

Spiritual Capital:  
Definitions, Applications, and New Frontiers

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The notion that something is gained from religious beliefs and involvement is hardly new or surprising. Indeed, the idea that people receive benefits from belonging to religious organizations seems especially obvious in nations where participation is entirely voluntary. Yet, the concept of spiritual or religious capital promises to offer several advantages. The most obvious is an increased precision in describing what is being acquired and accumulated. But the far greater promise is that the concept will offer increased explanation when placed within a larger theoretical framework.

This brief essay will introduce current definitions for religious capital and offer examples of how the concept has been used to explain religious commitment and organizational change. For now, I will *not* explore the effects of religious capital on secular behaviors or beliefs, such as the relationships between religious capital and civic involvement or religious capital and morality. Instead, I will confine my attention to how religious capital is related to the production of religion by individuals and organizations. How does religious capital help explain religious consumption and changes in religious organizations? How does religious capital explain previous findings and what are the new propositions that are generated by this approach?

### Defining Spiritual Capital

The initial definition for religious capital was derived from Gary Becker's household production and human capital approach. Laurence Iannaccone (1990) argued that just as the production of household commodities was enhanced by the skills known as human capital, the production of religious practice and religious satisfaction was enhanced by religious human capital. He defined religious human capital as "skills and experiences specific to one's religion, includ[ing] religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendships with fellow worshippers." Thus, knowledge, familiarity, and friendships specific to a given religion helped individuals to produce religious commodities that they defined as valuable.

Rod Stark and I (Stark and Finke, 2000) offer two revisions to this definition. First, we remove friendships from the concept of religious capital. For the sake of clarity and precision, and for consistency with other theoretical work in the social sciences, we include the capital of friendships and other social networks under social capital. This allows us to distinguish between capital that is unique to religion and capital that can be acquired by joining any organization

(Finke and Dougherty, 2002). Second, we add a component that moves beyond the knowledge and familiarity of religion to emotional attachment. Although we think that the learning of a religion is important, the religious experiences often form an emotional bond that greatly enhances the productive capacity of religious capital.

Hence, our final definition includes two parts: *Religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture* (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 120). The “mastery of” refers to the knowledge and familiarity needed to appreciate a religion. To participate fully in any religion requires a mastery of how and when to make the sign of the cross, whether and when to shout Amen, the words to liturgies, blessings, and prayers, passages of scripture, stories and history, music, even jokes. But to fully appreciate a religion requires emotional attachments and experiences that become intrinsic to one's biography. Religious activities such as prayers, rituals, miracles, and mystical experiences, build up over a lifetime, not only increasing confidence in the truth of a religion, but strengthening emotional ties to a specific religion. Together these emotional attachments and the mastering of a religion become investments that build up over time and constitute religious capital. This capital helps to explain the religious activity and satisfaction of individuals.

#### Applications at the Micro-level

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) coined the term *cultural capital* to identify the investments or sunk costs that culture represents to each individual. People resist migrating or emigrating, not only to protect social capital, but also to protect their cultural capital. For example, if one is already proficient in French, one maximizes cultural capital by remaining within a French-speaking community rather than moving and having to invest in learning a new language and all of the other essential parts of a new culture. When applied to religion, this leads to a general proposition on religious capital.

*In making religious choices, people will attempt to **conserve** their religious capital*  
(Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 121).

A corollary of this proposition is that the more religious capital people have acquired the more they will seek to conserve their religious capital. In other words, as they learn to master their religion and their emotional attachments to the religion increase, they will avoid activities or relationships that threaten this investment.

This general proposition has generated a series of hypotheses that help to explain both past and recent research findings on religious mobility (see Iannaccone, 1990; Stark and Finke, 2000).

*The greater their religious capital, the less likely people are to either reaffiliate or convert to a new religion.*

*When people reaffiliate or convert to a new religion, they will tend to select an option that maximizes their conservation of religious capital (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 121, 123).*

A long line of previous research, including Darren Sherkat's (1997; 2001) recent series of studies on religious mobility, have supported these hypotheses with the following findings: 1) most individuals remain in their denomination of origin, 2) when they leave they select a denomination that closely resembles their previous affiliation, and 3) those with high levels of religious capital are the least likely to change.

A second series of hypotheses about marriage and religion is directly linked to the household production approach. Iannaccone (1990, p. 301) explains that "a household can produce religious commodities more efficiently when both husband and wife share the same religion." But sharing the same religion requires individuals to either limit their marriage partners to those of the same religion or for one person to change religions. This leads to the following hypotheses.

*Most people will marry within their religious group.  
In mixed religious marriages, spouses usually will be of very similar religious backgrounds, belonging to groups within the same religious tradition.  
Mixed religious marriages are more likely to the degree that one or both spouses lack religious capital (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 124).*

Because it is impossible to successfully transfer all of your religious capital when changing religions, the more individuals have invested in a faith the more they have at risk should they change faiths. When applied to mixed marriages this suggests the following hypothesis.

*When mixed religious marriages occur, the couple maximizes their religious capital when the partner with the lower level of commitment reaffiliates or converts to the religion of the more committed partner (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 125).*

To an outsider the differences across the religious denominations might appear small. After all, are there really any major differences between the many sects of conservative born-again Christians. Yet, for a pentecostal to join another conservative Protestant group could mean abandoning speaking in tongues, a change in the style of worship, and entirely new teachings on the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the daily life of the believer. To the extent that the individual accumulates this distinctive religious capital, these investments will be lost when reaffiliating. This inability to ever fully transfer religious capital raises several additional propositions at the organizational level.

#### Applications at the Organizational Level

Although each religious group holds distinctive features that prevent a complete transfer of religious capital, they vary in their distinctiveness. Most religious groups outline a set of core teachings and practices that are considered essential for full membership in a religious movement (often listed in confessions, catechisms, or summary faith statements). These core teachings are embedded in a unique history, make specific claims to truth about the supernatural, and are typically supported by sacred texts, narratives, divine revelations, and writings from the most respected and charismatic leaders of the movement. Justifying the very existence of the religious organization and often providing distinctive beliefs (e.g., new prophecies, spiritual gifts, worldview) and distinctive practices (e.g., special diets, required prayers, moral codes), these core teachings help to form the unique religious capital offered by the group. Thus, the distinctiveness of the core teachings helps to explain how easily religious capital can be transferred from one denomination to the next.

*To the extent that religious groups provide individuals with religious capital that is inimitable, the religious capital will retain members (Finke, 2003).*

This holds important implications for individuals and organizations. For individuals, this implies that it is not only the amount of religious capital, but also the ability to transfer religious capital that explains defection. For religious organizations, holding unique histories, offering distinctive worship, or laying sole claim to a source of religious authority (e.g., a prophet, institutions), allows them to offer a form of religious capital that others can't provide.

Sherkat's (2001) research on religious switching has found that religious groups that are distinctive from the secular culture and from each other are more likely to retain their members. Although the most distinctive religions are typically the high-tension religions (e.g., sects and cults), he finds that "distinctiveness is protective even among the more ecumenical groups -- as evidenced by Episcopalian's higher retention rates and smaller losses from switching (Sherkat, 2001, p. 1486)." Whether it is the liturgy of the Episcopalians, the rituals of the Catholics, or the unique prophecies of the Mormons, inimitable religious capital serves to retain members. For similar reasons, ethnic religions more effectively retain members. Holding a unique ethnicity, language, folklore, and religious traditions, ethnic religions offer a religious culture without substitute (Finke and Stark, 1992; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001). The challenge for ethnic religions is how they retain their distinctiveness as tradition and language differences fade in later generations (Yang, 1998; 1999; Stark and Finke, 2000). Hence, when denominations hold religious capital that is defined as valuable, but not provided by other religions, this capital serves to retain members.

The inability to transfer religious capital, also helps to explain organization defection and schism.

*When religious groups offer inimitable core teachings, which protect existing religious capital, the chance of a schism is reduced (see Finke and Wittberg, 2000; Miller, 2002; Finke, 2003).*

When core teachings give the religious group unique institutional authority (often tied to ecclesiastical traditions and prophecies), dissident groups are forced to either remain or lose part of their religious heritage. For example, conservative Catholic movements seeking to restore previous traditions are compelled by their very belief structure to remain within the church. Splitting from the formal structure of the Roman Catholic Church would mean abandoning the "one true church" that carries nearly two millennia of church tradition and is the source for Apostolic Succession. For those calling for a revival of past traditions, any attempts to split from the church would deny them the very traditions they seek to restore (Finke and Stark, 1992, p. 273; Dinges, 1995, p. 252-258; Finke and Wittberg, 2000). Therefore, even when their movements fail to win over the church authorities, schism is seldom an attractive option. In sharp contrast, for Baptists stressing the literal interpretation of the Bible and the authority of the local church, schism is always an option, and sometimes a duty.

I should also mention that just as distinctive beliefs and practices can prevent defection, they can also serve as a barrier to entry. For example, the Hare Krishna's provide distinctive religious capital that is difficult to transfer into your local Christian church (e.g., belief in a new sacred text and the practice of new religious rituals). But this same distinctive capital makes it difficult to transfer existing religious capital into the movement. Groups making the most successful appeals ease the transfer of existing religious capital into the movement and then add religious capital that makes defection difficult. The Mormons (or Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints) serve as an example. When appealing to Christians, Mormon missionaries note that they too are Christians and that they too believe in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments of the *Bible*. Hence, for members of other Christian denominations at least a portion of their religious capital can be transferred. But the Mormons also add new elements (e.g., additional sacred texts, new revelations, and a present day prophet) that are distinctive to their group. Thus, *to the extent that religious groups are able to ease entry into the group by accepting existing religious capital and are still able to offer distinctive capital that prevents defections, they will hold a competitive advantage.*

A host of other issues on the relationship between religious capital and organizational change could be raised. For example, how do attempts to preserve existing religious capital contribute to organizational continuity and change? I have argued elsewhere that retaining core teachings serves to preserve the religious capital accrued and valued by existing members (Finke, 2003). Throughout American history the religious organizations sustaining rapid growth have closely guarded the core teachings that preserve members' religious capital as they rapidly introduce other forms of organizational innovation (Finke and Stark, 1992). Preserving religious capital also raises questions about how clergy and laity acquire and accumulate this capital. When clergy acquire religious capital that is distinct from the laity (often through seminary education), the potential for conflict and organizational changes results (See Finke and

Dougherty, 2002). Finally, not only does the religious organization help to determine the type and quantity of religious capital acquired, it also contributes to how effectively this capital produces religious commodities. When other congregational members believe it reinforces the individual's beliefs and when they participate in rituals the collective experience is enhanced. In other words, when religious organizations provide members that share the same emotional attachments, hold the same beliefs, and practice the same rituals, the organization can more effectively produce religious commodities for all (see Stark and Finke, 2000).

### Beyond the Organization

In recent research using the 1998 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) "Religion" module and the 1997 World Values Survey (WVS), Amy Adamczyk and I (2003) found that the religious context of the nation as well as personal religious beliefs and rituals shape individual opinions on morality. We found that when levels of religious ritual and beliefs increased in a nation, the individual's standards for morality also increased, regardless of their own personal beliefs and practices. Although the power of the social context would seem a truism for sociologists, this basic point has often been ignored. With surveys focusing on a single nation, we can easily forget the national context within which these surveys are given. This is especially true in the United States where religious individualism and the separation of church and state are stressed over community and national influences.

If we are to better understand religious capital, however, we also need to address how the social contexts of nation, community, school, and so on influence the acquisition, accumulation, and investments of this capital. For example, is religious capital deemed as more valuable, when it is closely interwoven with the national or local culture? Does the value of religious capital increase when it serves to justify and mobilize resistance to a political threat? How does the social context of immediate networks and the social context of the community or nation shape religious capital and the production of religion?

As I noted in the beginning, the greatest promise of religious or spiritual capital is the application of this concept in a larger theoretical model, not the addition of another buzzword for our conversations. Here I offer a few propositions for explaining the religious production of individuals and organizations. Yet, this brief essay offers only a small sample of the propositions that could be used for explaining religious production and only indirectly touches on how religious or spiritual capital can be used outside of religious organization by individuals or the larger community. I eagerly await the conversations and the research that move us into new arenas.

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