

Monasteries, economies and states: the dissolution of monasteries in T'ang China and early modern Europe

Karel Davids

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Introduction

Travelling in T'ang China in the 840s, the Japanese monk Ennin witnessed from close by the suppression of Buddhism by Emperor Wu-Tsung. After issuing bans on ceremonies, festivals and pilgrimages and enacting orders to expel 'unaffiliated' monks, to oust 'undesirable' elements and to seize private property of individual members of the clergy, the emperor in 845 moved to a frontal attack on Buddhist monasteries. Imperial decrees ordained that monasteries were no longer allowed to hold landed property, that all wealth in the form of slaves, cash, grain, clothes and the like should be handed over to the imperial authorities and that all monks and nuns under the age of forty should revert to lay status. By one stroke of the pen, Buddhist monastic life in the empire was almost completely extinguished. 'Throughout the land the Buddha halls, monasteries, and temples have all been destroyed' , Ennin observed, 'throughout the land scriptures, images, and clerical clothing have all been burned; throughout the land the gold on the figures of the Buddhas has been peeled off; throughout the land the bronze and iron Buddhas have been smashed, weighed and confiscated; and the prefectures and sub-prefectures of the land have gathered in the money and estates of the monasteries and have taken their retainers and

slaves'.¹ Several centuries later, similar happenings were recorded in a diary kept during the early days of the Dutch Revolt by a prior of a Catholic monastery near the city of Gouda, Holland. Having fled his hometown after the Calvinist take-over in 1572 to the relative safety of Amsterdam, still loyal to the King of Spain, Fr. Wouter Jacobsz noted down all scraps of news about things taking place in the rebellious province. The fate of convents and monasteries was to him of special concern. The tidings were no better than in late T'ang China. In 1573 he learned that the monasteries in Delft, which were closely linked to his own convent near Gouda, had all been disbanded and that 'everybody wandered around in great desolation'. The Sea Beggars had captured the renowned abbey of Egmond and used it as an army camp for 600 soldiers. Some time later, the news that Jacobsz.. received was even worse: on leaving, the rebels had burnt the 'splendid abbey' to the ground.²

The stories of Ennin and Wouter Jacobsz. testify both to the ubiquity of monastic communities and the ferocity of their opponents in T'ang China and early modern Europe. On the eve of emperor Wu-Tsung's assault on Buddhism, there were at least 360,000 religious in China in 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 small establishments, which amounted to about 1 per cent of the population of the empire.³ The total number of monasteries in Europe before the onset of the first wave of suppressions in the sixteenth century, hitting England, Scandinavia, Switzerland, the Northern Netherlands and parts of the Holy Roman

¹ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge 1987) 116-132, Edwin O. Reischauer, *Ennin's diary. The record of a pilgrimage to China in search of the law* (New York 1955) 388.

² *Dagboek van Broeder Wouter Jacobsz (Gualtherius Jacobi Musius, prior van Stein) Amsterdam 1572-1578 en Montfoort 1578-1589*, edited by I.H. Van Eeghen, 2 vols., Werken Historisch Genootschap, 4th series, nrs.5-6 (Groningen 1959-1960), vol. I, 125, 147, 260.

³ Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society. An economic history from the fifth to the tenth centuries* (New York 1955) 6-8, 12, 318-319 note 27.

Empire, is not known, but a recent estimate by Derek Beales for Catholic Europe around 1750, shortly before the beginning of the second, even more devastating onslaught on monastic life, puts the total number of monasteries at more than 25,000. The 350,000 inmates of these religious establishments made up about 0.3 per cent of the total population in the parts of Europe where Catholicism reigned supreme.⁴ The Buddhist establishments in China by the early 840s owned overall an estimated 2 per cent of the cultivated lands (with wide regional variations), which may have yielded more than 10 per cent of the total agrarian produce.⁵ Estimates on the distribution of landed wealth in early modern Europe suggest that in many areas the share of monastic houses was not insignificant either. In England in the 1530s, about half of the total income of the lands of the church (which presumably made up some 20 to 30 per cent of all the land in the kingdom) came from monasteries and convents, mostly in the form of rents received from manors.⁶ In the Northern Netherlands, the share of monasteries in the total cultivated land area on the eve of the Reformation ranged from a few per cent in Holland to some 15 per cent in Groningen and 20 per cent in Friesland.⁷ At the end of the eighteenth century, monastic houses in Catholic Europe, according to Beales's estimate, probably overall owned some 10 per cent of all the land, or half of all the land held by the Church.⁸ Among all the Catholic states in Europe, perhaps the highest share was recorded in the Electorate of Bavaria: around 1800, monastic houses were landlords of c.

⁴ Derek Beales, *Prosperity and plunder. European Catholic monasteries in the age of Revolution, 1650-1815* (Cambridge 2003) 2, 316.

⁵ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 12, 140

⁶ W.G. Hoskins, *The age of plunder. King Henry's England 1500-1547* (London 1976) 128-129, Mark Overton, *Agricultural revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge 1996) 168.

⁷ Jan de Vries, *The Dutch rural economy in the Golden Age, 1500-1700* (New Haven/London 1974) 41-42.

⁸ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 3-4.

28% of all farms in the land.⁹ And landownership was by no means the only aspect of monastic life in China and Europe that had ramifications for the economy at large. Monasteries and convents often also played a role in economic development as employers, traders, consumers, reservoirs of labour, taxpayers or moneylenders to governments or private individuals.

Whether these religious institutions were 'good' or 'bad' for economic development has been a matter of dispute among contemporaries and historians alike. Critiques of monastic life in the past, whether voiced in T'ang China or in early modern Europe, were never entirely dictated by 'spiritual' considerations, but were also founded on various arguments of a 'temporal' nature, ranging from an supposed loss to the fiscal base, jurisdiction and authority of the state to an alleged misallocation of resources or a putative waste of demographic potential. The essence of these arguments was that monastic establishments laid a claim on people, lands and capital that could better be employed for other uses and/or should not remain under the sole control of these institutions at all. Pleas in defence of monasteries, in the late eighteenth century at least, did not exclusively rest on religious or juridical arguments either. The preservation of these institutions was partly vindicated on the grounds of their supposed economic and financial benefits for the state and society at large.¹⁰

Scholarly studies discussing the role of monasteries in economic development show a remarkable ambivalence on their contribution, too. In his economic history on Buddhism in Chinese society between c.400 and 900, Jacques Gernet stated that the spread of monastic communities on the one hand had the 'purely negative effect' of creating misery among the peasants by the appropriation of goods for religious ends but on the

⁹ Eberhard Weiss, *Die Säkularisation der bayerischen Klöster 1802/03* (Munich 1983) 21.

other led to 'an increase in commercial and manufacturing activity' and stimulated the rise of the tertiary sector.¹¹ Kenneth Ch'en set the 'economic drains' of the monastic communities and the loss of revenue for the state against the varied social functions of the monasteries for 'almost every group in Chinese society', which in his view was one of the principal reasons why Buddhism came to enjoy such a wide following among the Chinese people in the first place.¹² While many historians have depicted religious houses in England before the Reformation as wasteful or inefficient, a recent study on the contrary has stressed the size and effectiveness of the charitable provisions that these institutions managed to supply. Monastic charity 'constituted a considerable social service of sheltered housing as well as poor relief', the author concluded.¹³ With regard to the Northern Netherlands, Jan de Vries stressed the 'great importance' of religious orders as leaders of land reclamation projects in the Middle Ages, but also welcomed the confiscation of monastic lands during the Dutch Revolt as a 'positive encouragement' to the rural sector because it freed resources for investments in charity and education which were administered with 'energy and efficiency'.¹⁴

Research about the economic role of monasteries has until now mostly focused on particular regions, periods, houses or activities. The principal exception is Derek Beales' pioneering, wide-ranging work on Catholic monasteries in Continental Europe between the middle of the seventeenth century and the end of the Napoleonic Era.¹⁵ This paper aims to assess the role of monasteries in economic development in a

¹⁰ An eloquent example in Weiss, *Säkularisation*, 28-31.

¹¹ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 14-15..

¹² Kenneth K.S Ch'en, 'Economic background of the Hui-ch'ang persecution', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 19 (1956) 67-105 and 'The role of Buddhist monasteries in T'ang China', *History of Religions*, 15 (1976), 209-230.

¹³ Neil S Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision in Tudor England: quantifying and qualifying poor relief in the early sixteenth century', *Continuity and Change*, 16 (2001) 9-44 esp.9-12, 34-35..

¹⁴ De Vries, *Dutch rural economy*, 41-42, 210-211.

comparative, multifaceted way. The main features of the approach explored in this study are as follows. First of all, the paper will concentrate on periods of transformation, viz. periods in which monasteries were permanently or temporarily dissolved. Taking this specific focus can make us better equipped to answer the question: what exactly did the presence or absence of monasteries matter to economic development? Secondly, the paper will compare these transformations in different times, places and cultures (England, Sweden, the Netherlands and parts of the Holy Roman Empire in the sixteenth century, France and Central Europa about 1800, T'ang China in the ninth century). This comparison may help to establish recurrent patterns and variations and to probe the importance of an intervening variable, namely the role of states. Thirdly, the paper will examine these transformations from various angles, viz. looking at the variety of economic activities undertaken by monasteries as well as at ideas and values connected with these activities and the motives underlying the state (or state-sanctioned) efforts to dissolve religious houses. Such a combination of angles, I suggest, may allow us to get more insight into the actual nature of the relationship between monasteries, economies and states.

Although the results of this assessment can as yet only to a limited extent be expressed in quantitative terms, I believe that the inquiry into the contribution of religious houses to economic development nevertheless can be brought an important step forward by building up the analysis through the following three steps: (a) evaluate the role of monasteries from the point of view of the allocation of resources, (b) evaluate the role of monasteries as suppliers of a particular category of services and (c) evaluate the role of monasteries by examining the alternative uses to which monastic property could be put once the

¹⁵ See note 4.

communities had been dissolved. The next sections will address each of these three issues in turn.

Monasteries and resources

Although the profound sense of shock expressed by Ennin and Wouter Jacobsz. might suggest otherwise, the dissolution of monasteries was not entirely an unexpected event. Both in T'ang China and in early modern Europe, the final assault on monastic communities religious houses was preceded by a long period – varying from a decade to several centuries – in which they were more than once censured, curbed or cut down to size. Religious houses were already under threat before they succumbed to more or less drastic suppression. The main opposing forces usually could be found among governments and secular elites, but rival religious groupings sometimes were instrumental in the downfall of monastic communities, too.

The stock theme of 'temporal' critiques of these communities in T'ang China and early modern Europe was that they laid a claim on people, lands and capital that could better be employed for other purposes. One of the chief objections on the part of governments and secular elites was that the expansion of monastic communities threatened to reduce the tax base of the state and/or to enhance the fiscal burden of other groups in society. An extension of the monastic sector was said to imply a decrease of the amount of property or the number of people that could be taxed.

Monks and nuns in T'ang China were exempted from corvée duties and in principle from all taxes as well. While lands of Buddhist temples and monasteries were probably not exempted from taxation as such, some communities that had received official recognition from the Emperor

did enjoy fiscal privileges.¹⁶ The more people entered into religious orders or the more land was transferred to fiscally privileged religious houses, the smaller the reservoir of human or landed resources that could be mobilized by the state for labour services, military duties or the levying of taxes and the heavier the burden that weighed on those groups of the population and those parts of the territory that did not enjoy complete or partial exemption. What made the issue even more poignant was the fact that monastic lands were of better than average quality (hence the higher estimated share of the yield) and were considered to be 'consecrated and inalienable' property of monastic communities. Religious houses were taken to be exclusive owners of their landed assets, of which they could dispose as they saw fit.¹⁷

Long before Emperor Wu-Tsung's clampdown of the 840s, voices were heard inside and outside the imperial bureaucracy demanding to restrict or reverse the rampant growth of the Buddhist clergy and monastic communities. The T'ang government from the early eighth century onwards more than once drew up plans, and several times actually issued decrees, to laicize large numbers of monks and nuns, purge monastic houses from 'illegally ordained' monks and put restrictions on the construction of new monasteries. In the 830s, steps were already taken for a drastic reduction in the number of clergy.¹⁸

Similar actions, for comparable reasons, were undertaken in early modern Europe. Long before Calvinist rebels in the Low Countries began to capture and demolish monastic houses, for instance, the Burgundian state tried to check the expansion of monastic property and enhance the share of the fiscal burden borne by religious communities. Duke Philip the Good in the mid-fifteenth century issued several decrees for Holland and

¹⁶ Ch'en, 'Economic background', 72, 97-98, Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 30-32, 43-46.

¹⁷ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 66-73, 92-93, 140.

¹⁸ Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 51, 92, 106-114.

Zeeland that set limits on the amount of property which monastic houses were allowed to possess, put restrictions on the foundation of new monasteries and made rules for the handling of endowments to religious houses or individual monks and nuns. Monastic houses were pressured to contribute money to the ducal purse. Philip's Burgundian and Habsburg successors continued this assertive policy regarding monastic institutions. The rationale underlying their measures was, as in China, the idea that the state should call a halt to the erosion of the tax base and should seek to spread the burden of taxation across a wider section of the population.¹⁹

The critique on the privileged fiscal status of religious houses grew more widespread and intense in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In Catholic Europe, one state after another proceeded to take measures to obtain more precise information about the actual size of monastic property and income, to reduce the number of monks, nuns and monastic houses and to counter the removal of taxable land to the status of 'mortmain' through transfers to religious institutions.²⁰ For many governments, the sheer amount of wealth held by monasteries and convents in the form of a apparently massive stock of inalienable property assumed almost mythical proportions. The ruling elite of Venice seemed at the time to be so obsessed by the matter that, if a contemporary

¹⁹ A.G. Jongkees, *Staat en kerk in Holland en Zeeland onder de Bourgondische hertogen 1425-1477* (Groningen 1942) 80-103, 146-159, 187-205, D.de Man, 'Maatregelen door de middeleeuwse overheden genomen ten opzichte van het oeconomisch leven der kloosterlingen en leden van congregaties', *Bijdragen tot de Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde*, 5^{de} reeks, 8 (1921), 277-292, I.H. van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters en begijnhof in Amsterdam van de 14^e tot het eind der 16^e eeuw* (Amsterdam 1941) 36-40.

²⁰ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, chapter 7, Dietmar Stutzer, *Klöster als Arbeitgeber um 1800. Die bayerischen Klöster als Unternehmenseinheiten und ihre Sozialsysteme zur Zeit der Säkularisation 1803* (Göttingen 1986) 20-52, P. Vladimir Radonić, *Die Klosterreform in Venedig (1767-1770)* (Sibenik 1935), 16-17, 27-64

satirist is to be believed, the issue of mortmain loomed larger than all the woes that befell the old Republic: ²¹

Rotten past and present – think of the mortmain
Trade extinguished – think of the mortmain
All subjects discontented – think of the mortmain
Friuli nearly in revolt – think of the mortmain
Tribute to Barbary – think of the mortmain
Despised by foreign rulers – think of the mortmain

Etc.

However, the ways in which monasteries in T'ang China and early modern Europe were perceived as an economic 'problem' were not in all respects alike. Some differences can be noted as well. The effects of the expansion of monasteries on the size of tax base and the supply of labour were probably felt more acutely in China, because the majority of Buddhist monks were recruited from the tax-paying farming population. Most Buddhist monks were former peasants.²² As monks normally did not till the soil themselves, a rise in the number of monks meant both a decline in the number of taxpayers and a contraction of the labouring population. Labour on monastic lands was in fact largely carried out by slaves and other sorts of dependents.²³ Although monks in Europe left the cultivation of the fields mostly to dependents (lay brothers, tenants, wage labourers and the like) as well²⁴, the growth of religious houses had less direct consequences for the tax base than in China, because a larger proportion of the monastic population was recruited from the nobility, who

²¹ Quoted in Radonić, *Die Klosterreform in Venedig*, 14 note 53.

²² The origins of nuns may have been different, at least in the early phase of Buddhism in China. The majority of nuns singled out as examples in the *Lives of nuns* analyzed by Valentina Georgieva were of 'high class' birth, see her *Buddhist nuns in China from the Six Dynasties to the Tang* (Leiden 2000), 85-87, 188-192, 227.

²³ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 12, 95-96, 115-116, 126-129.

²⁴ See for example Stutzer, *Klöster als Arbeitgeber um 1800*, 137-146.

enjoyed fiscal privileges anyway.²⁵ There were variations, of course. No monastic house in England, for example, as David Knowles pointed out, ever attempted 'to make itself into a preserve for the sons of noble or at least knightly families', as happened not seldom on the Continent.²⁶ Mendicant friars had often different origins than monks belonging to other religious orders. Cloisters in cities drew on a different pool of recruits than convents and monasteries in the countryside. Yet, a substantial inflow of sons and daughters from the aristocracy remained a constant element of the European monastic landscape until the end of the eighteenth century.²⁷

Other differences between perceptions of the role of monasteries in T'ang China and early modern Europe had to do with the hoarding of scarce materials and human resources and the alleged unfair competition by monasteries as industrial producers. While monastic houses in Europe throughout the ages withdrew vast quantities of precious metals from circulation by preserving them in embodied form as religious objects, they were for this practice never attacked by public authorities in the same way as were Buddhist monasteries in T'ang China for the accumulation of copper. In the eyes of the imperial government, the demand for copper from Buddhist monasteries and temples as materials for religious images and statues was in the late eighth and early ninth century crowding out the demand from the government for copper as raw material for the production of coins. It was for this reason that the government banned the use of copper as material for Buddhist religious

²⁵ This does not mean that a connection between monasteries and the nobility was lacking in China. Under the T'ang, the 'imperial nobility' and high officials donated lands to monasteries 'to ensure the perpetuation of family cults', see Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 120-122, Ch'en, 'Economic background', 95-96.

²⁶ David Knowles, *The religious orders in England*, vol.II, *The End of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1955)

²⁷ Cf.. for example Lars-Anne Norborg, *Storföretaget Vadstena kloster. Studier in senmedeltida godspolitik och ekonimiförvaltning* (Lund 1958), 81-98 (on medieval

objects already several times before Wu-Tsung eventually dissolved the monasteries altogether and seized the entire stock of copper in their possession.²⁸ China, on the contrary, appears to offer no equivalent to the critique voiced by some 'enlightened' opponents of monasteries in France in the eighteenth century to the effect that the vow of celibacy required by monastic houses led to a limitation of population growth (a remarkable feat, considering the fact that monks and nuns represented a mere 0.3 % of the population in Catholic Europe and the overall proportion of people in Western Europe who never married at all amounted to more than 10 %).²⁹ Neither apparently did China offer a parallel to the complaints made by guilds and town governments in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands that the production for the market by monastic houses of goods like cloth, linen or beer - sometimes as subcontractors for urban entrepreneurs - represented unfair competition for local crafts and trades.³⁰

Monastic houses in T'ang China and early modern Europe thus were charged with a variety of violations of an ideal image of economic efficiency. Monasteries were time and again blamed for impairing an optimal allocation of resources in a multitude of ways. Such at least was the gist of the critique voiced by state officials or secular elites keen on reducing or utterly eliminating the role of monastic communities in economic and social life. But was it true ? Did this negative view of the economic role of monastic houses indeed correspond with reality ? Before we can draw any conclusions about the question to what extent monasteries were a drain on the economy, we should take a look at the other side of the balance as well.

Sweden) and Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 4-7 (on eighteenth-century Catholic Europe).

²⁸ Ch'en, 'Economic background', 88-90.

²⁹ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 171, 237.

³⁰ Jongkees, *Staat en kerk*, 20, 91-103, De Man, 'Maatregelen', 284-286, Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 40-42.

Turning first of all to fiscal aspects, it should be noted that the growth of monasteries not necessarily only exerted a depressing effect on the tax base of the state. While T'ang rulers and officials on the one hand bewailed the reduction of the fiscal base by the expansion of tax-exempt monastic communities, they managed on the other hand to generate new revenue by selling ordination certificates to Buddhist monks and nuns. From the middle of the eighth century onwards the imperial government, in urgent need of extra funds to finance war against legions of rebels, proceeded to raise money from Buddhist clergy by exacting from every newly-ordained monk or nun a official diploma at the price of 'one hundred strings of cash' (= 100 standard *kuan* (copper money)). True, the actual benefit for the state was less than this brief description of the system might suggest. Short-term gains obtained by the massive sale of ordination certificates were after all counterbalanced by the long-term loss of income due to the growth in numbers of tax-exempt people. The number of monks and nuns soared from c.500,000 about 740 to c.700,000 around 830. Revenues from these sales moreover not seldom flowed into the private purse of officials rather than into the imperial treasury.³¹ The spread of ordination certificates, which continued under the Sung, nevertheless meant that the expansion of monastic communities did not merely spell a loss of income to the state.

The T'ang system of turning entries of monks and nuns into a source of revenue for the state did, as far as I know, not have a parallel in early modern Europe. However, monasteries and convents were rarely entirely free from levies or impositions collected by secular authorities. The royal government in Sweden in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries more than once exacted contributions from religious houses in the form of confiscations of silver and, shortly before the start of

³¹ Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 59-61, Ch'en, 'Economic background', 79-81, Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 52-62, 331-332 note 124, 334 note 174 and 175.

dissolution, the billeting of troops.³² In the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands, monasteries and convents by and large successfully resisted attempts by urban, provincial and central governments to curtail their fiscal privileges, but nonetheless repeatedly paid a share in extraordinary levies required by secular authorities on a voluntary, or sometimes compulsory, basis.³³ In England, parliament in 1534 passed a law which authorized the King to enjoy one-tenth of the annual income of each clerical benefice. Local commissions were appointed to make a complete survey of all ecclesiastical incomes, including those of monastic houses. While this general survey, known as the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1535-1536), was originally compiled as an instrument for the royal treasury in collecting revenue from properties which would remain in the hands of the clergy, it eventually served as an excellent basis for the wholesale confiscations that followed.³⁴ In France, the clergy in 1561 formally acknowledged the right of the King to impose taxation on church property. Elsewhere in Catholic Europe, rulers were already increasing taxation on clerical estates in the late eighteenth-century well before the new wave of dissolutions commenced.³⁵

Secondly, transfer of land to monastic houses may have spelled a fiscal loss for the state but could still generate benefits for the economy as a whole. Although monasteries in the eyes of present-day historians no longer possess the status of heroic pioneers of reclamation they used to enjoy in the past (at least in Europe), it nevertheless remains true that they made a not insignificant contribution to in the growth of agrarian

³² Martin Berntson, *Klostren och reformationen. Upplösningen av kloster och konvent i Sverige 1523-1596* (Skellefteå 2003) 69-75.

³³ Jongkees, *Staat en kerk*, 18-20, 68-80, 146-147, 158-159, 202-204, James D. Tracy, *Holland under Habsburg rule 1506-1566. The formation of a body politic* (Berkeley 1990) 149.

³⁴ David Knowles, *The religious orders in England*, vol. III, *The Tudor Age* (Cambridge 1959) 241-244, Joyce Youings, *The dissolution of the monasteries* (London 1971) 33-39.

³⁵ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 103, 186.

production, either directly, by the exploitation of large farming estates, or indirectly, by letting out part of their land to tenants. Even if monastic houses in China and in Europe often received land that had already been brought into cultivation and thus did not face the arduous task of clearing the wilderness themselves³⁶, they *did* aid in increasing the area of arable land and they *did* help to enhance the total supply of agricultural produce available for consumption by society at large. Monasteries rarely produced only for their own needs. They were geared to regional (and sometimes long-distance) markets and were to some extent managed in an entrepreneurial fashion. Lands were bought and sold, leases altered, rents changed, wage rates adapted, the product mix transformed and so on.³⁷ Whether managers of monastic properties always took the right entrepreneurial decisions, is another story. Historians have noted, for example, that rents on lands of monastic houses in the Northern Netherlands in the sixteenth-century sometimes were slow to follow the general trends of rents and prices.³⁸ Monastic managers did apparently not always realize the maximum profit on their properties. But such entrepreneurial ‘underachievement’ by monastic houses was not necessarily detrimental to the economy as a whole. The monasteries’ loss was after all the tenants’ gain.

Thirdly, part of the income and wealth accumulated by monastic houses was recycled into the economy. The overall size of these flows

³⁶ Ch'en, 'Economic background', 92-95, Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 116-137, J.A. Mol, 'Aduard 1192-1594. Een korte geschiedenis van het klooster', *Een klooster, drie dorpen. Geschiedenis van Aduard, Den Ham en Den Horn* (Bedum 1992) 19-36, esp.21, B.J.P. van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer van de abdij Mariënweerd (1129-1592)* (Hilversum 1993) 270-275.

³⁷ See e.g. Ch'en, 'Economic background', 96, Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 129-141, Norborg, *Storföretaget Vadstena kloster*, chapter VI, X-XIV, J.G.M. Sanders, *Waterland als woestijn. Geschiedenis van het kartuizerklooster 'Het Hollandse Huis' bij Geertruidenberg 1336-1595* (Hilversum 1990), 83-110, Van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer*, passim.

³⁸ Mol, 'Aduard 1192-1594', 34, Van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer*, 573, Hertog, W.E. den, *De abdij van Loosduinen. Cisterciënzerinnenklooster van 1229-1572* (Den Haag 1997) 198-199.

can not be put in quantitative terms, but the mere fact that they existed is beyond doubt. Money flowed back from the monastic sector into society at large through the purchase of consumer goods, the payment of wages, the extension of credit or the provision of charity. Some of these flows were more common than others. Dispensation of alms or purchase of consumer goods (like wine, incense or fuel) were both in China and in Europe a much more normal part of the pattern of monastic expenditure than, say, lending to private individuals. The maximum range and extent of these flows appear to have been reached in T'ang China and late-eighteenth century Bavaria.³⁹ Furthermore, religious houses often supplied public services to society like shelter for travellers, care of the sick and education of the young. Bavaria was in this respect, again, an extreme case. Bavarian monasteries were not only large employers (around 1800, each monastic houses had on average 66 full time and 96 part time paid employees) but also provided a kind of apprenticeship tracks. Apprentices made up some 25-30 % of all craftsmen in monastic employment.⁴⁰

As far as the allocation of resources is concerned, the balance thus by no means unambiguously tilts against the monastic houses. The evidence available so far does not permit to conclude that the costs of monasteries and convents, viewed from a macro-economic perspective, invariably exceeded their benefits. Monastic houses evidently had economic drawbacks in several respects but brought various material advantages as well. An exact computation of the 'pros and cons' is at the moment not possible, and perhaps never will be. Given the sheer scale and pace of monastic expansion, and the relatively high share of recruits from the farming population, it could be hypothesized that the economic

³⁹ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, chapter 4 and 6, Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 4-5, Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision', Stutzer, *Klöster als Arbeitgeber um 1800*, chapters 8 and 9.

⁴⁰ Stutzer, *Klöster als Arbeitgeber um 1800*, 138-139, 141-142.

impact of monastic houses in material terms, both at the negative and the positive side, may have been greater in T'ang China than in early modern Europe, but this conjecture can as yet not be proven.

Monasteries and the market for spiritual services

For a proper assessment of the role of monastic houses in economic life, however, we should not exclusively look at material variables. The principal function of monastic communities was (and is) after all not to create material wealth but to serve a more lofty, immaterial purpose. Monasteries and convents are in essence means to a higher end. If we would restrict our analysis to purely earthly factors, the balance would be seriously anachronistic, incomplete and, consequently, distorted.

Monastic houses are meant to serve as continuous links to the world beyond the grave. Their mission is to care for the spiritual welfare of their inmates as well as for the souls of the human community at large, by means of prayers, hymns, masses, burnings of candles or incense and other forms of religious rituals. Monasteries and convents thus provide space and personnel for a particular kind of services. Whether these spiritual services in secular eyes are valuable or not, is not the point at issue. What matters from an economic point of view, is the actual extent of consumer demand. To put it bluntly: does the supply of spiritual services offered by monasteries respond to the taste of consumers ? This is evidently a historical question, too. The extent of consumer demand for spiritual services provided by religious houses is not an immutable given. It can vary in course of time. Economic historians should naturally take these aspects in their assessments into account.

Measuring demand for spiritual services from monastic houses in the past is a tall order, but not beforehand impossible. Spiritual services

had a price, which can, in principle, be traced. People were after all prepared to reward monks or nuns for their services in money or in kind. This remuneration was for a large part incorporated in the endowments of monasteries and convents itself. The landed properties which religious houses received at their foundation or in a later stage of their existence, were earmarked for the maintenance of the monks or nuns, who were expected to perform particular services (for example, say prayers or read masses) for the care of the souls of their donors in return. Monasteries and convents could also offer such services to other 'consumers' than the original donors on a regular or an ad hoc basis. Religious houses in fact derived a part of their income from the rewards for these very activities. For mendicant friars, these revenues were even the principal source of income. Changes in the size of such revenues therefore may say something about the extent of demand for spiritual services provided by monastic communities. As religious houses of a given denomination possessed no monopoly on 'the market of spiritual welfare'⁴¹ but often competed with each other or with other groups of 'suppliers' (such as secular clergy of the same church, or clergy of a different denomination), reliable inferences can not be drawn on the basis of evidence about a few monasteries alone. An inquiry into spiritual services provided by religious houses ideally should cover changes in the market as a whole

The evidence available so far does not suggest that the demand for spiritual services provided by religious houses generally had already diminished to a vanishing point before the wholesale dissolution of monasteries occurred. Apart from their income from landed property and commercial operations, Buddhist monks in T'ang China received plenty of gifts and offerings from all sorts of people for devotional reasons. This practice appears to have persisted right up to the start of Wu-Tsung's

⁴¹ J.A.Mol, 'Kruisheren op de Friese zieleheilsmarkt in de 15^e eeuw. De vestiging van de kloosters te Sneek en Franeker', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 16 (1990)

campaign against Buddhism in the 840s, and was resumed once his measures had been revoked.⁴² Europe in the time of the Reformation in this respect did not show an unambiguous decline either. Whereas the Northern Netherlands from the second quarter of the sixteenth century onwards saw a dramatic decline in legacies and gifts to religious houses and a concomitant fall in the number of monks and nuns (particularly in towns)⁴³, monasteries and popular religion in England in the 1530s were still intimately linked by the widespread practice of popular visits to monastic shrines. During the popular rising in the North of England in 1536-1537, known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, 'the one constant in all the discussions and petitions' of the insurgents was that 'the dissolved monasteries were to be restored'⁴⁴ Recent research on Sweden suggests that monastic houses on the eve of the Reformation still continued to fulfil their role as *bönefabriker* ('prayer factories') for the benefit of themselves and wide sections of the population.⁴⁵ In Catholic Europe in the eighteenth century, Derek Beales has insisted, 'monasteries in general attracted a significant proportion of the large sums of money left by the faithful in their wills to be expended on prayer and Masses for their souls', although this flow in some countries (notably France) and among some social groups (notably elites) showed signs of contraction after c.1750.⁴⁶

From the point of view of supply and demand of spiritual services, the wholesale dissolution of monastic structures in T'ang China and early

327-349, esp.327-328.

⁴² Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 195-210.

⁴³ Wiebe Bergsma, 'Church, state and people', in: Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds.). *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective* (Cambridge 1995) 196-228, esp. 214, Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum 2005) 161, Mol, 'Aduard 1192-1594', 34.

⁴⁴ Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars. Traditional religion in England c.. 1400 - c. 1480* (New Haven/London 1992) 384-385, Knowles, *The religious orders in England*, vol. III, *The Tudor Age* (Cambridge 1959) 320-331 esp.322..

⁴⁵ Berntson, *Klostren och reformationen*, 53-56, 60.

⁴⁶ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 28, 144, 292.

modern Europe thus did not make much economic sense. At the eve of dissolution, monastic communities as such (as distinct from individual convents or monasteries) still fulfilled a major role in satisfying the persistent demand from a wider consumer public for spiritual services, even if this demand at particular times and places, especially among elites, was no longer as high as it used to be in the past. The full-scale dismantlement of religious houses must have implied a significant loss in welfare for the 'consumer public' of religious believers, who at the time both in China and in Europe constituted the vast majority of the population. If the campaign against monastic houses yielded any tangible economic benefit at all, it was primarily a benefit for the state or for specific interest groups, which had the first picking of the spoils, rather than for society at large. Austria under the regime of Emperor Joseph II appears to have been the only case where an almost optimal solution was found between the demand from ordinary consumers and the strategic aims of the state. By combining a partial dissolution of the monasteries with a reinvestment of funds thus released into an expanded supply of spiritual services by secular clergy under the aegis of the state (to be discussed in more detail below), the Emperor managed to enhance in nearly all his territories (the Austrian Netherlands excepted) the power of the state without doing grave harm to the spiritual needs of his subjects.⁴⁷

Alternative uses of monastic property

Finally, let us play the devil's advocate. Let us imagine a world in which no monasteries existed. Leaving the possible benefit of monastic houses for the spiritual welfare of consumers for the moment aside, could monastic property have been employed in economically more useful ways

⁴⁷ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 227.

for society at large if it had been in the hands of other actors than religious communities ? What were the alternative uses to which property held by monastic houses could have been put ? And would these uses have made a difference for economic development of societies as a whole ?

This approach to the question of the contribution of monasteries to economic development is of course not as counterfactual as it seems. After all, much monastic property *was* eventually put to other uses and information about what actually happened after monastic houses were dissolved is by no means scarce. The fate of monastic property after dissolution therefore gives us some realistic insight into what alternative uses were, historically, conceivable and feasible. Once the alternative uses have been mapped out, we can give a tentative answer to the answer to the question whether these were indeed more conducive to economic growth than the uses of monastic property if the dissolution had not occurred.

The prime agent of the dissolution of the monasteries was invariably the state. Although the actual job of destruction was sometimes carried out by irregular bands like the Sea Beggars during the Dutch Revolt or the mobs in Revolutionary France, it was always the state that set up the administrative machinery for the process, supervised the execution and divided the spoils. However, the fact that the state took the lead in the dismantlement of monasteries does not imply that all monastic property was confiscated by the government, that all confiscated monastic property remained in possession of the state or that all property formerly belonging to monastic houses was re-employed for secular purposes. In all these respects, quite interesting variations can be observed among the cases from T'ang China and early modern Europe discussed in this paper.

One variant is represented by Wu-Tsung's China, Henry VIII's England, Revolutionary France and the Electorate (later Kingdom) of Bavaria in the Napoleonic Era. In these four cases, all property of the monastic houses was confiscated by the state and it was entirely used for the benefit of the state. Emperor Wu-Tsung in 845 seized all the landed estates of Buddhist monasteries, turned their 150,000 slaves into tax-paying citizens, gave their bells and images made of copper to the commissioner of salt and iron for use in the production of coins, assigned the images made of iron to the regional authorities to be employed in the casting of agricultural implements and ordered the melting of images made of gold, silver and other precious metals into ingots to be collected by the Department of Public Revenue. A small part of the confiscated lands was allocated for the maintenance of almshouses that had formerly been administered by monks.⁴⁸ Between 1536 and 1540, all the landed estates and movable property of the monastic houses in England passed into the hands of the Crown, to be used as a source of revenue for the state. In 1789-1790, the National Assembly of France abolished nearly all traditional religious orders and declared that all ecclesiastical property would henceforth be 'at the disposal of the nation'. In the wake of the expansion of France, the Bavarian government in 1802-1803 dissolved all monasteries and convents in Altbayern and the Oberpfalz and appropriated their assets for the benefit of the state.⁴⁹ The main difference between these cases was, that in England, France and Bavaria, in contrast with T'ang China, almost all the land seized by the state from monastic houses was quickly sold to private buyers. More than two-thirds of the monastic lands confiscated by the Tudor authorities had already changed hands by 1547. Established local families, mostly of

⁴⁸ Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 131, 133.

⁴⁹ Hoskins, *Age of plunder*, 131-133, Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 254-257, Weiss, *Säkularisation*, 10-17.

gentry stock, made up the vast majority of the new owners.⁵⁰ In France, the bulk of the monastic lands, like the rest of the *biens nationaux*, in a few years time ended up in the hands of bourgeois and well-to-do peasants.⁵¹ Although the English and French treasuries doubtless benefited from the massive disposal of freely acquired properties, the rapid rate at which huge amounts of land were thrown on the market presumably also implied that the total yield of the operation was lower than it would have been if the sales had proceeded at a more leisurely pace. The short-term need for cash trumped the uncertain profits of long-term investment.

Thanks to the meticulous administration kept by government officials at the time, the gap between *ex ante* and *ex post* assessments of the yield of confiscations of monastic property in the case of Bavaria is fairly exactly known. Contemporary experts put the gross value of all properties of monastic houses in Altbayern and the Oberpfalz at the time of confiscation at about 43,615,000 florin. A large part of this property was between 1803 and 1812 sold on the market, without any sort of rigging on the part of the state. The gross yield of this operation amounted to c. 20 million florin. However, the net yield was much lower, as debts, pension arrangements for former nuns and monks and so on had to be taken into account as well. The final account, drawn up in 1825, mentioned a net result of slightly more than 5 million florin. To put the matter in perspective, Eberhard Weiss pointed out that this amount was equivalent to the total annual costs of the French occupation army encamped in Bavaria in 1800, or slightly more than 4.5 % of the entire public debt of the Bavarian state in 1804. And equally significantly: it was many times

⁵⁰ Hoskins, *Age of plunder*, 135-138, Overton, *Agricultural revolution*, 168-169.

⁵¹ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 304-305.

lower the total amount received by the state from the monasteries in times of need during the eighteenth century on a partly voluntary basis.⁵²

Another variant of the uses of former monastic property can be found in countries in Continental Europe that in the sixteenth century changed over to the side of the Reformation. While Lutheran Sweden, the Lutheran states in the Holy Roman Empire or the Calvinist United Provinces witnessed an almost complete dismantling of monastic structures in their territories before 1600, they proceeded with the dissolution in a different manner than Tudor England or the Catholic states at the end of the eighteenth century. In these Reformed countries, the dissolution of monasteries was much less driven by the raw ambitions of state making than in the cases discussed above. Monasteries and convents were not simply confiscated by the state and former assets of monastic houses were not merely re-used for secular purposes. What these Continental countries in the time of the Reformation had in common, was not only that the process of dissolution and was carried out more gradually, but that claims to monastic property by other parties than the state were taken into consideration, too, and that former assets of monastic communities could be re-employed for a variety of uses, including religious ones. The coming of the Reformation often meant that monastic property remained earmarked *ad pios usus* (as the phrase went), albeit different ones than before.

In Sweden, where the process of dissolution lasted altogether more than seventy years, the landed estates of monasteries and convents were partly reclaimed by the nobility (with the argument that these had formed part of noble patrimonia, before being donated to the church), partly taken under the control of the Crown. Precious metals found in the religious

⁵² Stutzer, *Klöster als Arbeitgeber um 1800*, 102-110, 380, Weiss, *Säkularisation*, 51-54.

houses were confiscated by the King as well.⁵³ For the German state of Hessen-Kassel, whose Landgraves proved to be staunch supporters of Lutheranism since the 1520s, it has been calculated that in the period up to 1590 38 % of the revenues of the assets of the convents and monasteries expropriated by the state were used for administrative purposes, 3 % for rewards to faithful servants and 59 % for expenditure on education and the maintenance of clergy, parishes and hospitals. A substantial amount in the last category was set apart for the upkeep of a new university in Marburg, which was intended to serve as a bulwark of the Reformed religion.⁵⁴ The bulk of the newly-acquired income of the state in Hessen-Kassel thus was spent for 'pious uses'.

The Calvinist Netherlands showed a kind of mixture between the Swedish pattern and that of Hessen-Kassel. Like in Sweden, part of the monastic estates in the Netherlands were after the dissolution reclaimed by the nobility, and for the very same reasons. The property of the former nunneries of Leeuwenhorst and Rijnsburg in the southern part of Holland, for example, was in 1586 brought under the control of the deputation of the nobility in the Estates of Holland, to be used for the upkeep of unmarried noble ladies.⁵⁵ Properties of other religious houses situated in the countryside came under the administration of the Estates of the various provinces that constituted the Dutch Republic. As in Hessen-Kassel, the revenues of these properties were mainly allocated *ad pios usos*. 'Pious uses' were conceived in a very broad way, though. Apart from generating means to pay pensions to former monks and nuns, salaries to Reformed ministers and wages to village schoolmasters and to

⁵³ Bentson, *Klostren och reformationen*, ch.. 4 and 5

⁵⁴ D.W. Wolff, *Die Säkularisierung und Verwendung der Stifts- und Klostergüter in Hessen-Kassel unter Philipp dem Grossmütigen und Wilhelm IV. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Reformationsgeschichte* (Gotha 1913) 13, 132-161, 368-384.

⁵⁵ J..F. Van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtstoestand der geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen in Holland na de Reformatie* (Amsterdam 1910) 228-238, H. van

defray outlay on newly-founded universities (Leiden, Groningen and Franeker), which, like Marburg, were first and foremost intended as training centres for Reformed clergy, the erstwhile monastic properties also served as sources of funding for such purposes as financing the war against Spain or keeping the West-India Company afloat, which, purportedly, were essential for the defence of the cause of the True Religion, too.⁵⁶ Sales of former monastic estates began hesitantly after a few years, and became a long-drawn out affair. The land market was not suddenly flooded with former properties of religious houses. The last remnants of monastic landed estates in Friesland were not disposed of until the 1640s and in Groningen not until the third quarter of the eighteenth century.⁵⁷ Properties of monastic houses located in cities, by contrast, largely remained outside the jurisdiction of provincial Estates and came under the control of town governments instead. Their revenues were employed for 'pious uses', too, which were equally generously defined as in the case of monastic estates managed by the provincial governments. The city of Deventer, for instance, from the 1610s onwards began to spend money generated from former monastic properties on the outlay of fortifications, harbour improvement and dike building. In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the distinction in urban financial

Nierop, *Van ridders tot regenten. De Hollandse adel in de zestiende en de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1984) 139-141..

⁵⁶ Van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtstoestand*, 35-71, 209-228, A.J. Maris, *De reformatie der geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen in Gelderland, in het bijzonder in het Kwartier van Nijmegen* (The Hague 1939) 33-39, 42-48, 56-69, L..J. van Apeldoorn, *De kerkelijke goederen in Friesland. Beschrijving van de ontwikkeling van het recht omtrent de kerkelijke goederen in Friesland tot 1795* (Leeuwarden 1915), vol. II, 369-431, E.H. Roelfsema, *De klooster- en proosdijgoederen in de provincie Groningen* (Groningen 1928) 72-79.

⁵⁷ Van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtstoestand*, 249-254, R..Liesker and W. Fritschy (eds.), *Gewestelijke financiën ten tijde van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden*.vol. 4, *Holland 1572-1795* (The Hague 2004) 53-54, Maris, *Reformatie der geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen*, 214-245, Van Apeldoorn, *Kerkelijke goederen*, vol. II, 422-423, Roelfsema, *Klooster- en proosdijgoederen*, 76-100.

records between former monastic properties and other categories of public properties became in fact ever more vague.⁵⁸

A third variant of the uses of former monastic property is represented by Austria at the end of the eighteenth century. The distinctive features of this case were that the monastic structures were only partially dismantled and that the resources thus released were entirely re-directed to 'pious uses'. Emperor Joseph II in the 1780s suppressed about one third of all monasteries and convents in the central Austrian lands and Hungary. The brunt of his attack was borne by the houses of the so-called 'contemplative orders', which in the Emperor's view fulfilled no 'useful function' for society, such as providing education, charity or spiritual care. The revenues of the landed estates of the dissolved convents and monasteries that were not sold flowed into a special 'Religious Fund', created in 1782, as did the proceeds of lands and movable goods of other houses that *were* actually disposed of. The resources of the Fund were used to pay the pensions of former nuns and monks, finance the creation of new, secular clergy and contribute to the maintenance of newly-established seminaries. However, two-thirds of the monastic houses in the Austrian lands were never dissolved at all. In contrast with other countries in Europe today, Austria has quite a few monasteries that have been uninterruptedly in existence since the Middle Ages. Gous. The Religious Fund, incidentally, still operates in support of the Austrian church.⁵⁹

Were some alternative uses of former monastic property more conducive to economic growth than others ? Derek Beales has taken issue with the supposedly dominant view that 'the dedication of so many

⁵⁸ Van Beeck Calkoen, *Onderzoek naar den rechtstoestand*, 55, 255-276, Van Apeldoorn, *Kerkelijke goederen*, vol.II, 432-472, H. de Beer, 'Deventer en de reformatie der geestelijke goederen 1591-1650', *Deventer Jaarboek*, 1991, 22-34.

⁵⁹ P.G.M. Dickson, 'Joseph's II reshaping of the Austrian Church', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993) 89-114, esp. 107-112, Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 192-196, 205-210.

people and so much property to monasteries must have stood in the way of economic and social progress'. 'Historically the case is not straightforward', he claimed. While 'at the time of the French Revolution the economic advance of Protestant Britain already stood out and was ascribed by many commentators partly to the expropriation of the monasteries under Henry VIII', France, 'having carried through the most drastic of all the secularisations (...) suffered economically during the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, fell further behind Britain and proved notoriously slow to develop industrially in the nineteenth century'.⁶⁰ A rejoinder to this argument about the doubtful influence of the dissolution of the monasteries might be, that the question can not be decided unless farm size is taken into account as well. It could be argued that in England, in contrast with France after the Revolution, the sale of monastic lands in England contributed to an increase in farm size, which may have facilitated a rise in agricultural productivity.⁶¹ This Brennerian argument, however, has been forcefully attacked by Philip Hoffman in his study on the rural sector in France between 1450 and 1815. Hoffman frankly calls the assumption that 'farm size determines productivity' a 'grievous error'.

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The extended comparison in time and space which I have undertaken in this paper moreover suggests that the relationship between monasteries and economic growth was even more complex than Beales assumed. In China, where the dissolution of monastic houses took place long before Henry VIII was born, economic growth began indeed much earlier than in Europe. But the attack on Buddhism by Emperor Wu-Tsung in the 840s was not the final act. The sweeping measures he had enacted were discarded soon after his death. Many Buddhist monasteries were

⁶⁰ Beales, *Prosperity and plunder*, 305.

⁶¹ Cf. the debate about changes in rural social structure in England between 1500 and 1850, Overton, *Agricultural revolution*, 170-174.,

restored (although not with all their former possessions returned⁶³) and Buddhist monastic life thrived for centuries thereafter. An important difference with the previous period was that landed properties of monastic houses increasingly concentrated in the South, and became on average larger in size. 'Under the Sung and Yüan', Jacques Gernet has stated, 'large Buddhist communities and large landed estates became the rule'.⁶⁴ Restructuring of monastic property was perhaps no less conducive to economic growth than the wholesale dismantlement of monastic houses. The other cases discussed above demonstrate that, even when former monastic property was not quickly disposed of to private buyers (as happened in England, France or Bavaria) but was partly returned to noble families or was re-employed for 'pious uses', economic growth did not necessarily suffer as a result. The Netherlands is a prime example. Although the dissolution of the monasteries in this country (except in the province of Groningen) did not bring about a material change in the average size of landed properties⁶⁵, the economic performance of the Dutch Republic in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was certainly not worse than that of Tudor and Stuart England. Yet, the different experience of Sweden, Hessen-Kassel and Austria before the mid-nineteenth century shows that such alternative uses of monastic property did not perforce make a manifest contribution to economic growth either.

⁶² Philip T. Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society. The French countryside 1450-1815* (Princeton 1996) chapter 5 esp. 190.

⁶³ Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 319 note 34.

⁶⁴ Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 136-150, Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese society*, 140-141.

⁶⁵ B.J.P. van Bavel, 'Structures of landownership, mobility of land and farm sizes. Diverging developments in the northern part of the Low Countries, c.1300-c.1650', in: B.J.P. van Bavel and P. Hoppenbrouwers (eds.), *Landholding and landtransfer in the North Sea Area (Late Middle Ages – 19th century)* (Turnhout 2004) 131-148, esp.136.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the issue of the role of monastic houses in economic development from three different angles: the role of monasteries in the allocation of resources, the role of monasteries as suppliers of spiritual services and the alternative uses to which monastic property could be employed. For each perspective, the moment of dissolution served as a kind of benchmark. Although the empirical material discussed above is still somewhat too fragmentary and incomplete to allow any firm conclusions, a few remarks by way of conclusion can nevertheless be made.

The question whether monasteries had a stimulating or retarding effect on economic development (and conversely, whether dissolution has been 'bad' or 'good' for economic growth) can not be answered, in general, either in the affirmative or in the negative. The outcome depends on an array of variables. What I have tried to do in this paper, is to identify some of the variables that in this regard appear to be relevant, such as the extent of 'crowding out' of resources, the measure of tax exemption enjoyed by monasteries and monks, the manner of exploitation of monastic lands, the size of demand for spiritual services provided by religious houses or the kind of alternative uses to which former monastic property was put, and then to make some tentative assessments about the impact of these variables in different times and places..

Comparing T'ang China and early modern Europe, similarities stand out more clearly than differences. Insofar as the role of monasteries in economic development, or the process of dissolution, showed any geographical or chronological variations, the most interesting and significant variations occurred within Europe or within China in the course of time, rather than between these two large spatial units as such. Examples of such internal variations were the special path followed by late eighteenth-century Austria, the interference of the urban factor in the

case of the Low Countries before and after dissolution or the shifts in monastic property in China after the middle of the ninth century. The most relevant difference between T'ang China and early modern Europe was presumably, I suggested, that the sheer scale and pace of monastic expansion and the relatively high recruitment of monks from the ranks of the farming population in China may have entailed that the economic impact of monasteries in mid-T'ang China was greater than in early modern Europe. Monasteries seem to have become a more weighty or perhaps 'disturbing' factor in the Chinese economy in the middle of the ninth century than at any time in Europe between 1500 and 1800.

Last but not least: analyzing the role of monastic houses in economic development in a comparative manner has, I think, proved to be a useful way to bring the relationship between culture and economy more sharply into focus. And it has never been necessary to mention Max Weber.