³³

6. *Conclusions and Discussion*

Apart from this empirical critique connected with conversions, there is much more critique, and more fundamental critique possible. On a theoretical level, the assumption of the rational actor is questioned. Philosophically, many other rational actions are possible, and rational choice has a much too narrow and gender-based view. Rational choice is also accused from an unhealthy mix of sociology and economics,

³³ Durk Hak, 'Conversion as Rational Choice. An Evaluation of the Stark-Finke-Model on Conversion and Re-affiliation', in: Wout J. van Bekkum, Jan N. Bremmer and Arie L. Molendijk (eds), *Cultures of Conversion*, Leuven Peeters in press, 13-24; Durk Hak, 'Durkheim on Conversion and (Re-)Affiliation. An Outline of a Normative Rebuttal to Stark and Finke', paper presented at the annual meeting of the ASR, 2004.

not making a proper distinction between the two. Therefore, the theory is supposed to be inadequate to explain social processes, especially religious ones. The exclusive claim of rational choice theorists, to be able to explain all social processes in every period of time, is under attack. Third, rational choice is seen as an ‘American’ theory, not suited to explain European phenomena. The empirical critique displayed above seems to underline this critique.³⁴ Much of this critique is repeated in the other contributions to this volume. It is therefore a sign of great courage that the applicants of the project *Conversion Careers and Culture Politics in Pentecostalism* have chosen to situate their research in the context of the religious market. Their research question starts: ‘In their operating on the religious market, . . .’ etc. But when we read the research program more closely, it is striking that nowhere in the application the religious market and its implications for the culture politics and the conversion careers are really defined. The applicants immediately jump to the point that Pentecostals see and treat their environment as a religious market. This however says nothing *about* the religious market. Finally, under the heading ‘theoretical framework’ they say they make ‘. . . an eclectic use of rational choice theory and market theory’. The researchers thus do not seem to grasp the innovating opportunities that religious market theory for the field of conversion and the case of Pentecostalism offers.

As a conclusion, I will therefore reformulate some of the central theses of religious market theory to what I consider to be relevant questions for this project:

- Who are the actors on the religious market under investigation?
- With what theology do Pentecostal churches generate attachment, with what social rewards? Do these two differ across the countries under investigation?
- What is the role of the government in the respective countries? Does it promote or hinder the working of the Pentecostal churches? And by what means? Are the Pentecostals part of a religious cartel or how do they relate to other religious organisations?
- What are the niches on the religious market? In which niche we can establish the Pentecostals? What target groups do they have in mind? How does the demand for religion look like in the societies under investigation?

³⁴ Sengers, 59-60.

- What techniques do Pentecostals use to ‘market’ their religion to the target groups? Are these techniques successful? Are Pentecostals able to adapt their marketing techniques to local culture?
- Is the religious market saturated or are there some empty niches? Do Pentecostals react on these niches?
- And finally the research question under investigation: what does the religious market mean for conversion and the life course of those converted?

Religious market theory offers a comprehensive model with numerous hypotheses on individual religious behaviour, on religious organisations, and on the general religious market and the religious culture. It can therefore be a very useful theory to explain the complex interactions between individual decisions in the life course, the Pentecostal groups and the social and political environment(s) in which supply and demand meet. On the other hand, it could happen that in the actual research process the limits of religious market theory are met. This is even very likely for a research program that wants to study Pentecostal conversion careers in countries as different as the Netherlands, Japan, Nicaragua and Mozambique. In that case I propose not to dismiss the theory as a whole, but to adjust the theory on the basis of the general assumptions explicated above.

Erik Sengers (b. 1971) graduated from the Catholic Theological University (Utrecht) on a dissertation concerning the history of the Dutch Catholic Church from rational choice-perspective. Currently, he works as a postdoc at Kampen Theological University on a project about renewal movements on the Dutch religious market. Contact: erik-sengers@planet.nl.