

Not by what we see: how Christian religious beliefs influence market and community logics in a rural context.

Structured Abstract

Purpose – This study addresses decision-making processes of Christian entrepreneurs living and working in rural areas. The authors draw on the institutional logics perspective and stewardship perspective to demonstrate how religion influences rationality and entrepreneurial decision-making processes in a rural context.

Design/methodology – This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach supported by ethnographic fieldwork. Qualitative and interpretative analyses are employed to access deeper insights into the decision-making processes of Christian entrepreneurs in a rural environment. Data include short-term immersive events, observations and interviews as COVID-19 pandemic restrictions lifted in the region.

Findings – This study reveals that normative (religious) commitments – a sense of moral duty and action influenced by religion – and a high-religiosity context – where religion permeates diverse aspects of life – leads to behaviors that are perceived as rational and normative. In this context, the normative relationship between a market and a community logic, alongside a logic of religion, are all linked through a stewardship perspective. A broad focus on the development of community and place also safeguards business and community interests.

Research limitations/implications – Research limitations relate to a focus on one rural area in the USA and one religion. Future studies can consider a broader geographical reach and other religions. Additionally, the uncertainty arising from the Covid-19 restrictions and the resumption of business exchanges have influenced the decisions of entrepreneurial participants in this study. Our findings extend understanding of an institutional logics perspective in explicating how diverse

logics co-exist, and either reinforce or undermine the confidence of entrepreneurs in their decision-making process in terms of what is deemed rational or irrational.

Practical implications – Our findings suggest that entrepreneurs considering relocating to rural areas where a high religiosity setting exists should consider how the community, affiliated through a set of beliefs, may expect actors to behave.

Originality/value – This study answers the call to examine entrepreneurship and the underpinnings of rationality that challenge mainstream debates on entrepreneurial decision-making and religion. The findings answer this call by advancing our knowledge of the decision-making process of religious entrepreneurs. In this respect, the findings present a context where rational business behaviors, influenced by a market logic, are transformed through exchanges with a community informed by a logic of religion. A conceptual model illustrates the nature of this context and associated processes.

Keywords Rationality, Decision-making, Entrepreneurship, Religion, Stewardship, Rural, Institutional logics

Paper type Research paper

1 Introduction

Gaps exist in our current understanding of the rational underpinnings of entrepreneurial decision-making (Abatecola, 2014; Cristofaro, 2019; Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022). The study of rationality – the “normative basis for deciding and acting” (Miller, 2007, p. 67) – and decision-making processes represents a dynamic approach to understanding how entrepreneurs act (Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022; Pollack *et al.*, 2023). Entrepreneurial decisions – choices made by entrepreneurs when pursuing opportunities and managing businesses – are relevant to our understanding of rationality (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015). Recent studies have demonstrated that context – the “situational or environmental constraints and opportunities that have the functional capacity to affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behaviour” (Johns, 2017, p. 577) – is relevant to our understanding of entrepreneurial decision-making. Despite widespread recognition of decisions as processes influenced by context (Pankov *et al.*, 2021), scholars confirm that we still know little about how normative, entrepreneurial decision-making is influenced by context (Pollack *et al.*, 2023).

To address this call, we argue that religion is relevant to our understanding of rationality, particularly in contexts where religion may be pervasive and of significance to individuals (Cater and Alderson, 2022). We define religion as “systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, a community of faith, and a worldview of the sacred and what ultimately matters” (Schmidt *et al.*, 1999, p. 10). Religion is thus relevant to the study of entrepreneurial and rational decision-making because it not only embodies connection with context but also involves experiences, thoughts, emotions and behaviors affecting everyday occurrences (Benefiel *et al.*, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2021). Researchers have recently identified the influence of religion in decision-making (Burton *et al.*, 2022; Van Buren *et al.*, 2020). However, this relationship can be viewed as a separate issue, In this respect, researchers have demonstrated that interweaving entrepreneurial and religious

concerns can impact cultural and regional development (Audretsch *et al.*, 2013; Henley, 2017; Rietveld and van Burg, 2014). While there has been a renewed interest in organizational and entrepreneurship studies (Wong *et al.*, 2020) to address the multifaceted relationship between entrepreneurship and religion (Henley, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2019), further investigation is required (Benefiel *et al.*, 2014).

Existing theoretical explanations reveal that contextual dynamics can affect rational decisions, behaviors and perspectives when entrepreneurs deal with diverse challenges (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015). Scholars have thus called for further exploration of how entrepreneurs act based on their context (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019). Hence, we introduce the institutional logics perspective (Thornton *et al.*, 2012), a theoretical framework that presents society as a set of fields, with contexts characterized by beliefs, practices, values, assumptions and rules.

In this study, we focus on the major world religion of Christianity (Woodhead, 2004), which has not gone unnoticed in the study of entrepreneurship and decision-making (Audretsch *et al.*, 2017; Dana, 2009; Discua Cruz, 2015). We argue that the role of context in entrepreneurial decision-making may be better understood by exploring Christian entrepreneurs and normative commitments that are grounded in a sense to support (or reciprocate) initiatives based on moral judgments and duties to act as informed by beliefs and convictions (Meyer and Parfyonova, 2010). We define a Christian entrepreneur as an individual who has either created or acquired a small or medium-sized enterprise (i.e. SME) and who not only professes a set of beliefs grounded in the tenets of the Christian faith but also applies these beliefs as they manage their business and pursue further business opportunities (Goossen, 2004; Kaestner *et al.*, 2021).

We focus on a rural context where entrepreneurs must make difficult entrepreneurial decisions, as they deal with limited access to markets and distribution channels (Dawson *et al.*,

2011), and fluctuations that endanger business profitability and jeopardize new ventures (Tregear, 2005). In these types of contexts, entrepreneurs can encounter contrasting and conflicting perspectives, where values and beliefs may become relevant (Sá *et al.*, 2018; Vasconcelos, 2009). We thus examine Christian entrepreneurs and their decision-making in a rural setting to reveal the intersection of leveraging entrepreneurial decisions and practices within a specific context. To address this gap, we address *how normative commitments associated with Christian religious beliefs are featured in entrepreneurial decision-making processes in a rural area.*

We employ a qualitative interpretative perspective (Graebner *et al.*, 2012) and ethnographic fieldwork to answer our main research question. Ethnographic data is relevant because it allows for a better understanding of decision-making processes interrelated with Christian religious beliefs, values and actions (Miles *et al.*, 2014). We explore seven small businesses in rural Western North Carolina, USA. This rural community – located in a geographical area characterized by a population density of 250 people or less per square mile or less (Pennington, 2015) – offers individuals and their interactions in a non-urban setting (Ramsey and Smit, 2002).

We reveal that a rural, high-religiosity context is where religion strongly influences business and community logics. We argue that entrepreneurial decisions, based on religious beliefs, can influence business practices. Our findings thus support the claim that Christian beliefs can inform decisions about what is considered rational as enterprises are created and developed in rural settings (Henley, 2017). We also find that normative, religious commitments and a context of high-religiosity lead to rational, normative decisions that challenge rational business debates. In this context, a stewardship perspective – previously employed to explicate behavior by individuals within organizations (Davis *et al.*, 1997) – permeates what is deemed rational in a rural context.

By investigating the manifestation of a stewardship perspective, we contribute and advance current research by drawing from the entrepreneurial decision-making literature to explicate the profession of religious beliefs and its leverage on what is considered rational decision-making. This approach underscores existing knowledge limitations on rationality and entrepreneurship (Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022; Pollack *et al.*, 2023) while integrating growing research interest regarding entrepreneurship and religion (Dana, 2009).

To address our main research question, we first provide a literature review to frame our theoretical approach, followed by a description of our research design and methodology. We then present our findings, along with a discussion, including research and practical implications of this study, as well as several limitations and future avenues for research.

2 Literature review

While rationality, paired with the institutional logics perspective, guides our theoretical framing, we draw from literatures addressing religion (i.e. Christianity), stewardship and entrepreneurship to investigate entrepreneurial decision-making.

2.1 Rationality and context

The study of rationality, entailing the interrogation of reason and intentions for a particular set of thoughts or actions (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), is defined as the “normative basis for deciding and acting” (Miller, 2007, p. 67). Despite a plethora of approaches that address rationality in entrepreneurship, most scholars confirm that contexts pose limitations and influence decision-making. For example, Miller (2007) argued that rationality is situational, with contingent and creative responses to perceived demands or expectations in contexts and situations. Even in highly dynamic, uncertainty-laden environments, even seemingly irrational entrepreneurial decisions are made (Pollack *et al.*, 2023). Rationality thus implies that the behaviors of business leaders and

entrepreneurs may be motivated by decisions consistent with not only what is perceived as widely accepted business practices, experiences, and knowledge but also how they optimize actions, beliefs and collected information, subject to various constraints and stressors (Grandori, 2010; Phillips-Wren and Adya, 2020; Stone, 2009).

Decisions and actions that counter common sense – for example, those that oppose expected, general business practices – are often labeled irrational. Rationality thus not only involves “logical and probabilistic rules” (Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022, p. 2) but also acknowledges human irrationality (Ariely and Jones, 2008). Based on several theoretical perspectives, scholars argue that there are a multitude of influences shaping decision-making processes of entrepreneurs (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Reymen *et al.*, 2015). For example, the management and entrepreneurship literatures demonstrate disparities between reasons to act and actions (Abatecola, 2014; Cristofaro, 2019). In this study, we draw upon the institutional logics perspective to further interrogate contextual disparities.

2.2 Institutional logics

The institutional logics perspective is a theoretical framework that views society as composed of different fields or contexts, each having a pattern of beliefs that determine what is meaningful and legitimate (Greenwood *et al.*, 2009). Thornton *et al.* (2012) identified a diverse array of social institutions: markets, corporations, professions, communities, states, families and religion. Each of these institutions has its own logic that reflects values emerging within social exchanges, thus influencing decisions and actions to pursue specific goals.

On the one hand, a market logic influences decisions by emphasizing norms of self-interest and actions that build competitive positions, efficiencies, profits and legitimacy. All are based on performance and competition, with market success influencing firm development (Thornton *et al.*,

2012). A market logic drives swift business responses that correct lower performance prospects or improve perceived economic opportunities. For example, downsizing is a rational response to adverse market forces during economic downturns. However, below par exchanges, compromises in mainstream customer segments, failing to outmaneuver competitors in favorable market conditions and engaging in activities that compromise financial performance, are examples of irrational firm responses (Baker *et al.*, 2007; Duru, 2013).

On the other, a community logic influences individual and organizational behaviors by providing frameworks for actions, norms and competition (i.e. with other institutions, such as the market), and facilitating resource creation for those who uphold community interests. While rational actors leverage the benefits of culture, membership or location within a community (e.g. champagne producers in France; Spielman and Williams, 2016), irrational actors reject upholding shared values and social expectations, engaging in behaviors that damage community welfare and underestimate location benefits within communities (Chen *et al.*, 2020).

There are several types of community logics, including those influenced by geography and those by affiliation. Geographical areas bind communities but also create affiliations through conscious beliefs in specific values, interests or goals (Almandoz *et al.*, 2017). Recent studies have suggested that small rural villages may exhibit a stronger sense of community than others with lower degrees of affect, loyalty and shared values (Almandoz *et al.*, 2017, p. 192). While a market logic emphasizes economic performance and accumulation of monetary resources, a community logic emphasizes group membership, personal investments and relationships based on affect, loyalty, shared values and reciprocity. As a result, these two competing logics can thwart balance within communities.

Smets *et al.* (2015) demonstrated how a market and community logic could be segmented, differentiated and delineated based on “their applicability and relevance in a specific situation” (Thornton *et al.*, 2012, p. 84). For example, rural areas, characterized by lack of – or limited access to – resources, often have a dominant market logic, as actors procure resources or catalyze resources to support healthy resource flows (e.g. financial gain), using or abusing location advantages within communities (Cortez Arias and Discua Cruz, 2018).

Interdependencies amongst economic, political, social, environmental and cultural factors reveal economic asymmetries in rural regions and society (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; Rashid and Ratten, 2022). Examining entrepreneurial pathways for economic impact demands the investigation of all institutional logics within rural regions and communities. The applicability of institutional theory has been recently highlighted in business studies (Aksom *et al.*, 2019), particularly when inconsistencies emerge from conflicting logics (Khurram *et al.*, 2019). The institutional logics perspective is thus relevant to our study as it reveals how multiple logics interact in a rural setting and how market and community logics depend on their relative strengths and weaknesses. Studies have suggested that contradictory logics do co-exist (Mair and Hehenberger, 2014), but how they do so remains elusive.

Some researchers have argued that existing insights into rational, irrational and nonrational decisions are based on assumptions, values and beliefs (Back, 1961; Fernando and Jackson, 2006), such as the level of relevance of decisions, as perceived by actors. For example, Vasconcelos (2009) argued that rational approaches to decision-making are firmly based on tried-and-true techniques, methods and models, which provide a degree of decision certainty. However, entrepreneurs also rely on irrational approaches, such as intuition and religious experiences (e.g. prayer). Vasconcelos (2009; 2010) argued that the coexistence of rational and irrational approaches

provide decision-makers with a comprehensive approach to take a leap of faith in business. We argue that the logic of religion merits a closer look to comprehend rural community contexts where several institutions actively shape what is deemed rational or irrational in entrepreneurial decision-making.

2.3 Religion, rationality and entrepreneurship

Recent studies show that 84% of the world's population claims a religious affiliation, and many individuals report that religion is "important" or "extremely important" in shaping how they think and behave (Iyer, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2012). The logic of religion involves faith, and its norms are based on shared beliefs and practices supported by congregational membership (Thornton *et al.*, 2012, p. 73). The influence of religion in entrepreneurship has been previously associated with ethical decision-making and moral judgment (Henley, 2017). In urban business settings, the logic of religion also competes with a market logic (e.g. Chick-Fil-a), influencing how firms operate (Cater and Alderson, 2022). However, a market logic also addresses the interrelated concepts of market values, beliefs and ethics, which underpin contextual challenges.

Recent studies have demonstrated that the logic of religion not only interacts with other logics but also has an extensive reach, which can "percolate and (trans)form the nature of other logics" (Gümüşay, 2020, p. 867). The logic of religion also reveals why some leaders make decisions that run counter to standard business practices (for business succession, see Burton *et al.*, 2022). For example, Fernando and Jackson (2006) investigated the influence of the logic of religion on decision-making processes of religious business leaders. Their findings demonstrated that religion and spirituality can have a significant role in decision-making, judgment and emotional processes. However, judgment processes can also be influenced by culture and environments (Myerson, 2009), values and business practices. For example, Dodd and Gotsis

(2007) demonstrated that entrepreneurs may use religious criteria to inform their decision-making in contexts where religious salience is high. As a result, rationality and the logic of religion can compete to influence decisions and actions.

However, the dominance of the logic of religion in a particular setting is influenced by the level of adherence, which suggests that rational behaviors influenced by religion may be considered norms as long as most of the members of a community adhere to similar religious tenets (Weaver and Agle, 2002). Different religions are expected to be associated with varying configurations of entrepreneurial development due to varying values, culture and focus (Dana, 2009). As a result, the impact of the logic of religion on decision-making processes of religious entrepreneurs may also vary (Dodd and Gotsis, 2007).

2.4 Christianity, Rationality and Stewardship

In this study, we focus on Christianity (Woodhead, 2004). When the logic of religion is comprehended and applied, scholars have argued that Christian religious beliefs can be a powerful and influential force within society (Higginson, 2012). Christianity encompasses many traditions (i.e. Roman Catholic and Protestant) with different practices and normative commitments (Woodhead, 2004). In this study, we approach Christianity following C. S. Lewis (2001): we focus on the core beliefs shared amongst Christians (for a detailed description, see Woodhead, 2004).

Recent studies have demonstrated that Christian principles and values can shape the behaviors of business leaders because deeply held personal values influence individual perspectives (Chiles *et al.*, 2021; Rietveld and van Burg, 2014; Weaver and Agle, 2002), especially within ambiguous economic environments. While some entrepreneurs may aspire to be influenced by Christian principles as they engage in entrepreneurship, others may not integrate their Christian identity in business dealings (Knopf *et al.*, 2017; Parboteeah *et al.*, 2014).

Recent studies have also demonstrated that a counter-cultural or irrational approach by adherents of the Christian faith is associated with stewardship (Cafferky, 2012). In business, a stewardship perspective acknowledges that the actions of individuals are not always self-serving (Davis *et al.*, 1997). This perspective may explain why business owners serve the organizational mandate and mission, as well as their community, rather than pursuing opportunistic ends (Hernandez, 2008). While prior studies have demonstrated that business owners who adhere to Christianity foster a stewardship culture within their organizations, with business practices often running counter to typical business expectations (Discua Cruz, 2020), they have focused primarily on the individual level of analysis and urban settings.

Finally, recent studies have demonstrated that Christian entrepreneurs are strongly motivated by improving the welfare of their communities, especially in terms of the Christian tenets of honesty, humility and the call to treat their neighbors as themselves (Discua Cruz and Cavalcanti Junqueira, 2023). However, existing studies lack empirical evidence, creating a gap in our understanding of not only the role of religion in the decision-making processes of rural, Christian entrepreneurs but also the potential oddities and inconsistencies in their judgments and decisions.

2.5 Rationality in Rural Communities

Rural communities are distinctive localities related to social constructions (Halfacree, 1993), or “agglomerations of people, including their interactions in a non-urban setting or environment” (Ramsey and Smit, 2002, p. 369) who “share similar values, norms, meanings, history, and identity” (Shepherd and Patzelt, 2011, p. 139). Rural areas also have “location-specific advantages” in terms of material, social and cultural amenities, stemming from natural, social, cultural and historical elements, which have accumulated over time (Cortez Arias and Discua Cruz,

2018, p. 635). These unique amenities are context-specific, since each geographical area is comprised by a unique mix of resources, offering a unique set of opportunities for value creation (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015). Finally, members of rural communities are “bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values and/or personal interest in the personalities and life events of one another” (Brint, 2001, p. 8).

Recent research has demonstrated the crucial role of entrepreneurship in the collective destiny of a rural community (Audretsch *et al.*, 2017; Basco and Suwala, 2020; Spielmann *et al.*, 2022). Current studies of rural communities have revealed that business owners and entrepreneurs may be influenced by their personal goals, values and beliefs, as well as other actors, such as consumers and the community (Cortez Arias and Discua Cruz, 2018). This research has also revealed that decision-making within rural communities is influenced by interconnectedness, from the structure of the communities to the centrality (i.e. position) of business actors, including how their decisions are influenced by customers and relationship quality (Gulati, 1998). For example, a rural community can influence relationships shaped by trust, norms, obligations, and identification (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1997).

How entrepreneurs make decisions within a rural community is thus inseparable from relationship quality between actors and the influence of those who demand their products and services. Business rationality is deeply ingrained within social interactions and trust relationships, not only discouraging behaviors that are deemed irrational (Granovetter, 1985) but also supporting community logics. Contemporary studies have found that business ventures in rural settings interact with various institutions, which are characterized by sets of values determining rational decisions and actions (Besharov and Smith, 2014). We adapt the concept of rationality offered by Miller (2007) to reveal how normative, religious commitments – within high-religiosity contexts

– inform rational, normative decisions, thus offering a counterpoint to the current focus in the entrepreneurship literature (Chiles *et al.*, 2021; Griebel *et al.*, 2014). We expect motivations to challenge dominant logics is influenced by Christian tenets (Hoogendoorn *et al.*, 2016) and may depend on leveraging religion in decision-making processes. In high-religiosity contexts (i.e. Christianity), a stewardship perspective is viewed as rational, creating space for behaviors based on the intrinsic desire to pursue collective goals as part of shared, community beliefs (Cavalcanti Junqueira and Soetanto, 2022).

3 Research design and methodology

3.1 Research design

Studying decision-making processes of entrepreneurs requires a multifaceted approach to contexts and experiences (Howorth *et al.*, 2005). Since we focus on how and why phenomena occur, we employ a qualitative interpretive perspective (Graebner *et al.*, 2012) and conduct ethnographic fieldwork. An ethnographic qualitative approach is appropriate for gaining in-depth insights into the experiences, reflections and decisions of entrepreneurs (van Burg *et al.*, 2022). A qualitative approach also reveals the influence of religion within previously unexplored areas in the United States (Cater and Alderson, 2022), as well as captures concrete and detailed data (Graebner *et al.*, 2012; Howorth *et al.*, 2005).

3.2 Research context

We selected the United States of America as a relevant context to study the influence of religion in business (Nash, 1994). Analyses of the Brookings Institution have recently revealed a decline in the population of 56 major US metropolitan areas since 2010 (Frey, 2022). Non-metropolitan areas that had the most significant annual population gains have included rural areas. This shift was particularly noticeable in the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, millennials

(e.g. born between 1980 and 1996) have shaped relocations from US cities to rural areas (Frey, 2022), due to varying costs of living and safety concerns (Diamond and Moretti, 2021). In contrast to previous years, entrepreneurs who have relocated to rural settings are now benefitting from more diverse human and social resources (e.g. better education) and are thus willing to develop creative and innovative businesses (Akgün *et al.*, 2011; Píša and Hruška, 2019). While rural migration does pose some social challenges (i.e. newcomer vs. native), these new entrepreneurs offer novel businesses that create new jobs and economic growth (Píša and Hruška, 2019), a welcome change with a concurrent acknowledgement of community values, such as religion (Cater and Alderson, 2022).

Our research design employs a purposeful sampling (Emmel, 2013) of cases that provide a suitable context to investigate decision-making processes of Christian entrepreneurs who create/acquire a firm and operate within a rural context. Using local network contacts to identify potential cases, we selected seven non-agrarian business ventures spread across the rural, western regions of North Carolina. We selected entrepreneurs that acknowledged and practiced Christianity. Our rural context has a diverse range of Christian denominations. While the Southern Baptist Convention (i.e. SBC), a major Protestant denomination in the United States, has a significant presence in this region, as well as in the state of North Carolina (Tippett, 2014), our participants represent diverse Christian denominations, such as Anglicans/Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians and non-denominational. Most entrepreneurs in our study attend their local church and participate in church-related activities, thus suggesting a high-religiosity context.

3.3 Data collection

As COVID-19 pandemic restrictions gradually lifted, observation opportunities (Tremblay *et al.*, 2021) materialized (i.e. in-person visits and interviews), including attendance at short-term events,

such as outdoor farmer's markets (i.e. held on Saturdays), where we observed social engagements and interactions that respected regional COVID-19 pandemic protocols.

Two members of the research team, living near the rural community, facilitated data collection amidst COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and then during the subsequent business reopenings and commerce exchanges. To build contextual knowledge (Hammersley, 1997), ethnographic methods afforded an in-situ and in-depth immersion across social, rural and business contexts from a time of restriction to eventual relaxation. Despite these environmental shifts, we were able to immerse ourselves in our research context during the COVID-19 pandemic to the reopening of commerce, collecting observations and conversations alongside in-depth consideration of the literature. Collecting these data informed our overall understanding of the narratives and explanations of our research participants (Hlady-Rispal *et al.*, 2021).

The entrepreneurs representing our selected businesses vary in entrepreneurial experience and provide unrestricted accounts of decision-making processes. Most of their businesses were small start-ups, with the oldest business in operation for six years. The founders included seven males and four females, from the age of 27 to 42. Table I presents a list of the seven businesses (i.e. four of which are family businesses) and 11 participants.

Insert Table I Here

Most interviews were conducted in person at a mutually selected location, such as business offices or outdoor venues. Two interviews were conducted via VOIP (e.g. Zoom). Interviews were recorded and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and interview questions consisted of open-ended inquiries that encouraged respondents to discuss concepts and issues aligned with their experiences. From the outset, we identified specific themes involving decisions to create and develop a business in a rural area, alongside personal values and beliefs in the narratives. As we

gained an understanding of their business ventures, a comfortable atmosphere of trust was built with the participants. Since the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted this region, we naturally included discussions regarding how this crisis impacted entrepreneurial decision-making processes. These narratives and ethnographic methods helped us contextualize language, expression and conversation (Gartner, 2007).

Since most of the businesses in this study were relatively new (i.e. operating from two to six years), we wanted to learn more about their experiences of venture development. We employed probing questions, such as “How would you describe the experience of starting a business in a rural area?” and “After realization, what came next?” This form of questioning helped reveal motivations for creating businesses in a rural setting beyond the expected agricultural options. We also fielded questions concerning daily business activities and the necessary decisions to build a business. When responses were unclear, we asked the respondents to clarify and offer examples, which helped move our analysis beyond research assumptions to accurate representations and meanings of experiences.

We also wrote reflection memos to further engage with the data (Miles *et al.*, 2014). While our interview process was an excellent opportunity to appreciate the perspectives of the entrepreneurs, observations and short-term immersive events revealed further dynamics, synergies and associations in a rural context (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). These findings were later integrated with those based on the narratives of the respondents.

3.4 Data analysis

To elucidate the perceptions and experiences of our participants (Miles *et al.*, 2014), we ensured that our data analysis process was informed – but not constrained – by prior theoretical understandings (Finch, 2002). Data analysis was reiterative process, as we moved back and forth

between these data and emerging findings (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Following Cater and Alderson (2022), we independently examined the interviews, observation notes and documents. Our coding process then advanced in three steps: 1) assessing archival data; 2) evaluating the entrepreneurial literature on decision-making processes and any related research on the role of religion; and 3) leveraging a knowledge-based foundation to analyze interview transcriptions and to identify concepts (i.e. employing NVivo 11). After analyzing these data – collected from interviews, observations, events and memos related to each event, we established a list of the fundamental decisions that our participants made during a period of social and economic uncertainty.

We employed iterative procedures previously prescribed for uncovering qualitative interpretive perspectives (Hamilton *et al.*, 2017). The coding process thus included isolating key phrases, words and expressions to organize and refine thematic categorizations and interpretations. As a result, we uncovered new insights based on similarities and differences in the narratives of our respondents. Employing a knowledge-based foundation, we were able to identify themes noted by the respondents and to further strengthen our interpretations. These experiences provided additional insights and developed further trust as part of the analytical process (Discua Cruz *et al.*, 2021). Our analyses revealed that experiences of local culture were significant, as well as those associated with creating/acquiring and managing a venture. These findings helped refine our understanding and increase our confidence in our analytical process (Hamilton *et al.*, 2017). Finally, we re-contextualized our findings by reviewing the extant literature.

Guided by recent studies, we moved from empirical data to description, thematic categorization, thematic interpretation and theoretical implications (Discua Cruz *et al.*, 2021; McKeever *et al.*, 2015). We employed excerpts from the unique narratives of our respondents –

within and across cases – to illustrate arguments, increase transparency and address the trustworthiness of our research process (Gibbet and Ruigrok, 2010). Our approach enabled us to address suggested criteria for transparency in qualitative research when using cases and elite informants (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019).

4 Findings

The institutional logics perspective is the foundation of our examination of the impact of religion on rationality and entrepreneurial decision-making. Data analysis reveals novel insights, especially in a region shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, from its restrictions to subsequent uncertainties. Our findings in this study explicate two key developments. First, the influence of normative, religious behavior appears when actors embrace stewardship coping mechanisms, which may deviate from conventional business practices. Despite appearing illogical, these coping mechanisms underpin the business decisions of the entrepreneurs. Second, the intersection of stewardship, religion and entrepreneurial decision-making significantly impacts relationships, partnerships and mentorship. These contextual dynamics are essential in revealing new insights concerning how religion, rationality and entrepreneurial decision-making influence regional development.

4.1 Going against expectations – developing novel and non-agrarian ventures in rural contexts

Initial discussions with the respondents – regarding the decision to create a non-agrarian business in a rural context – provide insights concerning connection to place. Our respondents highlighted the lure of rural areas and geographical places as they created their businesses. Underpinning these decisions is a desire to serve, to commit and to safeguard not only business decisions but also community interests. Table II presents the initial motivations of the entrepreneurs to create enterprises in rural areas and communities.

Insert Table II Here

The entrepreneurs did not aspire to create traditional agrarian businesses connected with the rural area of study. Instead, they were keen to create businesses that leveraged their skills and the benefits of rural areas. As some of their skills were distant from agriculture, the emergence and development of their businesses suggest a plethora of motivations. All seven businesses, except for one (i.e. a second-generation business), took deliberate steps to research their business models in terms of place, community and identifiable needs in the area in which they wished to operate. Since the second-generation business had been transitioning its leadership since 2021, they were still assessing how to move forward two years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Caring for others – stewardship coping mechanisms and community interests

Our data analysis suggests strong intent by all participants to care for others. Our analysis demonstrates that coping mechanisms include the intention to care, such as discovering a role in the community and fostering community interests (e.g. growth and development). For example, the owner of a Camelia shop noted:

I think we've come to realize that, although we've been here really long time, we're still not from here. So there's a little bit of figuring out where our place is in the town that wants to grow and include new people, but sometimes still struggles with how to do that (Felipa, Camelia Shop).

Felipa explained that any market context faces common contextual challenges that hinder business development and growth in already resource-constrained rural regions. In our rural context, the implications of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, mask mandates, political disruptions and business closings brought many business adversities. Most entrepreneurs were aware of their

vulnerability but were also concerned about how their community would endure the demands of the pandemic. The owner of a microbrewery explained:

Well, I spent a lot of time praying during the shutdown.... I had people that would come here every day or every other day and buy growlers of beer, not because they needed the beer but because they wanted to keep us open. I had a local organization [...]. A woman walked up to me one day and just handed me \$350 and said, “We know you got kids, and we know y’all are struggling, and here’s a little something.” [...] That whole period of time people cared about my family because we are part of the community, because of what we’ve been able to make here (Jake, Heaven’s Gate).

Most respondents discussed overcoming despair and calling upon self-discipline to steer their businesses during the pandemic. They coined it an act of obedience and trust in God, which allowed them to make sense of a season of uncertainty. These behaviors were upheld by religious practices, similar to the integration of work and prayer in the Benedictine tradition (Benefiel *et al.*, 2014; Buchholz and Rosenthal, 2003).

Incorporating both ancient prayer practices (Benefield *et al.*, 2014) and meditation is based on actual or perceived connections with the divine. Studies have demonstrated that spiritual practices alter the behavior and experience of those who engage in them, particularly by enhancing personal well-being (Neubert, 2019). In our study, adopting prayer and reflection as coping mechanisms assisted entrepreneurs in their decision-making processes.

The narratives of respondents also reveal how they managed the stewardship of business decisions and community interests. The respondents repeatedly expressed being part of the community and “bearing visible fruit”. When asked to clarify what this expression meant to them, they expressed becoming known by the display of good fruits (Weber, 1985), a concept embedded

in stewardship of the communal good. Respondents also associated the expression with rural communities and agricultural business endeavors. For example, farmers must serve society and produce “good fruit” to positively represent business brands and values.

In Tables III and IV, we present a technique that moves from empirical data to description, thematic categorization and thematic interpretation (Discua Cruz *et al.*, 2021; McKeever *et al.*, 2015) to inform theoretical implications. Table III presents data demonstrating how respondents employed coping mechanisms while safeguarding family and community interests. For example, some respondents recounted how their families used Christian traditions (e.g. prayer, either alone or with family or community members) to run their businesses and how these factors influenced stewardship of business decisions.

Insert Table III Here

4.3 Walking the talk – intersecting stewardship and the decision process

A strong stewardship perspective emerged in our data analysis. Our findings indicate that the entrepreneurs were not motivated solely by self-interest (Neubert, 2013; 2019) but rather they were also motivated by key drivers, such as the desire to be successful within this context, when growing and developing their businesses. Their overall motivation thus extended beyond the self to the welfare and development of the region. On the one hand, inconsistencies related to judgment choices at the intersection of faith, work and community (Fernando and Jackson, 2006; Phipps and Shelton, 2021) were addressed in multiple ways, including a standard reply based on Christian traditions: “this is what we felt we should do”. On the other, inconsistencies related to decisions that did not align with normative business practices were also addressed since these decisions could have a positive impact on the community amidst challenging conditions and perceived inconsistencies.

To apprehend inconsistent business decisions in this context, we argue that synergies – created when the logic of religion influences a community logic and market knowledge – must be recognized as part of the decision-making processes. For example, the concept of Christian hospitality towards strangers must be explored. Following Nouwen (1998), who described genuine hospitality as a generous and welcoming act unconcerned with social and financial gains, we discussed these exchanges, taking note of words and behaviors of the respondents.

To further explicate the role of commercial activity, as part of the decision-making processes of these Christian entrepreneurs, an evaluation of the emerging stewardship perspective was required. Jake, owner of Heaven’s Gate, explained that sometimes he negotiated through competing community, faith and market values to make choices beyond the obvious. Following basic Christian practices of prayer, trust and leaps of faith, he noted:

For example, we have expat Brits in the area, and they wanted an ESB beer. We do not do this kind of thing in the area. But this kind was essential to this demographic. So, I did it not knowing how many brits I would attract [it did not matter]. But it has become one of our bestsellers, and I am pleased we have addressed their needs. But I was also prepared [to face it] if it did not work out (Jake, Heaven’s Gate).

The narratives underscored the profitability of business decision-making processes, which seemed to entirely depend on how they perceived and addressed the needs of their community. According to the respondents, perceived inconsistencies in behaviors and decisions were mitigated by their skills, products, and services, as well as long-term planning, faith and godly discernment. For these entrepreneurs, the right choice was practicing Christian hospitality not only for expats but also to build a flourishing community.

The normative relationship between a market logic and a community logic, alongside religious significance, reveals potential areas for rationality, sense-making and business decisions. For example, Homaro, with Mountain Goat Bikes, stated that he remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic as a government-endorsed, essential business because most community members rode bikes to work. While the first two years of the pandemic had been very profitable, he also helped his employees and customers suffering pandemic hardships. For Homaro, divergences from the norm created conflict but also reflected his concern for the community.

Narratives of all the respondents evoked the interpretation of ethics and Christian principles during the stewardship of business decisions and community service. Most entrepreneurs evaluated the value of forward-facing issues in terms of how they integrated with family, community and business. Since descriptions did not always align with rational business choices, some inconsistencies existed. As Jake explained:

The business itself can't be ethical, but I can. Business is not going to build relationships, but we are, and those relationships then go on to change society at large. It's the same thing a church is supposed to do. There's a whole lot of parallels between a brewery and a church because it's the same type of relationship that you have with your fellow human beings in those circumstances (Jake, Heaven's Gate).

All respondents freely shared knowledge about the operation and stewardship of their businesses, the moral core of religious values and unique business aspects in this context.

Table IV presents how the features of stewardship, religion and entrepreneurial decision-making processes intersect, as well as nuanced inconsistencies reinforcing rational decision-making. On the one hand, faith and religion not only shaped entrepreneurial decision-making process but also ethical conduct and a commitment to community service. On the other hand,

market and community logics also played a role in enabling entrepreneurs to navigate market challenges in a rural setting.

Insert Table IV Here

5 Discussion

We focus on elucidating how Christian entrepreneurs engage in decision-making in terms of how religion influences rationality and entrepreneurial decisions. Based on our in-depth analysis, including the relationship that entrepreneurs had with a rural context (i.e. place), we offer a model (see Figure 1) that identifies elements influencing rationality and entrepreneurial decision-making processes. Elaborating on how different logics intersect and interact, we reveal intricate associations between community, religion and market logics.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Our model illustrates how Christian entrepreneurial decision-making processes are generated in high-religiosity contexts. Community forces, Christian religious beliefs and market perspectives embedded in place, community, culture, rules, mentorships and environmental pressures mediate rationality, relationships, actions and implications. The norms of a community logic (i.e. Leverage A, Figure 1) and a market logic (i.e. Leverage B, Figure 1) signal that a group of entrepreneurs rely on shared values in their decision-making processes. However, entrepreneurs also act individually in their entrepreneurial decision-making processes within rural settings. Shared values may be supported by enculturation and specific experiences with other community members and mentors. Our model presents community and market logics as leverage to influence a Christian logic of religion. Dotted lines signal areas that we cannot “see rightly” (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry quoted in Kindt, 2020, p. 4), or areas that cannot be comprehended solely on what we see. Research

has demonstrated that this type of judgment has affective virtue, which is critical for rational objectivity and decision-making (Cristofaro, 2019; Klein, 2002).

Figure 1 also illustrates how Leverage A and Leverage B impact the logic of religion, as well as multidimensional considerations during decision-making processes. Rather than working independently, we argue that Leverage A and Leverage B are interdependent and do interact. These two forces guide the logic of religion and entrepreneurial decision-making during critical junctures (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic), impacting businesses, individuals, families, governments and community relationships.

5.1 Research implications

Our findings reveal that comprehending decision-making processes of Christian entrepreneurs in rural communities requires consideration of interrelations between a community logic (i.e. Leverage A), a logic of religion and a market logic (i.e. Leverage B). By highlighting the relevance of the institutional logics perspective in explicating how diverse logics co-exist (Thornton *et al.*, 2012), we demonstrate how distinct logics either reinforce or undermine the confidence of entrepreneurs in their decision-making process in terms of what is deemed rational or irrational.

We confirm relevance of knowledge limitations on rationality and entrepreneurship (Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022), as well as highlight the recent and growing research interest in entrepreneurship and religion (Dana, 2009). We thus contribute to extant understandings of rationality and entrepreneurship (Kurdoglu *et al.*, 2022) by emphasizing the significance of place and demonstrating that rational decisions may be quite distant from what is typically deemed rational in business studies (Baker *et al.*, 2007; Vasconcelos, 2009). Further, affective states, such as religious convictions, impact how entrepreneurs make decisions and act (Cristofaro, 2019). In tune with extant literatures on rationality and religion, our findings confirm Dodd and Gotsis

(2007): in a high-religiosity context, decision-making processes of entrepreneurs are influenced by what is considered rational.

While our findings are also in line with Vasconcelos (2009), who argued that the coexistence of rational and non-rational elements allows individuals to make decisions, we advance this perspective by demonstrating that, in a high-religiosity context, the logic of religion may dominate a market logic, as supported by community logics. Understanding how high-religiosity contexts operate is relevant for contextualizing how multiple logics interact and create space for both rational and context-based decisions.

We further expand on the contributions of Vasconcelos (2009) by identifying how an integrated approach unfolds within a Christian entrepreneurial mindset. As illustrated in our model, Christian entrepreneurs interweave religious practices (e.g. prayer) with decision-making processes, all the while expediting ethical routines supporting community activities via a community logic, or Leverage A, and regional economic stability via a market logic, or Leverage B (Gaddefors, and Anderson, 2019). Our subtle approach diverges from rational decision-making that is driven solely by a market logic and rather acknowledges entrepreneurial responsibility for community growth and development, which is considered an essential extension of faith. In practice, these entrepreneurs welcome and serve individuals, including individuals new to the community, such as refugees and expats.

We argue that these entrepreneurs perceived these decisions as rational because they applied them in a rural community where Christian religious beliefs are shared – or respected – by others. Previous studies have demonstrated that judgment inconsistencies are a critical condition for divergence between rational and irrational decisions (Back, 1961; Fernando and Jackson, 2006). Our findings suggest that the decision-making processes of entrepreneurs fosters the

interaction of religious values (i.e. a logic of religion) and market goals (i.e. a market logic, or Leverage B) through contextual rationality. In rural communities, value is created when new ways are established to integrate diverse, non-agrarian businesses and individuals with new product and service opportunities (i.e. a community logic, Leverage B).

While the entrepreneurs in this study discussed Christian religious beliefs, values and norms harvested from family and community traditions, the challenge of our synergistic research approach was to reveal how a Christian foundation infused business decisions and practices. In contrast to an agency perspective, which tends to explicate norms typically associated with a market logic, we offer an alternate view: stewardship.

5.2 Rethinking rational decision-making through a stewardship perspective

The field of management broadly defines stewardship as “the attitudes and behaviors that place the long-term best interests of a group ahead of personal goals that serve an individual’s self-interest” (Hernandez, 2008, p. 122). From an economic viewpoint, stewardship thus involves looking after “financial assets, physical facilities, products and services, systems, and processes” to benefit a broad group beyond the individual entrepreneur (McCuddy and Pirie, 2007, p. 962). Stewardship theory emphasizes a relationship-based system with a focus on non-financial objectives, whereby individuals serve the organizational good (Davis *et al.*, 1997) through an intrinsic desire to pursue collective goals and rely on trust as a control mechanism (Madison *et al.*, 2016). Hernandez (2008) argued that stewardship is created through social exchange in a unique context. Stewardship theory posits that social exchange is based on distinct behavioral principles, such as supporting the development of shared beliefs or understandings, highlighting not only relationship sustainability but also developing long-term, business perspectives (Davis *et al.*, 1997).

Our findings demonstrate that stewardship theory (Davis *et al.*, 1997) reveals how normative commitments connect entrepreneurship with decision-making through the logic of religion in rural contexts. First, stewardship is inherently related to decision-making as it focuses on caring for others, including decisions that address and impact the welfare of other individuals and society in rural settings (Hernandez, 2008). Second, entrepreneurial stewardship – where assets are assembled through entrepreneurship – has a broader mission beyond self-serving and opportunistic ends (Discua Cruz *et al.*, 2013). The logic of religion reveals how normative commitments prompt entrepreneurs to adopt a stewardship perspective as they integrate shared community interests (i.e. a community logic, Leverage A), improving the welfare of not only their businesses but also their immediate environments (i.e. a market logic, Leverage B) (Discua Cruz *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, a stewardship perspective manifests in the foundation of high-religiosity contexts (Cafferky, 2012). Our findings reveal the essence of a dominant logic of religion through stewardship in contexts where a particular denomination of Christianity predominates. Amidst adverse conditions – when rationality in entrepreneurial decision-making may come to the fore, stewardship prompts and harmonizes interests (Rossouw, 1994), with a focus on relationships and community welfare that may run counter to rational business decisions (Discua Cruz and Cavalcanti Junqueira, 2023). Our findings extend the application of a stewardship perspective to complement an institutional perspective when addressing rational entrepreneurial decision-making in rural settings and business community members sharing common religious beliefs on how to pursue collective goals and trust formation.

Our findings demonstrate that, by employing a stewardship perspective, Christian religious beliefs can shape a market logic, balancing it with a community logic. A rational approach is

stewardship not only for individual businesses through operational transformations but also for the community in terms of acting responsibly for its growth and development. Any approach that challenges stewardship can be perceived as irrational. Strong Christian beliefs can mirror stewardship behaviors at the intersection of a market and community logic, thus extending current theoretical developments focusing solely on the firm (Carradus *et al.*, 2020; Neubaum *et al.*, 2017).

Entrepreneurs who desire to engage in stewardship make decisions – based on their religious beliefs – that favorably impact both their businesses and communities (Dana, 2009; Discua Cruz, 2015). To capture varying yet essential aspects of a stewardship perspective in this study, we offer several interrelated features in Table IV. We capture how – and whether – businesses that develop relationships with rural communities serve a larger purpose: improving social value and creating a better society (Burton *et al.*, 2022). Relationships between businesses and rural communities can be influenced by a religious rationale that counters business practices informed by an agentic perspective.

Through a Christian religious perspective, a community and market logic become inextricably linked, which allows business owners to rationalize their decisions as part of stewardship activities. As a result, stewardship drives community and market logics, transforming normative business approaches to include a Christian logic of religion.

5.3 Practical implications

Our findings help inform entrepreneurs, educators, and practitioners on how to enhance sense-making practices. For example, Christian entrepreneurs, who relocate to rural areas in high-religiosity contexts, should reflect on how their communities – each affiliated through a set of beliefs – expect actors to behave. This practice opens avenues for a better awareness of business and community interests. We argue for a better understanding of how religion can impact the

decisions of entrepreneurs, primarily when they are related to personal beliefs, value systems, experiences and context (Chiles *et al.*, 2021; Henley, 2017). Following recent studies, our findings suggest that religion is connected to affective states (Riis and Woodhead, 2010), which can then influence decision-making processes (Cristofaro, 2019) in rural areas.

6 Research Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings offer new insights regarding rationality and the decision-making process of Christian entrepreneurs in a rural context. We highlight that a Christian logic of religion is fundamental for understanding the rhythms of rural communities in Northwest USA. Answering the call of Muñoz and Kimmitt (2019), we offer an more nuance visualization of “what a place for rural entrepreneurship looks like” (p. 845) when influenced by religious beliefs. However, we encourage future research to further address the broad range of implications of entrepreneurial decision-making processes in this type of context.

We also acknowledge that our findings require thoughtful interpretation. First, we rely on in-depth analyses of a set of cases to provide a comprehensive representation of the interplay of diverse logics. However, this approach limits the generalizability of our results to other, varying contexts (Stake, 2008). Second, our findings not only reflect the cases studied but also context in which we carried out our research (Cater and Alderson, 2022). We expect that the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced decision-making processes of the entrepreneurs that participated in this study.

We thus encourage future studies to address and explore whether – and to what extent – the findings of this study could have been influenced by not only the level of adherence to religious beliefs but also other cultural expectations (Miller and Ewest, 2015). Further studies should also investigate whether a stewardship perspective can reveal how entrepreneurs adhering to other

religious faiths foster interactions and improve relationships within communities as part of normative religious commitments (Burton *et al.*, 2022).

Since we conducted our study in one country (i.e. the United States) and one state (i.e. North Carolina), we are not only limited in its generalizability to rural contexts in other countries but also to other American states. We thus encourage researchers to conduct case studies in other regions to support, expand and challenge our findings. We also call for further studies that adopt diverse ontological and epistemological perspectives, such as qualitative positivism (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019).

Finally, we join the call for comparative studies focusing on the interplay of diverse logics in areas that share common or contrasting cultural traits (Müller *et al.*, 2014; Siegers, 2019). A transforming world necessitates revisions to the applicability and complementarity of theories (e.g. institutional theory and stewardship theory) in rural settings to expose and explain rational and seemingly irrational approaches by actors within a community.

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