State-Religion Relations in the Context of Rational Choice Theory: the Case of Russia

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Abstract. The paper offers methodology of rational choice theory for the analysis of the state-religion relations in contemporary Russia. That theory is employed in economic and social sciences to explain rational behavior of individuals when choosing potential opportunities. The paper argues that the situation of the ‘religious market’ has developed in Russia that causes religious organizations to act as companies and firms offering services. It is connected with the state’s efforts to control religious organizations, which, in turn, have to compete with each other in order to receive certain benefits. The authors point out that religious pluralism has its boundaries. Religious supply is bound by demand, which is formed by the state. The paper argues that religious pluralism leads to religious organizations becoming more active. Therefore, they supply more services. The paper concludes by arguing that individual religious demand is actively supported by religious organizations. That causes the formation of rational relationship and rational behavior of religious organizations. Drawing on that argument the theory allows to explain patterns and mechanisms of the state-religion relations in contemporary Russia.

1. Introduction
Contemporary Russian society is characterized by the changed role of religious organizations, inclusion of religion into social, political, and economic processes. Religious presents an important social institute in the system of social relations and is created by them. Nowadays, there is an active impact of religion on all social spheres. In such conditions, new approaches and research methods are needed to study religion, its place in society, and its relations with the state. In our view, rational choice theory might offer new basis to study this topic.

2. Aims of study
Despite a wide range of literature on religion and its relations with the state published in the last two decades, this topic is still understudied. Our study presents religion as a social institute and offers to study it in the context of social system as a whole. Developments of contemporary society require a search and development of new types of state-religion relations. One of the contemporary approaches – rational choice theory – is actively employed to study many social issues and topics. It is also employed to analyze religious life. This paper aims to discuss rational choice theory in comparison to secularization theory in the context of the analysis of state-religious relations. The paper also offers practical implementation of the theory.
3. Importance of study

There are two scholarly approaches to study relations between the state and religion. First is a classical theory of M. Weber that the paper will not discuss here since its ideas became foundational in sociology of religion. Another theory – theory of religious economic – was developed in the 1960-70s as a criticism of Weber’s classical theory and following secularization theory. William Bainbridge, Rodger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and Rodney Stark contributed to the development of that theory.

The paper will discuss M. Weber first. He paid a big attention to the discussion of religious-cultural element of modern capitalism. In his work ‘Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ [1], the philosopher views capitalism as a rationalized behavior. That was possible because Protestantism made a great contribution on the worldview of modern capitalism. For Weber, that explains the impact of religion on economic practice and its place and role in state-religion relations. Rational choice theory has an important role in analyzing religion. It was introduced to religious studies from economic studies where it was developed by Adam Smith, Stephen Woerner, and Charles Glock. It was started by Rodger Finke and further formulated by Rodney Stark William Bainbridge in ‘Theory of Religion’.

The paper will now discuss classical theory of Weber and his followers for clearer and fuller understanding of that approach and its possible employment in the analysis of state-religion relations. The paper will also discuss gaps in that theory that were later addressed by neo-classical scholars.

4. Research results

Weber emphasizes the role of professional labor that included a modest way of living and tireless work. At the same time, individual was fully responsible for their actions. For Weber, such properties of Protestantism made these ethic norms to become a basis of life. In fact, the scope of their impact did not limited only religion and culture, but also expanded to economic sphere. Thus, we can see that stimuli developed in religion existed even after disappearance of religious stimuli.

In his work ‘Economic Ethic of World Religions’, Weber pointed out the impact of religion on economy, connections between religious ideas and social strata.

Thus, Weber by assessing the role of religion in economic formation, of Protestantism on economic activity came to original conclusions that, in our view, are still relevant today. First, he emphasized the special function of Protestantism on the formation of necessary qualities that have a religious-moral basis. These qualities have an impact on ‘the development of rational capitalism’ [1]. Second, he pointed out that Protestantism affected socialization as a belonging to social group that provided an opportunity to receive economic benefits (credits, tax benefits).

In fact, there was a special regulation of life that affected economic activity. As a result, rational methodology of individual behavior was developed, which subsequently formed the worldview of Western capitalism. It is important to note that not only religion, but also other institutional forms affected the development of Western economic system. Catholic countries were also included into the capitalist development. V. Sombart argued for Jewish roots of capitalist spirit [2], which could be traced in Judaism, then in Catholicism, and later in Protestantism.

The main issue of Weber’s approach is the question of the impact of religious, cultural and ethical principles on economic activity. In his opinion, mentality formed on the basis of religious values presents an important factor affecting the formation of economic activity, its motivator. Rationality of economic space equals the force of religious impact. It turns out that the determining function of religion is its impact on economic activity of individual. Therefore, for Weber, it is important to analyze the impact of Protestantism on the formation of capitalism, while discussing the question of religious ethics. In fact, by analyzing Christianity and then Protestantism, Weber discovered that these religions contributed in the formation of European spirit of entrepreneurship and then the formation of economy.

R. Bell, being the follower of Weber, argues that, rather than Catholics, it was Protestants who possessed the mentality that contributed to the development of entrepreneurship [3].

Turning to research in Russia in this field, historian M. Nikolsky should be noted who studied the affect of Old Believers on the country’s industrial development. Nikolsky paid a great attention to Old
Believers’ community, its foundations that contributed to the formation and development of capitalism. Old Believers communities were located on important trade routes of Trans-Urals and Siberia [4]. As for the Russian Orthodox Church, it is important to note that in the pre-revolutionary period it was one of the major owners and, thus, had an impact on Russian economy. Monasteries of that time were not only education and cultural centers, but also economic centers.

Marxist scholars argue that the impact of religious factor in synthesis of traditional and modern in the East should not be underestimated due to high level of public religiosity. And also because the capitalist development is more or less combined with ‘pre-bourgeois cultural and related to them religious traditions’. The final outcome of reflecting basis changes in religion and its reverse impact on basis is determined, first of all, by confessional specifics, peculiarities of social functioning of religion on various stages of formational development. It is, finally, determined by historic and genetic connections of certain religions and their social-religious systems with particular components of synthesis of traditional and modern [5].

K. Dobbler discussed secularization and defined three levels of relations between state and religion in economic field. First level – macro level – presents relations in society. Meso level presents religious organizations. Micro level presents individual consciousness [6]. In his opinion, modern differentiated world has such an impact on religion that it becomes sub-system and, thus, its affect decreases.

The approaches discussed above analyzed, first of all, relations between religion and economic activity. these theories viewed religion as a certain connection with supernatural that accompanies economic transformation. Moreover, the idea of religion’s natural death is invisibly present in earlier theoretical approaches. It is important to note that, in our opinion, such argument on the death of religion is unfounded. Weber and his followers argued that with time and with modernization of society religiosity will decrease. However, there is not studies proving that religiosity has decreased in Europe. That also applies to the USA where the level of religiosity was always relatively high [7]. Another point against secularization theory is that it considered only Christianity. In that case, with decreasing Christian religiosity, there is a possibility for increase of belief in, for example, Buddha or Allah. These aspects contradict changes in religious sphere.

Modern transformations in state-religion relations led religion to fight for its survival. Religious organizations start to actively compete for followers. Such new developments need new theoretical and methodological approaches.

New approaches were developed stating that religion acts as one of competing elements of economy. It became included in economic field. William Bainbridge, Rodger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and Rodney Stark offered new approach to analyze the existence of religion in society, its activity. In their studies of religion, they are first to employ economic terminology introducing the concept ‘religious economy’. Their main argument is that religious organizations are full-fledged market participants competing in a market economy. Laws of the market affect religious organizations. Market might limit competition between religions by determining the mood of consumers of religious services. As R.O. Safronv rightfully notes, rational choice theory draws on analogy of religion as system of relations with the market, therefore, this theory is often referred to as religious-economic [8]. There is a competitive struggle between religious organizations on so-called ‘religious market’ when in conditions of religious pluralism believers prefer a religion that offers more opportunities. Rational choice theory is a neo-classical view on religion, which becomes universal. In classical Weber understanding of religion secularization is unavoidable. Here, on the other hand, secularization is limited. Religion does not disappear. Another religion comes on its place. Scholars of this approach recognize that religions affects individual’s worldview, determines type of economic activity in many ways, determine limits of economic activity. However, in their opinion, rationality of behavior of religious organizations determines their behavior.

In rational choice theory, religious pluralism, in the case of the USA, becomes a normal phenomenon. Weber’s classical theory draws on the case of Europe that is not suitable to the case of contempo-
rary Russian society. Nowadays, we see religious pluralism with dominating position of the Russian Orthodox Church. The main aspect here is ‘religious market’. Desire to receive goods is natural for individual. But those goods are not always accessible. In such moment, religion plays an important role by offering a certain compensation through supernatural goods. In rational choice theory, religion acts as a producer of such goods. Therefore, in addition to inner need for religion, people have external need. Economic law on supply and demand is, in that case, true. The role of religion as the service supplier and its special interest in that is clear.

Finke and Stark in their work ‘Dynamics of Religious Economies’ define religious economy as a new sub-system that includes all forms of religious activity including the market of existing and potential religions, organizations that aim to attract and keep followers, and religious culture offered by organizations [9].

Rational choice scholars argue that there is a religious market with religious goods (future retribution, supernatural explanation of events). These goods are produced, consumed, and compete with each other. However, they have a defect which is difficult to verify, to prove. Therefore, the religious market is connected with great risks because potential ‘client’ might change their religious views. It is important to note that, for this theory, religious firm are limited by goods, that is, religious values. That especially concerns organizations and churches with strict hierarchy and structure. Thus, it could be that they have to be supported by the state that is interested in existence of that religion. For example, great quantity of goods of newly founded organizations. While, for the Russian Orthodox Church, the set of goods is limited. The Church cannot change them. And, thus, has a support of the state. But such religions that have history and dogmatical specific economy characterized by particular culture, forms of religious activity, and supporters. However, Finke pointed out that different religious economy form in equal socio-cultural conditions and regulations of religious economy. He rightfully connected that with so-called ‘religious niches’ occupied by specific religions. Each religion has its own circle of clients, the more of them, the more diverse is religious offer. In fact, this of that church exist in a particular sector because its values are needed for representatives of that group. Therefore, the more diverse are resources, the more pluralistic is offer. By the way, a direct dependence may be pointed out here: increase in the country’s population leads to increase of number of followers of this or that church.

In our opinion, the importance of religious pluralism for religious market present an important argument of that theory. It suggests the relationship between supply and demand because people’s religious preferences depend on ethnic, social environment. It is well known that, according to old school scholars, religion is on the verge of death due to secularization. New approach suggests that the structure of religious market might regulate supply and demand of religious goods. And here appears the question of the state regulation (the case of the Russian Orthodox Church) or market regulation (the American case with a number of competing churches). The point is that lack of regulation is a direct way to pluralism and sacralization [11].

Based on the above definition of religious economy, it is important to note that each society has its own specific economy characterized by particular culture, forms of religious activity, and supporters. Moreover, Finke pointed out that different religious economy form in equal socio-cultural conditions and regulations of religious economy. He rightfully connected that with so-called ‘religious niches’ occupied by specific religions. Each religion has its own circle of clients, the more of them, the more diverse is religious offer. In fact, this of that church exist in a particular sector because its values are needed for representatives of that group. Therefore, the more diverse are resources, the more pluralistic is offer. By the way, a direct dependence may be pointed out here: increase in the country’s population leads to increase of number of followers of this or that church.

In the case of Russia, it is important to note pluralism of religious space with new religious movements occupying a very small niche. There also traditions confessions like Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism that are supported by the state.

In conditions of modern religious pluralism, as P. Berger stated, there is a competition between confessions. Thus, it is obvious that the Russian Orthodox Church has entered into struggle with ‘sects’ because they might be more attractive than traditional religions.

In addition, religious pluralism leads to increasing tendencies of proselytizing. Say, Islam and Buddhism do not have intersecting points on the missionary map. But Orthodoxy and Catholicism or Protestantism often come to open confrontation.
Existing contradictions between the state and religious organizations and lack of special coordinating body lead these relations to have vague no common understanding.

In our opinion, nowadays, state-religion relations are formed without active participation of the state. The reason behind that, we argue, in lack of clear concept of state-religion relations. There are no controlling bodies and institutions. And that, in turn, lead to the lack of elementary tool to solve it. In addition, religious organization are active in many questions, are involved in political, economic, and social life. Naturally, a big role in that activity plays the Russian Orthodox Church that uses its privileged position. Historically, in the regions, traditional confessions are more active. Therefore, privileged position reflects in in the authorities’ backlash, invitations to events, media coverage, provision of land, construction of temples, and access to the military and penitentiary system.

Therefore, principle of separating religion from the state is a formality. It is reinforced by the fact that religion becomes involved into economic sphere when church becomes the subject of economic activity. Moreover, intensification of such activities take place on all levels of church hierarchy. Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church as the subject of economy is constantly increasing, and its total turnover is constantly growing [12].

At the same time, not only the Russian Orthodox Church, but also other religious organizations are in a special position in regards to others concerning taxes, land provision, etc.

It is argued that the Russian Orthodox Church has turned into a grandiose extraterritorial offshore conducting independent financial and industrial activities [12].

In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, almost all religious organization aim to participate in economic activity. That concerns also Protestant confessions that established Association of Christian entrepreneurs with a goal of establishing business ethics.

Islamic organizations are also involved in entrepreneurial activity justifying that Islam equates entrepreneurs’ honest work with efforts of struggle for faith. There are associations of entrepreneurs advocating for Muslim entrepreneurs.

Another point supporting the argument that today religion penetrates all social spheres would be the use of religious symbols and rituals. Participation of religious figures is no longer a surprise, or a religious rite on secular event such as laying a stone or opening a hospital.

Therefore, the above arguments lead us to an idea of religion becoming a part of economic activity and religious organization becoming full participants of economic activity.

5. Conclusions and perspectives for future research

In our opinion, these theories are relevant and applicable to the analysis of contemporary state-religion relations. There is a formation of relations between religious organizations that are in acute competition for followers. Of course, rational choice scholars developed the theory in relation to the USA because in comparison to secularization theory could not be applied to other Christian countries. And that required a new theoretical approach [13]. However, we argue that it is possible to apply this theory to the analysis of religion in Russian society. Rational choice theory views religious sphere as similar to economic relations. Nowadays, we see rationalism and pragmatism of religious behavior and participation of both followers and confessions. Therefore, rational choice theory could be applied to examine behavior of particular religious organization and its relations with the state.

This theory’s important argument is an idea that, despite multiple alternatives of religious beliefs, society is still religious. Pluralism of religious market determines existence of religion and religiosity. Nowadays, religion is an equal participant of market relations. It adapts or builds into the system of economic relations and develops its own religious segment of economy.

Therefore, we see that examined concepts came from questions of the religion’s impact on economy to question of religion’s existence in economic field. It is impossible to state that this or that confession is false or absolutely true. It is a question whether theory is inclusive and correct in analyzing religion. Rational choice theory is more suitable to analyzing religion due to its rationality and objec-
tivity. Rational choice theory demonstrates a dependence between empirical reality and existence of religion. This theory allows a deeper understanding of state-religion relations.

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