ON "TRANSLATING" HISTORY: A REJOINDER TO MACMULLEN

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Our respect for the scholarly achievements of Ramsay MacMullen is undiminished, but we believe that his assessment of our (and others) work on the "economics of religion" is far off the mark.¹ His impatience with assumptions of "rational behavior" has apparently led him to misinterpret portions of our book². He further argues, in addition to so-called "factual errors" in our work, that the Kahneman-Tversky attempt to invest psychology (and neuroscience) into behavior is the "new economics" which should be fruitfully applied to religious history and to other social sciences. He is incorrect as regards both method and facts.³

First, consider method. MacMullen looks with extreme disdain on us and those like us (he cites sociologist Rodney Stark and economist Laurence Iannaccone but there are many others)


who use rational choice to study religion and its history. His impatience appears to stem from Nobel Laureates Gary Becker and George Stigler and others' extension of traditional principles to include implicit markets, full price and "goods" as anything producing utility. So be it, but such applications have helped economists to understand facets of markets for art, marriage, politics, anthropology and... religion. But MacMullen, unfortunately, goes much further to the erroneous assumption that analysis based on non-rational behavior -- exemplified by the interesting insights of Kahneman and Tversky -- has replaced the modern approach we use with respect to religion. In a current 30-year survey of the impact of Kahneman's non-rational "prospect theory" in an American Economic Association journal, Nicholas C. Barberis concludes that "Even prospect theory's most ardent fan would concede that economic analysis based on this theory is unlikely to replace the analysis that we currently present in our introductory textbooks." Studies using Kahneman insight have been limited principally to risk and insurance and especially to laboratory experiments, not to "real world" or historical testing. Psychology appears to have given far less to economics than economics has given to the other social sciences.

4 Contrary to MacMullen, gossip is or could be subject to rational analysis. Increase the price of gossip -- for example, make it sinful or illegal -- and you get less of it. Lower the price of gossip -- make it about sexual peccadilloes -- and you will get more. A particularly empty critique of the "new economic history" may be found in Francesco Boldizzi, The Poverty of Clio: Resurrecting Economic History (Princeton, 2011). Boldizzi regards the incursions of economics into allied fields (perpetrated by an all-star list of prominent economists, such as Robert Fogel, Douglass North, Gary Becker, and Richard Posner), as an essentially an American expansion of the liberal political tradition of investigations in social sciences. He asserts the primacy of institutions, environments, time and place, and other sociological elements, and rejects the self-interest axiom. Boldizzi wishes to replace economic man with sociological man, which implies that some meta-theory must be carved out of actual events for each era or episode if we are to truly understand economic history and the development of human societies. Intellectual history tells us, however, that Boldizzi's method (and presumably Macmullen's) of inquiry reduces economic history and behavior to mere prose -- a narrative that is always anecdotal and never falsifiable. Such criticisms have been made (and failed) since Adam Smith without bearing much fruit.

We are even more perplexed by Professor MacMullen's charge that a multitude of the conclusions that we drew from historical sources (including his own) are "wrong." MacMullen appears to have randomly selected or cherry-picked a rosary of statements from our Origins in these assessments. Consider only a few of these "charges:"

(1) MacMullen excuses us from his recent published attack on the growth of church membership -- we used data from Stark and historian Keith Hopkins -- but nevertheless claims that our story is not based on "the facts." The facts are, as we point out, that a multiplicity of Christianities punctuated the first three centuries of the church and that there was rapid growth. That is all that is necessary to develop our analysis.

(2) MacMullen claims that we did not understand pagan belief in an afterlife and argues that there is "little or no mention of this benefit in [Christian] conversion accounts." That is incorrect -- pagan afterlife beliefs are clearly treated in our book (see Origins, p. 49 et passim). It is unnecessary for our purposes to examine each of the many pagan belief systems -- a task that would itself be book length. Further, if "death and resurrection" is not the afterlife center of Christianity, both before and after the "Apostle's Creed," what is? Faith, moreover, created and buttressed by credence building (MacMullen 294), is a marketing tool that may be interpreted as rational behavior. Nowhere in our work, contrary to MacMullen, do we dismiss "faith" as a basis for behavior.

(3) MacMullen argues that we only consider the "security" of Christian practice (actually quoting him on page 48 of our book) without mentioning the countervailing persecutions they endured. He has perhaps neglected to read our multiple discussions of pre-Constantine persecution on pp. 68-69, 89-90 and in many other places in our account.
There are many other examples of MacMullen's misinterpretations (for example, our discussion of "theocracy" (39) refers to the medieval church, not to pre-Constantine Christianity). None of his factual corrections alter one jot of our economic narrative, brief as it is. He does not seem to understand that we are offering a multidisciplinary approach to the study of religious history, one which, of necessity, cannot include every detail. An economic interpretation does not replace historian's accounts (including his own) -- indeed they form the basis of the narrative. In short we believe that an economic application to the early history of Christianity aids understanding of key issues. Among them are:

- the origins and development of the organization of the medieval (12th century) church where a vertically integrated structure emerged, a fact that is verifiable in multiple historical sources;
- the role of entrepreneurship in spreading Christianity, an entrepreneurship that was not to increase profits but create and enhance the utility of believers;
- the Roman adoption of Christianity on efficiency grounds including the verifiable inculcation of Christian principles regarding family and social welfare (for example, increased survival rates during plagues and lower crime rates entailing less public expenditures on law enforcement).

Other paths might be taken to these conclusions, but a more systematic and facile approach is to use economics as a vehicle for explanation.

Historians disagree on many facts and two-thousand year old data, unlike that in the present, is hard to come by. This fact may account for some criticism of our approach, but calls to use "the nature of cognition," "powers of the mind" and to bring in all "facts" as the basis of
analysis are not possible. Theory without facts is barren, but facts without theory are quite meaningless. The assumption of rational analysis (and self-interest) in, on average and on balance, a fruitful path to explaining cause and effect in economic and religious history, vested interests to the contrary notwithstanding.

It is increasingly possible, again using the rationality assumption, to gain insight into motivations or determinants of religious behavior using contemporary data and econometrics: see for example, T. Randolph Beard, Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., George S. Ford, Ben Gaskins and Robert D. Tollison, “Secularism, Religion and Political Choice in the United States,” Politics and Religion (forthcoming 2013).