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# Religious Entrepreneurship: Advancing a Distinctive Domain



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**Religious Entrepreneurship: Advancing a Distinctive Domain**

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**Religious Entrepreneurship: Advancing a Distinctive Domain**


## Abstract

We introduce a distinctive domain of research: *religious entrepreneurship*, defined as *a scholarly field that seeks to understand how, when, and why the discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities to create future goods and services is reciprocally influenced by practices shaped by belief in, and connection to superhuman powers; by whom, and with what consequences*. It is dedicated to the investigation of: the role of religion in entrepreneurship (i.e., how religious practices and beliefs shape entrepreneurial action), the role of entrepreneurship in religion (i.e., how entrepreneurship may influence religious practices, beliefs, and connection), the interaction between religious and entrepreneurial processes (i.e., how a process perspective may provide a deeper understanding of the connection between individuals, organizations, institutions, and superhuman powers), and the outcomes of the interaction between religious and entrepreneurial processes (i.e., how consequences of interaction may be pursued and understood). The 15 articles in the special issue on religious entrepreneurship advance knowledge around these questions and attest to the rapidly expanding scope and rigor of research in this domain. They center around four important themes: religious entrepreneurship as: constraining or enabling entrepreneurial action; as identity, meaning, and legitimacy; as social and ethical impact; and as institutional work.



**Keywords:** religious entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship, religion, entrepreneurial action, identity, impact, institutions.



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**Introducing the Special Issue on Religious Entrepreneurship**

Although interest in the topic of religion and economic activity is not new - dating back to seminal works of Emile Durkheim ([1912] 1965) and Max Weber ([1930] 2013), there is a difference in both the quantity and quality of an emerging research stream in entrepreneurship. In the past, a number of barriers have limited the development of this research, including lack of personal relevance to scholars, the declining importance of religion in parts of the world, skepticism about the validity of research on religion, and the seeming inevitability of secularization, among others (King, 2008). However, scholars are overcoming these obstacles – real or perceived – because of religion's prevalence, centrality, established base of literature, and ability to provide novel answers to important questions in entrepreneurship (Tracey, Phillips & Lounsbury, 2014; Smith, McMullen & Cardon, 2021). In short, religion is a very old and still contemporary social phenomenon concerning varying populations worldwide, and which today increasingly attracts the attention of entrepreneurship scholars.

This intersection is influential because it combines religion, arguably one of the most substantial forces in human history, and entrepreneurship, arguably one of the most substantial contemporary forces used not only to create businesses but also to tackle grand challenges facing the world. Yet, understanding the combination of these two forces, what we call, *religious entrepreneurship*, is important because it potentially leads to widely varying beliefs, actions, processes, and outcomes that may be: enabling or constraining, virtuous or immoral, productive or destructive, inclusive or discriminating, among others (e.g., Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Smith Gümüsay, & Townsend, 2023). While academic interest mirrors the growing movement of entrepreneurial practice, it is critical to understand how and why religious entrepreneurship may yield one particular set of beliefs, actions, processes, and outcomes or another.

This increasing interest in the "theological turn" in entrepreneurship research (Smith, McMullen, & Cardon, 2021) includes a growing number of publications in top-tier management and entrepreneurship journals (*Financial Times Top 50*), the creation of an ongoing academic research conference (www.liferesearchconference.com) and doctoral seminar, the development of entrepreneurship centers dedicated to the topic (e.g., https://lifemiamioh.com/), and the launch of special issues in leading entrepreneurship journals (*Small Business Economics* and now *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*). What began as trickle of activities across many disparate actors is now picking up pace and coalescing around a growing movement of academic research. While numerous factors contribute to this interest in religion and entrepreneurship, it is clear the demand for research in the topic is rapidly increasing and contributing to the development of a *distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship*. To that end, we are excited to share this special issue on religious entrepreneurship, consisting of 15 studies from 44 authors with 300,000+ citations, which advance this distinctive domain.

**Defining the Distinctive Domain of Religious Entrepreneurship**

Over the last several decades, the field of entrepreneurship has gained legitimacy in academia. This has been achieved at least partly based on publishing entrepreneurship research in top-tier management journals and the ascent of top-tier entrepreneurship journals (Wood, 2020). As the field has grown, it has also spawned several unique domains on topics such as social entrepreneurship, corporate entrepreneurship, and development entrepreneurship. These domains advance our research in important ways, extending the reach of entrepreneurship into new areas, highlighting important boundary conditions, and raising critical new research questions (Lumpkin, 2011). To continue to advance research on entrepreneurship, we encourage research on the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship, an intersection of entrepreneurship and religion.

The domain of entrepreneurship research was initially defined as "a scholarly field that seeks to understand how opportunities to bring into existence 'future' goods and services are discovered, created, and exploited, by whom, and with what consequences" (Venkataraman, 1997: 120). This definition led to a central focus on both the opportunity and the individual. In this way, a common definition provided clarity for the field of entrepreneurship about its purpose, distinguishing features, and collective identity. Over time, the domain has expanded to include a focus on entrepreneurial action (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006) and entrepreneuring (Rindova, Barry & Ketchen, 2009: 477), which encompass a process perspective and broaden a narrow focus on wealth creation to incorporate changes to "new social, institutional and cultural environments." Taken together, these foundational understandings provide clarity for the distinctive domain of entrepreneurship.

While a definition of entrepreneurship has been developed over the last several decades, a definition of religion has been debated over several centuries. Building on the centuries of debate, sociologist Christian Smith (2017) developed a definition based on social scientific theory to avoid problematic definitional issues of the past.[1] Accordingly, religion is defined as "a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in the hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad" (Smith, 2017: 22). In other words, humans act based on their religious beliefs in order to maximize the good and avoid the bad.

We now detail some of the important components of the definition. First, *practices* refer to behaviors that are identified by some culture or tradition that include three key attributes:

[1] We recognize criticism of Smith's definition, including Western centrism and the ahistorical notion of religious endurance (e.g., Casanova, 2019).

intentionality, meaning, and repetition (Smith, 2017). This definition focuses on religious practices, but only when they are motivated by the religious beliefs of intentionality and meaning, thereby calling attention to integrated role of practices and beliefs. Second, premises about *superhuman powers* suggest these forces "are (believed to be) able to influence or control significant parts of reality that are usually beyond direct human intervention" (Smith, 2017: 22). Third, the notion of *access, communication and alignment* suggest individuals seek to acknowledge and understand the will, goals, and / or desires of the superhuman powers. This connection to the powers occurs by making contact, developing a relationship, worshipping, bargaining, and even at times attempting to manipulate the superhuman powers (Smith, 2017: 31). Finally, the *hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad* is considered one of the primary goals of religion. In essence, the purpose of religion is to gain help, support or aid in reframing in situations an individual cannot control or solve. While religion serves other functions, "realizing goods and avoiding bads, especially averting misfortune, obtaining blessings, and receiving deliverance from crises through superhuman means, are religion's core purpose, its ultimate raison d'être" (Smith, 2017: 36). Thus, religion is concerned with *practices*, *powers*, *connection*, and *outcomes*.

Drawing on these foundations, the domain of religious entrepreneurship occurs at the overlapping intersection of religion and entrepreneurship, as shown in Figure 1. Extant research made important strides in identifying the domain as entrepreneurial work "motivated by the cultural and ideological beliefs, practices, and/or outcomes rooted in religious faith" (Smith, Gümüsay, & Townsend, 2023). Yet, the construct of religious faith needs specificity. Building on this collective work in religion and entrepreneurship, we define **religious entrepreneurship** as *the scholarly field that seeks to understand how, when, and why the discovery, evaluation, and*

*exploitation of opportunities to create future goods and services is reciprocally influenced by practices shaped by belief in, and connection to, superhuman powers; by whom, and with what consequences*. This definition provides the foundation for three essential research questions in the domain:

1) Why, when, and how the practices shaped by belief in and connection to superhuman powers *influence* the discovery, evaluation, enactment, and exploitation of opportunities (and vice-versa)?

2) Why, when, and how do some entrepreneurs and religious practitioners, and not others, *integrate* culturally prescribed practices shaped by the belief in and *connection to* superhuman powers into their entrepreneurial pursuits?

3) Why, when, and how are the economic, psychological, social, and *spiritual* consequences of this pursuit *evaluated*, *interpreted*, and *configured* by the pursuer and other stakeholders?

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**INSERT FIGURE 1 about here**

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The first question starts by examining how religion may influence entrepreneurship, including both entrepreneurial action and potential consequences. Building on the theological turn in management research (Dyck, 2014), this question broadens the scope of entrepreneurship research to include religion as a primary variable of interest. It moves beyond the view of religion as simply a moderator variable providing incremental changes to existing explanations to more of a "shift parameter" (Oxley, 1985) that "influences the *distribution* of entrepreneurial individuals, organizations, opportunities, and outcomes" (Smith et al., 2021: 3). This question is consistent with Max Weber's (2013) focus on how religious beliefs, practices, and values facilitated entrepreneurs in developing and executing their businesses. This approach is represented in recent work that identifies the religious antecedents for entrepreneurial action and decision making (e.g.,

Gümüsay, 2015; Smith et al., 2019; Barbosa & Smith, 2024; Pidduck, Townsend & Busenitz, 2024).

This first question also recognizes reverse directionality, where entrepreneurship can influence religion. This approach aligns with Adam Smith's view that considers religious leaders as entrepreneurs (For a full review, see Seabright, 2016). For Smith, the role of nonconformist religious leaders is critical to gaining more religious followers and this is particularly important at a time when non-affiliated religious individuals (or "nones") is increasing. While entrepreneurship research has a long history of interdisciplinary research and often imports theories from other disciplines to explain entrepreneurship, this research question raises the possibility of giving back or exporting entrepreneurial theory and research to other disciplines, including religious studies, psychology, sociology, and economics. In this way, the directionality of research on religious entrepreneurship is reversed to examine how entrepreneurship may influence religious practices, powers, communication, and outcomes. For example, if the entrepreneur's actions result in the failure of a venture, the failure may not only affect the firm but the result may also have negative – or positive – consequences for the entrepreneur's religious identity. In this way, religious entrepreneurship may contribute to recursive interactions of entrepreneurship and religion. In a review on religion and organization studies, Tracey (2012) calls attention to this view by focusing on the development of religious organizations and the opportunity to examine entrepreneurship through new religious organizations and movements. To date, this research question has been relatively neglected despite its potential to provide empirical and theoretical insights (Block et al., 2020).

The second question focuses on why some, and not others, integrate religion and entrepreneurship. It raises questions about not only the actors of integration – entrepreneurs and

religious practitioners - but also the different degrees and types of integration of religion and entrepreneurship. In addition, the second research question zooms in on the *connection* element of religion.[2] Of primary concern is access, communication, and alignment with superhuman powers. In this way, the second research question highlights how a process perspective may illuminate a deeper understanding of the connection between individuals, organizations, and superhuman powers. This process perspective on the theological turn to entrepreneurship research elevates the importance of motivation, purpose, identity, and persistence (Smith et al., 2021). Early research in this stream shows how the connection of a religious purpose is associated with coping and persistence (Dwyer et al., 2026). Zooming in more directly on this connection is research that focuses on the development of a relationship with God. Scholars explain how access, communication, and alignment with superhuman powers may result in a relational identity with God (Smith, Lawson, Barbosa & Jones, 2023). This approach also highlights the potential to develop new theoretical constructs, such as a relational identity with God, that explain important entrepreneurial outcomes, such as persistence and well-being. Building on this work, research shows how this relational connection (relational development, relational identity, and relational obedience) may act as a double-edged sword in entrepreneurial creativity (Sottini et al., 2026). This research stream suggests that entrepreneurs' religious convictions may increase their persistence in pursuing an opportunity despite challenges and constraints (Cavalcanti Junqueira, Discua Cruz, & Gratton, 2023).

The third question focuses on the consequences of religious entrepreneurship. While acknowledging economic, psychological, and social outcomes, it also introduces a new form of outcomes: spiritual. In this way, it moves beyond the individualistic, materialistic outcomes of

[2] The very word *religion* originates from the Latin "*religare*", which literally means "*to reconnect*".

entrepreneurship to include not only psychological and social outcomes (Venkataraman, 1997), but also spiritual outcomes that may be central to some individuals, organizations, and institutions. While some important work has been done on measuring non-financial outcomes (Rawhouser, Cummings, & Newbert, 2019), the introduction of spiritual value (or impact) complicates the issue of measurement even further. How does an entrepreneur measure spiritual value? Conceptual and empirical work by scholars and practitioners is already making important strides. Yet, more work is needed to examine not only the measurement of spiritual value but also how it is evaluated and configured alongside other forms of value creation and capture (Smith et al., 2022).

Overall, these three questions form the identity and boundaries of a distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship. These questions recognize religious entrepreneurship as bi-directional and recursive. The domain acknowledges not only the influence of religion on entrepreneurial antecedents, processes, and outcomes, but also the influence of entrepreneurship on religious antecedents, processes and outcomes. It also recognizes that religion, as entrepreneurship, is a human experience. It can be both an individual as well as a collective endeavor occurring in entrepreneurial teams, families, communities, and regions.

The distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship opens a number of provocative avenues for entrepreneurship research. In developing this special issue, we identified at least four paths where research on the domain of religious entrepreneurship may advance the field of entrepreneurship. First, religious entrepreneurship raises questions about how the interaction and different forms of integration affect the entrepreneur, the entrepreneurial process, and entrepreneurial outcomes. Second, religious entrepreneurship raises questions about the multi-level effects of religion and entrepreneurship, including the role of values, communities, and regions. Third, religious entrepreneurship opens new avenues for both conceptual and

methodological research, including the roles of different religions, as well as the bright and dark sides of religious entrepreneurship as experience, process, and practice. Finally, this new research domain is open to varied methodological approaches including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, ethnography, and me-search, among others. We now provide an overview of the articles constituting the special issue.

**Overview of the Special Issue**

This special issue on religious entrepreneurship brings together the largest collection of articles published thus far in a top-tier entrepreneurship or management journal on the topic of religion and entrepreneurship. The special issue consists of 15 articles which draw on a range of religions, methodologies, and geographies. Figure 2 provides an overview of the articles, including authors, theory, method, and theme. In terms of different religions, the articles draw on various forms of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. From a methods perspective, there are 5 articles using quantitative methods and 10 articles employing qualitative methods. The use of large samples and quantitative methods is encouraging. The heavy usage of qualitative methods ranging from interviews to a single case study design, with a focus on theory building and elaboration, is of substantial importance given the early stages of the domain of religious entrepreneurship. In terms of geography, the articles in the special issue were conducted in countries across the globe, including Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. Two studies draw on samples across many countries (11 and 52). There is an excellent representation of the Global South, with six studies coming from Africa (4) and Latin America (2). We now turn to the major themes of the special issue, highlighting how this research begins to address the research questions related to the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship.

**Major Themes in the Special Issue on Religious Entrepreneurship**

When looking across the 15 articles in the special issue, there are four major themes represented to advance the domain of religious entrepreneurship. Building on key elements of theological turn to entrepreneurship (Smith, McMullen & Cardon, 2021), these themes focus on religion as a complementary explanation to an economic paradigm for entrepreneurial action, work, and consequences. The articles not only advance our understanding of how religion influences entrepreneurship but also how entrepreneurial approaches are used by religious individuals and organizations. These four themes are: 1. Religious entrepreneurship as enabler or constraint of action; 2. Religious entrepreneurship as identity, meaning and legitimacy; 3. Religious entrepreneurship as social and ethical impact; and 4. Religious entrepreneurship as institutional work. While articles may be associated with multiple themes, we introduce each of the articles under one theme. We now explain the themes and introduce each of the articles.

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**INSERT FIGURE 2 about here**

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***Theme 1: Religious entrepreneurship as enabler or constraint of action***

The first major theme focused on whether religion enabled or constrained entrepreneurial action. This theme connects to the first research question in the domain of religious entrepreneurship which asks how practices based on belief in superhuman powers may influence opportunities, action, and consequences of action. Across the special issue, the topic of how religion constrains or enables entrepreneurial action was one of the most prevalent.

First, in the article entitled, "Understanding Hindu religious entrepreneurship: a translation perspective," Sahasranamam and Kondayya show how Hindu entrepreneurs engage in translation work to overcome the anachronistic view of Hinduism. Drawing on a qualitative sample of 15

Hindu religious entrepreneurs, they develop a model of Hindu religious entrepreneurial intention (HREI). In so doing, they illustrate how religious knowledge and practices may enable entrepreneurial action in the contemporary world. This article explains how the culturally prescribed practices of Hinduism, when properly translated, may have an important influence on engaging in entrepreneurship.

Second, Fernhaber and Hawash in their article, "Does religion in the home country matter for new venture internationalization? A cross-country analysis," examine the relatively neglected topic of how religion influences internationalization of new ventures. Using data from 17,382 ventures across 52 countries, they find that religious diversity is positively associated with new venture internationalization. In terms of different forms of religiosity, they find cognitive religiosity is positively related but normative and regulative religiosity are negatively related to new venture internationalization. These results show how religion may both enable and constrain entrepreneurial action and highlight the importance of theoretical specification in religious entrepreneurship. The article culturally prescribed practices of religiosity and environmental factors of religious diversity serve as influential antecedents to venture internationalization.

Third, Sanchez-Ruiz, Maldonado-Bautista, Klein and Vaughn, in their article, "Moral boundaries: how sacred values and cultural tightness influence entrepreneurial action," explore how sacred values and cultural tightness affect entrepreneurial action. Drawing on multilevel, quantitative data from 14,000+ individuals across 11 countries, they find sacred values are negatively associated with entrepreneurial action and the relationship is stronger in culturally tight societies. These findings contribute to the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship by showing how religiously sacred values constrain entrepreneurial action and by explaining how cultural norms augment these constraints. The article shows how culturally prescribed practices

based on believed superhuman powers may constrain entrepreneurial action through grounded sacred values and cultural tightness.

Fourth, in their article entitled, "Spiritual bricolage among women entrepreneurs: reframing adversity," Tesfaye, Markowska, Segaro and Naldi explore how women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia leverage spiritual resources in the face of adversity to persist in their entrepreneurial ventures. Based on 52 life-story interviews, they find women entrepreneurs engage in spiritual bricolage to reframe the meanings of risk, constraints, and legitimacy. They find the reframing can facilitate or hinder sustained entrepreneurial motivation and persistence. This study focuses on how women utilize culturally prescribed practices based on believed superhuman powers to reframe meanings that may constrain or enable continued entrepreneurial action.

***Theme 2: Religious entrepreneurship as identity, meaning, and legitimacy***

The second major theme focused on the relationship between religion and identity, meaning, and legitimacy. The studies on this topic relate to all three proposed research questions in the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship (how practices influence entrepreneurship; how connection to superhuman powers influences entrepreneurship and outcomes; and how entrepreneurship in all its forms influences religious practices). Following extant research, the topic of how religious entrepreneurship is related to identity is one of the most salient.

First, Biru, Sottini, and Cannatelli, in their article entitled, "Venturing beyond sacred grounds: managing multiple identities in religious entrepreneurship," examine how religious organizations manage identity multiplicity and tensions related to pursuing social, economic, and spiritual value. Based on a qualitative study of Catholic missionary organizations in Uganda, they find organizational identity elasticity practices enable these organizations to continue to pursue all

three types of value by infusing each with religious meanings, values, and moral codes. This study shows how organizational identity elasticity is a critical component for meaning and legitimacy. It shows how the alignment or connection with the superhuman power of God is essential for the pursuit of entrepreneurial activities.

Second, in their study entitled, "Planting churches, growing identities: how religious entrepreneurship changes those who are called to it," Conger and Welter show how church planters vary in the degree to which they connect to a broader Christian denomination to navigate the identity challenges of the church and the communities they serve. In their study, they examine the entrepreneurial practices of 26 church planters from four different Protestant Christian denominations in the United States. This is one of the emerging studies that explores the reverse relationship in the domain of religious entrepreneurship in which entrepreneurship influences religion. In so doing, they provide evidence of how entrepreneurial action may influence the religious beliefs and practices of the church leaders and communities.

Third, Rifo and Poblete, in their study entitled, "Constructing the identity of the religious entrepreneur: A master narrative approach," examine the identity challenges and tensions of reconciling sacred commitments with secular economic expectations. In their study of 39 entrepreneurs in South America, they find entrepreneurs use two different identity narratives: a dominant secular entrepreneur and an alternative religious entrepreneur. Rather than a linear progression of identity, they find a more dynamic interaction of these different identities. In so doing, they identify identity navigation mechanisms of dispute, homologation, and sanctification. This study shows how the identity practices based on religious beliefs and practices enable entrepreneurs the agency to redefine entrepreneurial success through a religious lens.

Fourth, in their study entitled, “Tradition and organizational identity in religious entrepreneurship,” Rocha, Burton, Sinnicks, and Black explore the dialectic tensions religious organizations face when dealing with religious traditions in their entrepreneurial initiatives. Based on the study of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, they examine the identity challenges of honoring religious traditions while initiating entrepreneurial projects. They find that tradition operates as an ‘enabling constraint’ that both limits and facilitates organizational identity negotiation, where tradition is not only inherited from the past but also active in the present. This study adds to the limited research on how entrepreneurial action of religious organizations influences the religious beliefs and practices of the organization itself.

***Theme 3: Religious entrepreneurship as social and ethical impact***

The third major theme focused on how and why religion served as a mechanism by which individuals and organizations pursued not only economic, but also social or ethical, impact. This theme aligns with the theological turn to entrepreneurship research (Smith et al., 2021), by complementing an economic perspective with a religious perspective that leads to a potentially broader range of desired or pursued consequences and outcomes of entrepreneurship. In this way, it connects to the first research question in the domain of religious entrepreneurship which asks how practices based on belief in superhuman powers may influence opportunities, action, and consequences of entrepreneurial processes for the entrepreneur and other stakeholders. In this way, it connects the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship to social entrepreneurship.

First, in her article entitled, “Religious congregation social entrepreneurship in sacred church buildings,” Haugh examines the use of sacred church buildings as both places of worship and means of income generation. Drawing from qualitative data from the Church of England, she

develops a model of religious congregation social entrepreneurship. In so doing, she illustrates how the model is built on dimensions of faith and care about welfare, community, environment, and the church building. In so doing, she extends research on care ethics and proposes the novel concept of sacred-entrepreneurial hybridity. This study shows how religious organizations, and their sacred spaces, offer a broader perspective on the range of stakeholders and types of impact considered based on religious beliefs and practices.

Second, Dwyer and Neubert, in their article entitled, "Higher purposes in religious entrepreneurship: How Kenyan pastors sustain persistence toward spiritual impact," examine the trade-offs made in the pursuit of religious purposes. Drawing on 21 pastor entrepreneurs from Kenya, they examined how these entrepreneurs balanced their economic goals of survival with the religious goals of sharing their beliefs with others. In so doing, they provide insights into how the psychological effects of spiritual impact beliefs influenced risk taking and persistence. Given the primary focus on creating spiritual value for God, this study offers a direct lens into how religious beliefs and practices based on superhuman powers leads to the pursuit of entrepreneurial consequences that transcend economic value to include spiritual value.

Third, Emami, Shamohammadi, Packard, Jones, Ashourizadeh, and Dana, in their study entitled, "The role of religious beliefs in productive entrepreneurship and personal social responsibility: insights from a non-WEIRD nation," examine how religious beliefs influence entrepreneurs toward productive outcomes. Using a sample of 390 entrepreneurs from Iran, they find religious beliefs lead to productive entrepreneurship and this relationship is mediated by personal social responsibility. They find religious beliefs increase productive entrepreneurship by encouraging social and ethical duty. This study contributes to the domain of religious entrepreneurship in two ways: by illustrating how religious beliefs and practices lead to social

value and by adding theoretical specification of the mechanisms of religious entrepreneurship, answering calls by scholars to advance theorizing on this domain (Dejardin et al., 2024).

***Theme 4: Religious entrepreneurship as institutional work***

The fourth major theme focused on how and why religious entrepreneurship relates to institutional theory. This included articles on institutional voids, institutional engagement, and institutional complexity. Taken together, these articles examine religious entrepreneurship as institutional work, defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Even more broadly, these articles investigate religious organizing within these institutional contexts, defined as "the set of routines, structures, processes, and meanings by which individuals and organizations make sense of integrating their religion and their venture" (Smith et al., 2019: 6).

First, Patel, Dana and Audretsch, in their article entitled, "On one's own two feet: self-employment, poverty, and the importance of religion in South Africa," explore the relationship between self-employment and religious importance. Building on institutional voids and using South Africa's National Income Dynamics study, they find the self-employed are less likely to consider religion important, especially among the poor. The results suggest the self-employed disengage rather than depend on religion in institutional void contexts. This study adds to the limited research showing the reverse directionality of entrepreneurship influencing religion, as specified in the third research question in the domain of religious entrepreneurship.

Second, in their article, "Do the means justify the ends? Entrepreneurs' moral legitimacy in religious networks," Harris, MacKenzie, and Mason examine how religious entrepreneurs engage with institutional complexity to manage profit-faith tensions. Drawing on a sample of

Evangelical Christian entrepreneurs in Scotland, they find three strategies by which entrepreneurs make profits morally acceptable in their religious networks: stewardship framing, selective generosity, and strategic evangelism. They theorize that moral legitimacy is judged across the motives, means, and ends of entrepreneurs. This study contributes to the domain of religious entrepreneurship by identifying practices used by entrepreneurs as institutional work to legitimate economic pursuits.

Third, Moss, Loor, Meléndez, and Fernández, in their article entitled, "From faith to fortune? Religious entrepreneurs' responses to institutional voids," explore how entrepreneurs address institutional voids to yield either positive or negative outcomes of their ventures. Employing a qualitative approach in Mexico, they examine how entrepreneurs transfer their religious beliefs and practices in more or less visible ways to their ventures. Drawing on structuration and religious agency, they show how entrepreneurs use different mechanisms, depending on the level of religious transparency in their venture. This study introduces a multi-level model and contextualizes theory on religious entrepreneurship and institutional voids.

Fourth, in their article entitled, "Beyond simple embeddedness: probing entrepreneurs' strategic religious engagement," Hechavarria, Pidduck, and Patel examine how religious entrepreneurs engage in different patterns of interaction with institutions. In their two-wave study of 246 religious entrepreneurs in Nicaragua, they find respect-seeking entrepreneurs pursue religious institutional involvement for its visibility and status-conferring opportunities, while communitarian entrepreneurs leverage religious networks for tangible resources. An important insight from this institutional work by religious entrepreneurs is that motivational identities, not just religious identities, influence how and why entrepreneurs interact with religious institutions. In addition, their findings show that gender and church attendance moderate the relationship

between motivational identities and resource acquisition, with women generally facing steeper barriers but offsetting them through consistent church attendance. This study shows the need for deeper theoretical specification of institutional work in the domain of religious entrepreneurship.

**Conclusion**

In this introductory article of the special issue, we introduce religious entrepreneurship as a distinctive domain of research. While initial research in this area dates back more than 100 years, the increasing quantity and quality of research on religious entrepreneurship is new and exciting. Building on the definitions of entrepreneurship and religion (practices, powers, communication, and outcomes), we develop a definition and set of research questions that provide boundaries and research opportunities for the future of this distinctive domain. The 15 articles in the special issue on religious entrepreneurship attest to the rapidly expanding scope and rigor of research in this domain. They center around four important themes: religious entrepreneurship as constraining or enabling entrepreneurial action; religious entrepreneurship as identity, meaning, and legitimacy; religious entrepreneurship as social and ethical impact; and religious entrepreneurship as institutional work. It is our hope that the special issue serves as an important lever to advance the trajectory of the distinctive domain of religious entrepreneurship.

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**Figure 1 – The Domain of Religious Entrepreneurship**

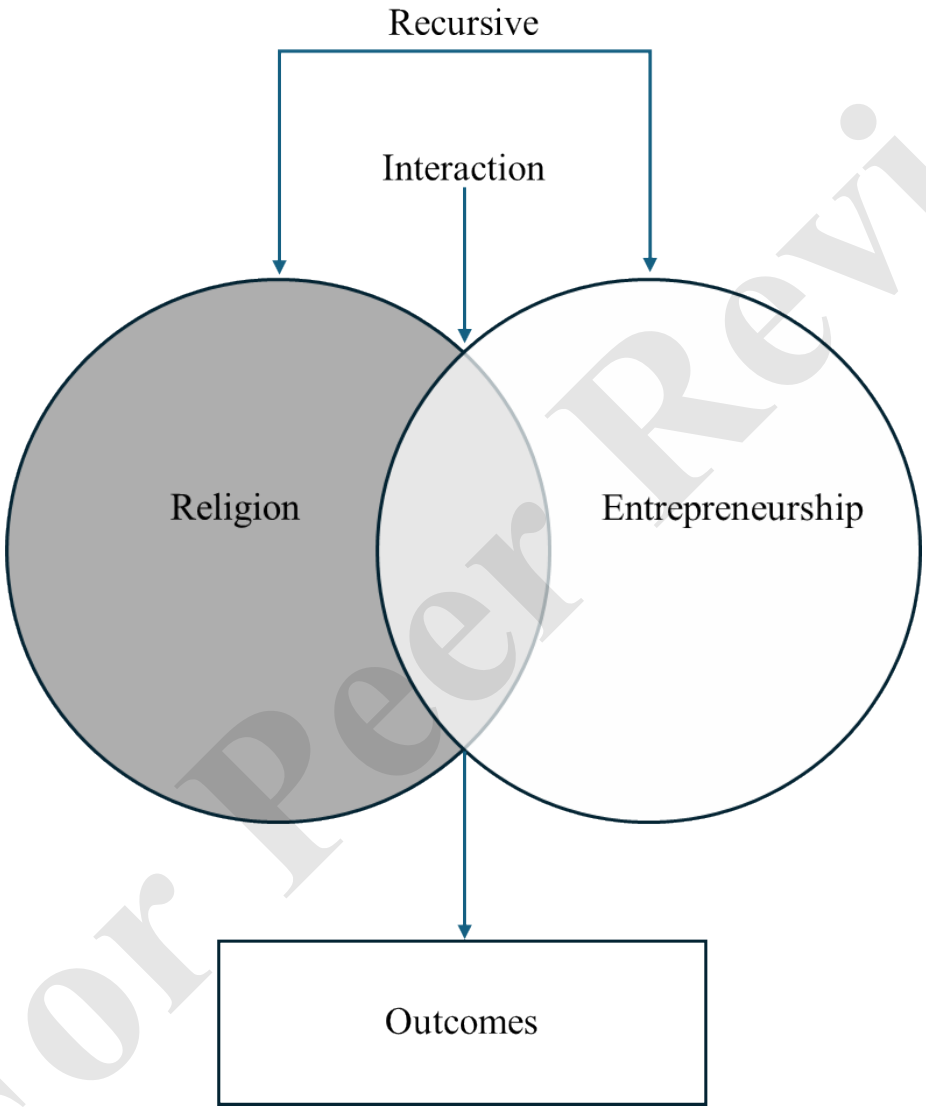

**Figure 2 – An Overview of the Articles on Religious Entrepreneurship (RE)**

| Author(s) | Theory | Method | Theme | Contribution to RE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sahasranamam & Kondayya | Translation theory | Qualitative: 15 entrepreneurs | Enabler or constraint | Practices of Hinduism enable entrepreneurship. |
| Fernhaber & Hawash | Entrepreneurial action | Quantitative: 17k in 52 countries | Enabler or constraint | Religious practices both enable and constrain internalization. |
| Sanchez-Ruiz, Maldonado-Bautista, Klein & Vaughn | Sacred values & Ent. action | Quantitative: 14k in 11 countries | Enabler or constraint | Practices constrain action via values and cultural tightness. |
| Tesfaye, Markowska, Segaro & Naldi | Bricolage | Qualitative: 52 life-stories | Enabler or constraint | Practices used to reframe meaning to enable or constrain action. |
| Biru, Sottini & Cannatelli | Organizational identity | Qualitative: Missionary orgs. | Identity, meaning & legitimacy | Shows alignment to God essential for entrepreneurial action. |
| Conger & Welter | Identity theory | Qualitative: 26 church planters | Identity, meaning & legitimacy | Reverses directionality: entrepreneurship to religion (E→R) |
| Rifo & Poblete | Narrative identity theory | Qualitative: 39 entrepreneurs | Identity, meaning & legitimacy | Identity practices redefine entrepreneurial success. |
| Rocha, Burton, Sinnicks & Black | Organizational identity | Qualitative: Case study | Identity, meaning & legitimacy | Reverses directionality: E→R tradition as enabling constraint. |
| Haugh | Care ethics | Qualitative: Church of England | Social or ethical impact | Religious organizations engage in different kinds of impact. |
| Dwyer & Neubert | Religious identity | Qualitative: 21 pastors | Social or ethical impact | Practices lead to pursuit of spiritual impact. |
| Emami, Shamohammadi, Packard, Jones, Ashourizadeh & Dana | Upper echelons theory | Quantitative: 390 entrepreneurs | Social or ethical impact | Practices lead to social value; adds theoretical mechanisms. |
| Patel, Dana & Audretsch | Institutional theory & voids | Quantitative: Panel Data | Institutional work | Reverses directionality: entrepreneurship to religion |
| Harris, MacKenzie & Mason | Relational embeddedness | Qualitative: 42 entrepreneurs | Institutional work | Practices used by entrepreneurs to legitimate economic pursuits. |
| Moss, Loor, Meléndez & Fernández | Structuration & Religious agency | Qualitative: 56 interviews | Institutional work | Practices via different levels of religious transparency. |
| Hechavarria, Pidduck & Patel | Social identity theory | Quantitative: 246 entrepreneurs | Institutional work | Theoretical specification on interplay of identities & institutions. |