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Economic and Religious Choice: A Case-Study from Early Christian Communities*

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Abstract.

The aim of this paper is to elaborate an evaluative framework of religious choice within the early Christian communities reconstructed through the narrative of a New Testament Epistle, 2Peter, based on an economic approach to moral dilemmas identified in this context. Thus the work concentrates on the stances, attitudes and social practices of deviant members who engaged in free-riding within early Christian congregations and were exposed to serious self-control problems. In our attempt to employ economic theories of religion, we are in a position to better assess the efficiency of early Christian responses to the entry of competing groups in the religious market of this era, as well as to identify and explore the sort of criteria that determine the intertemporal choices of distinct religious actors.

JEL classification code: B11, D81, D90, Z12.

Keywords: Religious choice and markets, religious consumption, religious dissidence, free-riding, self-control, uncertainty.

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Introduction.

The economic analysis of biblical and other religious texts is a rather complicated process that needs to take into account a wide range of interdependent factors: cultural, societal, religious and political. Such an approach is necessarily context-specific, depending upon the particular socio-cultural context and embedding economic reasoning in a broader framework that encompasses economic relationships and activities (Gotsis and Dodd 2002, 2004). Furthermore, it allows the economist to shape a more comprehensive view of the economic phenomena, but it hardly facilitates abstract theorizing based on generalizations or other observed regularities. In a contemporary context, religion is frequently conceptualized as a cultural factor entering into a process of interaction with political economy (e.g. McCleary and Barro 2006) or democracy (Lehrer 2007). On the one hand, religion is viewed as an independent variable: in the light of this argument, the main issue is to determine the mechanisms through which religiosity affects individual personality traits such as work ethic, honesty and thrift, as well as tax morale (Torgler 2006) and the experience of happiness (Mookerjee and Krista 2005, Lelkes 2006), thus influencing overall economic performance. Religion may also serve as a proxy for reputation, or as a mechanism for enforcement of exchange agreements, enhancing their members' capacity in performing economic roles (Berndt 2007). On the other hand, religion may be viewed as a dependent variable that could undergo economic explanations, primarily by demonstrating how economic development and political institutions affect religious participation, beliefs and commitment (Barro and McCleary 2003). Economic factors may be accounted for the existence of wide disparities in national religious participation, the latter being dependent on investment in religious human capital, religious market structure and social interactions (Smith, Sawkins and Seaman 1998). Other contributions to the literature investigate the consequences of religious values and beliefs to differences in per capita income worldwide: findings suggest that religious behaviour, exemplified in moderate

attitudes, is conducive to higher income levels in countries that are not located on both ends of the religious spectrum (Jacob and Osang 2007).

Not unexpectedly, attempts that favour economic analysis of religious commitment appear possible even in a context that may differ significantly from our own if the analytical interest focuses on a rationality principle in human motivation, belief and action. One recent example of such an approach is Smith (1999, 2002) who applies rational choice theory to specific texts, i.e. the book of Revelation and contends that the argument of this book functions so as to persuade believers not to engage in pagan idolatry, as the latter does not pay off. He then turns to demonstrate the underlying reasons of this compromise, i.e. the fact that eschatological outcomes are often subject to severe discounting and analyses Revelation's rhetoric as a thought-device preventing believers from heavy discount of the future. Equally importantly, Beck (2007) analyses the respective decisions of early fifth century church to reject doctrinal claims raised by Pelagius, in favour of Augustinian positions. The so-called 'Pelagian Controversy', Beck contends, revealed two self-interested church motives to condemn Pelagian views: such a doctrine would not only undermine church hierarchy, but it also would impose stricter behavioural rules, thus raising the cost of being a Christian. In doing so, Pelagianism could significantly discourage religious participation, particularly among the Roman aristocracy. Moving on to the institutional level, considerable effort has been recently devoted to explore not only the introduction of new religious doctrines, but also the emergence of new religious organizations as innovations that challenge existing hierarchies (Ekelund, Hébert and Tollison 2002, 2004).

Adopting a rational choice approach to biblical interpretation may be promising if viewed as a methodological stance that seeks to complement, but not to contradict existing methodologies. In this respect, one could escape some devastating criticism of rational choice approaches either as too narrow and restrictive (Boudon 2003), one-dimensional or instrumentalist (Bankston 2002, 2004), utilitarian or consequentialist (Johnson 2003), or even ignorant of the more idealistic or experienced dimensions of religious faith (Jerolmack and Porpora 2004; cf also Iannaccone 2005 for a reply to criticism).

The purpose of this paper is to critically discuss issues of religious choice within the early Christian communities in a New Testament Epistle, 2Peter (for a historical background of this approach

see Anderson 1988). This text is critical in involving problems of religious identity formation and maintenance, as well as deviance and apostasy, in early Christian communities other than those established through Pauline mission. The case-study under consideration epitomizes issues of religious choice both at the organizational and individual level that we are going to analyse from a supply-side and demand-side approach respectively. We explore religious disaffiliation due to the life-style and attitudes of dissidents challenging the prevailing interpretations of faith. We then turn to analyse the two main problems associated with this dissident group within Christian communities, religious free-riding and self-control problems, and we underscore the potential effects from dissemination of such attitudes within the emerging congregations. We also aim at examining the respective strategies of both competing groups, the petrine author's group and that of his opponents in gaining religious converts, as well as the rhetorical arguments employed to realize shared goals. For pure analytical purposes, we resort to the methodologies advanced by the contemporary analysis of religious organizations, also with respect to the underlying behavioural dimensions of religious actors operating their choices but enjoying entirely different benefits, here and in the afterlife (the pioneering article of this approach was Azzi and Ehrenber 1975).

The Case-Study: A brief overview.

The petrine communities.

2Peter appears in a testamentary form, perhaps as the last will of the Apostle Peter. This epistle is mostly concerned, not with state persecution or with other types of external threat to the community, but with dissent and enmity *within* the church, which seems to have been consumed with internal division. The author of *2Peter* argues against a certain group who seem to have questioned the likelihood of the final judgment and who have raised serious doubts about the reliability of the Christian faith. The epistle emerges from a Hellenistic Jewish milieu probably in Asia Minor (Neyrey 1993: 118-120). For other scholars, the epistle originates in Rome from an associate of Peter¹, provided that an ancient testament as a literary form consistently alluding to mechanisms of pseudepigraphy, tends to rule out direct Petrine authorship (Kraftchick 2002: 75-76, Horrell 1998: 136, Knight 1995: 61).

The occasion of *2Peter* is the emergence of a perceived heretical group, and the epistle places its emphasis upon this particular situation. The author grounds the apostolic message in scriptural writings, arguing in favour of their divine inspiration, and defends the proclamation of the gospel by reminding the eyewitness testimony to Jesus' transfiguration, with all its eschatological connotations (*2Pet.* 1:16-18). The epistle denounces the ideas and practices of a group consisting, not of outsiders, but of persons participating in the communal life (*2Pet.* 2:13). The opponents of *2Peter* adopted certain beliefs already familiar among Hellenistic philosophical circles (Webb 2004: 387), reminiscent of the Epicurean position concerning repudiation of the doctrine of a provident Deity and of divine intervention in inworldy affairs, a view shared by the group of Sadducees in Hellenistic Judaism. Such antitheodicy doctrines "became a generalized popular statement of deviant theology", perhaps akin to the Graeco-Roman audience (Neyrey 1993: 124). Against this view, *2Peter* develops an essentially Christian theodicy, demonstrating that the rejection of God's eschatological rule entails moral corruption, and it is subject to this very judgement it denies (Johnson 1999: 501-2).

In sum, the epistle struggles with deviant behaviour *within* a community of addressees living in a typical hellenistic social world, that of a more stable and rather middle class (Wall 2001: 67). *2 Peter* is more accurately a parenetic letter which aims to remind the readers of the truth they already know and to motivate them accordingly, urging them to recall the prophetic witness, or providing negative or positive behavioural models that function as an ethical paradigm for believers (Johnson 1999: 503). The ethical strategies adopted to accomplish these ends, will be the object of the next section.

Ethical controversies and religious dissidence.

The second petrine epistle is articulated on the grounds of honour and shame discourse, so prominent in Greco-Roman Antiquity (de Silva 2000: 23-93; Moxnes 1996; Pilch and Malina 1998: 106-15; Hellerman 2005). In a world where honour and shame represent the primary forms of social control and an individual acquires honour by his compliance with essential values and norms, this ideal encompasses commitments and attitudes in a way that the threat of dishonour is evoked in any attempt to eliminate socially disruptive behaviour. The author of *2Peter* presents himself as a person defending divine honour against opponents, by appealing to a set of traditions held as authoritative by the group

he belongs while denouncing the opponents' methods and practices. In doing so, the author acts as an honourable person, altruistically inclined on behalf of this group (Neyrey 1993: 116). On the contrary, opponents are vehemently denounced for violating and distorting the very content of this particular tradition: in his effort to shame his opponents, the author of *2Peter* attributes to them a number of doctrinal fallacies pertaining, not only to matters of belief or thought, but also to ethics and morality (*2Pet.* 2:12b-22). The adversaries were disparaging the notion of a world-ending catastrophe as inimical to their philosophical view of a by nature everlasting cosmos, thus opposing the author who defended this very belief. Opponents' skepticism was rather based on the increasing passage of time that was falsifying predictions of a temporally near ultimate event (Adams 2005: 114).

Equally striking is the author's contention that, apart from disseminating erroneous eschatological ideas, these leaders envisioned in preaching an opportunity for financial gain, thus demanding a non-negligible remuneration for their religious services (*2Pet.* 2:3). Evidence concerning the contested status of *2Peter's* opponents remains minimal. Polemical distortion seems to make recovery of their views an uncertain endeavour, yet they were rather influential and involved in the community as a dissident group, "perhaps sufficiently different to qualify for the accusation of apostasy" (Wilson 2004: 68). The petrine author appears as one entitled to dishonour those not belonging to his own fictive kin group as governed by self-interest, having forfeited the claims of kinship (cf. Esler 1994: 27). They not only indulged in shameful economic practices, but they also adopted and proclaimed a deviant mode of religious behaviour. Deviants were perceived to have negative qualities, dominated by avarice, greed and lust, culminating in disruptive behaviour often resulting in faction between opposing groups (Barclay 1999: 304-306). In doing so, they subordinated the core values of the community to their presumed individualism, by developing different ways of articulating the Jesus' narratives or distorting group orientation and identity. On the contrary, public witness to the testimony of the truth gave prominence to group members (*2Pet.* 1:16-18), as an intrinsic criterion of group ranking (Malina 2000: 392). In the same way, participation in the benefits bestowed by God the Patron and Benefactor, is elevated to a primary privilege (grace, favour) enjoyed by recipients of this divine benefaction (*2Pet.* 1:3-4, 10-11). In this sense, the social world of the author "enjoys a typical hierarchical arrangement"

(Neyrey 1993: 136): unlike the opponents, who “presumably are of a social status comparable to the author”, the addressees are “correspondingly lower in status” (*ibid*).

We proceed to the analysis of the opponents’ religious practices focusing on their two main aspects, free-riding and self-control problems, resorting to the necessary analytical tools provided by the contemporary economic literature.

Economic theories of religion: competition and the religious market model.

The fundamental premises: religious markets in the Ancient Mediterranean societies.

Our starting point in this endeavour is undeniably the religious markets in Ancient Rome which exhibited a *high* degree of religious diversity, given that many competing cults and sects were striving to attract new, potential adherents and new rites of initiation to the worship of new deities were emerging. Conceivably, these religions encompassed not only a wide range of public and private cults originating in classical Greek and Roman religious practices, but also various native cults, as well as mystery sects of Near East provenance, subsequently disseminated in and effectively spread to the major urban cities of the Roman world. A central feature of this religious system was the deep conviction that this maintenance of a constant relationship between humans and the gods was deemed a spiritual prerequisite of temporal prosperity and welfare at both the individual and social levels. In short, such heterogeneous religions were supposed to better satisfy diversified demands for religious services and styles of worship, given that competition produces consumer sovereignty as superior to established religions, as Adam Smith’s analysis of religious market structure predicts (see, Ekelund, Hébert and Tollison 2005 for a discussion; also, Fase 2005: 96-102). Early Christianity undoubtedly emerged in and was shaped by such a sacrificial religious culture (Klauck 2003: 12): the ancient Mediterranean societies witnessed a two-fold development of religious institutions, *domestic* religion (in terms of gods of specific kin groups) and *political* religion (consisting of temple-systems and of deities pertaining to certain people). Most importantly, domestic religion was reminiscent of domestic economy (in which producers and consumers were the same persons), while political religion was ultimately resorting to political economy (primarily involving exchange and transport of goods and services and yielding economic advantages to the local, or the ruling elites). In any case religious, as well as economic benefits should

be converted into kinship, or political advantages so as to be socially meaningful and legitimate human pursuits (Malina 2001a, 2001b).

Given the importance of religious participation for kinship groups or political systems, certain Christians did not entirely abandon central pagan practices, but their ability to effectively sustain such dual identities, or to exhibit dual loyalties, was far from being unproblematic and was vehemently criticized as a scandalous sort of compromise, as implying devastating effects to Christian commitment. Unlike the Greco-Roman religions which could tolerate dual loyalties and allowed for multiple allegiances, the Judeo-Christian tradition was unique in demanding complete and unconditional exclusivity. In this respect, polytheistic and Christian beliefs and values appeared to be mutually exclusive, as Christianity placed considerable restrictions on a believer's attempt to seek for alternate gods and deities within competitive ancient religious market. Paul for instance, in his Corinthian correspondence, *1Cor.* (10:1-22), addresses those liberal stances that allowed believers to maintain their pagan lifestyle virtually unchanged: he also advances a set of arguments oriented to free believers from polytheistic superstition and idol worship (Hays 1997: 157). Once again, as in the respective Old Testament narratives, God is distinctive in his refusal to share the covenant people with other gods. Idolatry is a real threat to proper Christian identity that is unlikely to be tolerated. This was rather the case in the nascent Christian communities: unsurprisingly, pagan religiosity, in its variety of forms, was permeating all aspects of public and private life of individuals in the Greco-Roman world (cf. Beard et al. 1998). Unlike paganism, adherence to Christianity denoted a high degree of intolerance of spiritual practices that facilitated participation in pagan worship, either individually or publicly (cf. Garnsey 1984).

Religious tolerance in paganistic worship originated in the high level of diversification exhibited in such religious environments. Since Greco-Roman deities enjoyed a high degree of specialization, none of them was in a position to impose exclusive devotion on its adherents. In the Judeo-Christian traditions on the contrary, God was perceived as an all-encompassing deity that affected every aspect of life. On the one hand, churches and new congregations were emerging in a *high* tension with surrounding reality: in the contemporary economics of religion, a new religious group implies a high state of tension with society, but its success over time results in *lowering* these levels of tension (Stark 1996, 2004), the outcome depending, among others, on the degree of institutionalization of a religious

organization. This is due to the fact that established religious firms compete in response to consumers preferences and needs, and mass religious movements adopt less strict criteria for admission of new members, albeit maintaining boundaries. Conversely, new religious firms and new movements exhibit a higher degree of ideological coherence to properly articulate distinct identities. Ancient Christianity, in this respect is viewed as seeking doctrinal orthodoxy, rather than positively appreciating the rich diversity of early Christian beliefs and practices, manifest in specific local settings (cf. Burrus 2005). This is also the case of nascent Christians communities, in which Christian leaders resisted diversity, opposed to deviance, strove for homogeneity of belief, practice and behaviour that resulted in viewing heterodoxy, as well as traditional cults, not merely as mistaken, but primarily as demonic ones (cf. the contributions in Harris 2005). The same principle applies to the communities under examination, in the context of which the focal point remains not the external threat due to such socio-economic antagonisms between competing cults or sects, but the *internal* peril substantiated in a sub-group of dissidents, as already discussed.

On the other hand, the same literature on economics of religion advances the view that it is *competition* among religious organizations in a given society that stimulates effort, thus increasing the overall level of religious commitment and entailing the *demise* of those faiths lacking sufficient market appeal (Stark 2006: 63). To properly motivate their members, as well as to attain higher levels of commitment, the new churches elaborated and developed strategies for exclusivity, consisting primarily of a “comprehensive theological system, and of a broad network of fellow members to meet both social and emotional needs” (Stonebroker 2005: 279). These strategies were deemed effective in reducing the considerable start-up costs that the nascent Christian communities were confronting. In Ekelund, Hébert and Tollison’s (2006) view, reaction against the new faith reduced the gross benefits of adherence in it, but the net benefits of switching to Christianity were progressively risen, due to the fact that martyrdom and sacrifice may have added credence to the new religious product. On the contrary, “the net benefits of loyalty to the Roman gods fell relative to the net benefits of joining the new Christian cult”, given the reduction of the net value of secular goods (safety, security, life-span and the like) due to socio-economic factors of the era (Ekelund, Hébert and Tollison 2006: 60). Arguably early Christianity, albeit a

by-product of the Graeco-Roman culture, was competing not just for a proper market share, but almost for everything.

Christian communities and respective networks were rather unique in offering “a distinctive and effective combination of shared ethics and sacred text, a supportive community with outreach to those in need, regular meetings and Mediterranean wide connections” (Clark 2004: 24). In such networks, in particular, new practices emerged and were progressively disseminated in, as well as assimilated by, the respective communities: these practices were reflective of an ethic of interdependence and mutuality, the latter reshaping the substantial norms of social interaction and affecting socio-economic activities through reciprocity, care and concern for the needy and destitute (see, Gotsis and Dodd 2004: 27-30). In an entrepreneurial context, these networks enhancing reciprocity and trust among fellow believers, may serve as an effective basis for facilitating religious entrepreneurs: evidently, the formation of new practices such as described above, may be understood as a kind of investment in spiritual and social capital, that in turn is conducive to sustainable competitive advantage in the religious market, and yields highest overall symbolic returns (cf. Bertrand et al. 2000, Bruderal and Preisendörfer 1998, Davidsson and Hönig 2003, Hoang and Antoncic 2003). Arguably, the creation of these networks may be accounted for the success in establishing, maintaining and perpetuating new religious organizations; such a success, however, would be hardly conceived in the absence of a specific language these communities came to adopt. We shall now turn to examine the underlying rationale of this language.

Compensators and symbolic rewards.

In the contemporary economics of religion, religion creates social benefits in that it “becomes an additional technology that rational humans might use to combat scarcity” (Stonebraker 2005: 265). Religious systems and traditions appeal to potential clients by providing *compensators* in the form of religious goods: compensators are defined as postulations of reward according to explanations not always susceptible to unambiguous evaluation (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). In Bainbridge’s (2003) terminology, compensators are viewed as “sacred algorithms” that emerge and evolve in a world eventually devoid of such a supernatural realm. Religious belief, however, is inseparable of rewards, of

genuine and authentic explanations of the ultimate meaning of life. Rational individuals, in this respect, seek to attain such symbolic rewards, possibly elevated to the state of religious certainties: these rewards frequently incur costs, that is sacrifices that any rational agent should normally avoid. In their religious behaviour, believers are intrinsically motivated insofar as they attempt to exchange compensators for rewards, given that compensators are treated by humans as if they were rewards: people often aspire for rewards presupposing “the existence of an active supernatural” that creates “credible compensators” based on such “supernatural assumptions” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 5-8).

Such compensators are context-specific, as dependent upon the particular contents of a given religious or theological tradition. In the context of *2Peter*, these compensators are identified in the form of eschatological promises offered to potential believers so as to enable them ultimately escape from the corruption of this world, thus becoming participants in God’s immortality and glory. The author of the epistle posits:

“Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption, that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature” (*2Peter* 1:4, NRSV).

Accordingly, sound knowledge of God presupposes all the traits of a virtuous behaviour: self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. Those devoid of such virtues are excluded from the very rewards, “entry into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (*2Peter* 1:11, NRSV).

These core promises of petrine teaching were exposed at the risk of being refuted by a particular interpretation of faith elaborated by a group that came to cast doubt on the *parousia*, Christ’s second advent. In this respect, this dissident -group seems to challenge the ultimate meaning of petrine teaching, i.e. the *compensators* it seeks to provide. The petrine polemic aims at eliminating such views, thus preventing them from being disseminated in and propagated through the Christian flock. Moreover, opponents adopted attitudes that, in contemporary parlance, were reminiscent of a typical free-riding problem in religious organizations, as we are going to explain in the following sub-section.

Religious participation and free-riding.

Contemporary religious organizations are frequently affected by internal problems, like free-riding and other inefficiencies. (Iannaccone, 1998). These problems emerge as a by-product of the combination of three factors. *First*, believers share common goals and aspirations, thus the respective utilities derived from religious participation are interdependent. *Second*, participation generates considerable spill-over effects insofar as the benefit of a typical church-member highly depends on the quantity of others' contributions, both in labour and money. *Third*, religious goods such as worship and education opportunities, spiritual counseling and social activities seem to be non-excludable: as in the case of public goods, they appear available to every member at no additional cost (Stonebraker 2005: 273). As a result, some members choose to benefit from religious goods while they contribute *disproportionately* to their production. Typical free-riders do not appear to care for the common good, but they entirely depend on the contributions of less-selfish members (cf. Iannaccone 1992, 1994).

Free-riding generates considerable problems within congregations, insofar as the proliferation of such attitudes disintegrates religious bonds of mutuality and cohesion. Free-riding is not only expensive in that it incurs additional costs to more committed believers, but it also negatively affects the less devoted members, given that it may be conducive to reduced levels of morality and commitment. These problems, Iannaccone (1992) contends, may be effectively mitigated by seemingly gratuitous costs, the sacrifice and stigma of sectarian religious groups. Sects, cults and communes impose considerable restrictions on their members, extending from prohibitions on normal economic activities to rules limiting social contact with outsiders. Sacrifice and stigma, as well as social isolation, make free-riders quit from membership in such sects, whilst they allow for increasing levels of religious involvement among the most committed members. Other religious groups are effectively limiting free-riding in offering a menu of club goods of varying excludability, as well as through a sophisticated administrative structure, so as to drastically foster commitment (McBride 2007). Such strategies pertain to *high-tension* religious or secular groups (cf. Berman 2003, 2000): on the contrary, in large mainstream denominations believers are induced to higher levels of commitment if they obtain rewards that considerably outweigh the costs and inconveniences implied in the exclusivity claims of religious groups. Brewer, Jozefowicz and Stonebraker (2006) advance the hypothesis that people benefiting of a church affiliation without

contributing to its mission are attracted by the more popular denominations, which may offer potential free-riders social acceptance, as well as other benefits of belonging to a predominant church. Minority groups on the contrary, may adopt such a distinctive 'subculture' that stigmatizes its members and isolates them from the rest of society (*ibid*: 390). Accordingly, free-riders and less devoted members will be prone to switch to more fashionable denominations: minority groups are ultimately left with a 'faithful remnant', i.e. their most committed members (*ibid*). Stricter groups appeal primarily to those devoid of the most attractive secular options i.e. education, status, income and other substitute goods that lower the demand for religious activities (cf. Gill and Lundegaarde 2004). The same bundle of secular goods, however, may be important in determining a specific aspect of religious behaviour in larger congregations, especially in the cases where current participation in religious activities appears to be *positively* associated with past religious experience (eg. the relationship between education and church attendance in Brown and Taylor 2007).

These observations are not devoid of importance for the context under consideration. The early Christians' opponents were not only perceived as benefiting from their fellow-believers' contributions, even in monetary terms (2Pet. 2:3), but they also appeared as practicing dissipation, leading an immoral life and living in luxury (cf. 2Pet.2:13). Most importantly, these persons participated in the love-feasts, but they markedly differed from their fellow-believers in that they were "reveling in their dissipation" counting it "a pleasure to revel in the daytime" (2Pet.2:13). Admittedly, in giving precedence to pleasure, the opponents appeared as ultimately practicing procrastination insofar as they consistently exhibited a negligent behaviour, not performing their true religious duties here and now (cf. König and Kleinmann 2004; also, O'Donoghue and Rabin 1999 for a discussion in the economic literature). Conceivably, false-teachers pursued their own agendas, engaging in deceitful pleasure, attempting to satisfy their insatiable desires. Their inappropriate mode of feasting signified that they appeared to neglect their responsibilities towards the community (Davids 2006: 239), perhaps not involved in productive engagements. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy taking part in the communal meal, given that table-covenant was one of the most significant religious goods shaping individual and communal identities as a sign of shared faith (Shannon Jung 2006, Smith 2003).

Under such conditions, one may plausibly argue that in the early Christians' view, their opponents were not far from being considered as persons prone to free-riding, benefiting from religious services without substantially contributing to them. In conformity to the contemporary analysis of religious free-riding briefly discussed, the opponents' attitudes were not only costly and expensive, but they also seemed detrimental to the community's morality and cohesion. The disruptive effects opponents exerted on the networks of believers were reflected in that these persons were perceived as "blots and blemishes" (*2Pet.* 2:13), experts in greed, appealing to those not trained enough in faith (*2Pet.* 2:14). This is due to the fact that proper behaviour was ethically shaped to enhance the common good of the community according to altruistic, other-centered pursuits (Smith 2003: 283-284).

Elimination of deviant attitudes and stances remains a primary concern of early Christian discourse. As the economic literature on the religious free-riding predicts, in smaller congregations free-riders tend to disappear by significantly elevating the cost of commitment, of sincere adherence in, and devotion to the community (Iannaccone 1992). In doing so, the petrine author strongly exhorts his audience to lead holy and godly lives, oriented to the Lord's day and speeding its coming (*2Pet.* 3:11-12). The petrine author significantly devaluates the structures and practices of this world reminding his addressees of the impending end of this age. As the value of any bundle of secular goods is rapidly diminishing in view of this ultimate event, anyone engaging in secular pursuits resembles to a uninformed investor placing his funds on a firm constantly running the risk of bankruptcy (cf. Davids 2006: 288). Adjusting one's life-style to the value systems of dominant culture is bereft of any rationale; the life of the future age, however costly and dysfunctional, purports to outweigh the "sacrifice and stigma" imposed on a true believer.

The 'Religious Market' of the Petrine Communities: The Supply-Side Approach.

The above approach to the hermeneutics of religious texts can be enriched by employing analytical tools from the contemporary economic analysis of religious competition, as suggested in the previous section. A commonplace assumption in the rational choice theory of religion is the well-elaborated distinction between monopolistic and pluralistic religious markets. In opposing free-market efficiency to monopolistic inefficiencies, a substantial body of literature is devoted to addressing issues

such as religious products, marketing policies, incentive structures, consumers' preferences and so forth (for a review see Iannaccone, 1998). In this line of argument, religious pluralism is supposed to be conducive to beneficial outcomes, enhancing religious vitality, or positively affecting religious participation. However, pluralism and religious diversity do not always imply deliberate choice, competition (cf. Bruce 2000a, Beaman 2003), or increased participation (Voas et al. 2002). In Bruce's (1992) view, pluralism in religious markets may exert detrimental effects in eroding the credibility of religious claims, in generating doubts concerning the plausibility of a given religious belief, or in threatening the predominance of an established truth. In sharp contrast to religious orthodoxies, religious diversity may negatively affect the demand for religiosity in that it results in increasing levels of *uncertainty*, thus lowering the expected utility of religious commitment (cf. Hull and Bold, 1998). These remarks can apply to the specific context under examination, as we shall demonstrate in the final section of this paper.

The literature also suggests that religious pluralism may allow product differentiation and specialization, as a monopolistic faith will satisfy only *one* market segment, unavoidably alienating another. A church's theology cannot encompass the entire spectrum of religious preferences, distributed along a space from liberal to conservative ones (Barros and Garoupa 2002). In Mao and Zech's (2002) view, churches attempt to maximize membership, as well as minimize the distance between their organizational structures and that preferred by their respective adherents, subject to their doctrinal constraints. Religious monopolies face no competitive pressures from other worldviews, thus implying a lack of fervour and zeal, especially in the case of government regulation that sanctions artificial restrictions on religious diversity, thus raising inefficiencies in the operation of religious markets (Finke 1997). On the contrary, in free-markets individual entrepreneurship may shape new religious groups, as in the process of formation of new alliances between denominations (Miller 2002), or in the delegation of responsibilities and tasks within the same church (Schmidtchen and Mayer 1997). As Smith and Sawkins (2003) argue, "fundamental economic explanation of international variations in religious attendance lies in the degree of competition in a religious economy", given that in the absence of competition the clergy of dominant firms has little incentive in engaging in product innovation and

effective marketing, the outcome being lower levels of religious participation (Smith and Sawkins 2003: 1587).

Arguably, a monopolistic structure of the religious market is undeniably inefficient, and it is inimical to religious vitality, primarily in the case of a *state-sponsored* church or faith. Taken for granted that Christianity in the making faced start-up costs as discussed earlier, the ongoing formation of an established “orthodoxy” was rather unlikely to result in short-run inefficiencies. For our analytical purposes, we suppose that an orthodox interpretation of the new faith begins to dominate the life of the emerging communities.

Consider the early Christian communities as constituents of a supposedly ‘monopoly church’ imposing differential prices on its members: since these members were primarily gentiles, they ought to abandon previous attitudes, even participation in pagan manifestations of social life, once converted to Christianity. Whereas in the religious market of the Graeco-Roman world many different cults were competing for preeminence, in the context of petrine congregations the need for doctrinal cohesion was ultimately substantiated in a ‘dominant firm’ that sought to maintain traditional doctrine. Church management, albeit loose and geographically dispersed, was based upon persons of pastoral oversight, also prominent in the respective communities (cf. *1Pet.* 5:1-4). In this respect, the established ‘petrine churches’ possibly practised a sort of price discrimination, in the sense that they were depending upon individual contributions proportionate to one’s status and prosperity, thus imposing differential prices to their members. Even in a context of honest stewardship, certain resources were extracted from believers; most importantly, the opportunity cost experienced by pagan converts, combined with price discrimination, seemed to push certain consumers to the limits of their demand for petrine religious product.

This kind of appropriation of consumer surplus made market entry by rival, or heretical doctrines, feasible because some members with no consumer surplus were rather inclined to adhere to these potential rivals. The latter entered the market of nascent Christianity as a rival firm claiming that it was charging people with a significantly cheaper price, as the assumed ethical permissiveness tended to considerably reduce the opportunity cost of being a Christian –Christian identity underwent some sort of accommodation, or adjustment, to worldly affairs. Such a diversification, however, may prove costly:

religious consumers who wished to exploit the opportunities afforded by several different congregations, were constantly exposed to the risk of isolation, or even ex-communication from the body of the faithful. Such an outcome appeared far from being unlikely, taken for granted that most churches adopted strategies that imposed severe symbolic sanctions on potential defectors. On the contrary, they seemed to develop value systems that rewarded allegiances in the context of network building, as demonstrated earlier. Accordingly, religious switching, albeit possible, considerably reduces the benefits derived through adherence to a given faith. Loveland (2003) investigates this phenomenon with respect to the U.S. religious experience: his findings suggest that almost a third of Americans came to change religious affiliation at some point of their lives in a way that religious preferences themselves is highly unlikely to remain unaltered over time. This is far from being unusual in a contemporary context, in sharp contrast to an early Christian context, in which maintaining allegiances to established authorities was one of the utmost importance. On the contrary, lower levels of participation in religious services (i.e. reduced attendance levels), were perceived as potentially conducive to defection. Religious apostasy could be stimulated by dissidents groups that challenged traditional interpretations of faith, as discussed earlier. Switching between religious cults seems to be a complicated outcome: conversion, in modern societies, is far from being a life-time experience, and one can distinguish different factors influencing religious involvement, disaffiliation or rejection of a former membership (Gooren 2007). In traditional societies however, religion is an integral part of these communal bonds that constitute a group's identity: in this respect, religious commitment may be determined in terms of loyalty to the respective group, being *less* a matter of choice than of devotion (cf. Bruce 2000b). Accordingly, the appropriate response to the entry of rival perceptions of faith within petrine Christianity was articulated at three distinct, albeit interrelated levels:

First, the presumed greed and avarice of the opponents was denoting the fact that these teachers aimed at extracting a considerable amount of resources from their congregations. The economic implications of such practices were that the opponents, in their turn, sought to appropriate the consumer surplus of those buying their religious product by inventing strategies consonant to economic exploitation. In a contemporary context, church ministers may remain highly productive even when they face relatively low financial rewards: empirical evidence however, suggests that, despite an emphasis

on calling and vocation rather than career in Christian ministry, compensation structure may affect ministers' incentives and intrinsic motivation, thus inducing high effort levels and increased performance (Smith, Sawkins and Mochrie 2007). In an economic world of reciprocities², however, these economic practices comprised a form of *negative reciprocity* describing the attempt in an exchange to get as much for oneself, but giving as little as possible in return. Such stances perennially involving attempts to impoverish others by cheating or deceiving, were universally recognized as morally shameful, insofar as they were typical of a treatment of enemies, not kins or neighbours (cf. Gotsis and Dodd 2004: 15-16).

Second, the rhetoric of virtue and divine benefaction to potential clients of God's grace has the economic significance of adopting or developing policies that would render early Christian product attractive to potential consumers –economically speaking, this implies policies aiming at a more inelastic demand for this product. The rhetoric of *generalised reciprocity* pertaining to kinship and including assistance and hospitality, is typical of an altruistic and asymmetrical concern for the wants and needs of another, culminating in God's beneficial care for the believers and in an open-ended debt of gratitude in return for the favours provided by divine Patron to his clients (Malina 1996: 146, 153-4).

Third, the rhetoric of divine judgement underlying the petrine strategy to eliminate heretical teaching, should bear the economic explanation as an attempt to increase the marginal cost of defection by employing cost-effective rhetorical strategies: the latter, placing an emphasis on divine retribution and on the impending judgement, operated as a kind of redistributive tax imposed on the product offered by the opponents who were facing a more elastic demand for their religious services, since their converts were afforded more alternatives than the petrine believers. That distinct groups of believers had different demand elasticities originated in the devotion to traditional piety, being practically an impediment to an access to other religious substitutes. Accordingly, by significantly raising the rivals' costs, benefits enjoyed from adherence to the heretical doctrines would seemingly decrease, due to an effective raising of the cost of membership in these sects: such an outcome would be feasible, provided that the rhetoric of divine punishment was intended to ultimately encompass any potential adherent to rival doctrines, thus affecting the level of participation in the deviant groups.

Having these in mind, we are going to move from the organizational to the individual level, focusing on how religious actors make their own respective choices of spiritual goods.

A Demand-Side Approach: The Formation of Religious Preferences.

Theoretical considerations.

We have so far discussed the relative attempts of the nascent Christian communities to secure a share in the religious market of the Roman Empire, as well as the respective barriers on the entry of new interpretations of Christian faith in the emerging and evolving communities. The question, however, still persists: how are we going to explain the particular content of religious belief? Religious belief may effectively be viewed as a form of social capital that encompasses traditions, past experiences and social identities and is reflected on a variety of socio-economic activities, the latter not being unimportant in shaping future beliefs (cf. Putnam 2000). Admittedly, rational religious belief involves the capacity of human beings to conceive of the supernatural realm in terms of rationality and scarcity (Stark and Finke 2000, Iannaccone 1999). Existing rational choice approaches to religion seek to explain the complicated processes of the formation of religious communities able to sustain long-term relationships and to foster high levels of commitment, as demonstrated earlier. Such cohesive communities appear difficult to maintain in the absence of moral claims about exclusivity and sacrifice: these costly constraints on individual choice prevent believers from investing in different portfolios of sacred commodities (Iannaccone 1995). This seems to be the case in the Christian religious tradition of the past, in which the demand for *diversified* religion was minimized, given the *uncertainty* it incurred and its relativising effects on the universalizing religious claims of each branch of faith. Unlike pagan religious markets in which rational clients had legitimate access to different competing suppliers, Christian believers were devoid of this opportunity. In these high-tension groups doctrinal and communal cohesion was given a high priority in a way that any challenge to these certainties was equally detrimental to group's orientation. Increasing *uncertainty* was then an act of depreciating accumulated religious capital and violating relationships and shared norms. In this respect, it would be of primary importance to explain the mechanisms affecting religious belief under uncertainty, by enriching our analysis with certain cognitive and behavioural elements underlying the formation of the religious preferences under examination.

Uncertainty in particular, turns out to be an important factor affecting the respective decisions of humans, whether believers or not. In an entirely ergodic world, i.e. in one whose fundamental underlying nature would be constant and in principle predictable, it would be sufficient for humans to make thorough insights about this nature, as well as to elaborate the appropriate structures of thought to conceive of the right course of future actions (cf. Dequech 2006: 115). In a static world, North (2005: 22) argues, “uncertainty is a function of the stock of knowledge...if this static world is repeated over time, then it may be plausible that states of uncertainty would go to zero”. Uncertainty however arises as the world is subject to various changes due to the action of human beings transforming their environment, creating new conditions and facing new problems (see also Drakopoulos, 1994). Even if humans had perfect perception at a given time, “their action might turn out to be flawed at another” (*ibid*). In a world of non-ergodicity, and taken for granted that people are far from being qualified with perfect perception, “institutions adopted for a particular time, even if optimal...at that time may be far from optimal as the human environment changes over time” (North 2005: 22). Supernatural beliefs and organized religions may generate major tensions, or produce fundamental conflicts, primarily when individual action is based on those ultimate supernatural explanations. As North (2005: 42) observes:

“Ideological conformity to this day is a major force in reducing the costs of maintaining order, but it comes with the additional societal costs of preventing institutional change, punishing deviants, and serving as the source of endless human conflict with the clash of competing religions”.

Intertemporal religious choice: the ensuing dilemmas.

In the early Christian context, maintenance of existing religious institutions (i.e. those pertaining to the apostolic heritage) might be viewed as sub-optimal because of their inherent rigidities to adjust to their environment, or as being a source of intolerance and prejudice towards others. If this was the case, believers faced two main choices: either to compromise with heretical views, or to remain faithful in traditions and divine scriptures. For practical purposes, we are distinguishing between two time-periods, the *present* and the *eschatological future*. In the *present*, choice in favour of faithfulness induces a significant opportunity cost for believers, namely higher levels of utility achieved only if their consumption patterns were no more affected by religious constraints, as in the case of licentious life-

styles, invoked by opponents. These life-styles were described, as we have seen, not only in terms of sensual depravity, but also in those of an assumed liberation from moral restrictions and of a concomitant promiscuity. Conversely, choice in favour of compromise induced significant opportunity costs for those converted in heretical doctrines, since they were deprived of virtue and acknowledgement of God as inappropriate clients of God the Patron's benefaction.

In the *eschatological future*, choices are more dramatically depicted, depending on the *degree* and the *intensity* to which future outcomes shape present choices³. In this remote future, believers are assumed to receive the divine rewards, while defectors incur the cost of punishment, primarily pertaining to the opponents as scoffers (*2Pet. 2:3*). Defection is eternally perilous, since the *certainty* of divine judgement permeates the entire epistle (*2Pet. 2:3b-10a, 3:5-7*). On the contrary, the opponents do not share this conviction. In doing so, particularly in denying the *parousia*, the second advent of Christ, dissidents were supposed to underestimate any distant rewards in the afterlife: in economic parlance, they strived for discounting future or eternal outcomes perceived as remote and uncertain eventualities that exerted no significant influence on present choices. In abandoning eternal payoffs, the opponents were discrediting intertemporal preferences by inducing believers to assign less weight on long-run consequences of their present choices.

Like other agents, believers are not infrequently depicted as individuals with limited will power which prevents them from properly assessing the importance of their long-term goals and aspirations. Due to weaknesses of human nature, human beings often seem to succumb to the temptation of immediate gratification: this is the case even when the latter proves to be detrimental to their long-term planning. Smokers who would like to quit in favour of their better long-term health but repeatedly fail to abstain from the immediate pleasure of smoking, offer a representative example of human failure to effectively perceive the long-term consequences of a present choice. As in the case of other forms of 'hyperbolic discounting' (O' Donoghue and Rabin 1999, Banks, Blundell and Tanner 1998, Laibson 1996, 1997) in which short-term and long-term preferences enter into conflict with each other, this type of behaviour systematically violates the principle of intertemporal utility maximization. Indeed, such self-control problems have been identified in a wide range of consumer decisions (Angeletos et al. 2001) that reveal 'time-inconsistent preferences' of individuals (Frederick et al 2002). To reduce costs incurred

when succumbing to immediate gratification seems almost unavoidable, individuals often have to resort to the coercive power of social institutions by establishing appropriate norms of self-commitment. Alternatively, social policies which enforce human planning for the future through proper incentives, are frequently evoked.

Gul and Pesendorfer (2001) posit that individuals often find themselves in having “temptation preferences” in that they may experience disutility from not choosing the option that offers the higher immediate satisfaction. In their view, a person might feel better off if this particular option was not available, and consequently, he may be willing to find ways to eliminate that option through developing a preference for commitment. The authors introduce a formal model in which agents have self-control if they resist temptation and choose an option with higher *ex-ante* utility. In their words, “the representation of self-control preferences allow us to quantify the cost of self-control as a utility penalty that applies whenever the ultimate choice is not the most tempting one” (Gul and Pesendorfer 2001: 1420). In the same line of argument, Brocas, Carrillo and Dewatripont (2004) analyse some of the main commitment devices employed to increase welfare in the case of agents with time inconsistent preferences, and discuss the process of formation of the respective choices of individuals maximizing their intertemporal utility from a current perspective constrained by the available commitment devices.

In our specific context, we can identify two potential groups: those engaging in licentious activities (exemplified in excesses of either food or drink, and/or sexual immorality) heavily discount long-term outcomes of their behaviour, in contrast to those who, insisting on the reliability of the apostolic tradition, attribute much more emphasis to the future consequences of their present choices. Not unexpectedly, early Christian authors praise self-control (*enkrateia*), a virtue sharply contrasted with desire (*epithymia*), the latter implying both feasting and sexual indulgence in a variety of contexts (cf. Davids 2006: 180-181). The teachers Peter emphatically opposes appear as persons that “are in no way self-controlled but rather given to desire” (Davids 2006: 180), this desire being negatively viewed in a context of zero-sum socio-economic relationships. These negative perceptions of excesses in consumption pertain to an ethically-structured intellectual milieu in which self-control is elevated to a primary virtue (2Pet. 1:6 cf. Gal. 5:23, 1Cor. 7:9, 9:25). Among the Hellenistic-Jewish literature, *Sirach* for instance (18:30-33) strongly admonishes against self-indulgence and licentiousness as conducive to

poverty (cf. *Prov.* 5:10, 21:17). In this respect, base desires and other unruly passions, as well as luxury (*Sir.* 18:32) and feasting with borrowed money (*Sir.* 18:33) are unique in their deleterious consequences, as they incur *unanticipated* future costs.

In early Christian discourse, intertemporal choices unavoidably involving tradeoffs among costs and benefits for each of the two respective groups affect not only their present, but also their future prosperity and well-being. The first group (opponents' followers) anticipates immediate (material) rewards and delayed (spiritual) costs, while the second (true believers) experiences present (material) costs but future (spiritual) rewards. Since delay is ordinarily associated with uncertainty, both groups are uncertain if these rewards and costs will ultimately materialize. This type of subjective (or epistemic) uncertainty associated with delay, takes account of a situation in which one is incapable of forming any belief or opinion due to lack of sufficient knowledge. In an unstable and highly variable environment, the unpredictability of events generates feelings of uncertainty within individuals, and it is our apprehension of this complex environment that engenders our limited ability of inferring probability judgements of the eventual occurrence of an event.

Since apprehension of an event is delineated by knowledge deficiencies, the knowledge we have of our circumstances seems to be highly *subjective*, being dependent on personality traits, intentions, motivations and desires, past experiences, emotions, spatio-temporal location and so on. In the context of delayed costs and rewards with respect to the two aforementioned groups, each group differs in his response to the challenge of uncertainty. Religious adherence seems to shape the structure of each group's intertemporal choice: while the first group (the 'apostates' from the orthodox faith) is supposed to have a preference for immediate gratification, the second (the true believers) is expected to derive additional utility from anticipating the eschatological rewards. This type of utility from anticipation should be enough to outweigh present losses, due to self-control in social behaviour, and to the commitment to traditional life-styles, from the believers' perspective. Indeed, this "utility from anticipation creates a downward bias on estimated discount rates, and this downward bias is larger for goods that create more anticipatory utility" (Frederick, Loewenstein and O' Donoghue 2002: 371).

The picture changes dramatically when one adopts the viewpoint of those adhering to the opponents' supposed fallacy. In contemporary parlance, these persons were perceived as prone to

certain *visceral influences*, particularly to a strong craving for food, drink and sexual lust (2Pet. 2:14). Berridge (2003) for instance, analyses the cognitive dimensions of the process of formation of such irrational pursuits and contends that 'a hyper-incentive wanting' may be accounted for provoking an irrational decision: arguably, such choices based on wanting arise and operate "outside the bounds of declarative conscious awareness" (*ibid*: 36). At this point, the moral component proves to be of the utmost importance, since it exceeds purely dogmatic issues: the reasons that moved this group to a decisive break with a shared tradition were not confined to rival interpretations of scripture central to this historical tradition, or to disputes between proponents of contrasting ecclesiological visions on the structure and mission of the Christian communities. In the predominant view, opponents did not create a distinctive kind of religious community rooted in friendship and love, as adherence to their fallacies, as well as the separation they entailed from the household of faith, was deeply affecting the emotions, desires and motivation of their followers.

These followers were thought to live in corruption, before entering the community of the faithful. This new allegiance was threatened as false-teaching, far from leading to self-control, was experienced as one that appealed to the "licentious desires of the flesh" (2Pet:2:18): the new communities witnessed a situation in which freedom from bondages of moral rules and dietary regulations was perceived as resulting in depravity (2:19), or inordinate sexual practices (2:10) through the pursuit of pleasure (2:13). This is a typical case of people experiencing a sufficiently strong craving and practically responding to these intense visceral factors (lust, greed, hunger) by entirely succumbing to their influence. Such choices seem attractive enough to give rise to an impulsive behaviour that creates a cleavage between the 'decision-utility' of this type of action and the 'experienced utility' that reflects people's welfare. Arguably an incontinent individual, one that is impulsive and deficient of the virtue of self-control, is supposed to possess different and competing cognitive selves, each justifying conflicting courses of action: one way from escaping such weaknesses of will is to conform to the requirements evident in "shared, mutually reinforcing social practices", insofar as participation in the practices of a community of individuals "enable them to achieve a unity of their multiple selves" (Davis 2003: 74). This may appear equivalent to the commitment to the binding values and practices of the believing community in the petrine context. Under the prevalence of visceral influences, people tend to underestimate their

intertemporal welfare, thus a preference for commitment appears as an appropriate means to avoid these situations.

These observations allow us to assume that, adhering to the opponents' doctrines was accounted for a sort of myopic behaviour that resulted in a conflict between present and future selves. Consuming the opponents' product not only considerably reduces the future welfare of their followers, but makes the latter enter into interpersonal strategic interactions of subordination to the former. The interaction between the opponents and their followers is an asymmetric relation in which the former (like all farsighted selves) attempt to control the behaviour of myopic selves, unlike self-control precepts which require the cooperation of temporally situated selves.

In sum, the opponents' perceived pursuit of pleasure ultimately entailed a voluntary delay in the intended course of the actions pertaining to the acquisition of virtue and holiness. Economically speaking, those who seek for pleasure practically discount the future cost of their procrastination by choosing not to perform a moral duty, but to do more enjoyable things. This form of positive discounting of the future implies such an inefficient procrastination, to the detriment of the long-run individual welfare. The rhetoric of the imminence of divine judgement, explicitly formulated in early Christian texts, may be considered as inducing believers to adopt a different pattern of time-management that renders a preference for improving sequences more feasible. In this respect, the established religious rhetoric seeks to manipulate the believers' model of evaluating sequences of actions in a way through which a preference for improvement originates in the decision to conform with a given deadline, the imminence of the *parousia*, as we shall demonstrate in the following section.

A tentative economic analysis of rhetorical strategies in religious discourses.

The necessity of persuasion.

Our analysis can be further specified in the light of the two-periods distinction between *present* and *eschatological future*. In the exhortations to his audience, the author of *2Peter* tends to construe his argument at three distinct levels: *decreasing the opportunity cost of faithfulness* to traditional doctrines and to apostolic teaching, *raising the present value of future rewards* enjoyed by true believers, and also *raising the eschatological cost of defection* by placing an emphasis on the eternal outcomes entailed by

adherence to heretical views. This *three-fold persuasive strategy* is rather consonant to *2Peter's* goals and aims in the attempt to affect human decision-making under uncertainty. From a rational choice theoretical perspective, believers should make a choice in favour of defection if the expected gains from such a decision would significantly exceed the expected costs, or alternatively, if the present gain from this choice were high enough to outweigh the anticipated present and eschatological cost. Underlying this approach is the standard theoretical premise that each rational agent should act in a way so as to maximize his expected utility.

In this respect, the choice of a life-style, licentious or not, is viewed as a function of individual needs or desires: it is precisely at the level of *preferences* that the persuasive strategy adopted ultimately operates. Economically speaking, the early Christian author is deeply concerned with altering those individual preferences that favour or encourage consumption of the opponents' products. Such considerations are not unparalleled in the economic literature: contrary to the prevailing assumption that individual preferences are given, as merely exogenous to economic decisions, individual choices are not infrequently conceived of as something more than mere attempts by rational economic agents to maximise their expected utilities. Religious precepts for instance are in a position to affect individual preferences or to reshape choices, as dictated by the proper norms or the behavioural patterns of the social network in which the believer participates. Deeper religious beliefs, identities and actions are reflecting competing perceptions of God, that can in turn predict *religious diversity*, measured by the salience of a particular religious faith, religious devotion and attitudes about the compatibility of secular and religious engagements (Froese and Bader 2007). In a contemporary context, religious participation is likely to have an important effect on the level of income, as well as on the net earnings potential of the adherents "by altering their preferences towards afterlife consumption and by requiring time and monetary commitments that discourage the acquisition of material wealth" (Lipford and Tollison 2003: 258). Conversely, high incomes deter religious participation by inducing a process of substitution between market earnings and religious activities. On the one hand, economic welfare is *partly* determined by religious membership insofar as the latter may directly inhibit the pursuit of material wealth. On the other hand, religious membership is *partly* determined by economic factors, given the opportunity cost associated with high earnings potential (Lipford and Tollison 2003: 257).

Tentatively, identities are supposed to influence economic decisions, primarily in the case of intrinsically motivated behaviour (Akerlof and Kranton 2000). Religious identities do matter in influencing consumption decisions, as believers come to internalize and appropriate the value-systems of a wider belief-network, acting in a way consonant to the maintenance of their proper identities (cf. Nixon 2007). In this respect, beliefs are not separate from preferences: Cosgel and Minkler (2004: 349) posit that “the analysis of choice as expression of religious identity and commitment suggests the presence of a sophisticated relationship between them” to the degree to which consumption decisions communicate information about identities and commitments. Religious consumption in particular, may be viewed as an activity integrating multiple spheres of life: issues of identity formation and maintenance, participation in a specific tradition, as well as engaging in market activities, are intrinsically associated with religious consumption choices that in turn, may transform spiritual experience. Religious influences in consumption patterns appear to reflect how one exercises such beliefs (Park and Baker 2007).

If choices are affected by the *salience* of a religious belief, or by the *intensity* of religious commitment, then consumption choices *do* reflect the *degree* of commitment. In our context, genuine believers’ decision to abstain from consuming the opponents’ products indicates the *quality* of their commitment to the apostolic teaching and practice. Those adhering to dissidents’ beliefs are certainly exhibiting *lower* levels of commitment, this possibly reflecting an alternative understanding of faith that derives from the process of their beliefs-formation. Hardin (1997) in his economic theory of knowledge argues that beliefs may be reinforced through a reduction of cognitive dissonance as information and knowledge is required to properly motivate someone to act in compliance to accepted rules, so as not to be excluded from a group’s life. The petrine author is intended to offer this type of information.

Religious rhetoric and consumption decisions.

Petrine three-fold persuasive strategy may be articulated as follows: *First*, in his attempt to significantly diminish the opportunity cost of faithfulness to the inheritance of the apostolic generation, the petrine author systematically repudiates worldly desires and concomitant economic practices. Foregone gains from participation in cultic activities induced by the opponents are constantly reduced, since for the petrine author alternative life-styles are deprived of intrinsic moral worth. This is justified on

petrine anticipation of the imminence of the *parousia*, having two ethical connotations –a loosing of all restraint or a call to holiness and purity- hence the accusation on the opponents of succumbing to the former, accompanying the exhortations to believers to pursue the latter. Moreover, consuming the religious product of the opponents is morally shameful to the extent that dissidents were perceived as instinctual beings, entirely devoid of reason and morality, “blots and blemishes” engaging in activities that reveal their insatiable desires so as to “entice unsteady souls” (2Pet. 2:14). In this respect, no real benefits are expected to be enjoyed by those converted to such heterodox forms of faith through adopting a licentious, but morally perilous, mode of living.

The next *two* rhetorical devices are of crucial importance, since it must be demonstrated how the choice of licentiousness as preference for the present can be outweighed by the future, albeit *uncertain* consequences of present decisions. There undeniably exists a *trade-off* between present and future pay-offs, and the petrine author needs to prove why the present and secure benefits of a licentious living are entirely exceeded by the distant and uncertain eschatological costs. Believers experience future rewards or punishments in *different* degrees, depending upon one’s conformity to traditional views on eschatology and prophecy: those who perceive of the future as remote, practically *discount* the weight attributed to eternal outcomes, or future consequences of their present choices. On the contrary, those conceiving of the future as realized in the present time, seem to underscore future pay-offs, thus revealing their preference for a future consumption of eternal goods, or gifts.

A constant concern of early Christian mainstream literature is to define rhetorical devices able to raise the present value of future rewards and punishments: in so doing, the petrine author has to effectively demonstrate *how* these future outcomes progressively affect, or shape, present choices. For this purpose, the elaboration of his ethics focusing on the potential benefits of God’s honourable clients, is of the utmost importance: in sharp contrast to the supposedly anti-social inclinations of dissident groups, believers are urged to exhibit the distinct qualities of a proper pro-social behaviour beneficial to others (cf. Frey and Meier 2004).

The delay of the *parousia* offers opportunities for salvation, whereas for those making a decision in favour of licentiousness, the probability of incurring *any* divine penalty seems almost negligible. To address these issues, the petrine author needs to stress the imaginative capital of his readers, i.e. their

ability to make assessments of the future consequences of present choices, so as to better appreciate their future welfare. This strategy is consonant to the fact that, due to the indeterminacy that engenders eschatological outcomes, religious agents frequently rely on conjectures about the ultimate consequences of their actions. Such conjectures are a by-product of imagination, they are flexible and can be shaped accordingly, not being necessarily bound by previous experience, as they are open to novelty and surprise in human affairs. Unsurprisingly, the early Christian rhetoric seeks to influence individual decision-making by offering a narrative that embodies previously unimagined informative material. In this respect, it has to considerably reduce the rate to which future events are discounted now, so as to increase the weight allocated to eternal outcomes.

A contemporary reading of the religious rhetoric might take into account certain empirical evidence that appears to offer support to the view that the rate of time-discounting differs, depending on the category of intertemporal decision. To the degree that gains are discounted more than losses (the so-called “Sign-Effect” in economic literature), economic agents should not prefer to delay a loss: the early Christian emphasis on *future* losses is operational to the extent that it is hardly discounted at the present.

Admittedly, the so-called “magnitude effect” may be of equal interest: since large outcomes are discounted at a lower rate than smaller ones, the petrine emphasis on *heavy losses* incurred by the ‘apostates’ (the loss of heaven plus eternal damnation) should exert a considerable effect in the present, and could be quite effective from a modern view-point in affecting present decisions of the addressees. In fact, these harmful future outcomes are intended to generate stronger emotional responses, and this is highly plausible, given that the potential of these anticipatory emotions is further reinforced by anxiety and uncertainty associated with waiting. This anxiety may prevent religious actors from proceeding to risky decisions, that is from entirely discounting the above potential losses, possibly in the form of an aversion to risky choices.

The rhetoric of divine judgement effectively performs this function, namely to raise the anticipated cost of engaging in licentious activities. Present pay-offs from licentious lives are subject to progressive depreciation: sinful satisfaction is perpetually endangered. The respective levels of utility derived from consuming the opponents’ product are significantly reduced, as believers perpetrating

shameful deeds are constantly exposed to the eventuality of their present pleasures being transformed to future afflictions.

The question, however still persists: why the opponents' followers who seemed to considerably discount future payoffs, proceeded to such an irreversible consumption with an uncertain net payoff, because of short-term benefits and long-run costs but entirely ignored the possibility of delaying the decision to consume? Drawing some analogies with the case of an increase in present-oriented, unplanned and impulse buying due to credit purchase and its concomitant facilities, we could argue that the opponents' practices helped to modify the believers' habits so as to proceed in emotional consumption with current (uncertain) benefits and delayed costs. In a sense, the loosening of self-control principles made them currently "indebted" in order to buy the opponents' spiritual commodity (licentiousness, permissiveness, freedom from moral restraints), and this even under the anticipation that they would probably not enjoy it as they wished. The opponents' followers decision to consume was precisely justified as a *hasty* one, as they estimated that the information value of waiting (and consequently, delaying the consumption) would be negative. Undoubtedly, the petrine teaching operated through various commitment devices that precluded this type of consumption. The opponents' followers incentives to take such hasty actions might be clarified in the light of this perspective: as the theory of haste of Brocas and Carrillo (2005: 16) predicts, the individual willingness to undertake activities with negative net present value is derivative of an attempt to avoid detrimental incoming information. For an individual with time-varying preferences, Brocas et al. (2004) argue, new information has both benefits and costs, not only in that it can improve the quality of current choices, but also as affecting a possible decision to *forego* this type of information, in particular when the anticipated costs of future choices *outweigh* the anticipated benefits of current decisions. In our case, the petrine strategy furnishes new information to those prone to defection, the result depending on how the latter will evaluate these new pieces of information. The petrine rhetoric seems to correspond to this very sort of information.

To summarise, we attempted to reconstruct dominant narrative concerning dissidents' attitudes in terms of agents facing self-control problems that may induce them to adopt inefficient consumption decisions. We analysed these attitudes as impulsive behavioural stances to which some rational

explanations could be attributed: following Brocas and Carrillo's permeating insights to impulsive behaviour, we consider these agents as undertaking an irreversible consumption decision yielding short-run benefits, but also severe long-run costs. We then introduced the concept of hyperbolic discounting of future pay-offs, and we emphasized the *imperfect* knowledge these agents possess about the long-term consequences of their present choices. As in Brocas and Carrillo's (2003: 99-103) theoretical suggestions, these agents (dissident groups in our case-study) experienced a major intrapersonal conflict originating in the fact that this consumption appeared profitable from the current, but highly *detrimental* from a future perspective. Taken for granted that under hyperbolic discounting the current benefits are attributed more weight than the future (delayed) costs, the religious agent will impulsively consume *now*, so as to avoid a psychological state in which his present and future preferences will enter into mutual conflict. This is due to happen when the *salience* of current pay-offs and the long delay between the costs and benefits of the consumption goods will motivate him to engage in impulsive behaviour. In this case, delaying consumption would be *costly* as future pay-offs are more easily discounted: if however, the agent opts for postponing his consumption-decision in the light of new flows of information, then he will probably be in a position to properly evaluate the bundle of consumption goods as worthless or desirable, irrespective of the time perspective. As Brocas and Carrillo (2003: 101) contend, in a hasty decision "consumption takes place not because of its intrinsic value but only as a *commitment device* against future choices" (italics our own). In so doing, religious agents are exposed to the risk of wishing they had chosen differently, indulging in self-recrimination involved in believing they made an error of judgement. As the regret theory of choice under uncertainty predicts, the intensity of regret experienced by those adhering (or not) to the alternative modes of faith may also depend on the extent to which such individuals blame themselves for the original decision (cf. Sugden 1985, Loomes and Sugden 1982). Religious rhetoric aspires to facilitate religious choice, insofar as it purportedly offers these flows of information mitigating such consumption inefficiencies through the emphasis on the primary commitments of a believing community.

Concluding comments.

Effective strategies that link theoretical constructs to new contexts center on properly delineating the boundaries, as well as expanding the perspective of widely held assumptions and prior analytical findings. A rational choice approach to religious institutions and organizations may also be applied to the early Christian communities involving religious antagonisms between competing groups. In the attempt to interpret theological controversies in the light of contemporary economics of religion, we discussed the two primary problems reflected in the social behaviour of a dissident religious group within the early Christian communities. We argued that the religious dissidents' free-riding with respect to the production of spiritual goods, as well as their grave self-control problems, were perceived as a considerable threat to the community's cohesion and orientation. The early Christian Churches were thus effective in selectively identifying symbolic rewards and spiritual benefits as most valued goods, entirely excluded from less committed members. We demonstrated that the rhetorical strategies employed by the dominant early Christian narratives can be viewed as an attempt to eliminate the opponents' share in the emerging religious markets of that era. We also showed that the heavy discount of the future these religious dissidents were supposed to proclaim, could be outweighed by rhetorical devices praising eschatological judgement and rewarding fidelity to traditions and personal vocation to holiness. In this respect, we attempted to analyse the ensuing dilemmas concerning religious choice at both institutional and individual levels, in the awareness that economic analysis might not be unimportant to a contemporary reading of sacred texts that evidence, shape or reflect a shared cultural heritage of the past.

Endnotes:

¹ Available evidence for dating the epistle seems to corroborate this perspective. *First*, the shared material between *2Peter* and *Jude* reveals a literary dependency of the first upon the second, a practice rather unlikely for an apostle (Neyrey 1993, Watson 1988). *Second*, passages as *2Pet.* 3:4 indicate the fading of the hope for an imminent return of Jesus, as the founding generation of the faith died prior to the Lord's *parousia*, an evolution that took place certainly after 80 C.E. This date fits well to the *third* piece of evidence: the reference to Paul's letters as "Scripture" in *2Pet.* 3:15-16, is rather suggestive of a period later than Paul's life-time. *2Peter* should be attributed to a circle of Peter's associates rather than to the apostle himself (Achtmeier et al. 2001: 529, Chester and Martin 1994: 145). Taken for granted that sufficient time had passed permitting doubts to arise and disseminate about the *parousia*, this is suggestive of one or two decades after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70; overall, such approaches have an adequate reason to favour the last two decades of the 1st century C.E.

² The reciprocity of benefactions proved to be an effective social network through which social bonds between the inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman world were constructed. In his treatise *De beneficiis* devoted to interpersonal benefit-exchange, Seneca determines the respective responsibilities of people involved in reciprocal relations. In this context, mere possession or accumulation of wealth was of no worth if not transformed through status or power by being distributed. Since the bestowal of a gift had to be reciprocated, the act of proving the recipient's gratitude turned to be a duty not less imperative than the return of a gift, or service. In the case that a return was of lower value, the original recipient became a *client* owing a debt, or obligation, to the giver. Accordingly, social exchange was embedded in a framework of patron-client interactions, so prominent in the Roman world. For further discussion on reciprocity, see Vivenza (1997). An overview of the contemporary connotations of the term, is provided in Fehr and Gächter (2000).

³ In modern economic theory, the time-preference component of a time-preference theory of the interest rate, serves as a basis for posing similar questions. In the Austrian marginalist analytical framework, individuals having to wait longer require additional compensation for their reduced ability to consume in the present, since human beings value the present more than the future, *ceteris paribus*. Having a present good is advantageous in that one is certain about his ability to consume now, while any future good is intrinsically associated with *uncertainty*, because of possible events intervening to prevent a future consumption: in a sense, present goods satisfy human wants *more effectively* than future goods.

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