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Reconceptualizing The Dynamics of Religion As A Macro-Institutional Domain

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ABSTRACT:

Macro-institutional analysis was once central to sociological inquiry, such that Durkheim saw it as synonymous with sociology. With the failure of Parsonsian grand macro theory, sociology shifted its lens to the organization, or meso-level of analysis. While producing key insights into the dynamics of corporate units, the macro-environment has become ambiguously theorized. In the paper below, the emergent properties and dynamics of the religious institution—an important sphere of human action central to classical sociology and currently a vibrant subfield—are elucidated. It is argued an analysis at the macro-institution can produce a more robust understanding of social organization and action, which supplements the important meso-level models by more precisely defining and delineating the contours of the macro-level. The paper below achieves this goal by (a) explicating the generic qualities of all religious institutions and (b) positing the key intra- and inter-institutional dynamics affecting various levels of society.

INTRODUCTION

Durkheim once posited "sociology can be defined as the *science of institutions*, their *genesis*, and their *functioning*" ([1895] 1982:45, emphasis added). As macro structural and cultural milieu they shape various "lower" levels of social life ranging from individuals (and their identities) to organizations and (their internal cultures), and, ultimately, fields, networks, and niches consisting of congeries of individual and corporate actors. Yet, in the wake of Parsons' systems theory a paradigm shift from the macro-level of analysis to the meso-level took hold in sociology. This shift has contributed to the prominence of organizational studies (cf. Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Fligstein 1996; Powell 1999; Fligstein and McAdam 2011) and, consequently, the peripheralization of macro-institutional analysis.

Though macro-institutional analysis has continued to thrive in some corners (cf. Turner 2003; Nolan and Lenski 2009; Abrutyn and Turner 2011; Abrutyn 2009, 2012, 2013b) it has rarely been synthesized with meso-level models despite the potential for robust theories of social organization and action. Typically macro-level theories ignore actors, while most meso-level models conceptualize "institutional environments" in vague terms like "isomorphic pressures," "rules of the game," or "cultural myths." Thus, meso-level analyses typically ignore 'top-down' macro-level dynamics (cf. Turner 1995) that could enrich their research by more precisely delineating what institutional environment actually are, what emergent properties and dynamics exist on the macro-level in ways that shape the micro- and meso-levels of society, and, ultimately, how these levels are linked together.

While any institution would serve as a good departure for refocusing the lens from the meso to the macro, the paper below will consider the religious institution for three reasons. First, religion, as a sphere of social action, was central to the earliest sociologists while today it remains a vibrant and important sub-discipline. Second, religious institutions are like political

and economic institutions in that they have historically influenced large segments of populations within and across geographic boundaries. Third, contemporary meso-level theories of religion abound—e.g., religious economies (Finke and Stark 1988; Stark 1999), denominational ecology (Chaves 2004), and religious movements traditions (Wuthnow 1980; Zald 1982)—thus making the link between macro- and meso-levels easy to draw. Hence, by (1) clearly delineating the generic qualities of the religious institution and (2) elucidating the internal and inter-institutional dynamics of note, these models can be supplemented.

ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are macro-level structural and cultural spheres or domains in which *actors*, *resources*, and *authority systems* are distributed in bounded ecological space—e.g., *physically*, *temporally*, *socially*, and *symbolically*—organized by and around one or more *universal human concern* and, in which, generalized action, exchange, and communication systems are governed by a symbolic medium (Abrutyn 2013b). Hence, every institution has, at the very least, one *institutional core*. The core is surrounded by an *institutional environment* consisting of various types of institutional and extra-institutional actors as well as intra- and inter-institutional fields of actors; some segments of the environment overlap with other institutional environments. The core can be a real, physical location, a cognitive 'space' that orients individual and corporate actors' attention, or an amalgam of the two. Additionally, the core is the central locus of (a) key institutional actors—*institutional entrepreneurs* (Eisenstadt 1980; Colomy and Rhodes 1994)¹, (b) the production, distribution, and exchange of institutional resources, and (c) the seat of authority.

The degree to which the core is discretely bounded from other institutional domains reflects the level of the given institution's autonomy. That is, entrepreneurs struggle for structural and/or symbolic independence vis-à-vis other entrepreneurs and social strata (Abrutyn 2009); as they gain independence they are able to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space of the core and eventually the institutional environment. As autonomy increases an institution's actors/resources/rules and four dimensions of space become increasingly organized by and around one or more monopolized *universal human concerns* resolved or addressed by the institution and its entrepreneurs. Finally, as actors and/or the niches/fields they are embedded within become increasingly oriented towards the autonomous institutional core, their goals, decisions, interactions/exchanges, and lines of action become facilitated and constrained by the institutional domain's *generalized symbolic media of exchange* (Abrutyn and Turner 2011). Proximity from a core plus an institution's level of autonomy are key dynamics conditioning ecological forces: *The closer is an actor or field to the institutional core (and the greater is the level of institutional autonomy vis-à-vis other institutional cores), the greater is the visibility and access to institutional resources, visibility and subjection to institutionally-specific authority systems/mechanisms of social control, and impact of institutionally-specific dynamics on action, goal setting, and decision-making.*

From this brief sketch on institutions, institutional autonomy, and institutional ecology, it should be clear that institutions could be conceptualized more robustly than they currently are. For instance, a religious institution with very low levels of autonomy will have less distinct role/status-positions and organizational units than those with greater autonomy. The resources actors use and pursue, as well as the rules governing the relationships between actors, and actors

¹ What "entrepreneurs" are and their role in institutional processes will be considered in greater detail below.

and resources, will also be less religious in nature. Put another way, from an objective standpoint what is understood by a significant proportion of the population as "religious" would be less distinguishable from those elements understood as "political" or "kin-based." Because religious entrepreneurs shape the religious institution their dependence upon extant elite in other domains for material, human, and symbolic resources precludes them from drawing stark lines between their actions, goals, and decisions and that of other dominant entrepreneurs.

Conversely, where a religious institution has grown in autonomy, its actors, resources, and rules will grow far more distinct from others.² A relatively discrete religious core (or set of cores) will emerge because religious entrepreneurs found alternative, diverse bases of resources, legitimated their vision of reality and claims to monopolies over key resources, concerns, and knowledge, and leveraged this into a power-dependent advantage and independence vis-à-vis other entrepreneurs.³ The ultimate source generating power-dependent advantages and facilitating influence comes from religious entrepreneurs who can monopolize the legitimate means of *psychological violence* (Weber 1978:54-6; Abrutyn 2013a). Control over both the production of ideas, knowledge, and paths to truth, salvation, immortality, and legitimacy generates symbolic *capital* and *power*, which can shape and legitimate a religious entrepreneur's authoritative *vision of reality* (Bourdieu 1989), oppress categories of people, intensify (extant or new) patterns of stratification, and enhance their control over other desired resources like political power, wealth, and prestige.⁴

Entrepreneurs, Autonomy, and the Four Dimensions of Space

Religious entrepreneurs are forces of qualitative change because the independence they struggle for, and when successful secure, provides them with the ability to reconfigure physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space in ways that differentiate the religious sphere from other spheres (Abrutyn 2013a). As the physical landscape is reshaped by buildings, monuments, and other physical/social objects these become real signposts indicating to people that religious activities or actors are present; entire geographic zones can be differentiated—e.g., holy cities like Mecca or Jerusalem, locations like the Oracle at Delphi, or even an entire state or region like Palestine/Israel. Alongside these physical distinctions come temporal differentiations: times in which these sites are to be visited, holy-days that order the economic rounds, and notions of the past (and creation), the present, and future (eschatology).

Social differentiation also occurs as distinct religious roles and organizations embedded

² For analytical reasons, the concept of institutional autonomy is often discussed in kind rather than degree. However, autonomy exists on a continuum with the extremes being ideal types (Abrutyn 2009). That is, even where an institution has become very autonomous, relatively speaking, its elements are never truly independent, interpenetration is the rule and not the exception, and corruption from outside is always a possibility.

³ One final point regarding autonomy is worth making. In most small-scale societies, all institutional domains are inextricably embedded within kinship. In societies like these religious roles and organizational units, actions and goals, and space, time, and symbols will blur with those of kinship, making them difficult to distinguish. It is far rarer in modernity to see religious institutions with a 'compromised' core, but the former Soviet Union offers an example (Froese 2009). The polity grew so autonomous, it managed to subordinate all institutions, such that media like *sacredness/piety* or *influence*, was ruled by polity, *power*, and party loyalty. Clearly, low levels of autonomy radically alter role-players, corporate units, and fields of units in interesting ways.

⁴ In religious institutions where multiple cores operate—e.g., heterodoxies or pluralist societies, monopolies over psychological violence are rare, contested, and often subject to competing claims by non-religious cosmological entrepreneurs like scientific entrepreneurs.

in unique horizontal and vertical divisions of labor proliferate. In addition, entrepreneurs have the unique opportunity to alter the mechanisms or modes by which these actors are integrated within the religious core and its environment. There are, at least, eight specific modes of integration: two structural modes—segmentation and differentiation; and six sociocultural modes: exchange, domination, inclusion/embedding, mobility, boundary overlaps, and intersecting parameters (see Abrutyn and Turner 2011 for a detailed discussion on modes of integration). As the institution's physical, temporal, and social spaces are increasingly differentiated from other domains, and as the number and density of endogenous institutional social units grow, entrepreneurs reconfigure how organizations and role-players are interrelated within the institutional sphere and between institutions. In part, this process is affected by *sacredness/piety* being a "hot" medium of exchange (more on this below), but the tremendous amount of variation across religions in time and space indicates entrepreneurs have some control over the way the social space is constructed and thus meso-level dynamics either in terms of fields/niches or the internal environment of organizations.

Finally, the differentiation of symbolic space can be understood in two ways. First, religious institutions generate symbolic elements—e.g., ideologies, interests and, values—internalized by individuals and embedded within the framework of groups in ways that cognitively orient actors to the religious core regardless of their physical location. Second, the other types of space become increasingly 'drenched' in religious symbols as the institution grows autonomous. Buildings become symbolic cues to think and act religiously, as do encounters outside of these locations with congregants or their leaders; the cross or star of David become totems, replete with prescriptions and prohibitions regarding their use as well as symbolic signposts delineating membership, beliefs, histories, and shared meanings; rituals like fasting or putting ash on one's forehead are all symbolic manifestations of temporal distinctions; and, religious relationships themselves—e.g., priest-lay person or congregant-congregant—become infused with symbolic meanings that reinforce expectations and obligations and ensure some level of compliance.

Ubiquitous Religious Concerns

The four dimensions of space are not arbitrarily differentiated according to the whims of an entrepreneurial unit. Rather, as institutional domains grow in autonomy their logic, the way actors/resources are distributed in space, and the entrepreneur's claims to legitimacy are all predicated and shaped by ubiquitous religious concerns and the ways in which they have been resolved or addressed in the past. Hence, institutional domains are not just spheres of social exchange, but also structural/cultural centers producing resources meant to address one or more universal human concerns. Human concerns *are not* societal requisites or needs, but *are* universal in so far as the vast majority of individuals are *capable* on experiencing them as salient given the right conditions.⁵ Human concerns are important for institutions for two reasons. First, the concern(s) a given institution monopolizes will shape the actors, their goals and decisions, and other institutional dynamics. Second, as an institutional domain becomes increasingly autonomous, certain concerns and their solution(s) can be monopolized by entrepreneurs and leveraged for greater power-dependence. Three concerns appear universal to religious institutions across time and space.

⁵ It is always possible that (a) people will fail to perceive a concern as pressing despite its existence, (b) perception and innovation are not necessarily linked, (c) existing political, economic, or environmental conditions may stymie efforts to solve them, and (d) even where solutions are created, there are no guarantees that they will work in the long- or short-term.

The first concern religious institutions ubiquitously deal with is *communication with the supranatural* (cf. Geertz 1965; Swanson 1966; Stark 2007). Humans appear to have a unique drive to understand how the supranatural and the natural world are related. The basis of this concern may vary: some assume a rational-choice perspective and argue that humans "invent" gods to obtain goods/services unobtainable through worldly sources (Stark 1999), others argue the "invention" of god(s) is a misattribution of the emotions generated during collective rituals (Durkheim 1912); still others presume something more primordial and/or, perhaps, biological behind our ubiquitous concern to communicate with the supranatural (Boyer 2001). Either way, as a religious institution becomes autonomous and its religious entrepreneurs independent, the location for communicating with the supranatural—whether mediated by entrepreneurs or not—is nearly always the religious institution. Indeed, this key concern is the source and force behind the generalized religious medium of exchange, *sacredness/piety*.

A second concern is *morality/solidarity* (Durkheim 1912). While the first explicitly "ethical" or "moral" religions emerged during the Axial Age (Eisenstadt 1986), all religious institutions are deeply concerned with prescribing what is good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral. Without a doubt, religious institutions rarely have a true monopoly over this concern, yet even in so-called secular western nation-states the religious institution remains interested in morality, shapes its constituent actor's conception of morality, and with varying success tries to shape the broader societal discussion on morality. Moreover, producing, reinforcing, and sanctioning solidarity is the essence of morality and the medium of religious exchange, *sacredness/piety*.

A third concern of religious institutions will be termed *existential or metaphysical anxiety*. Geertz (1966) proposed that all religions deal with at least two psychologically stressful elements of human nature: the problem of suffering and that of evil. Religious institutions offer symbolic systems meant to address, explain, and justify why the innocent suffer and why evil exists. In addition, one could add the fear of death/desire for immortality (Weber 1922), fear of the future, and the need for meaning and/or purpose of existence (Radin [1937] 1957). It is from these anxieties that soteriologies and eschatologies are crafted.⁶

Part of the monopoly religious entrepreneurs secure over psychological violence derives from their control and solutions to a fourth concern labeled *cosmological uncertainty*, or the pressing need to answer questions such as what it means to be human, what the natural and/or supranatural environment is and where it came from, why things happen in the natural and social world, and how we got here. Furthermore, religions offer epistemologies that order the natural and supranatural world (Durkheim 1912). Not coincidentally, the birth of modern legal actors and legal logic (Berman 1983), the modern autonomous scientific institution (Gaukroger 2006), the modern educational institution (Rashdall 1936), and the medical institution (Sigerist 1951-61) occurred out of and at the expense of the religious institution. These four institutions all deal in knowledge, learning, truth, (and with art, beauty and truth)—that is, concerns previously monopolized by the religious institution and related to these larger cosmological questions.

What makes these concerns so important is religious entrepreneurs, for example, interpret them whether already exist theologies working within a given doctrine or new innovators

⁶ It has become fashionable in many corners of sociology to base explanations solely on material factors. To do so ignores the fact that humans have very large brains that make their own impending mortality a fear equal to, and perhaps more pressing, than, say, being hungry. *Ideal* interests, like salvation, have had a role in shaping action and attitudes for most of sociocultural evolution; and while the cynic would argue that ministers are pursuing monetary reward and power or lay persons are ignorant bumpkins, a judicious student of human behavior would admit that both may in fact be true believers and their economic or political behavior is shaped by their beliefs.

reinterpreting past traditions or adding new elements. The gravity of the concern as perceived by the entrepreneur, the size of his/her audience and resource base, the number and relative advantage of competitors, and the structural position of the entrepreneur will often dictate the form and content of religious dynamics. Moral, existential, or cosmological concerns that appear dire can create revitalization movements that can be peaceful or violent (Wallace 1956), revolutionary movements from the margins or minorities (Hall 2003), or various other types of movements (Wuthnow 1980; Zald 1982).

Sacredness/Piety

Finally, entrepreneurs are transformative forces because they can monopolize the production/distribution of the generalized symbolic medium of religious exchange such that exchanges within the religious core, between the core and its environment, and between institutional domains will be primarily about *sacredness/piety* and less so about *money* (the medium of autonomous economic exchange) or *power* (the medium of polity). Generalized symbolic media of exchange are symbols that organize talk and cognition within a domain; they are what actors often exchange; they are often the valued resources unequally distributed to individuals by corporate units leading to patterns of inequality and stratification; they are used to formulate worldviews and themes differentiating actors across domains (e.g., churches versus universities, priests and professors); and they are the symbolic ingredients of ideologies evolving within a particular domain (Abrutyn and Turner 2011). Ultimately:

culture has to come from somewhere, and while it is certainly true that individuals generate culture as they act, interact, and organize, they do so through the use of generalized symbolic media. [Furthermore,] depending upon the relative dominance of one or more institutional domains, the environment of organizations will be disproportionately influenced by the ideologies of these dominant domains. For example, if *sacredness/piety* from religion dominates, the cultural environment of kinship, law, polity, and education will be heavily influenced by the ideology and norms built from this medium (ibid. 4).

The importance of a given generalized medium of exchange is variable in time and space. The classic historical bureaucratic empires such as Egypt or Mesopotamia valued *sacredness/piety* as highly as *power* and more so than most other media, save for *love/loyalty* in the kinship institution (Eisenstadt 1963); the same institutional arrangement can be said to have existed in Europe during the Catholic Church's zenith and in most contemporary Islamic nation-states. Conversely, in the contemporary U.S. *sacredness/piety* has powerful local value as the penetration of the religious institution is often confined to smaller social units. In its place has emerged a powerful meta-ideology that infuses the values of economy (*money*), with that of polity (*power*), law (*influence*), and to a lesser extent those of science (*learning, applied knowledge*). The ramifications are apparent: the creation of new organizational units, the fields they emerge within or create, and the way the individual understands him/ herself and his/her place in society becomes torn between local definitions shaped by religio-kin institutions and national/global by political economy.

There are some other dynamics related to the circulation of *sacredness/piety* worth elucidating. First, the religious domain's medium, like that of kinship, is socio-emotionally anchored. Unlike *money* or *power* which tend to be "cool" media—and, therefore, impersonal, easily transferable across boundaries, and rooted in universalist values and ideologies—

sacredness/piety is "hot"—e.g., typically particularistic and deeply personal. Additionally, because it is hot, *sacredness/piety* typically require other mechanisms to facilitate circulation across political/cultural/territorial boundaries it often facilitates schisms, heterodoxies, and sectarianism as it is harder to generate integrative cultural patterns across large distances.

A second dynamic resulting from the relative "hotness" of the religious medium is its ability to resist "corruption" or "pollution" far more efficaciously than cooler media. *Money* and *power*, for example, can and do corrupt *sacredness/piety* in ways that can reorient religious actions or goals towards those of the economy or polity. Yet, there are obvious reasons for the rise and proliferation of anti-Capitalist/western and/or anti-globalization movements rooted in a meta-ideology of traditional familial/kin and fundamentalist religious media (or religio-kin movements). Where impersonal, intense and rapid circulation of *money* and *power* becomes dominant, the civic sphere and relationships can appear devoid of meaning, morals, and socio-emotional moorings. The two institutional domains most apt to protect the individual and the primary groups he/she belongs to are kinship and religion because they are personal, moral, and emotionally anchored. Thus, a blending of the two creates powerful ideologies that can speak to, mobilize, and organize the vast majority of humans who generally lack access to economic/political media.

Religious Entrepreneurs, Concerns, and Sacredness/Piety

Entrepreneurs are corporate actors transformed by their motivation to innovate technologically, organizationally, and/or symbolically in ways meant to deal with one or more human concern perceived as problematic (Eisenstadt 1980; Colomy and Rhoades 1994).⁷; they are key forces of sociocultural evolution and qualitative structural/cultural transformation (Abrutyn 2009). As they innovate they become entrepreneurs when they recognize and actively pursue the leverage and power-dependent advantage gained through monopolizing the production and distribution of key resources dealing with one or more human concerns—especially generalized media of exchange. In turn, all entrepreneurs can parlay the power-dependent advantage into structural and symbolic independence, which involves (1) carving out autonomous institutional space by reconfiguring physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space, (2) reorganizing the flow of resources, (3) creating new paths of social mobility, and (4) imposing new visions of reality and cultural orientations that facilitate and constrain the actions, goals, and decisions of institutional actors and non-institutional actors seeking their "goods and services," as well as the shape and dynamics of congeries of actors (i.e., fields and niches).

What distinguishes religious entrepreneurs from other entrepreneurs is the fact that they rely on "charismatic fervor...rooted in the attempt to come into contact with the very essence of being, to go to the very roots of existence, of cosmic, social, and cultural order, to what is seen as sacred and fundamental" as their base of legitimacy (Eisenstadt in Weber 1968:xix). Other entrepreneurs tap into other sources of legitimacy or use religious entrepreneur's unique position to legitimate their own authority and claims, while religious entrepreneurs seek a monopoly over

⁷ They are entrepreneurs because they pursue high-risk/high-reward strategies that could result in their extinction or in their mobility. Second, their efforts may or may not end successfully in the short- or long-run. Third, their emergence in the first place is not guaranteed, but instead contingent on historical and sociocultural contingencies. Fourth, innovation by itself does not necessarily produce entrepreneurship. Finally, they may or may not innovate purposefully in the first place. That is, most people do not perceive "population pressures"; instead they perceive that their standard of living is being threatened or in decline. Thus, self-interest may be equally as important as collective interest. However, to be an entrepreneur means to, at some point in the process, recognize the gains that can be made by innovating and monopolizing those innovations and consciously pursuing this gain.

the means of psychological violence (Abrutyn 2013a). More importantly, religious entrepreneurs face cheaper "costs" when organizing and mobilizing their constituents to act because their authority rests not on external, regulatory or coercive mechanisms but control over ideas and norms.

Second, and closely related, *sacredness/piety* is anchored in emotional energy, which provides religious entrepreneurs with a potentially potent source of solidarity and a legitimate monopoly over the means of psychological violence. *Collective effervescence*, or the collective emotion generated during religious rituals has powerful solidarious consequences for the group (Durkheim 1912). Thus, religious institutions often link together individuals, corporate actors, and networks or fields of corporate actors through religious experiences, as do rituals meant to create contact with the supranatural. And while all institutional domains can generate collective effervescence through collective secular rituals, religious rituals are always undergirded by the supranatural and, therefore, an implicit moral imperative. Moreover, being in a position to marshal this energy and its solidarious consequences is a unique privilege: entrepreneurs can (a) become a totemic or external representation of the group, (b) draw charismatic authority from this totemic centrality, and (c) produce collective effervescence when needed to mobilize actors.

Third, the hotness of the medium provides religious entrepreneurs with the opportunity to occupy indispensable positions rooted in personal relationships. Unlike kings or presidents who rely on generalized mechanisms of exchange, religious entrepreneurs—even when dealing with a relatively large congregation that is generally founded on impersonal relationships—have access to an emotional medium of exchange that engenders feelings of closeness, trust, and commitment, all of which foster *productive* and *reciprocal* modes of exchange (Lawler 2006:257-8). The result is a higher likelihood of penetrating the lives of those seeking the religious entrepreneur's goods and services, as well as credibility in interpreting societal malaise and passing judgment on others.

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Institutional domains vary across time and space along certain dimensions that impact the way actors and fields or networks of actors are distributed in space. In particular, three dimensions shape some of the structural and cultural dynamics of religious institutions. First, the number of institutional cores the religious institution has; second, the relationship between the religious and political institution; and finally, the degree to which religious entrepreneurs have monopolized legitimate claims over cosmological concerns vis-à-vis non-religious entrepreneurs.

Single vs. Multiple Cores

Not all institutions have single institutional cores—e.g., the seat of American polity may physically be Washington D.C., but physical distance requires local federal buildings with authorized political agents, as well as the allowance for jurisdictional distinctions between state and local political cores. The religious domain also may vary in the number of extant cores. Is there a single temple or holy city that is the central locus of the religious institution? Are their vertically integrated cores varying in levels of resources, responsibilities, and authority? The Vatican, for example, acts as the physical and cognitive/spiritual center of Catholicism while the parish or local church acts as a lower-level physical core orienting action/attitudes of smaller units. Or, are there competing cores as can be found in most pluralist societies where not only are they horizontally distributed (e.g., actual competing churches/synagogues), but they are also vertically integrated through inclusion/embedding into national associations and internationally

integrated? Such is the case of the U.S. Catholic Church.

Single-cored religious institutions exhibit higher levels of autonomy than multi-core ones. For one thing, there are fewer, if any, cosmological/religious competitors. A relatively homogenous entrepreneurial unit monopolizes the accumulation, production, and distribution of *sacredness/piety*, religious power and prestige, and most likely, wealth. Fewer alternative sources favor stronger power-dependent advantages (Emerson 1962), and in cases where there is a singular source, structural holes can be manipulated to generate higher levels of indispensability. To be sure, single-cores are also more susceptible to selection pressures against the religious institution and, in some cases, society: sociocultural evolution, like its biotic counterpart, favors cultural diversity while single-cored religious institutions restrict the speed, creativity, and potential for adaptivity.

Polity and Religion

No institution has had a more important and unique historical impact on religion than polity (Eisenstadt 1963; Abrutyn 2013c). From about 5,000 years ago until very recently the primary base of political authority rested on religious authority. Still today, many Islamic nations explicitly derive authority from the Koran, the ulama, and Allah, while Christian nations still employ religious symbols in association with the transfer of power and authority—e.g., the Presidential inauguration involves taking the oath with one hand on the Bible. The first stirrings of religious autonomy and, later, the first real entrepreneurs struggling for religious independence were driven by political entrepreneurship (Eisenstadt 1963): the need for theocratic authority meant creating, expanding, and protecting a relatively distinct priestly class that created a stratum "for itself." By the Axial Age (c. 850-100 BCE), a set of religious innovators and entrepreneurs emerged on the physical or cognitive margins in China, India, Persia, Greece, and Israel; each pushed for independence from political dependence and, ultimately, some say, from 'national' matters (Eisenstadt 1986). Even today, religion and polity in Western democratic states have paradoxical relationships. On the one hand, many religious entrepreneurs seek to avoid politics, while on the other hand other entrepreneurs have shifted from a status group to a faction in a political party (Brint and Abrutyn 2009).

Expanding the pie. Though it remains a scarce resource at any moment, the amount of power in any given society at any given point can grow larger (Mann 1986). Religious entrepreneurs must often find ways to expand the pie and force political entrepreneurs into power-sharing agreements that safeguard their structural and symbolic independence and allow them to sustain and expand religious autonomy. Like any group struggling for mobility and privilege, power sharing is always tenuous as is independence. Yet, there are plenty of cases that demonstrate the success religious entrepreneurs can have and, therefore, the varied consequences of different types of power-sharing agreements. Upon return from Babylonian exile (c. 537-20 BCE) the Hebraic Priestly class won the support of the Persian emperors and made a few modifications which ensured their relative local independence—e.g., they redacted the Pentateuch in such a way as to prevent the reconstitution of the monarchy in Jerusalem and, thus, ensure their elite position while also assuring the emperors that there would be no political sovereign challenging their hegemony (Gabrini 1988; Albertz 1992). A slightly different example can be culled from the Confucian literati, who like the Egyptian priesthood, were essentially a set of bureaucrats whose primary concerns were pragmatic: floods, taxes, and hostile neighbors. By monopolizing writing, they were able to create a counterbalance to the

Emperor's omnipotence in that the Emperor needed the approval from the literati to maintain legitimacy (Wei-Ming 1986). Finally, the most extreme case in history can be found in ancient India where a powerfully autonomous religious institution successfully prevented the polity from centralizing.⁸ The consequence was a caste system founded first on religious privilege and then on kingly/warrior privilege (Thapar 1975). While these three examples are historical, the basic point regarding subordination versus superordination can transpose such questions into any case in history where the data allow.

Counter examples, however, abound. Political entrepreneurs can use their considerable resources, power, and monopoly over physical force to contract or prevent expansion of the pie. Consider the narratives of two Mesopotamian kings who used very different political strategies. Naram-Sin (c. 2190–2154 BCE), the Akkadian grandson of the Sargon the Great (Liverani 1993), was a political innovator: he was the first Mesopotamian king to declare himself divine (van de Mieroop 2004:68-9). In doing so, all of the temple land—which was literally understood as the house and land of its resident deity—belonged to him; i.e., a blatant power grab which subordinated the priests to a level previously unseen. This decision eventually led to rebellions on multiple fronts, which would doom the Akkadian empire under Naram-Sin's son. Learning from Naram-Sin's mistakes a new regional power emerged in southern Iraq employing a new strategy of subordination. King Ur-Namma (c. 2112) instituted a policy (carried on by his son Shulgi) whereby the polity sought to control religious entrepreneurs through the use of economic power as opposed to coercive force (ibid. 73-84). They proceeded to embark on temple building/rebuilding projects that were meant to 'decentralize' authority in the hands of local governors and the local temple priests and demonstrate the king's magnanimity, all the while reducing the overall control religious entrepreneurs had by making them dependent upon the king's material subsidies. Stories, such as this, are well-worn in history—e.g., Akhenaton of Egypt, the nobility throughout ancient India, or Henry IV's opposition to Pope Gregory VII's reforms (and his famous walk to Canossa).

On the one hand, kings need priests to (a) uphold the practical sides of the ideological premise that each city or region has a deity who needs to be fed (Stark 2007) and (b) to act as scribes for various administrative, legal, and ideological tasks (Postgate 1977). On the other hand, *sacredness/piety* is emotionally anchored and can readily appeal to the masses in ways that drive "populist" movements, usurping the throne and threatening the political entrepreneur's independence and perhaps their lives. Thus, one of the foremost dynamics of religious institutions stems from a religious entrepreneur's degree of subordination to their political counterparts.

Single religious institution or single polity? A second salient dynamic derives from the intersections of autonomy and singularity. Where multiple political institutions are dependent upon a single religious institution, individual and corporate action and goal setting in both the religious institution and other non-religious institutions will be quite different than in the opposite case. In western Christendom, for example, the physical and cognitive/spiritual location of religion was singular, yet a plethora of polities ranging in size, population, and autonomy dotted the landscape thus giving the unified religious entrepreneurs many advantages over the fractured and diffuse political elite.

These dynamics are not limited to the so-called "universal" religions. Returning to

⁸ That is, aside from the brief Mauryan empire (c. 323-185 BCE), which elevated Buddhism to 'national' prominence (Keay 2000)

Mesopotamia, one of the most unique attributes of a region marked by the near-constant rise and fall of dynasties, ethnicities, and ecological zones is the relative continuity of the religious domain that spanned the first city-state of Uruk (c. 4000 BCE) to the fall of the Persian Empire in 330 BCE (van de Mieroop 2004). Additions were made by each successive empire, yet for almost 3,000 years Nippur remained the holy city, the title "King of Kish" was passed across empires, Sumerian language remained the written language of the priestly class, and the basic pantheon and mythology were sustained (Oppenheim 1964). It is clear the powerful integrative effects a single religious institution has on myriad political institutions, as well as how it encourages competition and conflict between political institutions looking for supremacy over greater swaths of territory.

Conversely, where multiple religious institutions become dependent on a single political institution various outcomes are possible. The elevation of a single state "Church" is possible, which marginalizes and threatens those religious systems not selected. It may also produce integrative problems founded on disagreements in "truth" and the supranatural such as those witnessed in Rome before Constantine elevated Christianity to a superordinate position (Stark 1996). Finally, it could produce the fracturing of the core into a series of decentralized religious cores, thereby weakening the level of religious autonomy and forcing religious entrepreneurs into a sanctioned religious economy marked by high-levels of competition.

The Specter of Cosmological Competitors

For some, science and religion are not inherently contradictory; for others like evolutionary psychologist Richard Dawkins (2006) they are combatants in a vital match that will determine the human race's future viability. Whatever may be the case the fundamental reality is that both science and religion, as increasingly autonomous institutions in modernity, make claims to solve and deal with overlapping human concerns. Earlier authors argued that one of the most basic concerns religious entrepreneurs dealt with is cosmological uncertainty: why things happen, how we got here, what and where the basic laws governing behavior derive from, how to heal others or make them sick, how to uncover "Truths," the standards by which one evaluates beauty, and so on. The methods which each entrepreneur employs to discover "Truth" for example, varies as do the arguments concerning the sources of cause and effect and, ultimately, the cosmogony undergirding human life.

A careful examination of history will demonstrate the gradual emergence of scientific entrepreneurs from the religious institution as a by-product of the religious entrepreneur's desire to understand the world, then as a group seeking independence. Or, consider the emergence of legal entrepreneurs: by Roman times, priests had also taken to the independent study of law in their free time, as both an intellectual past-time and as a gentleman's job (Kunkel 1966). In Islamic societies, the ulama are a 'priestly' class whose role is to interpret Shar'ia law (Akhavi 1992). The first truly independent legal entrepreneurs were trained in the Catholic universities, first in the invention of Canon law and then as separate entrepreneurs for nobility, aristocracy, and a burgeoning urban merchant middle class (Berman 1983). The same story underlies the evolution of the medical institution and medicine: the first distinct role players concerned with healing were shamans and, later, the priestly class—due to their monopoly over writing—began in earnest to compile medical compendia of symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments (Sigerist 1951-61). All of these types of entrepreneurs, and one could add others like the educational and artistic entrepreneurs, usurp one or more historically religious concerns as they gain their independence from the religious institution.

Therefore, it is proposed that the greater the degree to which other cosmological entrepreneurs become independent of the religious institution, the greater are the challenges to religious entrepreneur's legitimate claims of authority, access to sustainable resource flows, and, ultimately, independence. Moreover, where some cosmological entrepreneurs carve out autonomous institutional space, the potential for marginalization or, at the very least, declining autonomy in the religious sphere, grow increasingly probable. Science, for example, has a better 'track record' than religion because science relies on manipulating the material world in ways that allow even lay people to ascertain the validity of entrepreneurial claims. Within reason, our cars start daily, planes land regularly with no problem, and weather patterns are forecasted. Miracles, the supernatural, and salvation are difficult to measure or evaluate in any quantifiable manner.⁹

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS OF NOTE

Besides the relationship between the religious and political institutions, three other inter-institutional relations warrant attention: that of kinship-religion, economy-religion, and law-religion.

Particularistic Institutions

The similarities between kinship and religion have already been alluded to above: both employ hot, particularistic media of exchange; social relationships tend to be personal, intense, and guided by normative mechanisms of control; and physical and temporal space are highly demarcated. There are two historically unique dynamics founded on the relationship between kinship and religious institutions worth considering.

First, religious institutions have often acted as a medium through which political and kinship entrepreneurs interact. As political autonomy increased in the earliest states, two nearly separate societal structures emerged in tension: one rooted in a Palace-economy and the other founded on older patterns of village-level polity. For most of human sociocultural evolution after the urban revolution little personal contact was made across this yawning gap in social strata. Religious entrepreneurs worked hard to reduce this gap, sometimes in the stead of political entrepreneurs and other times for their own personal interest. The creation of pantheons with complex levels of jurisdiction was invented, in part, to link the "highest" levels of polity with those on the lowest local levels (Swanson 1966); annual community-wide festivals were held to generate some form of collective effervescence meant to reinforce a "peopleness" and a sense of duty to the larger moral order. Similar dynamics emerged with the rise of universal religions like Christianity and Islam, which could link the larger political economy—despite its material and cognitive distance from the average person—to the local village or household. Syncretisms were often tolerated in exchange for loyalty to the larger body of dogma and doctrine and political entrepreneurs relied on the accumulation and expenditure of *sacredness/piety* in exchange for *loyalty* from kin.

The second aspect is a more recent phenomenon, but is rooted in some of the same interrelationships as the first one. Religious institutions, in modernity especially, have become increasingly a buffer and arena of resistance to the impersonal and largely disconnected political and economic institutions. A cursory examination of prevalent social movements found throughout the globe that are anti-systemic (whether anti-government, anti-Capitalist, anti-

⁹ This is not to say one offers truth vis-à-vis the other, but rather to point to the material success science has had in measurable ways and the challenges this has presented to religious entrepreneurs and their lay followers.

western, and/or anti-globalization) are rooted in "traditional" religious ideologies married to "traditional" kinship ideologies. The emphasis is on religio-kin relationships, moral/substantive values, and distinct gender relations (Almond et al. 2003). Kinship and religious institutional autonomy is most threatened in capitalist-democracies because of the penetration and ubiquity of cool media like money and power. Yet, their advantages lie in the fact that institutional access is typically ascriptive, membership criteria are relatively simple, and institutional resources are generally available in equitable amounts for members. In other words, most Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists belong to a moral community with most members considered equal in the eyes of their respective deity—e.g., besides sex and age stratification in kinship, most people are able to obtain similar amounts of resources.¹⁰ Hence, the interstices between religious and kinship institutions in many societies have become the central loci for resistance movements, anti-systemic grievances, and buffers from the harsh dynamics of the more diffuse and "cool" institutional domains like polity, economy, or law.

The Religious Ethic and the Spirit of Economics

Weber (1946) made a cogent argument that religious institutions were often shaped by the economic position and, therefore, by the material and ideal interests of those entrepreneurs most responsible for innovating religiously, succeeding against competitors, and establishing privileged positions within the religious institution such that they could legitimate their claims to reality and propagate their religious innovations. The interpenetration could work either way according to Weber: certain religious carriers located in certain economic positions and sharing certain lifestyle consumptive patterns could institutionalize religious goals and actions having effects on their economic patterns. Where a religious institution has gained autonomy, those actors in its environment closest to the core would also see their economic ethics affected (cf. Swedberg 1998). Conversely, shifts in the economic institution could penetrate the religious institution in ways that force entrepreneurs to adapt. Randall Collins (1997), for example, has demonstrated how organizational religious innovations in Japanese Buddhist monasteries rationalized the collectives' economic ethic; eventually, these organizational patterns were secularized and spread to other corporate units in ways that altered their economic ethics as well. Ultimately, the point stands that prohibitions, prescriptions, organizational or symbolic innovations, and/or new values, ideologies, and norms produced within the religious institution can and sometimes do have consequences for economic entrepreneurs and their institutional domain; the two institutions, like any two institutions, are inextricably linked.

To be sure, modern social science is biased towards material forces driving cultural patterns because in most capitalist nation-states the economic institution and its entrepreneurs dominate the logic of many other institutional domains. First, as many scholars of religion have argued, democratic societies foster pluralist religious institutions and generate religious economies or markets that behave quite similarly to their secular counterparts (Finke and Stark 1988; Berger 1969). It is not necessarily *money* which drives the religious market, but rather varied tangible resources associated with *sacredness/piety*: the degree to which worship is charismatic and informal (Chaves 2004); the degree to which there is a singular supranatural source to exchange with (Stark 1999); or the degree to which unbridled competition is allowed by political economic selection mechanisms (Wuthnow 1980; Zald 1982). Secondly, like other

¹⁰ Where women are given less power or access to wealth religious ideologies justify and explain why and stabilize these inequalities.

professionals in other institutional domains, religious entrepreneurs are no longer supported by political entrepreneurs, but rather go to credentialed schools and compete on a labor market for salaries. Third, where self-interest, individuality, and accumulation of wealth are cherished and pervasive economic values, religious entrepreneurs must adjust and decide how to adapt. Some, as noted above, powerfully resist these forces while others welcome them and attempt to graft religious norms and values on to economic ones. Finally, where economic institutions have obtained great amounts of autonomy, vague values like progress, technological advance, and innovation become dominant and challenge religious notions of time, history, and cosmology. Again, religious entrepreneurs are forced to adapt or resist at their own risk.

Custom, Divine Law, and Modern Autonomous Legal Institutions

In preliterate societies, religion and law were relatively separate spheres of social action (Hoebel 1973). To be sure, they both exhibited low levels of autonomy—e.g., "primitive" law lacks a formally authorized body of legal actors as well as procedural and substantive rules (Weber 1978). Still, there were individuals occasionally authorized to mediate as third-party arbitrators and who were allowed to enforce their binding decisions with force (cf. Barton 1919). As political autonomy emerges in the earliest bureaucratic empires, law, like polity, becomes severed into two levels of jurisdiction: local, kin-based law that dominates the lives of most people alongside public, casuistic law on the royal/regional level (Yoffee 2000). At the regional level, political entrepreneurs embedded their legal proclamations in divine sources of authority, which of course became linked to religious entrepreneurship.

There are some obvious reasons religious entrepreneurs became interested in law and, where possible, attempted to monopolize the creation and enforcement of legal prescriptions. First, casuistic law facilitates the integration of heterogeneous populations (Bredemeier 1962). As was evident during the various Axial Age revolutions, religious entrepreneurs from Buddhism to Judaism to Confucianism posited universal ethical prescriptions, moral imperatives, and divine sanctions for correct and incorrect behavior (Eisenstadt 1986). Combined with the invention of transcendent notions of the supranatural, these ethical prescriptions could span diverse populations and political borders because they were universal notions of duty, responsibility, and human rights (Nikiprowetzky 1975; Thapar 1975).

Secondly, law is clearly a mechanism of social control (Parsons 1962)—whether through external regulations and agents or through administrative legality and taken for grantedness (Turk 1976). Integration is often a latent result of law, while many political and, later, religious entrepreneurs recognize the utility of law as a means of "defining" legal and illegal categories of people (Scott 1998) and protecting property rights of one class against another. Third, law's medium of exchange is *influence* (Abrutyn and Turner 2011) and autonomous legal institutions monopolize the basic ubiquitous concerns surrounding "justice" and conflict resolution (Luhmann 2004). Thus, control over both the production and distribution of *influence* and those concerns it historically deals with gives entrepreneurs even greater control over the legitimate vision of reality and psychological violence (Bourdieu 1989). Defining, for example, what "justice" is, what "legal" means, and the right to resolve conflicts produces powerful leverage for structural and symbolic independence and institutional autonomy. It is for these reasons that Catholic entrepreneurs purposefully defined the jurisdiction of the Church legally and focused their primary legal concerns on kinship dimensions like regulating marriage, adoption, inheritance, sexuality, and child rearing (Goody 2000). Even today, religious entrepreneurs recognize the benefits of claiming jurisdiction over personal affairs: most Muslim countries

regulate individual and other kin-based behavior (Schacht 1964), while in contemporary Israel secular courts handle economic, political, and other profane matters while separate religious courts regulate personal matters (Baker 1968). However, in contemporary democratic societies, like the U.S., legal autonomy rests on rational principles of positive law (Unger 1976). As such, positive law is in tension with religious entrepreneurs as a source further weakening their claims to independence and their influence in such societies. Rules separating church and state, essentially, protect a market-based religious economy that forces religious entrepreneurs to compete against each other in ways that threaten each of their organizations with loss of human and material resources as well as the devaluation of *sacredness/piety*.

CONCLUSION

The descriptive theory above was posited for three reasons: (a) to refocus the sociological lens on the macro-institutional level as had been much more common in the past, (b) to clearly delineate what a religious institution was, and (c) to explore the important dynamics religious institutions impose on both the denizens of religious spheres as well as between institutional domains. Having elucidated what a religious institution is, we can finally offer a formal definition. For our purposes, religious institutions are *macro structural-cultural spheres of social action comprised of actors and the fields/networks they are embedded within, material and symbolic resources and a system (or systems) of authority organized by and around the basic human concerns regarding communication with the supranatural, solidarity/morality, metaphysical anxieties, and cosmological uncertainty as well as the generalized symbolic medium of religious exchange—sacredness/piety*. Like any institution, religious institutions are conceptualized as ecological structural/cultural spaces where individual and corporate actors pursue, accumulate, and use resources; the relationship between actors and resources, as well as the relative distribution of actors/resources and the justification for this distribution is governed by an authority system or set of systems. Furthermore, the links between actors, resources, and rules as well as the dominant orientations of actors to each other, resources, and non-institutional actors is constrained by the generalized symbolic medium of exchange, its relative hotness or coldness, and its competition from outside. Finally, all of these elements, as well as those that are historically or socioculturally contingent and specific, are organized by and around the types of concerns both generically or typically handled by an institution.

Across time and space, religious institutions vary in autonomy and, therefore, the degree to which religious entrepreneurs and religious elements penetrate other institutional domains and contribute to the trajectory of a given cultural/political group's trajectory. For our purposes, religious autonomy is the process by which *religious entrepreneurs struggle and succeed in (1) monopolizing (a) the production and distribution of sacredness/piety, (b) the means for communicating or facilitating communication with the supranatural, and (c) other key resources associated with other human concerns, (2) the degree to which they succeed in gaining power-dependent advantages over and legitimacy from extant elites and a significant proportion of the general population, (3) the success with which they have in eliminating cosmological competitors, and (4) the degree to which their structural and symbolic independence allows them to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space of the religious institution vis-à-vis other institutions*. Thus, religious actors struggle and with varying success gain privileged positions in society; the better these positions, the more they can carve out discrete religious space which in turn differentiates religious actions, goals, and decisions from their economic or political counterparts. By reconfiguring the macro-structural and cultural physical,

temporal, social, and symbolic spaces, as well as differentiating micro-level aspects like roles or goals, religious autonomy makes religion a force *sui generis*. It provides conduits for religious goals and decisions to impact political or economic orientations in ways that alter how political or economic actors orient their attitudes or actions, and therefore, affects the historical path a given local, regional, state-level, or international group of people embark upon.

Less abstractly, religious institutions are the vaguely defined environments elucidated by meso-level theorists interested in organizational dynamics at the expense of macro-institutional dynamics (cf. Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Given the definition as well as the elucidation above of religious institutional dynamics a more robust understanding of the relationship between the macro- and meso-levels is possible, and the unique dynamics found in religious fields, niches, or networks as opposed to those in political or economic institutions can be posited. Take, for example, Fligstein and McAdam's (2011) excellent integrative theory of *strategic action fields* (SAFs). They argue that SAFs are the loci of collective action while implying that larger forces shape the contours of these fields of contention. If we were to locate their SAFs in precisely defined institutional spaces we could add more to their analysis—e.g., a religious SAF would be different than a political one. The "interpretive schema" and rules of the field would be defined by *sacredness/piety* and other specifically religious elements; the goals guiding corporate action would be vastly different, as would the strategies actors would like employ; and finally, the way other institutional domains affected conflicts and competition could be more clearly worked out.

However, if the strategic action field were located in the interstices between religion and another institution, we would expect action, goal setting, and choice in strategies to be less distinguishably religious; there would be greater disagreement regarding the rules of the engagement, which interpretive schema was 'correct', and what meanings should be employed to evaluate behavior; in place of a clear ideology, meta-ideologies featuring multiple institutional ideologies would guide movements; and, social movements against entrepreneurs and the legitimate vision of reality would be more likely as marginal groups are in unique positions to innovate, combine and recombine existing symbolic elements, and larger swaths of the population can be mobilized through hybridized symbolic messages.

While space considerations restrict further analysis it is apparent that a theory of religious institutions could also supplement other meso-level models such as DiMaggio and Powell's *organizational fields* or Hannan and Freeman's *resource niches*. Essentially, the institutional domain in which any given meso-level phenomena is embedded, the level with which that institution is autonomous, and the relative distance these phenomena and their actors find themselves from their institutional core all shape the way the institution is constructed, reconstructed, and altered. These shape the mechanisms integrating social units, as well as the degree to which broader societal patterns of stratification are reproduced. Organizational dynamics are not simply conditioned on the internal relationships found between organizations, but also on the modes of integration an institution employs to link them together, the generalized medium of (in this case, religious) exchange and its value vis-à-vis other institutional media, and the types of concerns that are monopolized by the institution and whether or not cosmological competitors offer legitimate alternatives to their (religious) counterparts. Precisely understanding what the religious institution is, what its emergent properties and dynamics are, and suggesting the links between the macro and meso-levels has provided a great departure point for further integrative theoretical and methodological work that produces more robust conceptions of social organization and action.

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