

Researching Spiritual Capital: Promises and Pitfalls

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In the United States, highly religious people tend to live longer, have fewer health and mental problems, steal less, volunteer more time, and give away more money than others. Even when other relevant factors are controlled for statistically, these differences persist. Moreover, in many cases the religiosity of the community influences these factors as much as the religiosity of individuals. Thus, there seems to be a communal product which goes beyond individual religiosity.

All the factors listed above presumably influence the economy. To the extent people's religious commitments cause these differences, we can view religion as a resource which social scientists should account for in their economic models. Just as scholars have used the concepts of "human capital," "social capital," and "cultural capital" – perhaps we can add the concept "spiritual capital." We can define this as resources that are created or people have access to when people invest in religion as religion.

"Spiritual capital" differs from the other forms of capital, not because religious groups don't have material resources, skills, trusting relationships, and cultural-valued knowledge – that is, financial, human, social and cultural capital.¹ They do. But religious groups are concerned with more than these. For example, most religious groups purport to be more than mere social clubs. They often stress that their relationship with God is central and that the focus of group activity is precisely to emphasize and actualize that relationship. Moreover, participants often claim that people can access spiritual resources anywhere without respect to group solidarity *per se*. Both these suggest that what happens in religious groups is not fully encompassed by the concept of social capital.

Empirical evidence seems to confirm this. Research consistently shows that those who attend religious services for social or other non-religious reasons (the extrinsically religious) are significantly different from those who attend for religious reasons (the intrinsically religious), even if they attend church the same

¹ Scholars use the concept of social capital in different ways. Some use it to refer to a generalized social trust that is beyond the individual and thus an individual cannot transport it to different contexts. Others treat it as an individual characteristic akin to a form of human capital. Empirically, social capital research has tended to focus on memberships in formal organizations where people learn compromise, reciprocity, and come into contact with people of other groups. If this interaction is the crucial factor in generating social capital, the religious content of groups should not matter. This is one area where I think the concept of spiritual capital can add something useful.

amount (e.g., Gorsuch 1988). If social capital is the main resource congregations create, we would not expect this difference. Motivation and theological content shouldn't matter.

In fact, religious people invest money and skilled work, risk certain relationships, and forgo chances to learn culturally-valued knowledge in pursuit of spiritual returns. In the process, they build up spiritual, material, intellectual, and social resources that shape both themselves and society. The metaphor of "spiritual capital" may aid in this investigating the impact this has on society.

Advantages of the Metaphor:

First, the metaphor helps us see religion as an investment and as a distinct end. People and societies invest resources in religion with the hope of some return. Although people may use religion to gain financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital, many also seek something uniquely spiritual, something that cannot be reduced to money or sex or power.

The metaphor also helps us see religion as a resource; one that people draw on to meet various challenges – sickness, political oppression, ethical choices, or social problems. Religious organizations are repositories of financial, human, social, and cultural capital, but they are also sources of moral teachings and religious experiences that may motivate, channel, and strengthen people to reach particular ends. These spiritual resources may also shape how people use other forms of capital in ways these theories would not predict. Introducing the concept of "spiritual capital" may challenge scholars to analyze whether there are any uniquely religious resources or whether religious groups are merely repositories of material resources and networks of people that happen to be in religious organization.

Focusing on religion as a resource may also spur research on the economic impact of religion. Because some religions influence health, rule-following behavior, voluntarism, and sound work habits, they probably have an important impact on the economy. However, perhaps because most of these influences are indirect and economists have generally not viewed religion as a resource, the impact of religion on the economy has remained largely unexplored.

This metaphor may also spur research on the consequences to both individuals and societies of increasing or decreasing investments in spiritual capital and the impact of changing the types of spiritual capital in which people invest. Finally, it invites comparison between investing in spiritual capital and investing in other forms of capital. The resources people invest to gain one type of capital are often resources they cannot invest to gain another type. Scholars may research the consequences to individuals and societies of differential investment strategies.

Limitations of the Metaphor:

However, the metaphor has some limitations. One problem is that it may over-emphasize religion as a means to reach particular ends, whereas religion is also concerned about shaping which ends people seek. It is a resource, but not only a resource. Religious traditions help people change themselves, to decide what they should want and the means they should use to reach these ends. This does not mean that people always follow their stated beliefs. But some religious traditions may provide resources to help people evaluate the match between their stated beliefs and their behaviors and enlist divine and human aid in reducing the gap between them. Prayer groups, Bible studies, and mentoring relationships often serve this role.

The metaphor may also suggest that the main goal of religion is personal profit. This may be true for many people and many religious traditions, but some religious traditions stress that spiritual profit is only a byproduct of losing the self or “dying” to self. For example, for Christians the goal is to love God and seek his rule (Dt. 6: 4-9; Mt 6:31; 22: 37-40; Lk 11: 2): to seek first God’s gifts is idolatry, to seek spiritual gifts for financial benefit is Simony.² For orthodox Theravada Buddhists, to seek material possessions is to be trapped by desire. The goal is to release all desires so that you can be freed from the cycle of suffering and reach enlightenment.

Spiritual Resources

There are many spiritual and religious resources. Some are related to material capital, social capital, and cultural capital, and others are not. One example of an unambiguous religious resource is the Eucharist. The value of receiving a small piece of bread and a sip of wine, and the idea that they may become either actually or symbolically the body and blood of Christ, makes sense only within a religious worldview. The Eucharist has little direct monetary or nutritional value. However, the sense of spiritual well-being that believers experience on receiving the Eucharist reinforces the authority of the Christian tradition to make moral claims on the believer’s life. These moral claims and sense of spiritual strength that results may drive people to engage in other activities that influence society.

Other religious resources may also prompt people to act. For example, experiences of the divine; conviction on “sin”; the strength believers feel from knowing that others are praying for them or that God is in control; the sense that God is

² The word “Simony” comes from Simon Magus (Acts, viii, 18-24) who attempted to buy the gifts of the Holy Spirit to use for financial gain.

watching or that “sin” will “hamper one’s witness”. Because relationships in religious groups have a spiritual context and often an external moral authority, religion may also shape social relations in ways traditional social capital theories would not predict. A boating club, a street gang and a small group Bible study may all be groups people belong to, but they may not all generate the same amount of “social capital” or have the same social impact. For example, in a small group Bible study, people may be more willing to call others to ethical change or challenge them to help outsiders than in a boating club. People may also be more willing to let others prod them ethically in religious contexts than in other contexts.

Even between religious groups, teaching on social action and missions may influence such things as which groups invest in social services or purposely bridge social cleavages. Historical evidence suggests that variation in attitudes towards missions influenced which religious groups worked directly with slaves and thus which groups got involved in advocating immediate abolitionism (Woodberry 2003; Rooke 1978-79; Ferguson 2002: 121). Cross-national studies also suggest that different religious traditions have radically different impacts on the formation of voluntary social service organizations (Woodberry 2000; Curtis, Baer and Grabb 2001; Solomon and Anheier 1996; 1998; Anheier and Solomon 1998).

Thus the religious context shapes the “value” and uses of social relations. Studying the number of group memberships, the density of social networks, and whether they bridge cleavages in society may not be sufficient. The content and motivation for these interactions may also be important.

These examples only touch on the breadth of spiritual resources. These “resources” are hard to explain with existing theoretical concepts, but they fill many personal accounts of why people do the things they do – even in private journals. Thus, social scientists should take them seriously.

Possible Economic Consequences of Religion

When people invest in spiritual capital, they are often not trying to influence the economy, the political system, and so forth; but the religious resources they create may indirectly shape society. Some ways spiritual capital may influence the economy are through health, rule of law, volunteerism, and education. Unfortunately the vast majority of statistical evidence comes from Western Europe and North America – areas where Protestantism and Catholicism predominate. Thus, some of these relationships may not generalize to some other religious traditions.

Health: Religion has an important impact on health (e.g., Smith and Woodberry 2001). For example in the West, religiously involved people generally live longer. In fact, building on the path-breaking research of Hummer *et al.* (1999), Koenig

(2000) calculated that in the United States, religious un-involvement is linked with a decreased lifespan equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes every day for forty years (i.e., about seven years). Highly religious people seem to have fewer mental problems, get sick less often, and recover from sicknesses more quickly than people who are less religiously active. They engage in less risky behavior with respect to health; for example, they have fewer lifetime sexual partners, smoke less, drink less, use drugs less, and attempt suicide less often. They are more socially involved and report higher self-esteem, greater levels of happiness, less stress, and more satisfying and lasting marriages and relationships – all social and emotional factors that influence health (Ellison and Levin 1998; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Koenig 2000; Hummer *et al.* 1999; Smith and Woodberry 2001; Townsend *et al.* 2002; Chatters 2000).³ Yet to date, no study has measured the short and long-term economic impacts these practices have on society. Moreover, these relationships are amenable to quantification, such as the calculated reduction in insurance pay-outs, uninsured medical costs, diminished productivity, and lost workdays.

Rule of Law: Some religious traditions seem to be an important resource for increasing the rule of law (Woodberry 2003; Stark 2001).⁴ Quantitative evidence suggests that people affiliating with these traditions display lower involvement in crime, political corruption, and misappropriation of resources – for example, workers calling in sick when they are not, using company supplies for personal benefit, and so forth (*ibid.*, Johnson *et al.* 2000; La Porta *et al.* 1999; Treisman 2000; Sikkink and Smith 1998; also see Brennan and London 2001).⁵ The economic link here should be obvious. For example, quantitative research consistently suggests that corruption slows subsequent economic growth, accentuates income inequality, reduces government efficiency, and diminishes the quality and quantity of education, medical work, social services, infrastructure, etc. (Jain 2001).

Volunteerism: In the West, empirical evidence suggests that highly religious people tend to volunteer more time and give more money to help people informally and to support both religious and nonreligious voluntary organizations (Woodberry 2000; Smidt 2003; Lam 2002; Regnerus, Smith and Sikkink 1998; Cadge and Wuthnow forthcoming). Religious groups are also central to forming humanitarian organizations, private schools, and private hospitals, even if these organizations no longer have religious ties (Young 2002; Woodberry 2000; Smith and Woodberry 2001; Anheier and Salamon 1998). Voluntary activity can have an

³ However, scholars still do not fully understand all the ways religion influences health and the strength of particular health benefits is still contested.

⁴ Internationally the link is primarily with monotheistic religious traditions, especially Protestantism. In North America, the link is strongest with theologically conservative traditions.

⁵ Research on delinquency among adolescent boys, suggests the effect is primarily in areas with high overall religiosity.

important effect on the economy by, among other things, providing social services that make the workforce more productive, reducing the tax burden required to fund social programs, contributing to high quality education of youth, etc.

Education: Some religious traditions have influenced worldwide education rates (Woodberry 2000; 2003). For example, Protestants came to believe that religious authority was primarily in a text (the Bible), that that text was translatable into vernacular languages without losing its core meaning, and that every believer had a duty to read the Bible for themselves. Thus, they have consistently championed universal literacy and have invested massively in expanding education, both in their own societies and, through missionaries, in other societies (*ibid.*; Sanneh 1989). Other religious traditions invested in mass education primarily when competing with Protestants (Woodberry 2003).⁶

Thus areas with more Protestants and Protestant missionaries have historically had higher education rates and, on average, continue to have more formal education today (*ibid.*, Greer 1997). Historical research suggests that missionary educators were motivated primarily by religious ideals. They wanted to convert people and thought education would help them do this. Colonial governments, settlers, and businesspeople generally resisted the expansion of mass education in the colonies. Thus, missionaries were not primarily serving the interests of these financially interested groups (Woodberry 2003, Mackenzie 1993). Missionaries and their supporters were investing in spiritual capital; but through the educational institutions they created, this investment had important economic consequences. In fact, many scholars argue that differential investments in education partially explain later trajectories in economic growth (e.g., Barro 1991; Grier 1999; Sokoloff and Engermann 2000).

Caveats

In discussing spiritual capital and the impact religious resources have on society, I have focused on factors that many people may view as positive. But I need to present several caveats. First, religion is not the only factor that influences health, rule of law, volunteerism, or education. I am merely discussing one factor. Of course, some religious groups promote unhealthy behaviors, resist certain types of education, and hamper the economy. At times, religious differences may also lead to conflict, thus squandering economic resources. Religious strictures may also block the economic use of some resources. For example, Islam and Catholicism long promulgated ethical and legal restrictions against charging interest. In fact all

⁶ Mass education is distinct from elite education – which has been practiced more broadly. Although both Islam and Buddhism have traditionally trained broader segments of the male population to recite religious texts, these texts are generally in a foreign or archaic language and the texts are often memorized rather than read. Thus, with the possible exception of Japan, this has not led to mass literacy.

religious traditions presumably have a mixture of positive and negative effects on the economy.

Second, I am talking about general tendencies, not universal truths. For example, some non-religious people volunteer more time and give money than many religious people. However, individual variation does not negate the general tendency that, *on average*, highly religious people volunteer and give more to both religious and non-religious groups (Smidt 2003; Lam 2002).

Third, although some patterns may develop originally in religious groups, they may diffuse through society and continue over time. Thus, although the modern form of social-movement organization seems to have developed from non-state Protestant mission and revivalist groups, once these organizational forms developed, non-religious people have learned to use them effectively without direct contact with religious groups (Young 2002; Woodberry 2000). In some societies, the impact of religion on corruption rates and political democracy may also be more historic than contemporary. Once institutions and patterns of behavior are in place, they may continue even after religiosity declines (Woodberry 2003). Like financial capital, later generations may draw on the spiritual capital accumulated by previous generations. Thus, in measuring spiritual capital, we should not focus entirely on current investment levels or assume only religiously active people draw on it.

Challenges

Research on spiritual capital faces several important challenges. First, although all societies have religious resources, they probably cannot be measured in the same way in every culture. For example, for Jews and Christians weekly religious service attendance may be one good indicator of individual investment in spiritual capital. However, this measure may not be appropriate for Buddhists and Hindus. Even though Christians attend group religious services more often than Buddhists or Hindus, this does not mean they invest more in generating spiritual capital; they just invest in different ways.⁷

Second, because people's motivations for religious activity vary, the same external act may not be an equivalent investment in spiritual capital. On things ranging from racial attitudes to helping behavior, people who attend religious services to gain social capital, seem to be significantly different from those who attend for religious reasons (e.g., Gorsuch 1988). Thus, an ideal measure of spiritual capital

⁷ See Tarakeshwar, Pargament, and Mahoney (2003) for an analysis of measuring religiosity among Hindus.

investment, would include a motivational component and/or measures of private religiosity.

Third, investing in “spiritual capital” may generate very different resources in different religious traditions. The beliefs and goals in different traditions, their sources of authority, their means of interaction, and their institutional forms make a difference. Thus for example, quantitative analysis suggests that Protestantism is associated with lower levels of corruption; other religious traditions are not (e.g. Triesman 2000; La Porta *et al.* 1999). Historical analysis suggests a role of Protestant renewal movements in this process (Gorski 1993, Woodberry 2003). This does not mean that Protestants invest more in spiritual capital or that Protestant spiritual capital is “superior.” It merely means investing in Protestantism may provide resources useful for some things and investing in other traditions may provide resources useful for other things. Thus, we can miss some of the impacts religious traditions have if we *assume* that religious groups are interchangeable or that we can measure spiritual capital in the same way regardless of religious tradition.

Fourth, the return on investments in spiritual capital may take a long time to accrue. The effect of religion on corruption, or trust, or political institutions, or social movement forms, or education, or economic development may take decades or generations. The effect is not as immediate as for changing the tax laws or the Fed lowering interest rates. When people adopt a new religion or change their level of religiosity, they do not automatically change their values and beliefs and still have to work in the same institutional, social and political environment. Changing human lives, changing social expectations and changing institutional forms takes a long time. Thus a typical five to ten year lag may not be sufficient to capture religions impact. Moreover, the cumulative impact of religion may be crucial rather than the impact of religious investment at one point in time on economic outcomes at another point in time. Measuring cumulative impact may require developing some new statistical procedures.

Still, spiritual capital may be a useful metaphor. Perhaps it can help us see new aspects of religion and channel scholarship in some promising new directions. It may even lead to important insights if spiritual “accounting” is developed with appropriate nuance and recognition of the complexity of and barriers to quantification of those aspects of life that are intractably intangible.

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