

Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu Against Bourdieu*

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Bourdieu's theory of culture offers a rich conceptual resource for the social-scientific study of religion. In particular, his analysis of cultural capital as a medium of social relations suggests an economic model of religion alternative to that championed by rational choice theorists. After evaluating Bourdieu's limited writings on religion, this paper draws upon his wider work to craft a new model of "spiritual capital." Distinct from Iannaccone's and Stark and Finke's visions of "religious capital," this Bourdieuan model treats religious knowledge, competencies, and preferences as positional goods within a competitive symbolic economy. The valuation of spiritual capital is the object of continuous struggle and is subject to considerable temporal and subcultural variation. A model of spiritual capital illuminates such phenomena as religious conversion, devotional eclecticism, religious fads, and social mobility. It also suggests some necessary modifications to Bourdieu's theoretical system, particularly his understanding of individual agency, cultural production, and the relative autonomy of fields.

Let us put an end to the widespread and misleading distinction between goods that sustain life and health and others that service the mind and heart—spiritual goods. (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:72)

Pierre Bourdieu's bequest to the social-scientific study of religion is greater than even he realized. Although his direct contributions to the field are relatively modest—particularly when assessed alongside his voluminous work on such subjects as art or education—he has crafted a powerful set of conceptual tools that may be adapted for apprehending a range of contemporary religious phenomena.¹ In particular, his theory of cultural capital posits a sophisticated model of symbolic competition, personal inter-dynamics, and individual choice that, when applied to the religious sphere, offers a complex and useful alternative to rational action theory. This paper outlines a Bourdieuan approach to the sociology of religion and sketches some possible applications.

The model of religion adumbrated here is Bourdieuan, but it is not Bourdieu's. In order to see Bourdieu's relevance for sociologists of religion, one must—quite paradoxically—turn away from his writings on religion. This is a curious irony, particularly given the importance of this field of endeavor to Bourdieu's work. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to name another general social theorist for whom metaphors and examples culled from the study of religion consistently play so great a role. Bourdieu's reflections on religion contributed significantly to his development of a sophisticated model for analyzing elaborate relational structures in a variety of social contexts. Churches, priests, prophets,

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¹ Bourdieu's writings on religion include Bourdieu (1962:107–18, 1987a, 1987b, 1991a, 1995, 1998:112–26) and Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1982). A major article revising and expanding his earlier theoretical work on religion remains unpublished and possibly unfinished (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:234 n.24.).

magicians, and oblates populate his discussions of politics, education, literature, and art. His essays on the symbolic economy of aesthetic perception identify positions of “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy,” and speak of a work of art as a “fetish object,” art appreciation as a matter of “faith,” cultural mediators as “agents of consecration,” avant-garde *blagues* as acts of “ritual sacrilege,” the cult of individual genius as a “charismatic ideology,” and so on (Bourdieu 1993a:74–111). Both of his most thorough discussions of the sociology of religion (1987b, 1991a) were originally printed in 1971, preceding the publication of *Outline of a Theory of Practice* ([1972] 1977), the first systematic articulation of the distinctive broader theoretical approach that he was to develop and refine over the ensuing three decades.² Bourdieu credits the inspiration for his influential concept of the field to Weber’s sociology of religion (Bourdieu 1990a:49, 2000a:119), and, as a number of scholars have noted, many of the key notions that recur frequently in Bourdieu’s work on culture are drawn from his readings of classic theorists on the political economy of religion (Brubaker 1985; Dianteill 2002; Fowler 2000:3–4, 8–9; Swartz, 1996, 1997:41–45; Vandenberghe 1999:54).³ It might be argued that the model of the hierocratic church is Bourdieu’s starting point for each of his many investigations of symbolic power.⁴

Regrettably, it is also the starting point for Bourdieu’s few forays into the field of religion. As a result, Bourdieu’s vision of religion is unidimensional, characterized by none of the complexity and subtlety with which he depicts other social arenas. The problem, put simply, is that Bourdieu perceives religion almost exclusively in organizational terms, exemplified particularly by a rather Voltairean image of the Roman Catholic church as an instrument of oppression and exploitation. This leaves little room for imagining lay-people as social actors capable, for example, of manipulating religious symbols on their own behalf. The fault is not entirely his: Bourdieu’s early model of religion—which served to shape so much of his later work—relies heavily on Weber’s analysis of hierocracy, legitimation, and charisma. Centered on the dynamics between religious specialists (priests, prophets, magicians), this model treats religion as an institution but not as a disposition, as an intricate system of coercion but not as a liquid species of capital. In short, it employs categories that are too rigid to account for the fluidities of today’s spiritual marketplace. Although Bourdieu developed an approach to subjectivity and individual agency in his theory of the habitus, he did not use this to modify significantly the assumptions upon which his earlier analyses were predicated.

Perhaps he thought it unnecessary.⁵ In 1974, Bourdieu suggested that his work on culture extended and replaced his thinking on religion: “The sociology of culture is the

² Bourdieu’s seminal article on “the market for symbolic goods” (Bourdieu 1993a:112–41) was first published in 1971, the same year as his major analyses of religion, and the three essays may be read in tandem to illustrate a key moment in the development of his thought.

³ These include Marx ([1887] 1967:163–77) on fetishism, Weber (1946, 1968) on charisma, Durkheim ([1912] 1995) on the sacred and the profane, and Mauss (1972) on magic. Indeed, even habitus is a Weberian term (see, e.g., Weber 1968:536), which he used interchangeably with *Lebensführung* (life conduct). According to Hennis (1983), identifying the dynamics of the *Lebensführung* was Weber’s “central question.” Bourdieu’s account of the genealogy of the concept of the habitus deemphasizes Weber’s contribution (Bourdieu 1985, 2000a: 118–19).

⁴ In his insightful synthesis, which came to my attention only after the present essay was completed, Dianteill suggests that the entirety of Bourdieu’s work might thus be understood as “a generalized sociology of religion” (Dianteill 2002:5). Intriguingly, Bourdieu makes an analogous claim for Weber, noting that his work approaches “a materialistic theory of the symbolic” in which religion “plays a very crucial role . . . as the symbolic *par excellence*” (200a:117).

⁵ Pointing to Bourdieu’s 1982 speech before the Association Française de Sociologies des Religions (Bourdieu 1987c), Dianteill suggests that Bourdieu’s relative silence on the topic stemmed in part from his concern over the epistemological quandary facing the sociologist of religion, a corollary of his understanding of the limits of both subjectivism and objectivism (Dianteill 2002:16–18). With respect to religion, Bourdieu explained, one is always either an insider or an outsider; both positions limit perceptions and slant judgments. Reflexively aware of his own presuppositions, Bourdieu was the “premier victim of this aporia” (Dianteill 2002:17). Dianteill also notes that Bourdieu’s belief that the symbolic power of organized religion was waning (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1987a) made the subject less interesting to him.

sociology of the religion of our day” (Bourdieu 1993b:132). If this statement is to be taken literally—and, given the source of his theory of culture, it surely was not merely a rhetorical flourish—then the reverse must also be true. Exercising a practice Bourdieu repeatedly noted was central to his own method (e.g., 1991a:49, 2000a), this paper will think *with* and *against* Bourdieu simultaneously, drawing on his brilliant analysis of culture both to critique his presentation of the religious field and to articulate a Bourdieuan theory of spiritual capital.

The notion of spiritual capital—quite distinct from the models of “religious capital” outlined by Iannaccone (1990, 1995) and Stark and Finke (2000)—draws upon Bourdieu’s extensive inquiry into the forms of symbolic capital. Like Marx, Bourdieu defines capital as accumulated labor. But whereas Marx imagined an important dichotomy between a material infrastructure and a symbolic superstructure (Marx [1887] 1967:43–87), Bourdieu collapses the distinction: the material and the ideal are both facets of a larger economy of power. The notion of capital, then, encapsulates assets other than money and property. Education, social networks, artistic abilities, and cultural knowledge are all obtained at the expense of labor, and these forms of symbolic capital are all subject to the same laws of accumulation, inheritance, and exchange that govern material forms of capital.

Of the various species of symbolic capital Bourdieu has discussed, cultural capital is the most complex, the most novel, and analytically the most useful. Cultural theorists have long recognized that the consumption of exclusive cultural products—classical music, fine art, gourmet foods, and so on—has functioned as a marker of social status (DiMaggio and Useem 1978, 1982; Gans 1973; Veblen [1899] 1961; etc.). Bourdieu has developed this notion significantly by insisting that cultural capital is a matter of disposition, not just acquisition (Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1993a:215–37). Aesthetic perceptions and preferences, the qualifications to judge a painting authoritatively, the linguistic facility to discuss a string quartet; the yen for sushi or caviar: these abstract tastes and competencies are precious assets in a symbolic economy characterized by the struggle for domination. Actor Vincent Price titled his memoir of art collecting *I Like What I Know* (1959), a phrase that nicely suggests the link between taste and such other factors as education and social position. According to Bourdieu, aesthetic dispositions are both products and instruments of social reproduction within a system of class relations. Scholars, critics, and others who produce, distribute, and mediate cultural products struggle for the power to define tastes as a strategy of maintaining or modifying their social position (Bourdieu 1984, 1993a, 1996).

Breaking with Bourdieu’s explicit analysis of religion, the present study suggests that spiritual dispositions may be regarded as a form of cultural capital.⁶ Personal piety may be viewed as a matter of taste—in other words, as a product of social relations—and thus as a marker of status within struggles for domination in a variety of contexts. Spiritual knowledge, competencies, and preferences may be understood as valuable assets in the economy of symbolic goods.

BOURDIEU ON RELIGION

Bourdieu’s approach to religion may be regarded as a selective rearticulation of Weber’s sprawling and detail-burdened analysis within a tight structuralist framework.

⁶Robertson makes a similar suggestion (Robertson 1992:151–52).

While retaining many of his predecessor's key insights, Bourdieu takes pains to distance himself from what he identifies as Weber's interactionist perspective, which is asociological in its echoes of heroic individualism. Thus for example, the "decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest," according to Weber, is "the personal call," founded on "personal revelation and charisma" (Weber 1968:440). "The laity's acceptance of the prophet," he asserts, "is generally based on the fact that he possesses a certain charisma," defined as "an *extraordinary* quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed" (Weber 1968:467, 1946:295). By contrast, Bourdieu insists that the varieties of religious specialist are distinguished not by their personal qualities, but rather by "the structure of the objective relations between the *positions* these agents occupy" in a relatively autonomous field (Bourdieu 1987b:121).⁷ A field, in Bourdieu's distinctive terminology, is a hierarchically structured social arena (or market) in which actors compete for money, prestige, and power. Like competitive athletes, players in a field must have a sense of what is at stake, an investment in the outcome, a mastery of the strategies required for success, and above all, "a feel for the game," a talent for innovation within continuously changing circumstances (Bourdieu 1990b:66). The religious field is thus a competitive arena, the structure of which determines both the form and the representation of religious dynamics (Bourdieu 1987b:121). The notion of conflict between religious specialists is a crucial one, and another point that Bourdieu claims (perhaps over-emphatically) is at variance with Weber's formulation.⁸ While Weber notes the rivalry between priests, prophets, and magicians, Bourdieu considers their competition for religious power to be the central principle informing the dynamics of the religious field.

Religious power is measured by the authority "to modify, in a deep and lasting fashion, the practice and world-view of lay people" through the "absolutization of the relative and legitimation of the arbitrary" (Bourdieu 1987b:127, 1991a:14). This notion is another inheritance from Weber, who, as Bourdieu points out, usefully extends Marx by arguing that religion serves as the ideological instrument by which the state legitimizes its domination through social and political institutions (Bourdieu 1987b:125, 1990a:36). "As a legitimating power hierarchy is almost indispensable . . . [to] all those strata whose privileges depend upon the 'legitimacy' of the political system," Weber notes; "[H]ierarchy is the incomparable means of domesticating the subjects in all things great and little" (Weber 1968:1175–76). There are clear affinities here with Althusser, who identifies "the Church" as the Ideological State Apparatus *par excellence* (Althusser 1971:143, 151), but following Weber, Bourdieu sees religion not as a mere epiphenomenon of a political and economic base, but rather as a key force in the production—not just reproduction—of structure, and religious specialists as dynamic agents, not as interpellated subjects (see Bourdieu 1990a:9).

Weber identifies "elective affinities" between particular social strata and distinctive systems of morality, theodicy, and soteriology, but rejects the presumption that the correlations are either direct or invariant, and repudiates Marx's assertion that "the

⁷ "Let us then dispose once and for all of the notion of charisma as a property attaching to the nature of a single individual, and examine instead, in each particular case, sociologically pertinent characteristics of an individual biography" (Bourdieu 1987b:131). Bourdieu retains the term, but only in Weber's (1968:1139–41) sense of "the charisma of office."

⁸ While it may be argued that Bourdieu overstates his case when he claims that this and related ideas are alien to Weber, his emphases nevertheless allow him to explore themes to which his predecessor gave only glancing attention.

religious world is but the reflex of the real world" (Weber 1946:284; Marx and Engels 1964:135). As Weber expresses it,

The need for salvation and ethical religion has yet another source besides the social condition of the disprivileged and the rationalism of the bourgeoisie, which is shaped by its way of life. This additional factor is intellectualism as such, more particularly the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by a material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it. (Weber 1968:499)

Though Bourdieu wishes to retain this sense of a "strictly religious interest" (Bourdieu 1991a:13), his understanding of the dialectic between material and ideological forces is closer than Weber's to Marx. Although Weber explicitly disavowed idealism as a monistic explanation of the course of history (à la Hegel), he did argue for the ability of *specific* ideas to influence political and economic developments (Weber [1930] 1992:125, 48). There is nothing in Bourdieu's writings on religion to suggest a similar view, and it is telling that for all his admiration of Weber he never cites *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in his theoretical work.⁹

Bourdieu's idealism is Durkheimian; he is interested in the way that symbolic forms such as religion serve as the epistemological foundations of a "logic of practice" by providing a symbolic medium that makes social life possible (Bourdieu 1991a:2, 14–15; cf. Durkheim [1912] 1995:8–18, 419–26; see also Wacquant 2000). Thus:

Religion contributes to the (hidden) imposition of the principles of structuration of the perception and thinking of the world, and of the social world in particular, insofar as it imposes a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively founded on a principle of political division, presents itself as the natural-supernatural structure of the cosmos. (Bourdieu 1991a:5)

Through the normal processes of socialization, this symbolic system becomes embodied on the individual level in the form of what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, "a lasting, generalized and transposable disposition to act in conformity with a (quasi-) systematic view of the world and human existence" (Bourdieu 1987b:126; see also 1990b:52–65). Internalized and naturalized as a mode of thought and behavior, the *habitus* precedes conscious thought, ordering one's choices and structuring one's activities.

The objective source of religion's ideological function is latent in the "correspondence [that] exists between social structures (strictly speaking, power structures) and mental structures," and thus "one may construct the religious fact in a strictly sociological manner, that is, as the legitimate expression of a social position" (Bourdieu 1991a:5, 16). There is a structural homology between theological and ecclesiastical interests, on the one hand, and political and economic interests, on the other:

⁹ The brief selection from *The Protestant Ethic* included in the introductory reader Bourdieu coedited is incidental to these themes (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991:126–29). *The Protestant Ethic* was Bourdieu's introduction to Weber, and he drew upon it in his early field researches to conceptualize Algerian economic life, without citing it directly (Bourdieu 1962:104; 2000a:111–12, 117–18; Bourdieu et al. 1963). French intellectuals of this era, Bourdieu later recalled, had "a pretty flat interpretation" of Weber as "the champion of a spiritualistic philosophy of history," and read him through Marx, or not at all (Bourdieu 2000a:114).

To inculcate, by implicit and explicit education, respect for the “logical” disciplines such as those that support the mythico-ritual system or the religious ideology and liturgy, and, more precisely, to impose ritual observances which, lived as the condition of the safeguard of cosmic order and of the subsistence of the group, . . . tends in fact to perpetuate the fundamental relations of the social order. (Bourdieu 1991a:33)

Catering to the religious needs of particular lay audiences within an open symbolic market, religious specialists struggle to control access to “the means of production, reproduction, and division of the goods of salvation” (Bourdieu 1987b:129, 1991a:23; see also Weber 1946:284, 294).¹⁰ Churches strive to maintain a monopoly by legitimizing only a small pool of specialists (priests) who control the administration of religious goods and services (salvation and the sacraments). As Weber put it, “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is the motto of all churches” (Weber 1968:1167).¹¹ Magicians represent challenges to the church by manipulating the sacred in an unauthorized (and thus profane) manner (Bourdieu 1991a:12). The authority prophets command derives from their ability to give symbolic expression to the religious needs of their audience; what makes them exceptional is not the originality of their message, since demand precedes supply, but rather their alienation from the institutional church (Bourdieu 1987b:127, 130, 1991a:34–36).¹² Religious authority generally is a product of a practitioner’s ability to meet the religious needs of his or her particular lay audience—a theodicy of suffering for the dominated, and a “theodicy of good fortune” for the dominant (Weber 1946:270–71; Bourdieu 1987b:129, 1991a:19, 22). The material and symbolic resources each of these actors may command is a function of “the state of the specifically religious power relations” within a continuously shifting religious field of dominant and subordinated specialists (Bourdieu 1987b:127). The belief of the laity—and of religious specialists—is predicated on their failure to recognize the political relations that underlie dynamics within the religious field (Bourdieu 1991a:14, 20, 25).

Compared with Bourdieu’s general theoretical writings and his studies of culture, his work on religion has not been widely applied.¹³ Several anthropologists and historians of religions have observed that Bourdieu’s economic approach is particularly useful in assessing the cultural value of secret traditions. The status and power accorded to diviners in Yoruba society, witches in Soweto, cargo cultists in the south Pacific, magicians in preliterate societies, Tantric Buddhists in Bengal, and Freemasons in nineteenth-century France is dependent in part upon the articulation and unequal distribution of a desirable resource—secret knowledge (Akinaso 1995; Ashforth 1996; Lindstrom 1991; Suchman 1989; Urban 1997, 1998). But although they invoke Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, these studies of what one might, in the spirit of levity, call “voodoo economics” are more properly regarded as innovative applications of Simmel’s analysis of secret societies (Simmel 1950). These scholars have documented the ways in which secret societies help to maintain the

¹⁰ In a later article, Bourdieu extended the classic Weberian triumvirate to include secular therapists (psychologists, social workers, personal trainers, etc.), who compete with traditional clergy in an expanded field of symbolic manipulation (Bourdieu 1987a).

¹¹ The Latin phrase, which may be translated as “There is no salvation outside of the Church,” is the key line in “Unam Sanctam,” an influential bull promulgated by Boniface VIII in 1302 that subjected temporal power to spiritual power and affirmed the divine authority of the Pope.

¹² One will note here the rough parallel with Gramsci’s discussion of the genesis of “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci 1957:118–19).

¹³ Exceptions include Colonna (1974), Fassin and Fassin (1988), Grignon (1977), Howell (1997), Lambert (1992), Lienard and Rousseau (1972), Maduro ([1979] 1982), and Remy (1972).

social structure by preserving symbolic power among a ruling elite. But beyond this insight, they have not explored the broader ramifications suggested by Bourdieu's heuristic schema. They focus on the political aspects of symbolic capital—the ways in which it is exercised to reproduce structures of dominance. But they do not consider the economic aspects of symbolic capital—the ways it is produced, accumulated, exchanged, and reevaluated in different fields.

Bourdieu himself shares these limitations, to an extent. His vision of the religious field—perhaps of fields generally—is too insular. In his formulation, every field may be viewed as an independent game, each with its own species of capital. Bourdieu discusses structural parallels between various autonomous fields (religion, art, education, etc.) and the larger “field of power,” the arena of class struggle that encompasses and, to some extent, overshadows all other fields. But he is less explicit on the possibility of relations between these lesser fields, or the transferability of capital among them (Bourdieu 1991b:163–70; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:98–99, 105–10). Thus, while he analyzes religion's relation to larger *political* and *economic* forces of domination, he does not generally imagine religion to be connected to the symbolic economy of a broader *cultural* nexus. Bourdieu has noted that fields may overlap. For example, a series of changes in the late twentieth century eroded the boundary between the medical and religious fields and created an expanded realm of competition in which secular therapists now vie with traditional clergy to define the means of “curing the soul” (Bourdieu 1987a). What allows for this overlap is a parallel logic of practice: psychologists and priests share therapeutic techniques and offer similar goods: they use, in other words, a very similar species of capital. But religion, as this paper shall argue, may be valued in fields that are governed by dissimilar logics. Bourdieu's interesting discussion of religious art treats piety and aestheticism as possibly coexistent yet still fundamentally distinct dispositions; he does not consider how spiritual devotion might itself become aestheticized (Bourdieu 1994).

A similarly parochial approach to the religious field is also evident in Bourdieu's delineation of the roles available for actors. Bourdieu disavows “the characteristically Aristotelian logic of *typological* thought” (Bourdieu 1987b:121), as does Weber himself, who cautions his readers not to lose sight of the fact that the divisions along which his ideal types are drawn are seldom as clear in reality as they are in theory (Weber 1949:90). Yet, like his predecessor, Bourdieu has outlined forms whose rigidity undermines their utility as tools for assessing the micropolitics or the social psychology of religious adherence. In his model, agency is limited to religious professionals, who struggle to legitimate and manipulate their particular vision of the sacred. In contrast, the laity is “objectively defined as profane” and “dispossessed of the instruments of symbolic production” (Bourdieu 1991a:9, 12, 1991b:169). This might conceivably have been the case during the Middle Ages—like Althusser, Bourdieu identifies the medieval church (and a rather medieval model of the contemporary Roman Catholic church) as the major prototype for his analysis (Althusser 1971:151; Bourdieu 1991a:27, 1998:112–26). But it hardly does justice to the complex state of contemporary spirituality, at least in the United States, where popular piety since the postwar era has been marked by high levels of individualism, expressed through theological eclecticism and spiritual exploration outside of an institutional context (Bellah et al. 1985; Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1978, 1988, 1998; see also Hervieu-Léger 2000:111).¹⁴

¹⁴ In a coauthored study of the social origins of French bishops, Bourdieu belies the simple division between a dispossessed laity and a monopolistic clergy by documenting the struggles for symbolic power that may exist *within* a religious institution (Bourdieu and Saint Martin 1982).

Bourdieu's limited conceptualization of the religious field has restricted his discussion of "religious capital" (Bourdieu 1991a:10, 22–23). The product of accumulated labor, religious capital has two forms: religious symbolic systems (myths and ideologies), on the one hand, and religious competences (mastery of specific practices and bodies of knowledge), on the other. The church manages its fund of religious capital by maintaining a steady demand for the goods of salvation among the laity, and by ensuring a steady and monopolistic supply of these goods through its reproduction of a pool of authorized producers and distributors of the sacred and its exclusion of rivals, whom the church identifies as blasphemers, heretics, and magicians—that is, as illegitimate. The weight of this accumulated capital supports the structure of authority that grants the church's rituals and utterances their efficacy (Bourdieu 1991b:107–16).

There are several problems with this otherwise rich model. First is that for Bourdieu, religious capital circulates within a closed system: it is produced, accumulated, traded, consumed, and recognized (or misrecognized) only within a narrowly circumscribed field of religion. There is little sense of how religious capital might be related to other species of capital, such as cultural, social, and economic capital. Furthermore, Bourdieu's Voltairean vision of religious exploitation distracts him from looking at more subtle dynamics. As a medium of social relations, religious capital certainly may serve as an instrument of symbolic violence employed to legitimate social differences. But considering it in the stark terms of class conflict obscures the more complex ways in which the terms of the production, valuation, distribution, and consumption of spiritual products are continuously renegotiated through the exchange of ideas across social groups. Finally, although Bourdieu discusses the economic aspects of the production and distribution of religious capital, he does not consider the dynamics of its consumption or its manipulation in contexts other than those defined by their relationship to institutional structures of authority. In Bourdieu's vision, the accumulation of religious capital is limited to those who produce it; he explicitly disavows the notion that laypeople might accumulate and wield religious capital. Bourdieu acknowledges that members of the laity are indoctrinated into a particular religious habitus, "the generative basis of all thoughts, perceptions, and actions conforming with the norms of a religious representation of the natural and supernatural world" (Bourdieu 1991a:22, 1987b:126). But he does not theorize how a religious habitus might affect social dynamics beyond the arena of competition between religious professionals.

The reader will immediately recognize that many of the criticisms raised above are inspired by Bourdieu's later writings, especially *Distinction* (1984), and will doubtless agree that it is hardly fair to castigate an author's early work on the basis of insights gained from his subsequent research. So, rather than probing further the shortcomings of Bourdieu's explicit model of the social economics of religion, the present inquiry shall seek to extend it by returning his cultural theory to its origins and exploring the dimensions of spiritual capital.

SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

Despite the fact that Bourdieu—and others—have used the phrase "religious capital," it will be useful to coin a new term.¹⁵ Though "spirituality" is notoriously ill defined, when used in opposition to "religion" (as in the lamentably common locution, "I'm

¹⁵ In an aside, Lambert also suggests the phrase "spiritual capital" (Lambert 1992:135).

not religious but I'm spiritual"), it generally connotes an extrainstitutional, resolutely individualistic, and often highly eclectic personal theology self-consciously resistant to dogma (Bellah et al. 1985; Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1998). Thus, if religious capital is conceived à la Bourdieu as something that is produced and accumulated within a hierocratic institutional framework, spiritual capital may be regarded as a more widely diffused commodity, governed by more complex patterns of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

Spiritual capital may also be distinguished from Iannaccone's version of religious capital. Drawing inspiration from Becker's (1976, 1981) analyses of the economics of everyday life, Iannaccone identifies religious capital as "the skills and experience specific to one's religion includ[ing] religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendships with fellow worshippers" (Iannaccone 1990:299). In this model, religious capital, as a species of human capital, clearly is a personal commodity, one that—*contra* Bourdieu—may be accumulated by individual members of the laity (see Iannaccone 1995:175). But it is also a rigidly institutionalized one. If Bourdieu's model of production is (like Marx's) the factory, or more pointedly (like Horkheimer and Adorno's) the culture industry, then Iannaccone's is (like Becker's) the home. Conceiving of religious capital in terms of household production portrays it as a conservative social force—limiting denominational mobility and religious intermarriage, for example. This model explains the conditions of stasis, but not the dynamics of change.

Iannaccone's version of religious capital is closely akin to social capital; investment, accumulation, and profit are all functions of being a member of a network (or in Putnamesque [2000] terms, not praying alone). Stark and Finke build on Iannaccone's model by drawing a distinction between social capital, derived from interpersonal attachments, and religious capital, which they define as "mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture" (Stark and Finke 2000:120–25). They accord particular importance to this latter quality of attachment, which affords their version of religious capital an affective dimension they believe is missing from other formulations. Here, too, religious capital acts as a conservative force, explaining why so many apples fall so close to the tree, as it were. In both of these models, religious capital has a value fixed by the gold standard of tradition; it does not appear to fluctuate. Neither Iannaccone nor Stark and Finke identify capital as an object or a medium of conflict.

On the other hand, conflict is central to Bourdieu, who sees fields as sites of struggle over the "principles of hierarchization" (Bourdieu 1993a), or—to put it in Weberian terms—the power of legitimation, the power to define the value of one or another product. For example, in the field of art, agents (established artists, avant-garde artists, dealers, critics, publishers, scholars, and other interested parties) position themselves vis-à-vis one another by producing works of art, lionizing or denigrating other works of art, issuing manifestos, and so on. Because these polemical practices are engaged in the context of a struggle for dominance, they may be identified as acts of "symbolic violence." To paraphrase Mao, beauty grows out of the barrel of a gun. At stake in these aesthetic struggles is the power to structure the status hierarchy of artistic works, a power that has economic and political value.

Though there is thus no fixed scale in the art world or any other cultural field, these are not free markets; competitors do not enjoy equal advantages. Markets of ideas are structured: there are stronger positions and weaker ones. One's position is linked both to the amount of capital one possesses and to one's relation to the processes through

which capital is distributed. As Bourdieu explains, one's position shapes one's actions, and one's actions shape the overall field:

The *space of literary or artistic position-takings*, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field... is inseparable from the *space of literary or artistic positions*... The network of objective relations between positions subtends and orients the strategies which the occupants of the different positions implement in their struggles to defend or improve their positions... strategies which depend for their force and form on the position each agent occupies in the [network of] power relations. (Bourdieu 1993a:30, emphasis in original)

Although there is a structure to this lattice of power relations, it continuously shifts according to the dynamics of agents within the field. Because the structure of the field is constantly changing, the assessment of capital within it is always in flux. To return to the metaphors of finance, then, spiritual capital is not a stable currency; it is less like gold than like stocks, subject to sudden inflation and Enronesque collapses, the value of particular denominations dependent upon the fluctuations of the market.

THE FORMS OF SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu identifies three forms of cultural capital: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state (Bourdieu 1986:243–48). As a form of cultural capital, spiritual capital also exists in these three forms. In the *embodied* state, spiritual capital is a measure of not only position, but also disposition; it is the knowledge, abilities, tastes, and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion, and is the outcome of explicit education or unconscious processes of socialization. Its efficacy resides in the fact that it is not recognized as capital—that is, as the product of a primitive accumulation within a struggle to impose an arbitrary symbolic hierarchy—but rather is mistaken for competence within a naturalized social order. Like cultural capital, spiritual capital is embodied in the habitus, the socially structured mode of apprehending and acting in the world.

In the *objectified* state, spiritual capital takes the form of material and symbolic commodities—votive objects, exegetical texts, and ritual vestments, as well as theologies, ideologies, and theodicies. If embodied cultural capital is measured by acts of consumption, then objectified capital is measured by the goods consumed. As Bourdieu notes, capital in the objectified state is largely dependent upon embodied capital: one must possess the technical expertise to properly “consume” or appropriate these objects, texts, and vestments (Bourdieu 1986:246–47). Proper consumption in the religious field implies knowing the operations through which sacred objects release their power. But religious commodities may have a fetish value even for consumers who lack the technical abilities required to implement these objects toward the purposes for which they were manufactured. Consider, for example, the collecting of African or Asian ritual objects (Clifford 1998; see also Bourdieu 1994). In this case, the embodied capital is artistic, not spiritual: the collector manifests the tastes and abilities to appreciate “the primitive,” to perceive Yoruban divination bowls or Tibetan *purbhas* as *objets d'art*, and to esteem these rare commodities above “vulgar” products produced for the tourist trade. There remain traces of spiritual capital even

in the aesthetic consumption of ritual objects, however, as part of their fetish value for the collector resides in his or her cognizance of their original usage. Indeed, one may buy recently manufactured *purbhas* of exquisite craftsmanship in the markets of Kathmandu, but their trade value is diminished by the fact that they have never been used in ritual contexts, whereas older implements command a premium precisely because of their provenance, though they are generally worn or feature much ruder handicraft (Paul Park 2002, interview). This strange nexus of embodied cultural capital and objectified spiritual capital is entirely typical of late capitalist society. As Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1972) note, when one buys a cultural product, one consumes not only a commodity but also an ideology; the ideologies one consumes when one buys a *purbha* or some other exotic object are manifold and complex (for a detailed discussion, see Root 1995).

Finally, spiritual capital exists in an *institutionalized* state: the power that churches, seminaries, and other religious organizations exercise to legitimate an arbitrary array of religious goods, promote the demand for these goods, and feed the supply by bestowing qualifications on a select group of authorized producers. Bourdieu's explicit analysis of religion is concerned primarily with religious capital in its institutionalized state. Iannaccone's and Stark and Finke's analyses are concerned primarily with religious capital in its embodied state, though Finke and Dougherty (2002) have recently written on the institutionalized form.

Though it is clear that institutions—both organizational (Bourdieu; Finke and Dougherty) and familial (Iannaccone; Stark and Finke)—play a vital role as producers and conservators of religious capital, there also exist forms of spiritual capital that are valued specifically because they are perceived as extrainstitutional—the many varieties of New Age religion, for instance. The major axis of differentiation here is what Bourdieu identifies as the scale of production:

The field of production *per se* owes its own structure to the opposition between the *field of restricted production* as a system producing cultural goods (and the instruments for appropriating these goods) objectively destined for a public of producers of cultural goods, and the *field of large-scale production*, specifically organized with a view to the production of cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods, “the public at large.” In contrast to the field of large-scale production, which submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market, the field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors. (Bourdieu 1993a:115)

The difference between these offers a clarification of the supply-side model of religious competition articulated by Stark and Finke and their collaborators (e.g., Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997). The arena with which they are concerned is that of large-scale production, oriented toward the open market. When Bourdieu writes on religion, he too focuses on large-scale production. His work on art, on the other hand, is concerned primarily with the field of restricted production. The restricted field is more insular. It is here that the differences between producers and consumers dissolve; it is here that artists impugn public tastes and claim to produce art “for art's sake,” and here that religious virtuosi articulate divine truths ostensibly without concern for the convictions of the masses of laity. The rate of change in the restricted field is much more rapid than in the large-scale field, which is characterized by a certain structural inertia.

THE VALUATION OF SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

The differences between the restricted and the large-scale field of production in aesthetic terms is the difference between middlebrow and high art. In spiritual terms, it is the difference between traditional and esoteric theology. Since at least the nineteenth century, esoteric spiritual products have been highly esteemed within certain fields—including that of cultural production—and incorporated into an elite habitus. Esotericism is valued less because the supplies are limited or the demand is high than because it is what economists call a “positional good,” a commodity whose value depends not upon its absolute qualities, but rather upon its comparative rank, which may be socially determined (Frank 1985a, 1985b; Hirsch 1976). The status of esoteric goods is the outcome of a number of historical developments, including the Enlightenment critique of traditional religious institutions, the evolution of the study of comparative religion, and the rise of a bohemian class (for a detailed genealogical analysis, see Verter 1998). A variety of material restrictions—social, educational, economic, and temporal—have served to limit access to esoteric goods, thus maintaining their value.¹⁶

Traditional and esoteric theology represent two poles of a much wider spectrum of spiritual capital, the structure of which is subject to subcultural variation. Figure 1 offers a schematic diagram of the hierarchization of spiritual capital within the field of cultural production, which Bourdieu notes is contained within a broader field of power (Bourdieu 1993a:37–39). Each of these fields is relatively autonomous with respect to the other, and each contains other relatively autonomous subfields not pictured here. The field of power also contains, for example, the educational field and the scientific field. The field of cultural production contains relatively autonomous

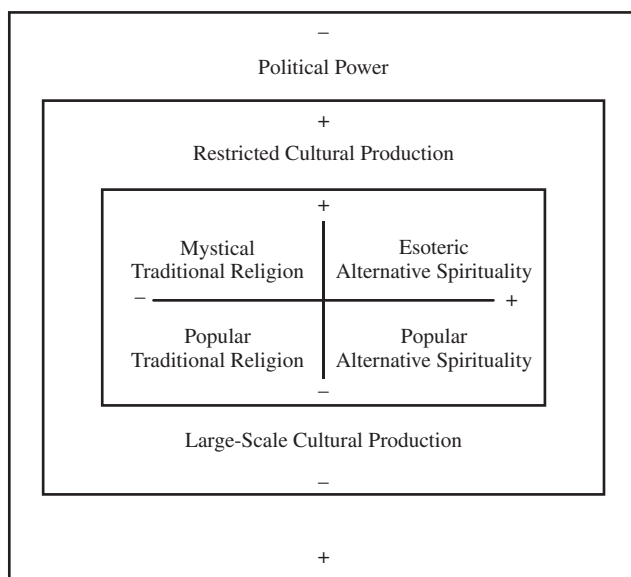


Figure 1. The field of spiritual capital within the field of cultural production, within the field of power.

¹⁶ The question of access to esoteric goods, too complex to address here, must be reserved for a separate essay.

subfields of art, literature, film, and so on. Autonomy is relative because “whatever its degree of independence, [a field] continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it” (Bourdieu 1993a:39). At the restricted end of the field of cultural production, esoteric forms of alternative spirituality are valued most highly, whereas at the large-scale end of cultural production, popular forms of traditional religion are esteemed. The principles of hierarchization are reversed when one shifts from the cultural to the political sphere. Popular religious forms and large-scale cultural products, denigrated within their respective fields, are closer to the dominant end of the field of political power.

The structure of spiritual capital within the field of cultural production is not homologous with the structure of spiritual capital within other fields. One might imagine very different principles of hierarchization in the fields of science or sports, for example. A weakness in Bourdieu’s approach is his tendency to assume that fields are uniformly structured, that there is a homologous distribution of resources across different fields, and that societies are characterized by a large degree of cultural homogeneity.¹⁷ Drawing on the work of Hebdige (1979) and others, Lamont and Lareau rightly stress that even economically and politically subordinate groups maintain autonomous standards of taste (Lamont and Lareau 1988:158; see also Rose 2001). Lamont and Lareau’s point might be extended further by challenging Bourdieu’s claims regarding the degree of structural homology that exists among fields and the degree of uniformity that is evidenced within socioeconomic strata. Certainly the varieties of spiritual capital would appear to confound these assertions. There exist, not one, but many parallel hierarchies of religious value, and these vary across subcultures that are structured more complexly than Bourdieu’s language of field and class fraction can characterize. Scales of spiritual capital may vary widely among different groups of analogous social status. The definition of high spiritual capital changes dramatically when one compares media celebrities with Republican members of Congress, or school officials in Brookline, Massachusetts—a progressive, multicultural community—with their evangelical counterparts in Amarillo, Texas (on whom, see Mojtabai 1986).

Figure 2 depicts two imaginary but plausible social groups, A and B. Members of group A value esoteric forms of spirituality, ranking Wicca and Kabbalah the highest, with astrology a close third. At the bottom of its scale of spiritual capital are

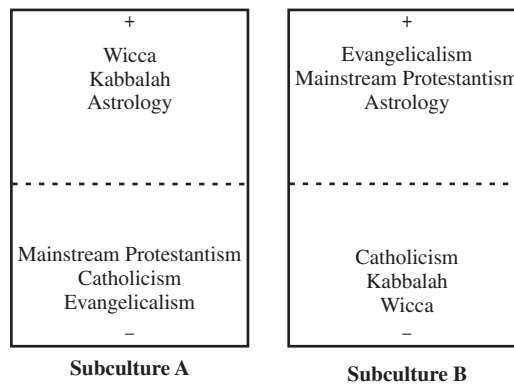


Figure 2. Subcultural variations in spiritual capital.

¹⁷ A careful reading of his major work on the subject (Bourdieu 1984) reveals that he does acknowledge that different standards of cultural value pertain within different subcultures. But this point is obscured within his larger vision of aesthetics as a system of domination.

institutional churches, with a special odium reserved for Catholicism and evangelicalism. In contrast, members of group B prize evangelicalism above all else but are willing to make allowances for mainline Protestants and see no conflict with astrology, though they suspect Catholics, Wiccans, and Kabbalists of being in league with the devil. Although there are overlaps between the two groups (both prize astrology and denigrate Catholicism), their criteria for evaluating spiritual capital are very different. Subcultural differences are to be expected, because cultural products—paintings, sculptures, symphonies, poems, narratives, religions, theories—are produced and received within specific social contexts. As Bourdieu defines it, the *habitus* is “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (Bourdieu 1990b:56). But history is not always played out on a grand scale: there are microhistories, local and regional histories, and so the recognition of genius, the evaluation of art, the estimation of truth are ever subject to temporal, geographical, and cultural variance. It is not surprising, then, that the valuation of spiritual capital should vary according to the broader field in which it is embedded.

This does not mean that the hierarchization of capital in one field cannot influence another, and this points to another weakness in Bourdieu’s system. Emphasizing the relative autonomy of fields, Bourdieu does not discuss interactions between the fields that are contained within the field of power.¹⁸ Interaction is inevitable, however, not simply because groups occupying homologous field positions may form strategic linkages (Swartz 1997:135–36), but, more importantly, because individuals inhabit multiple fields. An individual specimen of *homo academicus* may also be viewed as a specimen of *homo religiosus*, *homo aestheticus*, *homo politicus*, *homo ludens*, *homo eroticus*, *homo numismaticus*, and so on. The shifting framework of an individual’s dispositions (or *habitus*), which determines what position he or she will take in a particular field, is the aggregated product of multiple inputs. It is this fact that gives an individual an identity apart from his or her statistical class. Bourdieu acknowledges this, but prefers to emphasize the homogeneous elements, noting, for example, that “the singular *habitus* of members of the same class...[reflects] the diversity within homogeneity characteristic of the social conditions of production” (Bourdieu 1990b:60). Emphasizing the heterogeneous elements alerts one to the fact that the conditions of production are culturally more complex than a simple Marxist framework would allow. Overlapping membership is doubtless what accounts for the homologous structures of capital that exist between different fields, and for the possibility of exchange between different species of capital. Because there is a fluid dialectic between the definition of a field and the activities of its inhabitants, and because people occupy multiple fields simultaneously, changes in one field may affect another. Thus, a change in the valuation of capital in the scientific field will have ripple effects on the valuation of symbolic capital in the fields of religion, education, and politics. Take, for example, the ramifications of Darwin’s challenge to the scientific paradigm of “natural theology.”

Regarding fields, Bourdieu conveys an overall impression of dissociation; one thinks of parallel universes, or perhaps of an archipelago—independent islands scattered in a common sea. He notes that fields tend toward greater or lesser autonomy, and observes that stratification within restricted fields is relatively independent of political, economic, or social considerations (Bourdieu 1993a:115–17; see also

¹⁸ Bourdieu acknowledges that interfield relations exist, but notes that the absence of transhistoric laws governing their interaction makes this subject too difficult to discuss without making gross generalizations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:109–10). His untimely death left unfinished a masterwork offering a general theory of fields that might have addressed these questions.

2000b:17–21). But this perspective obscures the degree to which fields overlap, not just in terms of their members, but also in terms of their content. The subculture devoted to teaching mathematics, for example, is a subset of the fields of education and math, one that shares not only accidental members but also contents, concerns, and scales of value. The subculture devoted to producing public monuments combines the fields of politics and art. In graphic terms, then, fields should be displayed not as a series of nested and parallel boxes, but rather as a multidimensional Venn diagram with snaking elements. Of these latter, one of the snakiest is religion, which intersects a number of distinct fields at different levels (the overlap between religion and politics occurs at a relatively high level of the scale of politics; the overlap between religion and science occurs at a relatively low level of the scale of science). These distinct fields (e.g., politics and science) also have points of intersection, making the picture even more complicated. Thus, the forces that affect the valuation of capital within the field of religion—or any other field—are the product of both internal and interrelational dynamics.

The effect of other fields on religion may be particularly high because religious authority is so diffuse. Bourdieu's reading of Weber's work on legitimation led him to look to the role of institutionally sanctioned mediators in the valuation of various species of symbolic capital—"agents of consecration" (Bourdieu 1993a:121). But the field of religion is distinct in this regard. The value of spiritual capital is determined not just by professionals but also by the laity, and this fact undermines the autonomy of the religious field. Spiritual capital may be valid currency in fields other than religion, and laypeople may exercise spiritual power by virtue of the material or symbolic capital they have accumulated in another field.

The production of spiritual capital by the laity, at least in the United States, is the consequence of a peculiar historical ideology—the myth of rational choice (*pace* Stark et al.). Bourdieu notes that symbolic capital is recognized only under the condition that its political and economic foundations are misrecognized (Bourdieu 1990b:67–68). For example, the authority of cultural mediators such as art critics depends on the key fiction that their opinion is disinterested, a function of objective standards of competence and not of "the social conditions of the production (or the invention) and of the reproduction (or inculcation) of the dispositions and classificatory schemas which are activated in artistic perception" (Bourdieu 1996:288). Bourdieu called this ideological fiction the myth of the "pure gaze" or the "pure aesthetic." There is no corresponding myth of professional objectivity in the field of religion: clergy cannot pretend to be impartial. (Other professionals—historians and sociologists of religion—are better positioned to dissemble their biases, though one suspects that their broader influence on lay belief is minimal.) Lay opinion, however, is perceived (erroneously) to be objective.

The myth of rational choice in matters of religion has historical origins. As Finke and Stark (1992) argue, the disestablishment of religion resulted in a proliferation of competing churches and sects in the decades following the American Revolution. The republican ethos propagated through Revolutionary rhetoric influenced a theological shift away from Calvinist doctrines of predestination and toward an Arminian creed emphasizing the freedom of the individual believer to effect his or her own salvation by accepting God's gift of grace (Hatch 1989). Concurrently, economic shifts identified free-market liberalism as an ideology close to the heart of democratic individualism, a doctrine quickly extended to the religious realm (Carwardine 1996; Sellars 1991). During the antebellum period, then, religious affiliation came to be seen as a matter less of circumstance than of choice. The first sociologist to identify voluntarism as the American mode of religion was not Stark, but Tocqueville ([1835–40] 1945).

While voluntarism did exist to a degree during these years (many people did shift from one Protestant denomination to another), taken to an extreme, it proved to be a chimera (relatively few abandoned Protestantism altogether). Indeed, even those who thought they were pursuing a radically alternate course—by converting to Buddhism, for example—tended to cast their new faith in the mold of the traditions from which they had converted (see Tweed 1992). Freedom of choice in matters of religion is less a social fact than a political and economic ideology. As Bourdieu's theory of the habitus suggests, individual preferences are less a matter of rationality than socialization (see also Sherkat and Wilson 1995). But, despite the fact that individual choices are more narrowly circumscribed than they seem, the illusion of boundless option has remained a cherished American ideal. One's religious affiliation, then, has come to be perceived as a conscious and rational decision to endorse a particular faith.

In this context, the perceived choices of high-status laypeople have had broad social impacts. The cultural tastes and social behavior of members of the elite classes have long served as models for the activities of the lower classes, in America as in Europe (Bushman 1992; Elias 1978). Srinivas coined the term "Sanskritization" to describe the way members of lower castes in India emulate Brahmanic rituals and behavior in their pursuit of social mobility (Srinivas [1952] 1963). A large literature on denominational switching suggests that converts typically choose high-status denominations to demonstrate or facilitate their upward mobility (e.g., Newport 1979; Stark and Glock 1968). The status of a given denomination is a function not of its clergy but of its membership (Niebuhr [1929] 1975). Thus, the religious affiliations of celebrities have served as a legitimating discourse even for established religious traditions. One thinks of the pride Catholics in the 1950s took in the faith of entertainer Danny Thomas (Orsi 1996:x, 25, 62), or the pleasure American Jews and evangelicals have taken in identifying celebrities from their traditions (see, e.g., Davis 1951; and, for a gentle satire, Schoenstein 1981). As Bourdieu indicated, there is a symbiosis between religious professionals and members of the laity (Bourdieu 1987b:129). Particularly in fields of restricted spiritual production, the influence of lay members is so great that they may be seen along with clergy and other specialists as coproducers of spiritual goods. The New Age movement offers an example of this, though even here there are popular (large-scale) and esoteric (restricted) varieties. Consider the cultural influence of celebrities who have pursued one or another variety of mystical spirituality: Rudolph Valentino (spiritualism); Aldous Huxley (Vedanta); Jack Kerouac (Zen); the Beatles (Transcendental Meditation and Krishna Consciousness); Jimmy Page (ritual magic); Shirley MacLaine (channeling); Tom Cruise (Scientology); Richard Gere (Tibetan Buddhism); Madonna (Kabbalah). Their high ranking in their own fields (very broadly, the field of cultural production) invested them with the authority to legitimize these alternative faiths as spiritual options among their cohorts and—through the power of media—the wider public.

By the same token, religious choice may be regarded as a position-taking (*prise de position*) within a field of struggle. Because accumulated spiritual capital functions as cultural capital, espousing an esoteric faith helps celebrities in their efforts to maintain (or improve) their position within the field of cultural production. Such an act represents a systematic choice, but not a deliberate one: the decision to convert and—even more significantly—the selection of one spiritual product over another are determined by the social variables that structure tastes, competencies, knowledge, and practices (Bourdieu 1984; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Socialization into the habitus of a particular class or social fraction or field involves developing a "practical sense," a set of dispositions, for religion no less than culture, one that defines

normative scales of spiritual capital, delimits options, and constrains choice (Bourdieu 1990b:66). Huxley was inclined toward Vedanta because Eastern and esoteric religion had long been accorded relatively high status as spiritual capital among British intellectuals; his class habitus invested Vedanta with an appeal that seemed natural. Similarly, the prejudices he shared by virtue of his membership in his particular class rendered other possibilities—converting to Judaism, for example—all but inconceivable.

As Bourdieu observed, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 1984:6). In this sense, an esoteric spiritual product such as Vedanta is both a commodity and a symbolic object. On the one hand, the status of Vedanta depends upon the people who study it. On the other hand, Vedanta may also confer status upon its devotees. In the 1940s, Huxley’s pursuit of Vedanta augmented his status among his peers, and, in turn, his devotion to this variety of mysticism increased the prestige value of Vedanta. The exclusive individual and the exclusive faith thus operate symbiotically in a circular system of hierarchical signifiers devoted to maintaining itself.

On the other hand, Vedanta is not as popular today as it once was. The value of particular varieties of spiritual capital is subject to the fluctuations of the market. As Hirsch observed, positional goods become devalued once they become congested (Hirsch 1976:27–31, 36–41). One recalls Yogi Berra’s famous comment on a St. Louis restaurant: “Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.” A similar process may be observed also in the religious field. In the late 1990s, a popular form of Kabbalah enjoyed a vogue among entertainment celebrities; comedian Sandra Bernhard, one of the propagators of the faith, stopped speaking about the glories of the *sephiroth* once she observed that “it’s just getting too trendy” (O’Neil 1998; Stukin 1998). If the symbolic value of positional spiritual goods, such as Vedanta or Zen or Scientology, depends upon their real or perceived scarcity, then their worth declines as they become more accessible. This suggests an approach to understanding religious fads, which scholars of religion generally have been at a loss to explain: spiritual fads represent the social trajectory of estimations of religious value.

In contrast to esotericism, adherence to a common faith does nothing to add to the status of people within the field of restricted artistic production, and may even serve as a handicap. Huxley may be usefully compared in this regard with T. S. Eliot, whose social stock plummeted among his Bloomsbury cohort after he converted to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. Eliot kept his catechization secret and was received into the church in a private ceremony; not even his wife attended. When the news spread months later, his colleagues were dismayed (Ackroyd 1984:161–52, 172–73). Writing to Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf lamented:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God. (Woolf 1975:457–58)

Ezra Pound expressed a similar sentiment in a pithy couplet: “In any case, let us lament the psychosis / Of all those who abandon the Muses for Moses” (Ackroyd 1984:172).

THE ACQUISITION AND EXPENDITURE OF SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

Spiritual capital, like other immaterial forms of capital, may only be acquired through the exchange of material forms of capital, a process Bourdieu amusingly refers to as *transubstantiation* (Bourdieu 1986:242). Iannaccone notes three forms of input in the production of religious capital: purchased goods and financial contributions; time and labor; and—most central to his analysis—human capital, which Bourdieu and others call social capital (Iannaccone 1990:299–300). Like economic, social, and cultural capital, spiritual capital may be inherited from one's family in the context of socialization into a particular class fraction. The amount of economic and social capital that one must invest to amass new spiritual capital is proportional to its position in the field. Amassing capital within a popular religious tradition typically requires a low level of investment compared to doing so within an esoteric spiritual alternative. For example, gaining accolades in the Anglican church would have been a rather simple matter for author Christopher Isherwood, given the circumstances of his birth and education. Were such an option conceivable to him, converting to Judaism would have required greater effort and certainly, in his circles, a sacrifice of social capital, but here, too, the requisite steps would have been relatively small. But, like his friend Huxley, Isherwood was inclined toward Vedanta. Establishing himself as a virtuoso of this faith required him to move to an ashram, submit himself to a guru, purchase the necessary supplies, learn Sanskrit and Hatha Yoga, spend long tracts of time meditating, chanting, and fasting, restrict himself to a vegetarian diet, and abandon a vigorous erotic life in favor of celibacy (Isherwood 1980, 1997).¹⁹ Spiritual capital may thus been seen to have a labor value, either directly, as a function of the work devoted to its accumulation through devotional practice, or indirectly, as a function of the work devoted to amassing the economic or social wealth exchanged for mystical attainment. These costs account for the widely reported observation that the ardent pursuit of alternative spiritual systems is positively correlated with standard measures of social status (see, e.g., Adler 1986; Brown 1997; Eller 1993; Hartman 1976; Kirkpatrick, Rainey, and Rubi 1986; Wuthnow 1976, 1978).

Assessing the labor value of investment in spiritual capital may help to understand the trajectory of conversion careers. Religious seekers who sample a variety of faiths are making a series of modest investments. (And indeed, celibacy proved to be too high a cost for Isherwood, who abandoned a vocation in Vedanta after two and a half years of semimonastic life.) Although there may be a cumulative toll, this strategy minimizes the chances of serious loss of economic and social capital. Investment in spiritual capital may also be related to the positive correlation between the demands groups place upon their adherents and the relative strength of the group's coherence (Kanter 1972; Kelly 1972). Groups that demand a serious commitment (financial, familial, emotional, etc.) require a substantially greater investment of capital. Disassociation from such a group represents a substantial sacrifice of accumulated spiritual capital (Iannaccone 1994).

Spiritual omnivorosity—the sort witnessed in individuals who combine multiple religious traditions (imagine someone who considers herself a Buddhist but attends seders, practices Yoga, consults an astrologer, wears a crystal, and professes an interest in American Indian spirituality)—may be the most exclusive form of spiritual

¹⁹ On the other hand, Isherwood received a discount, so to speak, on the price of admission to Vedanta by virtue of the cultural background he shared with his guru, who had been educated in England, studied British literature and philosophy, and spoke British English (Isherwood 1980:37). "The habitus," Bourdieu notes, "tends to favour experiences likely to reinforce it" (Bourdieu 1990:61).

capital. Recent analyses of consumption patterns suggest that definitions of elite tastes are shifting: whereas high culture once defined the range of highbrow taste, cultural eclecticism has now become the preferred position; elites used to be snobs—now they are omnivores (Peterson and Kern 1996). Peterson and Kern identify a number of factors that account for cultural omnivorosity, including generational shifts, value changes, and media developments. An ideological assumption peculiar to the religious field facilitates spiritual omnivorosity—universalism: the belief that all religious traditions have at their core the same element of divine truth, and that each tradition is an equally valid route to transcendence. A corollary of this assumption is that exploring more than one spiritual path might facilitate the process of enlightenment. This latter idea was the progenitor of Theosophy and other spiritual hybrids of the New Age (Verter 1998:88–94). Though universalism represents an ideal among New Age practitioners, it is not one that is easily attained. The costs of pursuing one esoteric system are high enough; developing expertise in multiple creeds requires substantial investment of both material and symbolic capital.

Polymorphous spiritual consumption may also reflect a process of “aesthetic distancing,” a performative strategy of emotional detachment that is another defining element of an elite disposition (Bourdieu 1984:34–35). Isherwood’s period of zeal was a matter of consternation for his literary peers. As his publisher back in England recalled, “None of us were particularly enthusiastic about the move to the Vedanta ‘monastery’; fearing that it would increase the gulf between us, perhaps even to a point of total non-comprehension” (Lehmann 1960:180). By contrast, Huxley’s avowedly intense interest in Vedanta aroused no such concern, precisely because it was nonexclusive: his outline of the “perennial philosophy” linked mystical strains from a wide variety of religious traditions (Huxley 1945a, 1945b). Conspicuous displays of familiarity with multiple religions further serve the dual function of maximizing one’s social network while minimizing the appearance of investment. This latter function is an important defensive strategy, particularly because the value of spiritual capital in porous, heterogeneous communities (as opposed to isolated, traditional ones) is inherently unstable.

Because it may be translated into other forms of capital, spiritual capital is a valuable asset that, when strategically invested, might bring social and economic advancement, a process that Bourdieu referred to as the reconversion of capital (see, e.g., Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978). For evidence of this, one need only look at the great number of religious leaders hailing from the lower or middle classes who managed to catapult themselves into the uppermost strata by establishing themselves as spiritual virtuosi. Billy Graham, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and L. Ron Hubbard are a few of the examples that come immediately to mind. Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1982) note that Catholic bishops from poor, rural areas who were raised in the church as oblates might attain the same institutional positions and ideological opinions as bishops from much more privileged backgrounds. In the United States, a discomfort with this admixture of God and mammon has given rise to popular critiques of clerical simony and hypocrisy, evidenced particularly in attacks on leaders of new religious movements and evangelical revivalists. The eponymous antihero of Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Elmer Gantry* (1927) is a case in point. An impious man, Gantry is nevertheless able to acquire wealth and prestige by aping the outward signs of faith. Although Gantry may have his real-life analogues, the critical discourse that informs Lewis’s novel is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the fluidity of exchange between spiritual and economic capital.

While spiritual capital may serve as a medium of social mobility, its forms are not universally recognized, so individuals may feel inclined to divest by hiding, abandoning, or altering their faith as part of the process of acculturation into a new lifestyle. Declension among students from strong religious backgrounds who attend nondenominational colleges and universities and are socialized into a secular educational culture (see, e.g., Marsden 1992) represents the exchange of spiritual capital for another form of capital (and, not incidentally, demonstrates the relatively parochial value of any given form of spiritual capital).

The accumulation or divestment of spiritual capital, it should be noted, need not be so dramatic as the examples just related. Smaller changes—say, the decision to serve on a church's board, or to attend synagogue services only during the high holy days—also represent acts of positioning that involve the recalculation of spiritual capital. Like other episodes of conversion or apostasy, these slighter adjustments are also shaped by the changing array of tastes generated by one's ever-shifting social context.

Spiritual capital may be amassed and exchanged, but it may also be squandered. Evangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker used their ministry as a platform for the accumulation of extraordinary wealth, but once their illicit business dealings were revealed, they fell from grace. Spiritual capital poorly invested may lead to personal ruin. In the classic novel by Harold Frederic ([1896] 1960), Theron Ware, a young minister in a small town, loses his status by acting more sophisticated than he is. Seduced from his vocation by Celia, a wealthy and beautiful aesthete with pantheistic leanings, Ware attempts to match her cultural attainments. But in an inversion of the Pygmalion story, he fails miserably. "When you thought you were impressing us most by your smart sayings and doings, you were reminding us most of the fable about the donkey trying to play lapdog," Celia tells him (Frederic [1896] 1960:332). Ware gains access to Celia's elite circle by virtue of his spiritual capital, but it is not enough to sustain him, particularly in the absence of other relevant forms of capital—economic, cultural, or social.

CONCLUSION

It may be worth recapitulating the theoretical implications of the present examination of spiritual capital, both for applying Bourdieu and for studying religion.

Theorizing religion *with* Bourdieu illustrates the flexibility of his conceptualization of symbolic capital and the utility of his model of status competition. Religious choice—that most personal of spiritual matters—is revealed to be inclined and constrained, not just by virtue of one's birth and education, but also by the continuously shifting dynamics of one's social context, defined in terms of both the macroeconomics of the field of power and the micropolitics of one's individual field. The structured nexus of attitudes and preferences that comprises the *habitus* engenders not only "commonsense" perceptions, everyday behaviors, linguistic abilities, and cultural knowledge, but also spiritual predilections: subcultural identity shapes religious tastes. As matters of taste, spiritual dispositions may be regarded as a form of cultural capital, as positional goods bought dearly and misrecognized as natural attributes, rather than socially structured ones. The dynamics through which various forms of spiritual capital are recognized as *specie* are manifested in such dynamic processes as religious conversion, devotional eclecticism, religious fads, and social mobility.

Theorizing religion with Bourdieu also suggests ways of rethinking the economic approach to religion championed by rational choice theorists. The notion of spiritual capital poses the trajectories of religious movements as a matter less of supply than of demand. It portrays religion as a field of conflict, not just between rival denominations, but also among individuals, including those who share the same faith. It identifies individual investment, not as steady accumulation along a linear path, but rather as an incessant recalculation of one's position within a framework of human relations—a framework modeled not simply by one's family or one's church, but by one's broader social field. It offers a model characterized not by stasis, but by change.

But coming to these conclusions has required us also to theorize religion *against* Bourdieu's explicit model. The notion of spiritual capital redirects attention away from the Weberian triumvirate of priest-prophet-magician and grants an agency to the layperson that Bourdieu denied. The interdependence of the religious professional and his or her flock that exists even within the field of restricted spiritual production—analogue, perhaps, to the Hegelian master/slave relationship—may be a factor that distinguishes religion from fields such as art or mathematics. But it raises the question of whether nonprofessionals might exercise a similar influence on the dynamics and the valuation of capital in other fields. What conditions allow consumers to assume the intellectual functions of cultural production that Bourdieu claims are reserved for institutionally established professionals?²⁰

The idea of spiritual capital also suggests that fields may not be as autonomous as Bourdieu suggests. Although each field may be governed by a unique set of implicit rules, this autonomous structure must be considered as a feature of a more complex interactive network involving the conjuncture of multiple fields. The functioning of fields is simultaneously independent and interdependent. One may, moreover, conjecture that relations between fields fluctuate as steadily as do relations within them. Fields may be isolated for the sake of analysis, but one must not lose sight of the larger complexity.

Finally, the model articulated here calls attention to the fact that spiritual capital—if not, indeed, all forms of symbolic capital—is, unlike most forms of economic capital (cowrie shells and wampum among the exceptions), not universally recognized. There are subcultural variances in the normative definition of religious practice. Systematic attention to the conditions through which spiritual capital is produced and reproduced within different social fractions should lend greater insight into the operation and function of religious trends within the broader culture.

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²⁰ I am indebted to David Swartz for the clarification of these questions.

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