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Author: Rüpke, Jörg

Title: "What did Religion Cost in Ancient Rome"

Published in: The Economics of Roman Religion
Oxford: Oxford University Press

Year: 2023

Pages: 30 - 49

Persistent Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192883537.003.0002>

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What Did Religion Cost in Ancient Rome?

Jörg Rüpke

Introduction

Scholarship on the ancient world has paid little attention to problems of financing religion.¹ The relationship between money and religion has been discussed mainly in the light of two theses that are increasingly seen as discredited. These are Max Weber's thesis that the western capitalist economy is an offspring of Protestantism, and especially of Calvin's teaching on predestination; and the thesis that the state is an offspring of the centralizing redistributive function of Mesopotamian temple economies.² To give a hint of the fundamental critique: Weber analyses only a few letters and theological treatises and combines the results with a statement of some general correlations between economic development and confessional history in some European regions.³ Detailed analysis of the social and economic history is missing. Criticism of the second thesis is even more radical: here, owing to a generalization from fragmentary sources, all the inhabitants of the Mesopotamian city state of Lagaš have been turned into employees of the temple.⁴ How much money (or goods) religions owned, how they raised the money, or how they were forced to spend it have not been seen to be of importance.

But these questions are important.⁵ Ritual is expensive. Sacrificial animals must be bought or raised,⁶ buildings have to be erected and maintained,⁷ religious specialists, from butchers and musicians to the transmitter and producer of liturgical texts, have to be supported, either temporarily or permanently.⁸ Where do the resources come from? Is there anything like an intra-religious economy, religious cattle, or quarries? Does an accumulation

¹ For an overview of the concept of 'the economy of religion', see Koch (2014); briefly Rüpke (2008a). For antiquity, see Gordon, Raja, and Rieger (2021).

² Max Weber (1905/2014); Mesopotamia: e.g. Diakonoff (1969).

³ Schluchter (1988, 1989).

⁴ Gelb (1969); Renger (1984, 1989); Postgate (1994/2009).

⁵ See, in general, Bruce (1992).

⁶ Méniel (2015: 158–9).

⁷ e.g. Burford (1965).

⁸ Horster (2007).

of capital in the form of land or valuable dedications exist? Is it open to use when needed? Will costs be borne by users, participants, or members?⁹ How much does religion cost for the individual? Are there cheap and expensive religions?¹⁰

These are not the kinds of question that define the self-image of a religion, but the answers do shape the appearance of religion in marble temples, magnificent processions, and a multitude of religious specialists, on the one hand, and terracotta votives, candles, and sacrificial cakes, on the other. The degree of financial autonomy, the possibility to use one's own funds, the dependency on short-term surplus or on the wealth of others could define the relationship to individuals, groups in society, and institutions of the state, and qualify these relationships in a manner not visible in the standard sources of the history of religion. Instead, the analytical instruments of economics might further our understanding; and this is what I shall try to demonstrate on the basis of an example from ancient Rome.

It needs to be made explicit that my focus is on so-called public religion—that is, on highly visible religious performances and infrastructure, religion on display that claims to be correct and exemplary, 'expensive religion' of the political elite that does not exclude, but dwarfs, the 'cheap religion' of the masses. These in turn appropriated such performances or locations by actually participating, cheering, or keeping silent, by dedicating votives or carving graffiti into the walls. Easily popular spaces and time slots were probably scarce, and continuous attraction entailed a matter of continuous expenses, in the upkeep of gardens, the dedication of new works of 'art', or the distribution of free meat or wine. All this is beyond quantification. What is on offer in this chapter is just an educated guess for a small segment of such spending, resulting in some—in details surprising—insights into factors and preferences.

What Did Religion Cost at Rome?

Within the empire, cultural and economic conditions varied widely, and any attempt at quantification must therefore limit itself to a small area. I have chosen the central locality, Rome, at least as a surface on which to project data gathered elsewhere. At Rome, the annual expenditure for public games and temples must have been in the order of thirty million to fifty million *sestertii* (HS).¹¹ The large games, lasting several days, cost from one million to three

⁹ cf., for Greece, Sokolowski (1954).

¹⁰ Rüpke (2018: 84, 320–1).

¹¹ Freyberg (1988: 118) gives the lower number, but cf. Knapowski (1967).

million *sestertii* without any special extravagance; a new temple in the city would have cost roughly the same.¹² It is not known how much the public treasury actually paid. The building or restoration of temples and certain rituals or games could be paid for by individuals, usually magistrates.¹³ Largesse was expected, and was one of the most important means of preparing for the election of a magistrate during the Republic. In 58 BC, the aedile M. Aemilius Scaurus is said to have spent thirty million *sestertii* just for the scenery of his games.¹⁴

As it was necessary to secure the financing of rituals on a long-term and reliable basis, apart from liturgies, the institutionalization of a cult involved the allocation of certain revenues, usually derived from the lease of land. In Roman imagination King Numa's rituals already included such provisions.¹⁵ To this form of security no real alternative existed until modern times.¹⁶ As the usufructaries usually had no adequate administrative organization, the normal procedure was to rent the land out to tenants. When Pliny donated property to his local town in order to secure the financing of orphans, he immediately rented the property back for an annual sum of HS 300,000, thus sparing the community any direct administrative costs.¹⁷

Which religious institutions coordinated this financing? Generally speaking, as in the ancient Orient, Egypt, Greece, and India, temples and their priesthoods normally fulfilled this function.¹⁸ In these societies, temples owned large plots of land, which sometimes even included entire villages. This was not usually the case with temples in the city of Rome. In Roman sources, plots of sacred land belong to priesthoods;¹⁹ as a rule, temples were not even entitled to inherit.²⁰ The large state-priesthoods, for their part, did

¹² Knapowski (1967: 55–6 for temples and 57–62 for games), supported by Cavallaro (1984: 132–3). Knapowski assumes a long-term average of HS 11,000,000 for the upkeep of the public Roman temples.

¹³ See Orlin (1997) for the Republican period.

¹⁴ Plin. *HN* 36.115; Aemilius Scaurus' expenditure was imitated and surpassed by Pompey (*Cic. off.* 2.57). Further extravagances are well attested: e.g. HS 2,000,000 for a driver or HS 9,000,000 for thirteen gladiators (*Suet. Calig.* 55.7 and 18.5). For lavish municipal games, Petronius' Trimalchio invests HS 400,000 (45.6, on which, see 84 n. 157).

¹⁵ Livy 1.20.5.

¹⁶ For a few exceptional Greek cases in the form of dedicated taxes, see Schlaifer (1940).

¹⁷ Plin. *Ep.* 7.18; see, for the many details regulated in such contracts, Wörrle (1988: 141–64).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Janssen (1979); Lipiński (1979); Renger (1979); India: Appadurai and Appadurai Breckenridge (1976); Fuller (1984); for Greece and the Roman Near East, see, e.g., Linders (1988); Lozano (2015).

¹⁹ The sources are documented in Bodei Giglioli (1977): *Oros.* 5.18.27; *App. Mith.* 84; see also Dio 43.47.4; *Suet. Jul.* 20.3; *Liber coloniarum* p. 235.6–7; 239.9–10. See Wissowa (1912: 407 n. 3); *Fest.* p. 204.32–25 Lindsay; *Sic. Flacc. grom.* p. 162.28–163.4 Lachmann; *Hyg. grom.* p. 117.5–11 Lachmann; *Grom.* p. 283.18–20 Lachmann.

²⁰ Exceptional cases like the temple of Diana Tifatina clearly have Greek models or date to exceptional decisions of the imperial period. Cf. Introduction, pp. 11–12 and 15, n. 71.

not have economic relations with specific temples; exceptions concern temples that were not widely accessed by the general populace, as in the case of the sanctuary of Dea Dia of the Arval Brethren.

If we intend to apply an economic analysis to ancient Roman religion, then we need to focus on priesthoods.²¹ I here examine the pontifical core of the pontifical college at Rome, which consisted of about twenty priests; thus, I exclude the minor pontiffs, the *flamines*, and the Vestal Virgins.²² Of course, for the following calculations most of the figures stem from anecdotal sources and are not very reliable. Thus, in the absence of a proper balance sheet, rough magnitudes are given in Table 2.1.

Expenditure

We do not have precise figures for individual items of the ritual; the prices of draught animals as given in Diocletian's *Edict on Maximum Prices* cannot be used for sacrificial animals.²³ However, in the sources, there are several sums for complex rituals, sometimes in the form of a statement, more frequently as a definition of the necessary revenue of an endowment. These are the magnitudes for smaller towns that might be applicable for our priesthood, as we are considering small routine rituals without any or at least any larger audience: a simple sacrifice, HS 60–100;²⁴ a sacrifice with a meal for a smaller group, about HS 250;²⁵ for a good meal, HS 20–30 *per capita*.²⁶ The colleges of *Augustales*, who were responsible for the local emperor worship, spent HS 400–600 for their sacrificial meals called *epula*.²⁷ Small games, the *ludi scaenici*, theatrical games, cost about HS 2,000 a day.²⁸ In Rome, however, the ritual kernel of the small games of *Equirria* and *Consualia*, which were organized by urban priests, would have cost about HS 30,000 each.²⁹

The monthly and weekly routine rituals of the pontifical college amount to about eighty a year (Table 2.1 (i): 1(a)); together with some twenty larger festivals and the four priestly games (1(b)), the costs would come to about HS

²¹ See, for Greece, A. Weber (1924).

²² For the composition of the pontifical college Rüpke (2008b): 43–6.

²³ *Edict. imp. Diocl.* 30: for cattle 10,000 *denarii*, a cow 2,000, sheep 400 (14. 16. 18 Giaccherio). Festus (p. 220.22–30 L; 270.2–5 L) refers to fines on the basis of conventional prices for animals, namely 100 *asses* for cattle and 10 *asses* for a sheep. Taking inflation into account, Knapowski (1967) calculates HS 1,000 for male cattle at the end of the Republic.

²⁴ Duncan-Jones (1982: 204–5).

²⁵ Duncan-Jones (1982: 204–5). Sometimes unspecified sums around HS 200 are given *ad sacra*.

²⁶ Duncan-Jones (1982: 140).

²⁷ Toller (1889: 97).

²⁸ Toller (1889: 97).

²⁹ Numbers taken from Knapowski (1961: 33–5; 1967: 58 and xxix).

Table 2.1 Expenditures and revenues of a Roman priesthood (in HS)

(i) Expenditures	HS	
1. Material		
(a) Monthly routine rituals	36 + 45 × HS 100	
(b) Annual rituals:	15 small × 250	
	5 larger × 2,500	
	<i>ludi</i> (2 Equirria,	8,100
	2 Consualia) × 30,000	136,500
(c) Meals (<i>cenae</i>)	—	?
(d) Instruments	—	100
(e) Building activities	—	1,200
2. Personnel		
(a) (Calculated) salaries for <i>publici</i>	20 × 500	10,000
(b) Salaries for <i>kalatores</i>	23 × 8,750	201,250
(c) Salaries for other <i>apparitores</i>	10 × 7,000	70,000
(d) <i>sportulae</i> on average	15 × 12 + 5 × 100	25,500
3. Deductions/depreciations		
(a) Temples or <i>scholae</i>	—	1,200
(b) Instruments	—	10
(c) Slaves	—	5,000
4. Losses		
(a) Loss in land property (illegal, war, dispossession)	—	?
(b) Loss of instruments	—	?
(c) Loss/destruction of votive offerings	—	—
5. Interests		
6. Deductions on financial investments		
7. Fees/taxes		
Summary of expenditures		458,860 minimum

145,000. Once a month the college met. We do not know whether they had the same lavish meals as the augurs—the luxury of the *cenae sacerdotum*, the priestly meals, was proverbial (1(c)). However, again it is not known whether such *cenae* were paid for by the hosts in rotation or out of the college's treasury. The former is more probable, if we think in terms of members of an elite competing also in dining.³⁰

³⁰ See Rüpke (1998) and later in this chapter.

(ii) Revenues	HS
1. Proceeds of turnover	
(a) Entrance fees	—
(b) <i>stips</i> (small monetary gifts)	—
(c) Votive offerings	—
(d) Participation in public fines	50,000
(e) Payments for assistance in third-party rituals	—
2. Increase in stock	50
3. Other direct revenues	
(a) From sales of property	—
(b) From <i>emancipationes</i>	—
(c) Direct public subsidies	296,250
(d) <i>summae honorariae</i>	—
4. Rents (on property)	200,000 minimum
5. Interest, etc.	—
6. Extraordinary revenues	
(a) Inheritances, legacies	—
(b) New foundations, newly allocated property	—
Summary of revenues	546,300 minimum
Annual difference in quantifiable positions	+87,440

If iron knives used in rituals could be easily replaced by a lead copy,³¹ luxury in instruments must have been fairly restricted (1(d)). The maintenance of buildings (1(e)) amounts to 1–2 per cent a year. For the small communal halls (*scholae*) of the priesthoods, the sum of a few thousand *sestertii* would not have been surpassed.³²

We have now to address the wages (Table 2.1 (i): 2).³³ Here, several groups of functionaries have to be differentiated. A more precise figure might be calculated only for the *kalatores*, a sort of personal companion and assistant, one for each priest. Their annual wages would total around HS 200,000.

³¹ Suetonius refers to such an incident, a measure to avoid assassination attempts (*Tib.* 25.3).

³² The number given here is taken from the expenditures of a municipal temple (Duncan-Jones 1982: 206). Late antique ecclesiastical norms demanded to set aside a third of a dedication for the building of a new church for the costs of upkeep, and a second third for the necessary clerics, who could not be joined by the dedicator (Pietri 1978).

³³ The numbers are calculated on the basis of Knapowski (1967: 13–14). As occasional attestations show that salaries could be five times higher in the imperial period, I have multiplied the numbers by 2.5.

The number of the official slaves employed (*publici*) and of the minor civil servants (*apparitores*) cannot be reconstructed. Judging by the many tasks in ritual as well as administration, a larger number of servants is to be expected. Yet some of the more specialized functionaries formed autonomous colleges that would serve all Roman magistrates and priests—for instance, the flute players (*tibicines*) or the *victimarii*, the butchers proper. It is certain that public slaves who were employed in tasks like those in the priestly colleges were given a sort of wage.³⁴ We cannot exclude that it was paid for directly by the state.³⁵ Taken all together, the figures would amount to a magnitude of HS 300,000.

No wages were paid to the priests themselves. The Vestal Virgins, unmarried and hence unprovided for, were an exception and were given a stipend. The minor priesthood of *curiones*, not even knights, were given an *aes curionum*, ‘Curiones’ money’, of unknown value.³⁶ We cannot exclude, however, that fees (*sportulae*) were given to the priests participating in a ritual. It is known for the Arval Brethren and municipal colleges that such fees were given after sacrificial meals.³⁷ Already in Tertullian’s work at the beginning of the third century we can observe that such fees formed the basis of the regular income of Christian clerics.³⁸ If such a fee of, often, HS 100 were given to the pontiffs, the expenditure would have increased by some HS 25,000.

The following positions (Table 2.1 (i): 3–6) are not known at all; they repeat earlier sums (for example, 1(e)) or are estimated on the basis of an average price of HS 2,000 for a well-trained slave, usable for a period of twenty years (a period approaching average durations of service of upper-class priests). They are given to illustrate the extent of the unknown as well as the differences from modern enterprises, the balance sheets of which are employed as a heuristic tool here. Investment credits in this field were not totally unthinkable; Tertullian at least imagines a priest in need of a creditor for a Salian meal.³⁹

At Rome, temples and colleges had nearly no tax obligations (Table 2.1 (i): 7). In other places, however (for example, in Egypt), such taxes could be decisive for the affluence of a temple and its priesthood. It is not without profit that today’s religious communities fight for their non-profit status.

³⁴ Mommsen (1887a: 322); Bömer (1981: 18).

³⁵ Thus the assumption of Mommsen (1887b: 64).

³⁶ See Mommsen (1887b: 65); Livy 1.20.3; Tac. *Ann.* 4.16 on payments to these priesthoods.

³⁷ Pasqualini (1969).

³⁸ Schöllgen (1990).

³⁹ Tert. *Apol.* 39.15.

Revenue

I turn now to the revenues (Table 2.1 (ii)). As far as we know, the pontiffs had only one source of income, directly connected with their activity: as the supervising authority on the inviolability of graves, the fines sanctioning offences against graves and tombs had to be paid to the college. According to the prescriptive texts on tombstones, these fines were very large, often several tens of thousands of *sestertii*.⁴⁰ Yet it is very questionable whether in the case of an offence these fines could really be materialized into actual payment.⁴¹

The sources do not reveal anything about fees for the pontiffs' cooperation in sacrifices or other rituals such as dedications of temples or patrician marriages (*confarreationes*) (1(e)).⁴² Such fees were charged by private offerers of religious services, diviners male or female, producers of curses or the many producers of ritual cakes.⁴³ A single and very fragmentary inscription proves that private individuals had to pay fees when using state temples.⁴⁴ The fees for sacrifices varied according to the kind of animal and went up to HS 40; a holocaust was more expensive than a sacrifice from which the animal skin could go to the temple. Even the smallest items were charged for: a wreath cost four *asses*, hot water two, which is one *sestertius* and half a *sestertius* respectively. And, yet, the unqualified entrance fees, polemically presupposed by the Christian apologetic Tertullian, lack any further evidence (1(a)).⁴⁵ Probably the practice of monetary offerings (*stips*) is polemically reinterpreted as an entrance fee (1(b)).⁴⁶ Revenues from begging were restricted to the annual processions of the *Galli*, the priests of the Mater Magna.⁴⁷

Of course, priestly colleges might have small stocks of material used in rituals that might increase (2) or decrease over the course of a year. Unlike temples, priesthoods would not profit from the acceptance of dedications (1(c)), a class of objects that might form an enormous financial asset, mobilized in exceptional situations.⁴⁸ For the sake of a more complex balance sheet, I accept the thesis of Theodor Mommsen that the salaries for public servants were directly paid from the *fiscus* (3(c)). Sometimes 'secular' colleges and even

⁴⁰ e.g. *CIL* VI.10219, 13152.

⁴¹ Fines are dedicated to the financing of rituals at Urso (*lex Urson*. 65).

⁴² See Wissowa (1912: 118–19).

⁴³ Wendt (2016); Rüpke (2018: 302–3); e.g. Plaut. *Mil.* 691–3; Cato, *Agr.* 4.3.

⁴⁴ *CIL* VI.820.

⁴⁵ See Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.10.24 (similar *Apol.* 13.6).

⁴⁶ See *Apol.* 42.8. Cic. *Leg.* 2.25 refers to the necessary expenses involved in approaching the gods, *Sen. Ep.* 41.1 talks of the bribing of an *aedituus* in order to get closer to an image of a god.

⁴⁷ This practice is taken up normatively in Cic. *Leg.* 2.22.

⁴⁸ See Bodei Giglioli (1977: 35–7) and the value of dedications offered by Augustus to five Roman temples, amounting to HS 100 million (August. *Res gest.* 21).

local administrations benefited from endowments that enabled the regular performance of rituals and banquets. Again, there is no proof that the urban priesthoods were beneficiaries of such endowments (6(a)).

I now turn to one of the most difficult points of the calculation (3(d)). On entering the municipal college of the *seviri Augustales*, new members had to pay a kind of entrance fee called *summa honoraria*, 'honorary sum'. It often amounted to HS 2,000. Such a fee had to be paid for nearly all local magistrates in colonies or *municipia* administrated on Roman lines. The sales of priesthoods in Greece or compulsory taxes due on any advancement in Egyptian temples are equivalents. With regard to the multitude of local positions and the annual recruiting of the magistrates, these entrance fees could be the most important type of revenue for communities or colleges that did not possess any land.⁴⁹ Such *summae* are not attested for the urban priesthoods of Rome; the two literary references to such payments concern priesthoods instituted by Caligula.⁵⁰ Instead of paying a fixed sum, Roman priests and magistrates seem to have been obliged to organize and pay for games, the *processus consularis*, the *sparsio*—that is, the sprinkling of audiences in places like an amphitheatre with perfumed water or presents,⁵¹ or the like. Newly co-opted priests invited their older colleagues to come to an extremely luxurious 'inauguration banquet', the *cena aditialis*. Seneca, the philosopher, laments that, on the one hand, it was thought to be shameful to consume a knight's fortune—that is HS 400,000—in a sumptuous meal, yet, on the other hand, even extremely modest persons are obliged to organize 'inauguration banquets' costing a million *sestertii*.⁵² These sums did not appear in the book-keeping of the *arca pontificum*, the pontifical budget, but they have to be reckoned in the total balance of the individual members of the college. Allowing for exaggeration, on the basis of a college of twenty persons each holding such a banquet each year over, we might reach a sum of half a million *sestertii* each year—not showing up in the institutional balance.

Without doubt, the revenue from leased land would form the major position on the positive side of the balance sheet. Roman expectation of a net capital revenue of this type amounted to 4–6 per cent.⁵³ For the permanent minimum costs of HS 400,000 to 500,000 (including wages), the priesthood would have needed a minimum capital of about ten million *sestertii*. One *iugerum*, that is two-thirds of an acre, of good Italian land would have cost

⁴⁹ See Duncan-Jones (1990: 174–84) on the long-term financing of local building programmes.

⁵⁰ See Wissowa (1912: 491); Suet. *Calig.* 22; *Claud.* 9; Dio 59.28.5.

⁵¹ Sen. *Contr.* 10, pr. 9.; Stat. *Silv.* 1.6.66. ⁵² Sen. *Ep.* 95.41.

⁵³ Shatzman (1975: 50); Wesch-Klein (1990: 22); see in detail Duncan-Jones (1982: 33 ff., 348 ff.).

about HS 1,000. The minimum capital, then, represents some 7,000 acres of land. To finance the war against Mithridates, the late Republican general Sulla sold land belonging to the priesthoods for some thirty-six million *sestertii*.⁵⁴ At contemporary prices, this would have represented more than 50,000 acres, thus illustrating the margin of security inherent in this system of financing.

Consequences

I do not have to repeat the general remarks on the reliability of the figures in the sources and the hypothetical character of my whole calculation. Nevertheless, the attempt at quantification is a necessary step in an evaluation of the relative position of the religious institutions. Controlling only 1–2 per cent of the public spending on religion, the most important Roman priesthood was only minimally involved in the production of religious goods. This statement would not be seriously modified if we include all other major priesthoods. A sum of perhaps four million *sestertii*—that is, less than 10 per cent—would not be exceeded. The priesthoods were responsible for the routine rituals, but they were neither the financiers nor the consumers of the enormous costs caused by the large rituals intended for public display.

As a consequence, the economic importance of the public priesthoods for the economy and those areas deeply involved in religion is small: the production and selling of devotional objects, the meat industry, the international trade in exotic animals for the amphitheatres or in incense, and, last but not least, the building industry, did not depend on the *sacerdotes publici*.

The structure of the expenses, in particular the enormous share of the banquets, which would amount to 50 per cent of all costs if integrated into the balance sheet, shows the pontifical college mainly interacting among themselves. Status and personal interrelations were defined and maintained, not at the expense of religion, but through the medium of religion, and more precisely by a culinary potlatch. The religious activities of the priesthood—their jurisdiction, the routine rituals—were above all, from Cicero and the Tiberian period onwards, claimed to be important for the coherence of the religious practices as a whole,⁵⁵ but unimportant for the financing of religion and those economic sectors most intimately related to religious practices,⁵⁶ the

⁵⁴ App. *Mith.* 84. ⁵⁵ Thus Rüpke (2016).

⁵⁶ cf. already Felsmann (1937) for Delphi, and Castritius (1969: 52–62) for the late ancient Eastern Mediterranean.

production and distribution of votives, the production of meat, for trading exotic animals or incense.⁵⁷

The lion's share of the costs of 'public', 'expensive' religion at Rome was accounted for by temples and games. They were financed by victorious generals, magistrates, or emperors. It was their willingness to contribute on a—statistically—regular basis that was responsible for the functioning of this part of the religious field. No fees for the private use of temples could replace these contributions. This is not to say, though, that religion was free of charge for the mass of the population. Instead, the structures of financing seem to repeat themselves. Monthly contributions of all members enabled the colleges to organize a minimum of cult and sociability, but only irregular endowments by patrons (or matrons) facilitated more frequent and more festive congregations.

The economic analysis enables us to test a frequently formulated hypothesis: did the public expropriations of the priesthoods' land possessions at the end of the fourth century by Valentinian and Gratian⁵⁸ cause the rapid end of the traditional cults now classified as 'pagan'?⁵⁹

From an analysis of the structure of the priests' expenses, fixed costs are very limited. There are large possibilities to economize on expenditure. Parallel to the fiscal dispossessions, the state's demand of ritual and other services would be largely reduced. The ban on animal sacrifice rendered the purchase of sacrificial animals and the wages for the relevant specialists unnecessary. Other personnel could be replaced by each priest's own servants. The priests themselves belonged to the uppermost layer of society. Even the exorbitant costs of a *cena aditialis* would appear to be small in relation to their possessions; the share of the current costs of routine ritual would appear ridiculous. Thus, it was not the state dispossession of the priesthoods, but the general atmosphere in politics and society—of course furthered by such measures—that discouraged priests to continue their specifically ritual commitment and that led to the dissolution of the colleges within a few years, even if the pontiffs, for instance, continued the hunting-down of 'incestuous' Vestals.⁶⁰ This corroborates the interpretation of Alan Cameron that the lack

⁵⁷ See also Drexhage (1981); Montgomery (1991); Tert. *Idol.* 11.

⁵⁸ *Cod. Theod.* 5.13.3; 10.1.8; *Symm. Relat.* 3.11 ff.; *Ambr. Epist.* 72.14 and 73, *extr. coll.* 10.2. 6. 10 (all CSEL 82.3).

⁵⁹ As suggested by Cancik (1986: 72), and Chuvin (1990: 57).

⁶⁰ See the correspondence of Symmachus (O'Donnell 1979: 71–2). Cf., for local case studies in the decline of traditional religious investment, Leone (2013). See Rüpke and Glock (2008) for the topographical data; Salzman (1992) for the career perspectives. Cf. the case of the loss of state financing of Christian churches in the GDR (Hoffmann and Kehrer 1995).

of any evidence for the actual replacement of the easily replaceable public funding points to an unwillingness individually to associate with anything close to sacrificial ritual.⁶¹

Economics of Religion: Methodological Options

At the end of the historical analysis it should not be necessary to differentiate my approach from a theological reflection on the legitimacy of certain methods of financing in view of certain religious ends. It may, however, be useful to compare my approach and its stress on financing with those economics of religion that have been proffered in previous decades.

Theories of economics of religion have been propounded by Stark and Bainbridge, and by Iannaccone.⁶² In a rather micro-economic approach, they concentrate on the individual as the subject of demand within a religious market. This market is occupied by different religions and cults, including the extreme of highly deviant sects. This is the market situation: what goods that are highly valued by the potential consumer are offered by the religions? Eternal bliss? And before that: integration within a community? Emotional support? Social security? How will the quality of the product be guaranteed (a central problem of all religious goods)? What will the acquisition of adequate information cost? What costs will be incurred after the choice, in terms of money, time, obligations to do without something, or obligations to behave in an unusual manner, let us say in the realm of food, sexual behaviour, or dress?

The economic theory of rational choice can explain the voluntary acceptance of such obligations. On the one hand, the religious group or organization erects high barriers to entrance in order to prevent free-riders—that is, people who take part in the evening orgy without having signed a standing order for their membership fee. The member who has accepted and passed the high barriers and is obliged to pay a high contribution in whatever form will intensify his deviant commitment in order to maximize his own benefits: once shorn, he will prefer participation in the morning prayer to secular activities.

My criticism of this approach may start from some general observations. The authors named take their test material and proofs from the US American middle classes only. This *is* a large segment of society, and probably some of

⁶¹ Cameron (2011: 42–51).

⁶² e.g. Stark and Bainbridge (1987); Iannaccone (1998).

the results are transferable to western and central European societies. Yet, the specific conditions implied would have to have been reflected in the past. Thanks mostly to the electronic mass media, even in small localities a large spectrum of undogmatically differentiated denominations is present; charity plays an important role for the definition of social status; there is a large layer of society that controls freely allocatable money—all this is very important for the suitability of the concept of an ideal ‘market’. For many religions of antiquity, and for the widespread forms of diffused, only minimally organized religiosity, ‘membership’ is a problematic concept. The ‘resource mobilization theory’ has demonstrated for the social and religious movements of the present that distant supporters or even benevolent spectators may be of high value.⁶³ Public support by the state might be more important than an additional number of members; in modern industrial societies, tax laws and the classification of an organization as non-profit are often a decisive criterion for the financial well-being and development of a religion.

The ‘economics of religion’ just criticized makes the far-reaching claim of explaining religious behaviour in general within the model of neoclassical economics. This attempt at an economic theory of religion is part of a neoclassical type of economics that defines economic behaviour, not substantially—that is, by limiting its subject to activities such as trade and production—but formally—namely, by conceptualizing every type of allocation of scarce resources as economic behaviour. The human actor is conceptualized as a rational human actor, rationally making his or her choices on the basis of quantifiable and comparable expectations.⁶⁴

This theoretical enterprise, however, is neither left without criticism from within economics and the anthropology of economics, nor is it completed by using the market metaphor. To name just one example: Peter Berger, who—by the way—is the protagonist of the metaphor of a religious market, stresses the importance of a uniform horizon of plausibility for the functioning of religions.⁶⁵ If this claim is taken seriously, the market situation of religions has to be discussed within an alternative conceptual framework. Religion would then be a natural monopoly—that is, with a growing number of believers the marginal costs *per capita* would decrease instead of increase, as is the case

⁶³ McCarthy and Zald (1977); Richardson (1988: 3–7).

⁶⁴ Defence and critique of the rational choice theory is abundant: e.g. Young (1997); Spickard (1998); Zafirovski (1998) for an intensive debate. For a critique from a history-of-religion point of view, see, e.g., Brubaker (1984/2006); Chaves (1995); Kippenberg (1997); Bruce (1999); Mellor (2000); Boudon (2001); Heesterman (2001); Bankston (2002); Rüpke (2007).

⁶⁵ Fundamental: Berger (1967).

with usual goods. To put it less theoretically: the more persons believe in a specific god, the more easily others will join them. Another theoretical deficit of the rational-choice type of economics of religion is the lack of attention paid to external benefits. These external benefits are clearly demonstrated by the Roman example. The cost-intensive behaviour of individual benefactors—giving money for games or building temples—largely increases the utility for other users of the religious system, but does not improve the religion's utility for the donating individual and hence does not exert control over any market-adapted behaviour.

In contrast, the economics of religion as employed here has a much more limited object. It refers to a substantially defined, common-sense concept of economy. Its aim is to analyse economic relationships and interdependencies between religion and other systems of society, relations, and dependencies that might inform the conscious or subconscious behaviour of religious organizations. Of course, financial contributions by individuals are part of this analysis. However, it would be too hasty to interpret them as the outcome of market behaviour and use them as a scale of religious commitment. There are other economic models that might be more fruitful—for example, mechanisms such as redistribution and the different types of reciprocity that have been illustrated by the history of economics following Karl Polanyi.⁶⁶

Such an enterprise renders the cooperation with the historical branch of economics necessary. If historians of religion analyse religious practices within the larger framework of culture and society, it is important to define the economic interaction of such practices and other fields not only in terms of quality, but—as far as possible—in terms of quantity, too. Here, methods and results would be the same as the ones of historical economics. Yet the primary object of interest is not the place of religion within a society's economic system, but the place of economic activities within the larger framework of religious agents and institutions' activities. Economics of religion, defined in this way, is not a new paradigm for the interpretation of religion, but just a field of historical research.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate the possibilities, or even the necessity, of 'economics of religion.' The answer to the question 'how much did

⁶⁶ Polanyi (1968).

religion cost at Rome?’ appeared to be quite hypothetical, but the questions ‘who paid?’ and ‘for what?’ turned out to be quite fruitful. Finally, I have also tried to show the limits of an economic approach towards religion: this is not a plea for a new theory of religion, but for a fresh look at religious practices, agents, and institutions.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors and to Andrew Wilson in particular for the invitation to revise a paper published in a German version as ‘Was kostet Religion? Quantifizierungsversuche für die Stadt Rom’, in Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi (eds), *Lokale Religionsgeschichte* (Marburg, 1995), 273–87. I am also grateful to Richard Gordon for more recent discussion of the topic, some of which is reflected here. I dedicate this chapter to Burkhard Gladigow, who first made me think about *Religionsökonomie*.

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