

The Economy of Prosperity Gospel

Hybrid or Distinctive Social Worlds?

Draft Version

Article published as:

Koehrsen, Jens (2018) “The Economy of Prosperity Gospel: Hybrid or Distinctive Social Worlds?”, in: Schnabel, Annette; Reddig, Melanie; Winkel, Heidemarie (ed.) Religion in Contexts: Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, Baden-Baden: Nomos, p. 159-172.

DOI: 10.5771/9783845276649-158

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1 Introduction

This contribution explores prosperity gospel from an economics of religion perspective. It thereby illustrates the interrelation of religion and economy in one of the most popular religious movements in the Global South. Prosperity Gospel—often also described as “wealth and health gospel”—assumes that obedient Christians have a right to enjoy a prosperous life: “By virtue of becoming born-again and confessing faith the true believer has the right to health and wealth and the possibility of consumption” (Hasu 2006: 680). According to this belief, God blesses its obedient believers. Therefore, being a true Christian implies that one will experience prosperity (Deacon & Lynch 2013: 109). However, prosperity may not only become manifest in material wealth, but also in physical health, self-fulfillment, and a pleasant social life (e.g. family relations).

Prosperity gospel originates from the US-American evangelical revival movement and becomes initially manifest in a theology of positive thinking. Prominent representatives are Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, and Kenneth Copeland. Since the 1960s, the theology has spread, in particular, via televangelism and disseminated into the Pentecostal movement where it constitutes a religious innovation: while traditional Pentecostal churches tended to turn away from this world and its pleasures, prosperity gospel preaches an orientation towards the here and now. In particular in the Global South, prosperity gospel has strongly spread within the Pentecostal movement where it has frequently been reformulated in more radical terms. Despite its strong success in many countries of the Global South, not all Pentecostals in these countries necessarily subscribe to its theology. It has experienced varying degrees of success in different regions. In countries such as Argentina, it is subject to fervent struggles between its opponents and promoters within the field of Pentecostalism (Koehrsen 2017). Moreover, varying contextual features have led to different styles of prosperity gospel in these regions (Koehrsen 2015). Even within the same countries, one will often find significant differences in styles of

prosperity gospel given the high diversification of the movement into numerous, mostly unrelated churches.

The following analysis will focus on prosperity gospel as a frequent part of Pentecostalism in the Global South. In order to study this phenomenon in its economic context, it draws upon an economics of religion perspective. Economics of religion is a comparatively recent field of research (Koch 2007; Seele, Gatti & Lohse 2014). As it is still developing, its boundaries are not clearly defined and subject to academic debates. Accordingly, there are diverse definitions of what “economics of religion” is. These definitions vary between the subjects that they include. Narrow definitions limit the field to the economic study of religion; this involves the use of economic theories and methods to explore religion (Iannaccone 1998; Iannaccone & Bainbridge 2010). By contrast, broader approaches also regard the study of the empirical relationships between the religious sphere and the economy as part of the field (e.g. Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Weber 2013); sometimes, these approaches even include religious perspectives to study the economy (e.g. Benjamin’s *Capitalism as Religion*; Benjamin 2009). Drawing upon a broad definition, the field can be differentiated into four subfields:

- 1) the employment of economic theories and methods to study religion,
- 2) the empirical study of the impact of the economy on religion,
- 3) the empirical study of the impact of religion on the economy, and
- 4) the employment of religious perspectives to study the economy.

These subfields are not clear-cut and may in some cases overlap (e.g. studying the influence of religion on the economy via economic methods). Nevertheless, they provide an overview about what is usually studied within the broader field of economics of religion. Each subfield constitutes a specific perspective from which a religious and/or economic phenomenon can be studied.

For this contribution, I will draw upon perspective 1-3 to explore prosperity gospel. Therefore, in the following sections, I will (1) analyze the success of prosperity gospel through an economic market perspective, (2) explore the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism shapes prosperity gospel, and (3) study how prosperity gospel transforms its socio-economic environment. Given the focus of this edited volume, there will be an emphasis on the second perspective: the economic influence on prosperity gospel.

2 An Economic Perspective on Religion

In the economic perspective, Pentecostalism and prosperity gospel are analyzed from a market approach. It addresses the question of why the movement has been so successful in comparison to its alternatives on the religious market (e.g. Historical Protestantism, Catholicism). In the case of Latin America, Andrew Chesnut (1997, 2003, 2012) has made important contributions to untangling this question. He argues that religious pluralization in Latin America has led to the evolution of highly competitive religious markets (Chesnut 2003: 3-16). In these markets, in particular, one product is thriving: Pentecostalism. Chesnut (2003: 39-63) explains the success of Pentecostalism by referring to its competitive advantages over other religious suppliers; these are (a) specific features of the Pentecostal product, (b) marketing strategies of Pentecostal churches, and (c) churches' organizational structures.

Firstly, the product "Pentecostalism" offers a high utility to believers. To those affected by the afflictions of poverty (e.g. unemployment, illness), it promises healing and an improvement of life through the intervention of the Holy Spirit (e.g. faith healing, exorcisms) and thereby spends hope (Chesnut 1997). Moreover, it provides believers with a life-structuring framework, condemning alcohol consumption, violence, gambling and demanding self-discipline, hard work, punctuality, and honesty. Those who struggled with their sluggish lifestyles may therefore experience their lives as positively changed and may also undergo material improvements. Additionally, the integration into a community of believers (e.g. congregation, bible groups)

that support each other is likely to improve psychological and physical wellbeing. Moreover, as Pentecostalism is a plural movement, it embraces a diversity of different styles between which “clients” can choose: “In effect, there are so many varieties of Pentecostalism available in the religious marketplace that consumers can choose their brands according to preferences in gender, class, age, musical tastes, and so on” (Chesnut 2003: 61). The diversification of the product contributes to the appeal of Pentecostalism, as it can match different consumer preferences. Among the varieties of Pentecostalism, prosperity gospel is highly successful, as it promises swift relief from worldly problems and thereby provides strong subjective utility: “Thus, the health and wealth gospel has quickly become a top-shelf item in the supermarket of faith because of its promise to ameliorate if not heal many of the most common pathogens of poverty in a timely manner” (Chesnut 2012: 220).

Secondly, the movement efficiently markets its product through its social networks (Chesnut 2003: 50-59). Members of the movement are encouraged to evangelize and thereby act as retailers themselves. Frequently, they evangelize within their own social networks, inviting family members, neighbors and friends to church services. Those invited may then in turn convert into future Pentecostals and industrious retailers of the faith, thereby leading to an ever-growing community of Pentecostals. Additionally, prosperity-related churches have explored the potentials of mass-media, marketing their faith through TV, radio channels and internet pages.

Thirdly, the organizational structure of Pentecostalism facilitates adaptation to the given market context (Chesnut 2003: 56-63). Given that there is no uniform head-organization determining the content and structure of Pentecostalism, churches can individually accommodate themselves to the given socio-cultural context along with its specific consumer preferences. Moreover, most churches are grassroots organizations that have been founded by a pastors and/or small groups of believers. These organizations have to finance themselves and therefore,

must attract other believers who will contribute with their tithes and donations to the survival of the church and the salary of the pastor. As they cannot rely on the monthly payments of a head-organization, churches are obliged to act as entrepreneurs and successfully sell their product to survive. This facilitates a growth-focus among Pentecostal churches and creates a beneficial setting for religious innovation.

The market-perspective explains the success of Pentecostalism through its competitive advantages vis-a-vis other religious market offers. As such, comparing Pentecostalism with historical Protestantism in Latin America shows that the latter is unable to generate similar growth rates, as it lacks the aforementioned features (Koehrsen 2016a). Nevertheless, the market perspective also has its limitations when it comes to making allowances for the cultural context and explaining the formation of consumer preferences (Koehrsen 2018a; Koehrsen 2018b). As such, Steve Bruce (2000) has, for instance, criticized that the market model is not sufficiently taking into account national cultural backgrounds, as these shape the success of specific religious suppliers. Also the expansion of prosperity gospel is embedded within a cultural context where neo-liberal capitalism rose to prominence in peoples' lives in the 1980s and 90s. Therefore, its fit with capitalistic culture may constitute another important moment for the movement's success, as Chesnut also indicates (2012: 218).

3 Economic Influences on Religion

Prosperity gospel reflects many features of the current global economy. The economic influence becomes manifest in various dimensions: (a) as socio-economic transformations that facilitate the success of prosperity gospel, (b) as prosperity theologies that reflect values and worldviews of neo-liberal capitalism, and (c) as organizational structures of churches that adapt to neo-liberal capitalism. In the following, I describe each of these dimensions.

The changing socio-economic context in the 1980s and 1990s is important for explaining the success of prosperity gospel in the Global South (Deacon & Lynch 2013; Míguez 1998). The implementation of structural adjustment programs and their socio-economic impacts mark this changing context. As part of the loans that countries in the Global South received from the *International Monetary Fund* and the *World Bank*, they had to undertake structural adjustment programs. These involved neo-liberal economic reforms aiming to untie market-forces and foster socio-economic development in these countries. The reforms included privatizing state-owned companies, cutting welfare and healthcare services, easing labor market regulations, and opening the national markets for global competitors. The economic restructuring had severe consequences in many African and Latin American countries, leading to rising unemployment and poverty rates, increasing social inequality, precarization of labor relations as well as the emergence of massive informal work sectors (Hasu 2006; Nolivos 2012).

Neo-liberal capitalism with its promise of consumption and wealth, combined with the socio-economic suffering that it produced, created a fertile ground for the spread of prosperity gospel. Given that prosperity gospel responds to these transformations, it particularly attracted those most affected by the changing economic system: individuals stuck in hardship, searching for socio-economic improvement (Chesnut 2012; Hasu 2006). As such, scholars frequently consider the expansion of prosperity gospel to be a result of economic transformations towards neo-liberal capitalism. This argument is prominently brought forward by Jean and John Comaroff (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a; Comaroff 2009). They describe neo-liberal capitalism as a “new world order” that does not remain limited to the economic sphere but becomes manifest in all social spheres. It therefore marks an epochal shift in modern societies in which speculation and consumption become the “moving spirits”. In the religious sphere, neo-liberal capitalism facilitates the evolution of new types of religion that incorporate the neo-liberal worldviews and cultural patterns of capitalism and are, therefore, well-adapted to the new world order: “many contemporary faiths, in both the North and the South, tend to mimic the creative

forms of the market, promising to unlock unprecedented sources of value and productivity by tapping the direct operation of God in the world” (Comaroff 2009: 24).

One of the new faiths that reproduce the capitalistic logic is prosperity gospel. It combines the ethics of Protestantism with the ideas of the neo-liberal market (Comaroff 2009: 30). This becomes, for instance, visible in the concept of financial harvest: “the language of Godly enterprise in Pentecostal liturgy is more likely to mimic the logic of finance capital. Pastors urge their congregations to believe that investment in the Lord will yield rich dividends, vying with competing options to offer ever more immediate returns on spiritual venture capital” (Comaroff 2009: 31). Paralleling neo-liberal capitalism, prosperity gospel promises individual prosperity and promotes the pursuit of success. As in Calvinistic Protestantism, success is a marker of God’s blessing: given that God will bless obedient followers they are supposed to thrive and prosper (Maxwell 1998: 364). However, contrasting Calvinistic Protestantism, consumerism and material well-being are not condemned, but celebrated. This new, prosperity-related Protestantism reflects the consumer culture of neo-liberal capitalism, promoting a “spirit of consumerism” (Maxwell 1998). Members are not only allowed to enjoy the fruits of material prosperity, but encouraged to do so, given that brand new cars and luxury clothing are regarded as a sign of God’s blessing (Maxwell 1998: 364; Meyer 2007: 15).

Promising material prosperity and health, prosperity gospel focuses on the here and now whereas the question of otherworldly salvation barely plays a role. Prosperity gospel turns the attention away from the afterlife and emphasizes the life in this world and its prospects for well-being. It is not the promise of the heavenly kingdom, but the promise of a wealthy life in the here and now that becomes the central concern of the faith. This matches with modern capitalism which relocates salvation—the promise of a better life—with its consumption prospects into the here and now (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a; see also Belk 2000). However, prosperity gospel adds supernatural instruments to capitalism through which its promises can

arguably be reached: it provides “new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends (...)” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000b: 316) and promises “swift paybacks” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a: 305). Therefore, prosperity gospel particularly attracts those that have not benefited from the promises of the “new world order”: it prospers in world regions and among population segments that have been struck by the structural disadvantages of global capitalism while still being subject to its unreachable promises (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a: 299). “[It appeals] to those left out of the promise of prosperity, who look in on the riches of the global economy from its exteriors. The neo-liberal turn held out the millennial prospect that everyone would be free to accumulate and speculate, to consume and indulge repressed desires. Yet for the majority, the millennium has passed without visible enrichment” (Comaroff 2009: 32; squared brackets by J.K.)

Prosperity gospel communicates the new capitalistic world order to these audiences by translating it into a religious language. This becomes, for instance, visible when preaching directly addresses the socio-economic reforms that the “new world order” has brought about. Hasu (2006) presents a quote from the charismatic preacher Mwakasege in Tanzania who refers to the economic situation in his country in the following way:

“In Canaan people had to pay taxes to the king and give tithes (sadaka) to the priests. In the modern language they entered the private sector; it wasn’t easy after having been fed for 40 years in the desert by way of miracles! It was like Tanzania now; the economic system of Tanzania is like that of Canaan. But there are three different groups of people: those who still want the system of Egypt (to be fed by the government) when they in actual fact are in Canaan in the private sector. Secondly, there are those who know nothing about Egypt—only hear about it—but who are also not prepared for the private sector and the economic system of Canaan. These people are dependent on their leaders. Lastly, there are the people like Joshua and Caleb who have experience of all systems

and who are prepared to change their mind-set. There are people who were born before the Arusha Declaration, people who were born after that and people who have experience of all of them. There are people who were taken care of by the government for more than thirty years as regards [sic] free education and health care. In the private sector you have to pay for these. Also, many were educated by the government but they have no employment in the present system (Mwakasege quoted in Hasu 2006: 685-686).

Mwakasege refers to the privatization of previous state services (education, health care) and encourages his listeners to adapt themselves to the new market mechanisms. By preaching in favor of economic deregulation and the individual vie for success, Mwakasege borrows according to Hasu (2006) concepts from the *International Monetary Fund*. Given this translation of neo-liberal economic thinking into the religious sphere, Birgit Meyer (2007) stipulates that the boundaries between religion and capitalism are dissolving in prosperity gospel. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's interpretation of capitalism as religion, she assumes that capitalism is turning into an actual religion and questions whether there are identifiable boundaries between religious and its (economic) context: "This erosion of a distinction between religion and the world, making (in Benjamin's terms) capitalism become religion, ultimately questions the existence of separate religious organizations. If religion is everywhere, it may be nowhere" (Meyer 2007: 22).

At large, the spread of Pentecostalism has pluralized the religious field in many countries of the Global South and has led to rising levels of competition between religious "suppliers". Against the backdrop of thriving competition, prosperity related churches seek to improve their "market shares" and appeal to ever rising audiences. According to Maddox (2012), this growth-focus reflects an ethos of capitalism. However, the "economization" of church culture goes further: to pursue membership growth and effectively market their faiths to potential followers, churches adopt marketing strategies, organize massive evangelization events, create extensive

church infrastructures, employ mass-media, and engineer appealing religious offers for diverse tastes. Meyer describes the infrastructures, as follows: “This entails the construction of impressive church buildings with internal television circuits that can seat thousands of visitors, running high-tech media studios, setting up stores selling church-branded products, instigating social networks for mutual help and microcredits, and even providing facilities for sports (some PCCs in Ghana now have their own gym)” (Meyer 2007: 14). As such, the neo-liberal economic model also becomes manifest in the organization of churches: churches increasingly turn into enterprises marked by a neo-liberal business culture, seeking for membership growth and financial returns.

To finance their activities (Hasu 2006: 683-684) and vast infrastructures, churches depend on substantial financial influxes which are covered through different income channels. The most direct one is through donations and tithing. Apart from the contributions of regular members, there are many visitors coming to churches for specific spiritual services for which they pay (Comaroff 2009: 31). The Comaroffs describe this phenomenon as “‘fee-for-service’ faiths” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a: 304). Faith becomes a product for which consumers pay. “Here Pentecostalism meets neoliberal enterprise. In its African churches, most of them (literally) storefronts, prayer meetings respond to frankly mercenary desires, offering everything from cures for depression through financial advice to remedies for unemployment; casual passersby, clients really, select the services they require” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000b: 314). In addition to charging for spiritual services, prosperity churches exploit other income channels: many churches have created their own businesses and started sell additional products in church-owned stores (e.g. books, CDs, DVDs, clothes). Moreover, bigger churches tend to invest in the mass-media sector: they have acquired TV and radio stations (Hasu 2006: 681-682; Meyer 2007). Other types of businesses include banks, real estate companies, newspapers, hospitals, and private schools which offer their services and products to members and non-members. Finally, in some cases, churches collaborate with other businesses to advertise their products (Comaroff

& Comaroff 2000b: 314; Ukah 2005: 266-267). Vying for profit in different business sectors has contributed to the wealth of these churches and their pastors. For instance, Edir Macedo, founder of the *Universal Church of the Kingdom of God*, has created a vast business empire around his church and figures among the wealthiest Brazilians.

Moreover, subscribing to theologies of prosperity and undertaking economic activities has led to the formation of business cultures in these churches. As such, Maxwell observes that “a business culture seeps down into the main body of the movement. Young pastors are told to use their first love-offerings to purchase a suit, shirt and tie and new shoes. They are expected to dress smartly like a successful entrepreneur. The language of business has even found its way into services. Thus, God is a good clerk who does not forget the gifts His people offer him. He promotes those who are faithful. His word is good. You can take it to the bank and cash it” (Maxwell 1998: 362-363). This culture is not only transmitted via preaching but also through professional business training to church audiences. Churches frequently offer courses for different business skills (e.g. selling, entrepreneurship, financial management) (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000b: 314ff.). In some cases, congregations even offer business experimentation spaces. For instance, Nathalie Luca (2011) has observed how Pentecostals in South Korea use the social networks of their churches as an experimental ground for direct marketing. Maxwell (1998: 355-357) provides another example with the “periods of talents” among the *Zimbabwean Assemblies of God, Africa*: in a six-month period members can experiment with “penny capitalism” and train their business skills. Vested with starter grants, they engage in different business activities to gain money for the church. At the end of the period, the financial outcomes of these activities are released in an official church ceremony. Having gained business experiences in this “period of talents”, members can form their own micro businesses. However, these features of prosperity gospel do not only reflect neo-liberal worldviews, they contribute to the consolidation of neo-liberal capitalism in the given world region and thereby shape the socio-economic order.

4 Religious Influences on the Economy

Many scholars suggest that prosperity gospel is not only influenced by neo-liberal capitalism but also contributes to the socio-economic transformations in the Global South (Martin 2002; Maxwell 1998). The aforementioned features of prosperity gospel help adherents of the movement to adapt themselves to neo-liberal capitalism, thereby facilitating the transition to the new economic *modus vivendi*. As such, prosperity gospel reinforces neo-liberal capitalism (Barker 2007; Chesnut 2012). Drawing upon Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2013), scholars assume that Pentecostalism promotes forms of behavior that match neo-liberal capitalism. Similar to Calvinism, Pentecostalism embraces a strong work ethic and other moral qualities such as sobriety, honesty, and self-discipline that render members of the movement more employable and industrious than their non-Pentecostal peers (Maxwell 1998). The conversion to Pentecostalism involves a "breaking with the past": the new-born Christians are supposed to leave their old life and traditions behind, starting a new, God-obeying life that follows the moral principles of their Pentecostal faith (Freeman 2012; Garner 2000; Meyer 1998; Meyer 2004; van Dijk 2012). These principles will allow members to survive and improve their living standards in the new economic system. Accordingly, Pentecostalism offers effective survival strategies for the poor (Nolivos, 2012), allowing them to cope with the problems caused by the socio-economic transformations (Chesnut 1997; Mariz 1994). Maxwell describes this for the case of Zimbabwe: "For many Zimbabweans it provides a framework with which to respond to the pressures of modernisation. (...) For those living on the margins of poverty pentecostalism's emphasis on renewing the family and protecting it from alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity at least stops them from slipping over the edge" (Maxwell 1998: 369-370).

Moreover, the prosperity theology empowers adherents of the movement (Chesnut 2012: 219) and encourages them "to realize their potential through hard work entrepreneurship, sobriety, and wise investments" (Chesnut 2012: 216). By providing business courses, micro-credits,

business networks, and internal labor markets, prosperity churches convey direct support mechanisms for accommodating oneself to the world of neo-liberal capitalism. Finally, against the backdrop of shrinking public welfare services, churches have invested in hospitals, universities, schools, and sport centers. Thereby, they help filling the gap left by the state and alleviate the change process (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000a: 305). Consequently, prosperity gospel may well help to accommodate capitalism in countries of the Global South, while for those affiliating with the movement, the commitment to a more industrious lifestyle may help them to experience improvements and climb the social ladder. However, the overall socio-economic impact that the expansion of Pentecostalism will have, is not clear yet (Chesnut 2012: 219; Heuser 2013). Aside from optimistic accounts, there are critical voices that point to the movement's limitations in facilitating socio-economic change and life improvement. Though it may help coping with poverty and enable small improvement on the lowest echelons, it is unlikely to pave the way into the affluent middle classes (Míguez 1998: 159; Míguez 2001; Woodberry 2006: 29, 35). The engagement in time-consuming religious activities (e.g. bible groups, night prayers, church services, voluntary work) reduces the time for economic activities (Gifford 2004: 157; Woodberry 2006: 31, 34). The sometimes-rigorous ethic can also limit the economic activity (Gooren 2002: 37), while high monetary investments in the church (e.g. tithing, donations) withdraw resources necessary for social improvement (Gifford 2004: 159). The strong emphasis on consumption may also lead adherents to spend their earnings on luxury goods rather than undertaking more economically profitable investments. Moreover, in some countries, the marginalization of the movement renders the acceptance in middle-class milieus and the successful integration in its social networks difficult (Koehrsen 2016b; Koehrsen 2017b). Whether and to what extent the movement contributes to socio-economic change and life improvement will depend on the interaction between the given socio-geographic context (e.g. middle class cultures) and the specific configuration of the movement (e.g. theology, support mechanisms) (Koehrsen 2015).

5 Conclusion

This contribution has addressed prosperity gospel from the standpoint of economics of religion. It has explored the phenomenon by using three different perspectives, inherent in economics of religion: (a) the economic analysis of religion, (b) economy's influence on religion, and (c) religion's influence on the economy. While the first perspective explains the success of Pentecostalism and prosperity gospel by highlighting its competitive advantages over market competitors, the second perspective suggests that neo-liberal capitalism has shaped prosperity gospel. Finally, the third perspective argues that prosperity gospel allows its followers to adapt to this world order and thereby facilitates the socio-economic transformations in the Global South.

The discussion of prosperity gospel shows that religion is not only shaped by its context, but may also influence it, contributing to the transformation of the socio-economic structures in the Global South. Therefore, religion should not only be described as embedded in a context, but also as actively shaping its contexts. In both directions there are return flows that reinforce each other and lead to an interweaving of religion and economy. Prosperity gospel is a vehicle for spreading neo-liberal capitalism because it is influenced by it and reflects its modes of operation. While spreading neo-liberal capitalism, prosperity gospel is likely to accommodate ever more capitalistic attributes. Also, in terms of the economic market perspective, we can determine similar feedback loops: the market model becomes a more legitimate mode of description—and framework for designing strategies—when religion increasingly assumes market features (e.g. competition, fee-for-service) while the rising legitimacy of the model contributes to the strengthening of these market attributes (e.g. usage of marketing strategies in churches) and the commodification of religion. Given the close entanglement of religion and economy in the case of prosperity gospel, directions of influence are sometimes barely distinguishable. Prosperity gospel appears to constitute a religious-economic hybrid. Religion and economy melt into each other, as Meyer suggests: “(...) Pentecostalism appears to be

entangled with the culture of neo-liberalism to such an extent, that it is impossible to still conceptually confine religion to a separate sphere (...), and investigate the relation between religion and economy in instrumental terms” (Meyer 2007: 12).

6 References

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