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Secularization in the Netherlands?

FRANK J. LECHNER†

This paper refutes Stark and Iannaccone’s recent argument about secularization in Europe as applied to the Netherlands. Relevant Dutch evidence shows that both organized religion and subjective religiosity have declined in the Netherlands since the 1950s. Any deregulation and increases in pluralism that occurred in that period did not have the theoretically expected effects. The anomalous Dutch case casts further doubt on the explanatory power of "supply-side" theories in the sociology of religion.

Is Europe becoming more secular? Stark and Iannaccone (1994) think not: religious participation, though lower than in the United States, has not declined and subjective religiosity remains strong. Those who thought that Europeans and their societies were losing touch with the transcendent are wrong to accept the conventional wisdom about the religious past and the irreligious present. The key to their error is empirical indifference to evidence of subjective faith and theoretical ignorance of the power of pluralism unleashed. Once Europe’s religious economies become fully deregulated, the resulting pluralism will lead to its "churching."

But is the conventional wisdom about European secularization all wrong? Bruce (1995a) offers a defense based on the British case. Historical evidence shows that medieval Britain indeed was a Christian society, even if churches were not always full; all indicators relevant to the Stark and Iannaccone thesis show decline from the nineteenth to the twentieth century; and even under nominal establishment Britain experienced substantial religious competition. Bruce thus affirms that Britain has become substantially more secular. As the "culprit" he identifies the agent who also serves as the moving force behind Stark and Iannaccone’s analysis, namely the freely choosing individual. In response, Stark and Iannaccone (1995) challenge Bruce’s data and interpretations, reiterate their emphasis on subjective religiosity, and deride again any misplaced "faith" in secularization. Focusing on a new analysis by Stark, Finke, and Iannaccone (1995), Bruce (1995b) replies that Britain was not less pluralistic than nineteenth-century America. He also marks a crucial turn in the Stark et al. argument, what he calls their "conversion to sociology" — specifically, their consideration of various social factors to show why the impact of pluralism on religious vitality is bound to vary.

In this paper I join the debate on the side of Bruce. To complement his analysis of British data, I offer an overview of survey-based Dutch evidence relevant to assessing Stark and Iannaccone’s thesis. I then show why their argument cannot explain the anomalous Dutch data. I conclude by identifying further weaknesses in the theoretical rationale for their interpretation of European religion. Empirically, the upshot of my analysis is that at least certain parts of Europe are undergoing rapid and continuing secularization. Theoretically, this calls into question the new position taken by Stark and Iannaccone and the type of theory they advocate.

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Before turning to the Dutch case, let me identify the specific steps Stark and Iannaccone take to reach their remarkable conclusions. They start out by turning attention from secularization to religious mobilization. Specifically, they ask "[u]nder what conditions are religious firms able to create a demand?" (1995: 232; emphasis in original). In theoretical principle, the answer is that specialized firms, operating in a pluralistic and competitive economy, are more likely to do so. The degree to which an economy is unregulated, and thus not subject to governmental rules limiting supply, largely accounts for its pluralism. Such pluralism in turn makes firms specialize. As specialized firms compete, they will more efficiently serve various market segments. Deregulation has considerable impact on previously regulated societies: the loss of religious monopoly means that the society will become desacralized. But desacralization should be correlated with increased mobilization. In a nutshell, as society becomes less, its people become more religious. Now all the argument needs to postulate is that many European societies have had religious monopolies, and we can infer two things. First, due to regulation and lack of pluralism, mobilization is bound to be relatively low in Europe; lazy firms do not satisfy latent demand. Second, the more the religious economies become deregulated, the more already existing demand based on continuing subjective religiosity is bound to be satisfied; the churging of Europe is about to commence — though the process may take a while (249).

As the Dutch case demonstrates, each part of this argument is subject to challenge, insofar as it intends to offer a general explanation of patterns of religiosity regardless of time and place. Until recently, regulation in the Netherlands did not mean low mobilization. Declines in subjective faith show that potential demand is not constant; actual mobilization in fact appears to match demand rather well. The Netherlands shows ongoing desacralization and decreased mobilization. The implication is that in the relationship between pluralism and participation the “other things” of the economist’s standard caveat are never equal, to the point where the relationship itself appears most tenuous. As Bruce suggested and Stark et al. now begin to acknowledge, they require a sociological account. The supply side of any religious economy can only do so much; a theory relying on it must be embedded in a proper sociological framework.

SECULARIZATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Since this section challenges Stark and Iannaccone’s argument with Dutch data, let us start with their own references to the Netherlands. First, Stark and Iannaccone consider its religious economy “substantially more regulated” than other authors did, mainly because of state financial support for some church functions (239). Thus, the Netherlands presumably fits the model of highly regulated (albeit not monopolized) religious economies. Second, they rely on International Social Survey data to show that in 1991, 57% of Dutchmen believed the Bible was inspired by God, 53% believed in life after death, and only 27% were “not religious” (246). Thus, the Netherlands presumably qualifies as one of the European nations where, remarkably, “high levels of subjective faith can be found” though “for lack of church participation, organized religious socialization is largely lacking” (246). They do see signs that things may be changing, in part due to the influx of North American Protestant missionaries that will bring to Europe the religious satisfaction Americans have long enjoyed.

Do the Dutch participate little in organized religion? At first sight, descriptive data seem to favor Stark and Iannaccone’s thesis insofar as it concerns the lingering effects of regulation. Fully 58% of Dutch respondents in a major 1991 survey were unchurched, in the sense of not considering themselves to be members of a church; 72% of young adults were unchurched (Becker and Vink 1994: 52–53). Fewer than half of church members go to church at least once every two weeks; among young Catholics, the proportion is down to 13%
An earlier national survey (1985) found a distribution of 53% churched (including marginal members) versus 47% unchurch. (Felling et al. 1991: 28). But do these figures in fact support the Stark and Iannaccone view? They would if they indicated long-standing “lack of participation” and weak “organized religious socialization.” Unfortunately for Stark and Iannaccone, if we consider the figures just cited in longitudinal perspective, a quite different picture emerges.

The single most significant fact about organized religion in the Netherlands is its precipitous decline in recent decades. To be sure, members of the Dutch Reformed church had begun to depart as early as the 1920s, but surveys conducted since the 1950s display a further, more general decline, notably among Catholics. Table 1 shows the unchurching of the Netherlands: an increase in the proportion of unchurch from 24% to 57%, and a first indication of a strong generational effect reinforcing this decline.

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<td>37</td>
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<td>43</td>
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Source: Becker and Vink 1994, Table 3.4, various surveys

As Becker and Vink interpret their data, since the 1950s each new generation has started adult life more unchurch, the decline is more rapid among the young, and it still continues, albeit at a slower pace, after 1980. The strongest contribution to this decline came from Roman Catholics. As Table 2 shows, the percentage Roman Catholics went from 42% to 22%; only the Reformed (i.e., traditional Calvinists) held on to their share of members.

Nineteen percent of those raised Catholic had become unchurch in 1970, which increased to 48% in 1991; even of those raised Reformed, 19% and 30% had become unchurch in 1970 and 1991, respectively (Becker and Vink 78). By 1991, fully 21% of the population consisted of unchurch former Catholics, up from only 8% two decades earlier (Becker and Vink 1994: 163).

The story for actual participation is one of dramatic decline as well. Table 3 shows that the percentage of church members attending at least once every two weeks decreased by 24% since 1970; Roman Catholic attendance went down from 71% to 30%.

The number of frequent attenders went down as well, from 57% in 1970 to 31% in 1991, while members attending less than once a month increased from 11% to 25%. By 1991, 20% of “members” claimed never to attend (Becker and Vink: 79). This picture of church involvement fits with earlier findings by Felling et al. from their 1985 survey (1991: 27). In 1960, by contrast, the Netherlands was still a “genuinely devout” nation in which the 80% of church members were “really involved in their churches” (71). Since then, however, the country has experienced “comprehensive secularisation” (sic)(75). Far from being once unchurch and now ready for “churching,” the Netherlands was heavily churched not long ago but has rapidly lost its Christian aura. Indeed, this unmistakable pattern leads Becker and Vink to project that by 2020 more than 70% of the Dutch population will be unchurch (Becker and Vink 72–73). Even if the models justifying that projection turn out to be too
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<tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>N (N=)</td>
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<td>1.653</td>
<td>1.686</td>
<td>1.700</td>
<td>1.695</td>
<td>1.650</td>
<td>1.643</td>
<td>1.687</td>
<td>1.720</td>
<td>1.677</td>
<td>1.607</td>
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Source: Becker and Vink 1994, Table B3.4, various surveys
simple, they indicate how much the Stark and Iannaccone prediction is at odds with the most judicious interpretations offered by Dutch social scientists.

### TABLE 3
**ATTENDANCE (AT LEAST ONCE PER TWO WEEKS) BY DENOMINATION; ADULTS 17-70, 1970-1991 (PERCENTAGES)**

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<tr>
<td>All Church Members</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>Roman Catholics</td>
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<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dutch Reformed</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>73</td>
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</table>

Source: Becker and Vink 1994, Table 3.8, various surveys

When it comes to membership and participation, then, Stark and Iannaccone are off the mark. But at first sight they still appear to have a point about subjective religiosity. They cite the International Social Survey finding that more than half of Dutch respondents believe the Bible to be "inspired by God."6 According to the same source, 50% of all Dutch have always believed in God, 5% have converted to a belief in God, and 54% consider themselves at least "somewhat faithful" (Becker and Vink 136–37). While 48% consider themselves believers, only 36% claim to be atheists or agnostics; those believing in a higher power make up 16% (134).7 Forty-nine percent believe in life after death and 41%, in heaven (142). Clearly, about half of the Dutch population appears to possess a fairly traditional faith, and an additional fraction holds nontraditional religious views. This might seem to favor the Stark and Iannaccone case. Of course, whether one considers that significant evidence of subjective faith depends on one's yardstick. By international and historical standards, it is not high.

Yet once again the snapshot misleads. First, as noted, a large percentage of respondents (15% to 20%) expressed no opinion on various core issues, including the Bible and belief in God. At best, such non-answers indicate uncertainty; at worst, for the Stark and Iannaccone thesis, they indicate that potential demand is much lower than the initial picture seemed to indicate. Second, examined more closely, the evidence on subjective faith suggests that only a small minority of the Dutch in fact hold a strong and vital faith. For example, only 18% consider themselves close to God (Becker and Vink 1994: 136), only 16% claim to be very faithful (137), 19% think only God gives meaning to life (140), and 26% believe in a God who is concerned with each person (164). For large minorities, morality is personal and individuals give meaning to their own lives (144, 140). Felling et al. find small declines in the salience of religion for daily life even in the short 1979–1985 period (1991: 32), and pride of place for an "innerwordly world view" among respondents, with the Christian worldview in fifth place (38). In 1966, 16% still considered a strong faith the most important thing in life; by 1993 that had declined to 4%; those choosing good health, by contrast, increased from 36% to 60% (SCPO 1995: 468). Third, by all available indicators subjective faith has been dropping for more than a generation in the Netherlands. Fully 20% used to believe in God but have lost faith (Becker and Vink 136).8 Between 1966 and 1979, Felling et al. show (1991: 73), explicit Christian belief in God dropped 15%, only partly offset by a 10% increase in general belief in transcendence. In the same period, the percentage claiming strong salience of belief in everyday life went down from 32% to 14%. Even among church members, self-selected though they now are, all indicators of orthodoxy, intolerance,
and obedience to church rules show declines starting in the 1960s and leveling off more recently; declines are especially dramatic for Roman Catholics but affect the Reformed as well (Becker and Vink 109, 112). In sum, over the last few decades more and more believers have given up on things once part and parcel of the subjective faith of Dutch Christians. This does not mean the demand for organized religion has disappeared; it does mean that claims about a large “potential demand” do not find ample support in the available data.

But could demand, however latent, still exceed actual mobilization? Could there still be a gap in spite of declines in subjective faith, creating an opportunity for churching? Forty-eight percent of the Dutch regard themselves as at least somewhat faithful (Becker and Vink 134, 137). Slightly over 40% claim membership in a church (52–53). In 1985, one-third of survey respondents expressed strong belief in transcendence; one-third also regularly attended church (Felling et al. 74). In terms of the simplest indicators one can use, then, there does not seem to be a huge unsatisfied demand. By all accounts, the Netherlands has indeed become a freer religious economy, in which consumers can easily express and realize their preferences, whether religious or nonreligious. Yet there still appears to be one group that might generate the demand Stark and Iannaccone require, namely those who believe more vaguely in transcendence, in some kind of higher power: 33% in Felling et al.’s study fell into the “medium” belief in transcendence category in 1985 (74); in 1991, 16% expressed belief in a “higher power” (Becker and Vink 134).

Certainly, a creative organization might be able to attract this potential audience. Yet its prospects for entering and succeeding in the Dutch religious market are hardly encouraging. Any tough-minded market analysis would show that demand is increasingly concentrated among the old, and on the way down even among them. More and more Dutch believe barely, if at all. For many years now, each new generation has expressed less interest in religion, not just organized religion. As I indicated above, Becker and Vink project a population in which more than 70% will be unchurched by 2020 (175–76) — exactly the reverse of the situation just 60 years earlier. Relying on firmer evidence than Stark and Iannaccone, they see few opportunities for a Christian revival. Only the increasing number of Muslims among the Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch population (between 600,000 and 1 million by 2000) serves the Stark and Iannaccone thesis, but this cannot offset the overall pattern of decline. Missionary churches would be wise to invest their resources in other economies.

**The Dutch Case in Context**

Even the seemingly adverse Dutch data might not discomfit Stark and Iannaccone. After all, their assignment of European religion resembles that of older secularization theories in one respect. For their theory to work, the Dutch corner of Europe must be relatively less religiously mobilized than, say, the U.S. Low levels of churching would seem to confirm part of their diagnosis. The actual declines, demonstrated above, still might be compatible with the theory if they can be related to the key factors Stark and Iannaccone identify, namely deregulation and pluralism. That is, the empirical pattern I have outlined would not refute the theory if the Netherlands had become more regulated and less pluralistic, which would have accounted for the observed declines. Stark and Iannaccone would still be wrong in part of their empirical assessment, but the theory would hold.

Does it? I submit that regulation has either remained stable or diminished in the Netherlands in recent decades; it therefore cannot have had the effects attributed to it. If pluralism is taken as a variable not entirely dependent on degree of regulation, then it is plausible to argue that it has increased; yet this greater pluralism ostensibly has not resulted in the expected churching. Consider regulations first. Stark and Iannaccone (239) find several criteria from the Chaves-Cann regulation scale (1992: 280) applicable to the Netherlands. Citing Barrett (1982), they regard the Netherlands as quite regulated because
the state subsidizes parochial schools, pays faculty in theological seminaries of the three main denominations, pays for some church capital and personnel expenses, and has some authority over conferral of ecclesiastical offices on expatriates. Of these, the subsidies for parochial schools are by far the most significant, both practically and historically. From the late nineteenth century on, representatives of various groups fought over the status and legitimacy of denominational schools. The settlement reached in 1917 specified that the state could set general standards for education but would provide funds for all qualifying denominational schools on an equal basis in proportion to enrollments, leaving them free to create their own form of religious instruction (cf. Lijphart 1975: 111). This resulted in “special” religious school systems that parallel the secular, public one. This system is still in place today. And that makes my point: in all relevant respects, the system today is the same as it was when the Netherlands was more churched. The other aspects of state regulation mentioned above, far less significant in any case, have not changed greatly either. The declines in membership and faith thus occurred in a relatively stable “regulatory” context. An unchanging independent variable cannot account for significant change in the dependent variable.9

For Stark and Iannaccone, pluralism varies directly with degree of regulation. That does not imply that it can only vary with regulation. Indeed, in the Netherlands pluralism has increased without greatly reduced regulation. From the nineteenth century until the 1960s, the main churches in the Netherlands had tried to manage the threat of secularization through what came to be called “pillarization” (cf. Lijphart 1975; Thurlings 1978). Each pillar consisted of institutions that had secular functions and religious identities. Newspapers, trade unions, political parties, schools, down to the proverbial associations of goat breeders, all were organized along denominational lines, directly or indirectly subject to church authority or influence. As a result, religious communities (as well as the emerging socialist one) coexisted as divided segments of the larger society, united only by elite interaction and consensus. Thus, churches were not engaged in religious competition. The closest economic analogy would be oligopoly: a limited number of suppliers had divided the market, each refraining from interference in the others’ affairs. The lives of members were dominated by church-related institutions; though some, notably among the Dutch Reformed, left the fold, most did not seek better offers from competing suppliers. For most practical purposes, the communities were internally closed. Gains in membership had to result from procreation by members, a strategy employed by the Catholics with political acumen and ample theological justification. Such gains of course could be translated into advantages in other spheres, not least by increasing voting strength. The communities competed for political and institutional advantage, within well-defined parameters (cf. again Lijphart 1975).

Although the state-regulatory features of this pillarized system remain in place, as a kind of political lag, the system itself has changed enormously since the 1960s, in the direction of greater openness and pluralism. Church influence over other institutions, such as newspapers and universities, diminished as their religious identities became more tenuous. The previously clear lines between pillarized organizations blurred, leading to mergers of the main religious parties in one Christian-Democratic party and of the Catholic and socialist labor unions in one general union. Public support for pillarization declined as well, with 33% regarding it as desirable in 1966, against 17% in 1991; among church members, support shrank from 45% to 25% in the same period; only among the Reformed nearly half still find it desirable (Becker and Vink 118, 112). Among pillarized institutions, only church-related schools received support in 1991 from more than one-third; church members, however, still clearly regard this as highly desirable (Becker and Vink 147). In 1991, 20% or less supported various forms of religious influence in the public sphere (Becker and Vink 146). Sixty-one percent of church members no longer object to a daughter marrying a spouse from another faith, 48% would not oppose a child choosing another faith (Becker and Vink 148).
Such changes in public opinion in turn reflect larger cultural changes. Whereas the culture of pillarization depended on respect for authority and tradition, in recent decades the Dutch have become more individualistic and innerworldly in their approach to problems of meaning and morality (Becker and Vink 1994; Elster et al. 1991; SCPO 1995). According to a recent summary by the Social and Cultural Planning Office, the main social-scientific research institute of the Dutch government, “In their totality the anticipated trends amount to individualization, critical scrutiny of the authorities and declining acceptance of closed groups and traditional structures” (SCPO 1995: 525). The key point for our purposes is that this set of changes in institutions, individual attitudes, and the culture at large has opened up the previously closed segments of the religious marketplace. No longer assured of market share and faced with critical consumers, churches must now market their wares in competition with others to attract a fickle public. Religious pluralism in the sense of “religious variety sufficiently nearby to be realistic options” (Stark et al. 1995: 442) has increased, yet thus far it has not had the expected results.

Why not? Stark and Iannaccone’s theory contains one final line of defense. A crucial assumption in the whole argument is that pluralism makes firms less lazy. Perhaps the anomalous Dutch pattern could be explained by the behavior of churches stuck in a prepluralistic rut. Accustomed to regular participation by regular customers, they might have been unable to adjust to the demands of a new market setting. Of course, such lack of adjustment is easy to infer from the data, but the argument would turn circular if we were to measure a church’s degree of activism by its success in mobilization. What independent evidence we have, however, suggests that the churches (their leaders, at any rate) were very much aware of the changes taking place in their environment and deliberately adopted strategies designed to appeal to potential customers. Consider the case of the community that underwent the greatest secularizing change, the Roman Catholic one. In a major study, Coleman (1978) examined the internal changes in the Catholic pillar and the church’s response. The thrust of his argument was that starting in the 1960s the church had begun to adopt a rational strategy to succeed in a more narrowly defined, specialized religious mission at a time when its public influence was irretrievably on the wane. Before policies set in Rome turned more conservative, the content of church teaching also liberalized as part of an effort to retain a segment of consumers undergoing dramatic change. The Church took a variety of measures to “market” its services more effectively. Contrary to Coleman’s own optimistic early assessment, it did not succeed — but not for lack of trying (cf. Lechner 1989). Clearly, the Church was dealing with forces beyond its control; what it supplied, and how it supplied it, was secondary. This final part of Stark and Iannaccone’s argument, then, cannot account for the Dutch pattern either.

The synopsis of the Catholic experience already contains a sketch of an alternative explanation. A few elements of the process of “depillarization” — cultural, political, institutional — are relevant to this paper. The empirical sources referred to above agree on one fact: since 1960, the Netherlands has undergone a cultural revolution. The content of once dominant values changed; the collective consciousness about desirable social relations changed. As a result, the “demand” for religion declined; other sources of meaning became more important (cf. again Felling et al. 1991). Even with a constant supply of equal quality, religious providers would not have been able to use new competition to gain market share. Not surprisingly, membership declines track declines in subjective faith rather closely. More generally, the cultural underpinning for the old pillarized structure disappeared. With its legitimacy in question, institutions had to adapt. They did so by operating more and more on strictly secular terms, as cogs in the machine of the new welfare state. To be sure, religiously identifiable institutions did not simply disappear. But church influence over institutions declined, as did its role in mobilizing segmented communities to engage effectively in political competition.
The end to the politics of accommodation, based on communities divided along ideological lines, was not simply the work of a cultural deus ex machina. In part, it resulted from success. In the Catholic case, for instance, the pillarized institutions blessed by Church approval served to advance Catholic interests in many spheres. By the 1960s the process of emancipation from nineteenth-century exclusion had been largely completed. As it outlived its usefulness, the pillar began to totter (Thurlings 1978). Younger generations, not fully reared in all-encompassing segmented communities, began to detach themselves from the pillars and the worldview they embodied. Cohort by cohort, secularist thought and behavior advanced — generational effects represent the one consistent explanatory theme endorsed by the quantitative literature on religious change in the Netherlands. Partly replacing the denominational support system, the growing welfare state reshaped the bond between individual and collectivity. Politics became less a matter of dividing communal spoils, more a matter of ensuring social provisions on universalistic grounds. The innerwordly demands of large groups could be satisfied without church mediation of any sort. Under pillarization, religion had been, to adapt Wilson’s (1982) phrase, the culture of community; in the new welfare state with its individualized culture, the old community was no more, and its culture could no longer claim the plausibility or adherence of old. Thus cultural, political, and institutional developments interacted to diminish both religious mobilization and subjective faith among the Dutch. The old faith was on the wane, and no major new suppliers appeared in the open market to take their place. The old mobilization practices had lost their political function and ideological support; in the new context, the churches had to compete with more than each other and could not achieve the results supply-side consultants would have promised.

**THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Sketching an explanation of recent religious decline in the Netherlands does not amount to offering a full-fledged theoretical alternative to the Stark and Iannaccone supply-side theory. To be sure, the causal links posited in the explanation above have received much attention and support from a wide array of students of Dutch religion. They also reflect the type of theory I favor. But my purpose here is not to spell out each of these links or to offer a more formal theoretical justification for selecting these instead of others. Rather, I focus on the implications of the refutation of the Stark and Iannaccone argument for the theory they propose. The point is to reinforce the conversion back to sociology announced in Stark et al. (1995: 442) with the unsurprising acknowledgment that “[f]actors other than state regulation of religious economies can constrain choice and thereby muffle competition.” They add that “no competent social scientist would deny the importance of human perception as mediating the effects of pluralism and competition” (443). My argument in this last section is that these concessions do not go far enough. The lessons to be drawn from the Dutch case indicate as much.

In the Netherlands, declining demand overwhelmed whatever effects depillarized pluralism might have had. Now recall that the original version of the Stark and Iannaccone theory focused on the conditions under which religious firms can “create a demand” (Stark and Iannaccone 1994: 232), on the behavior of firms “rather than” that of consumers (232; emphasis added). Yet the basic propositions depend on others that “establish the existence of natural segments in any religious market” (233), and this implies the existence of a relatively stable (potential) demand. Clearly, then a “supply-side” theory cannot work independently of “demand-side” assumptions. Now the critical assumption of stable potential demand is empirically untenable in many cases, including the Dutch one, but more importantly, it lacks theoretical justification as well. “Human perceptions” that presumably shape
potential demand indeed do "mediate" the effects of pluralism and competition — to the point of suppressing, or in the Dutch case reversing, them.

The critical question, of course, is how such perceptions are formed and changed. On this score, we have precious little formal theory of the kind Stark and Iannaccone advocate. We do have well-supported empirical generalizations, including those of the secularization theory Stark and Iannaccone reject. My point is not to suggest that this is sufficient. Indeed, I think it is not. Rather, I suggest that for the kind of explanation Stark and Iannaccone propose to work — and certainly for the kinds of explanations most sociologists want — substantially more theory-guided information is needed about patterns in "demand." This requires the examination of culturally situated preferences on the part of actors whose very status as "consumers" varies in meaning from one society to the next. Explaining the variable vitality of religious organizations on the basis of choices made by (lots of ) individuals requires contextual interpretation of the meaning of religious symbols, of religious motives, indeed of "religion." Only with the results of such interpretation in hand can we reasonably assess the relative significance of, and the strength of the "mediation" by, human perceptions.13

Criticizing Stark and Iannaccone's treatment of demand in this way might still appear to complement rather than undermine supply-side theory. Yet as we have seen their specific causal claims call for more substantial revision. In the Netherlands, "constraints on choice" did not "muffle competition." This suggests that the link between pluralism and mobilization is more complex than Stark and Iannaccone allow. Elite competition and conflict can spur mobilization even in the absence of religious pluralism in the Stark and Iannaccone sense — a possibility Stark et al. belatedly acknowledge. That bit of conventional conflict sociology certainly applies to mobilization in pillarized Holland. By the same token, changing political conditions that neutralize elite conflict based on world view differences also can lead to diminished participation. Forces other than conflict dynamics and political change affect the behavior of members as members. When religion does serve as the culture of community, to give a functional twist to Bryan Wilson's (1982) dictum, choice is indeed constrained; but when institutional change outside the community involves members in new roles and offers new opportunities, their choices become less constrained. Multiple involvements lead to identities in which the religious one is no longer central. Freer choice in a competitive institutional environment can thus result in declining mobilization. Of course, introducing such plausible other factors in an effort to improve our ability to explain actual cases also detracts from the presumed elegance of the original formulation.

The analysis in this paper more generally confirms the wisdom of returning to a more institutional or social-structural view of religious actors. In the Netherlands, both suppliers and consumers were subject to forces beyond their control. The rational strategies employed by active firms in an open market gave us little insight into the recent pattern of religious change. Reviewing the applicability of an argument derived from rational choice premises to the Dutch case confirms the lesson Herbert Simon (1987) drew long ago, namely, that in rational choice explanation of the kind favored by Stark and Iannaccone much of the action tends to be in the structures. Here, one such structural change was the process just mentioned, by which pillars lost their hold on members, who then became individual consumers in a religious economy. Depolarization within a growing welfare state undergoing a cultural revolution, part of long-term macrosecularization, set the stage for the kind of microsecularization analyzed above. Once we know the stage, inferences about the behavior of rational actors follow — as well as the realization that the most rational adjustments by suppliers could not achieve the desired outcome.

Characterizing actors and their setting remains an interpretive task good theory can inform but not preempt. This analysis indicates that conventional arguments about embeddedness offer better guidance in this regard than Stark and Iannaccone recognize. In the
Netherlands, churches were not simply engaged in competition with each other; the religious economy itself was exposed to competitive pressure. From the point of view of traditional macrotheories of secularization, that is not surprising, since participants in differentiated spheres necessarily become subject to conflicting demands and appeals from multiple spheres. Competition need not take place between suppliers within one well-defined market or within one industry. Just as technological change and consumer demand exposed mainframe suppliers to competition from PC producers who were creating a new market, so traditional religious suppliers in many modern settings must engage in competition with nonreligious providers of meaning. In spite of the difficulty of showing effects of competition expected by Stark and Iannaccone in the Dutch case, there is still good reason to think that a pluralistic context affects the actions of individuals — as I argued, it has in the Netherlands. Explaining the effects of pluralism and competition in particular cases requires an analysis of actual market structure — that is, the structure of the cultural economy, not simply the religious economy. Religious economies are always embedded. Only when other domains of culture do not present "realistic options" might that embeddedness be ignored.

This critique of the Stark and Iannaccone argument as applied to the Netherlands shows that it fails as a set of general propositions. It does not imply that the theory itself lacks any merit. Just because the theory does not work there, contrary to the author's claims, does not mean it cannot work anywhere. But it is unlikely to work by itself or in the way proposed by Stark and Iannaccone. Reformulated as a set of tentative contingent generalizations, embedded in a suitable contextual analysis and with scope conditions more clearly delineated, their propositions may add useful tools to the kit sociologists have assembled over the past century. When it comes to making sense of the real world, one that in some places is becoming dramatically more secular, a combination of such tools promises the greatest cognitive returns. The difficulties their theory encounters on foreign soil indicate that the tools offered by Stark and Iannaccone will need repair in any case.

NOTES

1 Although they frame their paper as a critique of secularization theory, it is important for the sake of clarity alone to point out that they do not address the theory as understood by most of its adherents, who focus on the decline in the social significance of religion, an issue noted only in passing by Stark and Iannaccone. Few proponents assert the "decay or decline of religion," let alone its "extinction," as Stark and Iannaccone would have it. To avoid the kind of confusion displayed here, Dobelaere (1981) drew the useful distinction between secularization at the macro and micro levels. The links between them need to be treated with great caution, both empirically and theoretically. Since Stark and Iannaccone use a previous paper of mine (Lechner 1991) expressing support for a more social-structural version of secularization theory as a target in their paper, I would like to clear up a related confusion as well. They quote me, in part, as follows: "Once progress has disconfirmed most general religious explanations . . . it is hard to see how the process can be reversed." However, this quote is preceded by: "By the logic of Stark and Bainbridge's own argument it is hard to see how secularization could be self-limiting at all" and followed by: "Their positivist faith seems to rule out any genuine comeback of religion" [emphasis added]. The passage Stark and Iannaccone quote clearly intends to represent Stark's earlier position (or at least a problem contained in it), which he now appears to consider a convenient foil.

2 In the Netherlands, regulation in the Stark and Iannaccone sense has coexisted with diversity; it is not clear how this pattern fits into the theory.

3 Relying on survey data as reported here is appropriate for the purposes of this paper. Stark and Iannaccone refer to such data in defense of their thesis. They represent some of the best Dutch social science has to offer. And since the emphasis will be on trends, any bias in favor of membership, attendance, or subjective faith will not affect the conclusions. Especially with respect to subjective religiosity, such bias would actually favor Stark and Iannaccone's thesis.
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4 The trend is not limited to recent decades. Religious "nones" increased from 0.1% in the 1859 census to 5% in 1909 to 18.4% in 1960 (Laeyendecker 1995: 132).

5 Cf. Laeyendecker for older data and for comments on the generational shift.

6 In fact, Stark and Iannaccone do not report this finding correctly, since 20% of respondents answered that they had no opinion on the Bible (Becker and Vink 1994: 28). Thus the 58% figure on divine inspiration refers only to those who expressed an opinion. Presumably, it is fair to regard the "no opinion" category as lacking in the subjective faith Stark and Iannaccone wish to identify.

7 Here again the figures actually overstate the extent of subjective faith: 15% responded "don't know" (135).

8 This figure coincides nicely with Felling et al.'s 23% ex-members in 1985 (1991: 28).

9 Some students of Dutch society no doubt would counter that there has been change, at least insofar as societal support for state financing of "pillarized" institutions has diminished (as Becker and Vink, and Felling et al. infer from their data). In addition, the religious status of some subsidized religious institutions has been called into question repeatedly. Even though this has not yet produced formal changes in "regulation," what change has occurred points to loosening, which further weakens Stark and Iannaccone's case.

10 I do not argue that the Dutch churches were stuck in this way. In fact, pillarization showed that quasi-monopolistic religious suppliers could engage in effective mobilization. Competition did play a role: the pillarized communities competed for worldly goods, for worldly reasons. Nonreligious motives enhanced participation and commitment on the part of members. To more materialist observers, an extension of this line of thought would suggest that the decline of churches' ability to provide or control access to worldly goods limited their appeal. See further comments below.

11 Cf. Laeyendecker (1995: 141–43) on efforts by the Dutch Catholic church to mobilize the faithful in new ways in the 1960s and on the counterproductive reaction by Rome. The reactionary response aggravated the losses already suffered and could not reverse the forces liberalization had unleashed. The more Rome intervened, the less effective the Catholic church became as a supplier on the Dutch market — a point that counts in Stark and Iannaccone's favor.

12 By itself, the first is also false. That pluralism is apparently unrelated to religious participation (at least not related in the expected manner) in postwar Holland has little to do with "constraints" on competitive forces. Stark et al. further qualify the proposition by saying that apparent constraints in caste-like societies might not suppress mobilization after all, "if there were high levels of conflict among castes and if the religious firms served as the organizational basis for the conflicts " (443). This makes good sense but does not follow from the theory.

13 Strictly speaking, then, survey data of the kind reported above, while appropriate for the purposes of this paper, cannot be decisive for an empirically grounded explanation of the religious condition of the Netherlands. Note, however, that scholars such as Felling et al. do complement quantitative with some interpretive analysis. More fine-grained investigation of religious participation and expressions of subjective faith might demonstrate not merely quantitative changes but also changes in what it means to be religious in the Netherlands.

REFERENCES


