



# The formation and role of religious social capital in driving entrepreneurial action

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual capital serves as a unique resource that can contribute to entrepreneurial action. This paper develops the concept of *religious social capital*, as a distinct component of spiritual capital, and theorizes its role in motivating and supporting entrepreneurial action. This is important because individuals with religious affiliations are often deeply embedded within a religious community yielding strong and unique forms of social capital; and social capital in general is well established as a key driver of entrepreneurial action. The paper then elaborates the distinctive structural, cognitive and relational dimensions of religious social capital, and theorizes distinctive mechanisms by which these enable effective entrepreneurial action through community attention and community spanning.

## 1. Introduction

Scholars have recently begun exploring the important role that religion can play in motivating and shaping entrepreneurial action. This emerging body of work underscores the importance of augmenting economic paradigms with religious perspectives (Busenitz and Lichtenstein, 2019; Smith et al., 2021). Religious knowledge and related motivations, such as personal calling, are theorized to inform entrepreneurial action (Smith et al., 2019). Religious affiliation can enhance entrepreneurial intentions (Giacomin, et al., 2022), while spirituality may act as cognitive buffer to mitigate risks of entrepreneurial action in the face of uncertainty (Ganzin et al., 2020). Spiritual capital, “the set of personal, intangible, and transcendent resources that emanate from an individual’s spiritual or religious beliefs and experiences”, may also support economic activity (Neubert et al., 2017: 622; Berger and Redding, 2010), thus forming a critical resource that can motivate and improve entrepreneurial performance.

One form of spiritual capital identified outside of organizational studies is religious social capital, defined as “the social resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections with a religious community” (Maselko et al., 2011: 760). Being embedded in a religious community facilitates social networking (Deller et al., 2018; Henley, 2017; Liu et al., 2019), although the entrepreneurship literature is yet to explore the distinctiveness of religious social capital. Consequently, theorizing the dimensions of religious social capital and its potential role in promoting and shaping entrepreneurial action remains unexplored. This is important because i) religion often creates unique and strong social connections; bringing people from all walks of life together, connecting them meaningfully and passionately, and significantly influencing their behaviors (Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Dodd and Seaman, 1998; Iannaccone, 1990; Kumar et al., 2022; Muller and Ellison, 2001; Rietveld and Hoogendoorn, 2022), and ii) social capital is a strong enabler of entrepreneurial action (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; Deller et al., 2018).

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In this paper, we theoretically elaborate the dimensions of religious social capital, and explore its role in enabling entrepreneurial action. Specifically, we first build on the framework of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) to identify the religion-distinctive structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions of social capital. Second, we theorize the distinct mechanisms by which these dimensions of religious social capital shape and enable entrepreneurial action through community attention and community spanning.

We contribute to the religious entrepreneurship literature (Deller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019, 2023a) in two ways. First, by identifying the religion-distinctive structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions of religious social capital, we theoretically elaborate the religious social capital construct in the entrepreneurship context. As such, we foreground an important component of spiritual capital (Neubert et al., 2017). Second, we develop a theoretical model which elaborates the crucial role that religious social capital can play in reducing uncertainty and the threshold for entrepreneurial action by facilitating increased community awareness and community spanning. In doing so, we extend current understandings of the role of religion in entrepreneurial action (Smith et al., 2019) by showing how the entrepreneur's religious social capital drives entrepreneurial action.

## 2. The dimensions of religious social capital

We build on Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) three dimensions of social capital, to elaborate religion-distinctive structural, cognitive and relational dimensions (see Fig. 1).

### 2.1. The structural dimension of religious social capital

The structural dimension represents the nature of network ties, the network configuration and the appropriability of transferring social capital developed in one context (e.g. religion) to another context (e.g. entrepreneurship) (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Pearson et al., 2008). We propose three distinctive structural characteristics of religious social capital.

First, religions facilitate **dense congregation-centric networks of strong ties**. Religions, through their institutional arrangements, create, promote and strengthen beneficial network ties between their congregation members, as one of their core missions (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2006). Through small group ministries, which focus on specific issues and bring together members with shared interests, passions, and experiences, religious institutions are structured in ways that help members develop and combine capabilities (Giacomin et al., 2022; Nunziata and Rocco, 2018). Facilitating extensive engagement builds a collective identity (Smith et al., 2023b). This develops strong ties through regular interactions in programs, meetings, and fellowship comprising people with strong shared beliefs and norms. Thus, congregation-centric networks provide access to shared institutional knowledge and resources through focused small groups with similar callings, such as sacred text study groups (Deller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). In all, these dense structures enable access to timely or trusted information and resources within the network (Choi, 2010; Dana, 2009).

Second, religious networks are often also characterized by **diverse boundary-spanners due to heterogeneity of membership**. Religious congregations usually comprise diverse followers by education, profession, race, gender and age (Nwankwo et al., 2012; Tong, 2019), bringing together people from all walks of life (Deller et al., 2018; Muller and Ellison, 2001; Smith et al., 2023a). In addition, members may function as boundary-spanners to other congregations (Ammerman, 2002; Todd, 2012). Following Granovetter (1973),

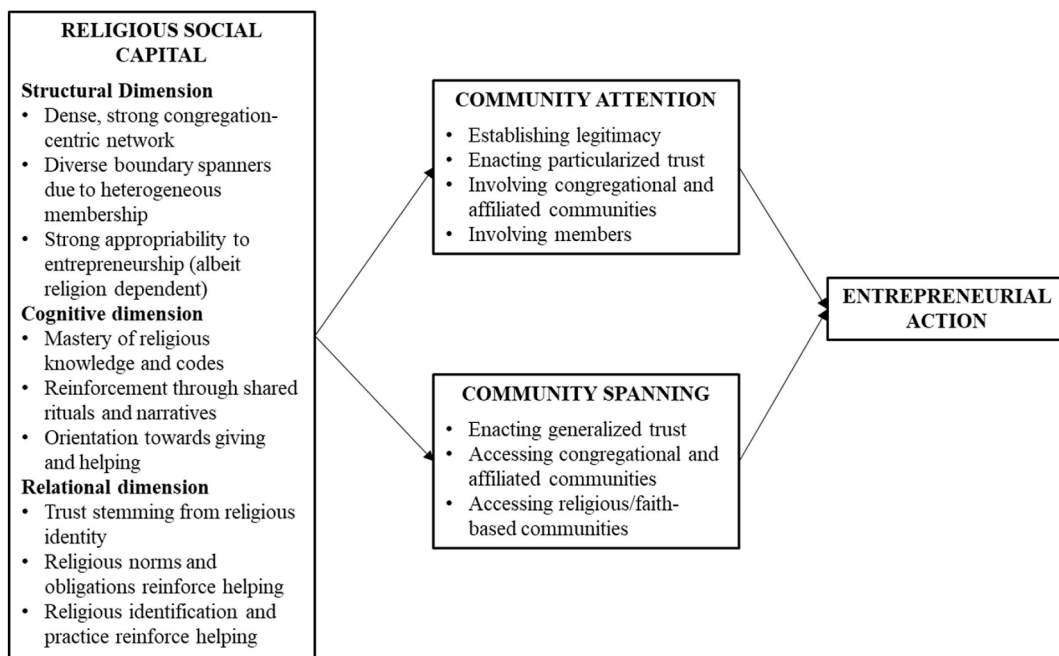


Fig. 1. Religious social capital and entrepreneurial action.

religious communities therefore may afford the benefit of weak-ties to external networks which facilitates the diffusion or acquisition of knowledge and resources.

Third, religious social capital exhibits **strong appropriability to entrepreneurial contexts**. It is not uncommon to see relationships that started in places of worship grow into business relationships (Choi, 2010), suggesting religious social capital helps members to fulfil personal or collective goals beyond the religious setting (Deller et al., 2018). In addition, despite different orientations towards risk-taking, business, and openness to self-employment across religions (Audretsch, et al., 2013; Henley, 2017; Smith et al., 2023a; Zelekha et al., 2014), many support the development of business and entrepreneurial capabilities as a mechanism for enriching the economic prosperity of their community.

## 2.2. The cognitive dimension of religious social capital

Shared language, codes, and narratives represents shared cognition and acts to enable the exchange and combination of resources (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). We discuss three distinctive aspects of shared cognition in religious settings.

First, **mastery of religious knowledge and codes** forms a strong domain of shared cognition and values. Indeed, establishing shared cognition is one of the major aims of religious teaching. Religion, through repetitive ministry and teaching using stories and metaphors, creates shared language and codes which instill and reinforce norms and behavioral expectations (Ebstyne King and Furrow, 2008; Muller and Ellison, 2001). The power of religion to create shared cognition on important issues, such as contributing, gifting and sharing, eases the psychological burden of seeking assistance, enhances resource availability, and improves exchange efficiency (Di Pietro and Masciarelli, 2021; Giacomini et al., 2022).

Second, religious beliefs are constantly **reinforced through narratives and rituals**. Ceremony and ritual are the cornerstone of religious practice, and their commonly embedded narratives reinforce core religious knowledge and beliefs (Srivastava and Tang, 2022). Moreover, rituals such as worship, rites or pilgrimages reinforce ones' belief by creating transcendent experiences that bond individuals with their higher power (Saroglou, 2011).

Third, many religions encompass an **orientation towards giving and helping**. Religious teachings emphasize the importance of sharing resources among members and beyond, transcending reciprocity. Hence, giving is posited as inherently valuable and satisfying, with followers often willing to share resources despite no immediate benefit for themselves (Dodd and Gotsis, 2007). Giving is a prescribed behavior expected of followers, that is manifest in many religions (Bloom, 2012). For example, *zakat*, *tithing* or *dāna* are obligatory giving behaviours; and parables like the Good Samaritan model norms which emphasize reaching out to support people in need (Candland, 2001; Eckel and Grossman, 2004). Indeed, sharing represents an act of showing faith, or a means of obtaining God's blessings. The maxim of sharing others' burdens, evident in almost all religions, generates a strong motivation to exchange resources (Bennett and Einolf, 2017; Eckel and Grossman, 2004; Griebel et al., 2014; Gümüşay, 2015).

## 2.3. The relational dimension of social capital

The relational dimension of social capital encompasses resources created through personal relationships (Pearson et al., 2008). Trust, norms, obligations, expectations and identification are key enablers of this relational dimension (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). We delineate three distinctive relational characteristics of religious social capital.

First, **trust is developed through religious identity**. The shared values and beliefs religious institutions create among believers lays the foundation for trust between them (Deller et al., 2018; Ebstyne King and Furrow, 2008), and creates conditions for trust even beyond these followers (Parboteeah et al., 2015). For those who share similar religious faiths and live under similar norms and behavioral expectations, trust comes naturally (Candland, 2001; Di Pietro and Masciarelli, 2021). Being associated with trustworthy religious establishments generates trust from those within, across related religions as well as from the secular world (Seabright, 2016; Stiles et al., 2007).

Religion has the potential to create both particularized trust and generalized trust. Particularized trust is described as a strategic trust based on assessment of the trustworthiness of a particular person or group (Kwon and Arenius, 2010; Uslaner, 2002). Religion provides the platform for believers to meet and engage with others through their attendance at rites and ceremonies (Ebstyne King and Furrow, 2008), facilitating the formation of particularized trust. In contrast, generalized trust, also known as moral trust (Uslaner, 2002), represents faith in others one does not know well (Kwon and Arenius, 2010; Uslaner, 2002). Religious people inherently trust strangers who follow the same religion but attend different congregations or religious services (Deller et al., 2018). Thus, generalized trust eases communication, facilitates information flow and increases cooperation (Kwon and Arenius, 2010).

The orientation towards giving and helping is further embodied in **religious norms and obligations**. In stressing the value of solidarity, demonstrating character and helping others, religions teachings serve to create strong norms and obligations that reinforce behavioral expectations of giving support to people in need (Bennett and Einolf, 2017; Griebel et al., 2014; Wuthnow, 2002). In addition to the intrinsic altruism that religious values and norms instill, the social pressure of "being seen" by others in the community as a helping person further amplifies giving behaviors (Cialdini, 1991).

Finally, **religious identification and practice** also reinforce giving and helping behaviors (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). Religion increases in-group identification creating an environment conducive to resource provision of various forms (Du et al., 2022). Regular and active religious practice further reinforces this by creating a sense of responsibility and stressing the importance of readiness to serve (Bennett and Einolf, 2017) within congregation as well as across secular boundaries (Bekkers and Schuyt, 2008; Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011).

### 3. Religious Social Capital and Entrepreneurial Action

Entrepreneurial action results from a social process of discussing, interpreting and supporting ideas (Dimov, 2007a; Saxton et al., 2016). Entrepreneurs engage social actors to interpret, elaborate, refine, and develop opportunities before acting (Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Dimov, 2007a, 2007b). In this process, religion may play a role by creating social spaces for individuals engaging with entrepreneurial ideas and bringing together actors willing to support their efforts (Choi, 2010; Nwankwo et al., 2012).

Consistent with Autio et al. (2013), we argue that an individual's proximal social structure is crucial to entrepreneurial action on account of relevant embedded resources. Entrepreneurs activate their social capital to gain access to external resources, bundle them with those they control, and to identify and exploit opportunities (Bhagavatula et al., 2010; Burgelman and Hitt, 2007). Religions offer unique advantages in assisting individuals to create and expand the social capital necessary for exchanges of information and resources which may lead to entrepreneurial action (Autio et al., 2013; Block et al., 2020; Dana, 2009; Zafar and Ammara, 2023). Thus, religious social capital catalyzes entrepreneurial action by enabling access to the information and other resources embedded in the religious social structure, and thereby reducing uncertainty to entrepreneurial action (Dana, 2009; Dodd and Gotsis, 2007).

Religious social relationships provide access to unique information available only to those in specific positions in the social structure (Avnimelech and Zelekha, 2023; Dodd and Gotsis, 2007). This allows the entrepreneur to identify unfulfilled demand in the immediate market (the religious community) as well as the general market (through boundary spanners), and make reasonable forecasts of demand patterns, addressing key aspects of market uncertainty (Autio et al., 2013). Thus, religious social capital enabled mechanisms allow entrepreneurs to garner community attention and enhance community spanning (see Fig. 1), the two essential entrepreneurial means by which market uncertainties and the threshold for entrepreneurial action are reduced (Autio et al., 2013).

#### 3.1. Community attention

Community attention represents engaging potential users of a solution to understand their needs (Autio et al., 2013). For our purpose, we define it as the involvement of religious communities in the opportunity development process to gain insights into their unfulfilled or unrealized needs and examine their responses to a potential solution. We elaborate four mechanisms that underpin community attention and enable entrepreneurial action.

**Establishing legitimacy** derived from religious social capital bolsters an entrepreneur's community attention through a *justice route* by establishing them as the rightful provider of a given product (Dana, 2009; Dodd and Gotsis, 2007) and through a *support route*, as one who should be assisted (Choi, 2010). For example, in religious traditions which forbid certain behaviors (e.g. consumption of alcohol or other dietary restrictions), businesses that condone or enable these behaviors, are likely to be less well received by followers. On the other hand, religious congregations may endorse certain businesses, and support them in overcoming entry liabilities or gaining market traction. This is particularly common in ethnic-based religious contexts (Choi, 2010; Martes and Rodriguez, 2003; Stiles et al., 2007).

Congregations help entrepreneurs derive significant legitimacy and reduce supplier uncertainty by providing information about the reputation and associated goodwill of the member's business to potential customers (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2009; Stiles et al., 2007). Endorsement by the congregation not only assists in accessing buyers, but establishes the business as a trusted and dependable supplier of the product. Indeed, these effects can extend beyond the bounds of a particular congregation (Dana, 2009; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2009).

**Enacting particularized trust** that emanates from frequent encounters with leaders and members of their congregation, affords entrepreneurs access to privileged information (Avnimelech and Zelekha, 2023; Dodd and Gotsis, 2007), to draw resources from within their congregation (Deller et al., 2018), and use the resources of affiliated communities (Choi, 2010). Particularized trust helps to gain acceptance from within the congregation, as stronger particularized trust indicates a willingness to cooperate among members of one's own religion (Maselko et al., 2011). Enacting particularized trust inspires the congregation to provide their knowledge, skills, abilities, or other resources for preferred rates to the entrepreneur (Smith et al., 2019) and reduces transaction costs by enhancing cooperation (Karaçuka, 2018).

**Involving congregational and affiliated communities** is contingent on an individual's religious social capital. Congregations house different smaller communities or ministries. Each community caters to different spiritual missions, social issues or organizational purposes, drawing together individuals with similar callings. Therefore, these congregational communities provide members with solidarity resources and collective resources (Martes and Rodriguez, 2003). These types of resources are particularly instrumental at early stages of a business. Enhanced religious social capital opens the door for entrepreneurs to use these communities to understand demand patterns and test initial solutions (Nwankwo et al., 2012; Stiles et al., 2007). Additionally, using the resources of the congregation to build and promote a business (Choi 2010), helps build a strong psychological bond between the congregation community and the business. Entrepreneurs can leverage such bonds to facilitate energized community support and resource commitment (Murray et al., 2020; Saxton et al., 2016).

**Involving Members** by drawing on their religious social capital can play a crucial role in helping entrepreneurs validate their venture ideas through engaging fellow believers. Strong religious social capital facilitates involvement and active participation of a large group of fellow believers in the entrepreneur's quest to understand the problems in the community and refine their venture ideas (Balog et al., 2014; Cater et al., 2017). Involvement of members also reduces demand uncertainty by building a passionate group of customers willing to buy from entrepreneurs in their congregation (Martes and Rodriguez, 2003).

### 3.2. Community spanning

Community spanning refers to an individual's participation in adjacent or distant communities to evaluate venture ideas from different vantage points, thus informing entrepreneurial action by furnishing critical information that allows opportunity evaluation from multiple perspectives (Autio et al., 2013). Community spanning provides access to otherwise unobtainable novel information, which helps assess the proposed idea's economic viability, align the offer with major trends across communities, and improve demand projections in those markets. In addition to these informational advantages, exposure to diverse groups of potential customers enables entrepreneurs to frame problems from multiple customers' perspectives. Religious social capital improves an entrepreneur's capacity for community spanning by removing hurdles to participation across religious communities (Balog et al., 2014). We delineate three religion-distinctive mechanisms that comprise community spanning and thereby enable entrepreneurial action.

**Enacting generalized trust** based on religious affiliation, routinely received from individuals beyond their congregation, amplifies community spanning. This allows entrepreneurs to bridge between different congregational and affiliated communities, as well as access alternate religious denominations (Deller et al., 2018), faith-based communities (Giacomin et al., 2022), in different geographic areas (Di Pietro and Masciarelli, 2021) and even secular groups. Thus, enacting generalized trust derived from religious affiliation acts to establish external legitimacy (Di Pietro and Masciarelli, 2021; Seabright, 2016), and thereby facilitates access to information and resources from these diverse communities.

**Access to congregational and affiliated communities:** religious social capital facilitates access to several exclusive and close-knit congregational and affiliated communities that provide potential entrepreneurs with unique and privileged information (Dana, 2009; Dodd and Gotsis, 2007; Stiles et al., 2007). As congregations are structured into several ministries which serve different missions, access to all these ministries may not be automatic for every congregation member, and is typically dependent on their religious social capital. Participation across such communities enables the entrepreneur to identify the needs of the community and examine the complementarity between the proposed solution and the need. Since religion can enhance entrepreneurial sensemaking (Smith et al., 2019), having access to multiple communities and drawing analogies across these can assist the assessment of viability for the entrepreneur's venture idea and anticipate demand patterns.

**Access to religious/faith-based communities:** Religious social capital gives access to non-congregational religious or other faith-based communities. These communities, while rooted in a certain religion, operate independently and work, collaborate and exchange with the wider community and non-religious institutions. Participation in these communities allows the entrepreneurs to reach a wider audience as religious/faith-based communities and organizations welcome people from other religions and even non-believers (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013; Ebaugh et al., 2003). As a result, this mechanism enables entrepreneurs to have access to diverse thought worlds that helps them to frame problems differently (Dougherty, 1992) and determine whether their product would be attractive in wider settings.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

Despite emerging evidence that religion may play an important role in entrepreneurship, religious social capital, as a distinct enabler, has thus far received little attention. In response, this paper has contextualized religious social capital within the entrepreneurship literature and theoretically elaborated religion-distinct elements of the structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions that comprise it. Further, we theorized how religious social capital enables and informs entrepreneurial action by developing a model which encompasses the distinct mechanisms through which community attention and community spanning are activated. By advancing religious social capital, we extend our understanding of the role of religion in entrepreneurship in two ways.

First, we contribute to the literature on the role of spiritual capital in entrepreneurship (Neubert et al., 2017). This literature suggests that spiritual capital can contribute to business innovation and performance beyond other forms of capital. Our study foregrounds the important role of religious social capital as a component of spiritual capital and elaborates nine distinctive characteristics of religious social capital (see Fig. 1). These suggest new avenues for future research. Religious social capital demonstrates distinct structural features that encompass both strong ties and dense bonding capital as well as weak ties and diverse bridging capital (Deller et al., 2018; Avnimelech and Zelekha, 2023). Additionally, the relational dimension of (religious) social capital is posited to have direct and indirect influence through structural and cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). This said, we fully acknowledge that characteristics of religious social networks and resulting social capital will vary with religion and local characteristics of congregations. Moreover, the social capital afforded to an individual will depend on their position in the network (Elfring et al., 2021), and for religious networks, this will depend on the individual's participation in religious services (Iannaccone, 1990). Future work should examine variation in the nature of religious social capital across contexts and individuals.

Second, we contribute to scholarship examining the role of religion in shaping and supporting entrepreneurial action (Deller et al., 2018; Neubert et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019). That literature suggests religious knowledge and motivation can shape opportunity recognition and ultimately, entrepreneurial action. We add to this work by delineating seven theoretical mechanisms by which social capital is likely to operate distinctively in a religious context to shape and support entrepreneurial action (see Fig. 1). We note that mechanisms entrepreneurs employ to initiate and sustain action over time will depend on the stage of their business (Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017). Seeking early legitimacy is crucial to establishing entrepreneurial endeavours, while the enactment of trust is critical to resource seeking across the lifespan of the business. In some circumstances manifest religious expression may be considered incongruent with entrepreneurship and adversely influence resource acquisition (Anglin et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to understand the dynamics of, and interplay between community attention and community spanning in reducing uncertainty and how these are facilitated by religious social capital. Hence, future research on how community attention and spanning mechanisms may compensate for different levels or configurations of religious social capital may also prove fruitful.



In summary, establishing religious social capital within the entrepreneurial context foregrounds the distinct and beneficial nature by which religious community can promote and support entrepreneurial action. It broadens and enriches the focus of an entrepreneur's religiosity within entrepreneurship scholarship by extending attention beyond an individual-centric approach, towards a community-centric emphasis.

### Author statement

Binyam Zewde Alemayehu was instigator of the project, lead in the conceptual and theoretical development and contributed to writing and revising the manuscript. Paul Steffens contributed to the conceptual and theoretical development and contributed to writing and revising the manuscript. Scott Gordon contributed to the conceptual and theoretical development and contributed to writing and revising the manuscript.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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