Reconceptualizing Religious Evolution: Toward a General Theory of Macro-Institutional Change

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ABSTRACT

Applying evolutionary analogies to religious change has been central to the Sociology of Religion for some time. Under scrutiny, though, these models neither ask nor answer the central questions biologists ask, and thus beg the question as to whether they are actually evolutionary or simply use the concept. The paper below posits a theory of religious evolution that precisely delineates 1) the unit of evolution; 2) the unit of adaptation and selection; 3) the selection processes; 4) the sources of variation, and 5) the non-religious factors facilitating/constraining religious evolution. Ultimately, Spencerian and/or Durkheimian selection processes work on the adaptive technological, organizational, and/or symbolic innovations of special religious groups, religious entrepreneurs; fitness is a measure of an entrepreneur's ability to sustain itself in its environment, while evolution is a result of its ability to qualitatively transform its environment such that its cultural traits are instituted into the religious domain's structure and culture and facilitate and constrain a significant proportion of the population.

INTRODUCTION

The questions 'why' and 'how' religions change have been central to the sociological study of religion. The earliest 'explanations' focused on the 'evolution' of religion, though have been largely discredited as they were teleological, Eurocentric, and progressivist (Tylor 2008 [1878]; Frazer 1911–1915). Max Weber (1964 [1922])

offered a second path, equally historical, but far more empirical and judicious in its theoretical assumptions: first, religious orders, like any institutional system, tended towards greater rationality as problems of generational transmission and taken for grantedness became pervasive; second, charismatic leaders – and, more importantly, the carrier groups imbued with the leader's charisma – were the forces of radical change; finally, because of rationalization and bureaucratization, the modern world has been moving towards disenchantment and thus a subsidiary role for religion overall. Typical of Weber's work, causal mechanisms and a clear model of change were vaguely stated at best.

In the 1960s, theories of religious evolution reemerged in the social sciences (Bellah 1964; Swanson 1966; Wallace 1966). Like their predecessors, and despite their theorists' insistence, these theories continued to assume progressivity implicit in the *ad hoc* stage-models they created. Following Weber, Bellah argued that Modern religion – or the final stage – was devoid of the supranatural 'enchantment' of previous stages, while both Wallace and Swanson saw monotheism as the final point. Bellah's (2011) most recent work maintains, though far more implicitly, his earlier stage-model and, rather strangely moves away from the evolution of religion to focus on the evolution of cognition – drawing, from Merlin Donald's (1993) dubious theory that 'primitive' peoples lack theoretic culture; an argument, incidentally, thoroughly refuted by Paul Radin's excellent work (1957 [1937]; also Anderson 2013). Perhaps, more problematic with these 'evolutionary' theories was that they never bothered to explicitly ask or answer the questions central to biological evolution – for example, what is evolving, what is being selected upon, what is/are the selection mechanisms? The utility of these theories is questionable; a cursory review of five social science handbooks on religion reveals the marginalization of evolutionary theorizing (Glazier 1997; Dillon 2003; Ebaugh 2006; Beckford and Demerath 2007; Clarke 2009).

The more recent trend in studying religious change reflects a more general sociological trend: the retreat from the macro-level of analysis to the meso-level (*e.g.,* organizations). One type of model conceptualizes religious space as markets in which organi-

zations compete for members, while members employ some form of cost-benefit analysis in choosing (Finke and Stark 1988); religious change is both predicated on the adaptations religious organizations make within their denominational niches (Chaves 2004) and the aggregation of choices by individuals (Stark 1999). A second path has posited typologies of religious movements based on their goals and relationship to national and/or global political economy (Wuthnow 1980; Zald 1982). These models have provided important insights into organizational behavior, but as Fligstein and McAdam (2011) recently argued, they (a) generally ignore macro-level dynamics – especially macro-institutional dynamics (Turner 2003, 2010; Abrutyn 2009, 2013; Abrutyn and Turner 2011) – which, consequently, (b) underconceptualizes the macro-meso link, (c) focuses on either qualitative transformation or quantitative growth without considering the connections between the two, and (d) is generally modeled on contemporary organizations, thereby limiting the historical comparative possibilities.

Neo-evolutionary theory can supplement the insights of these meso-level models, because it is inherently historical and is concerned with *all* societies while looking for the ubiquitous elements and their variation (*i.e.*, Turner 2003, 2010; Turner and Maryanski 2008; Nolan and Lenski 2009). In addition, because evolutionary theory begins at the macro-historical level, it is sensitive to tempo and types of change, thus it is already sensitive to both quantitative growth and qualitative transformation (Carneiro 2000), while recent theoretical efforts to link the two by introducing complexity theory and the notion of thresholds seem promising (Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010). Furthermore, these theories are macro in nature, elucidating a more robust conceptualization of the environments of organizations (Abrutyn and Turner 2011), while there have been efforts to take serious the interplay between Weberian carrier groups and macro-institutional space (Eisenstadt 1980; Colomy and Rhoades 1994; Abrutyn 2009, 2013; Abrutyn and Van Ness n.d.). Finally, a theory of religious evolution that attempts to answer the most basic biological evolutionary questions can offer clear mechanisms and causal logic that avoids teleology by substituting *selection pres-*

sures (Turner and Maryanski 2008; Turner 2010), and progressivism by refocusing the lens from the unit of selection being 'society', 'the human species', or the individual to the group (Wilson 2002). It is by way of a macro-institutional theory that a general theory of religious evolution can be posited without *a posteriori* stages that favor unilinear evolution, while remaining sensitive to the unique qualities of each specific case.

The paper below attempts to build such a theory by precisely 1) examining the process of selection as separate from the sources of variation; 2) delineating the adaptive unit; 3) identifying the sources of variation; 4) considering the differences and importance of both selection and diffusion, and 5) elucidating the major structural conditions facilitating or constraining selection. This project was inspired by certain theories/theorists whose work must be briefly reviewed, as the theory building process is not conducted in a vacuum and, to be sure, owes much to these forerunners.

The Pitfalls of Stage-Modeling

Unquestionably, this work is built on the great shoulders of Robert Bellah whose seminal essay, *Religious Evolution* (1964), sparked this project. Bellah produced a stage-model denoting the 'evolution' of religious symbolic systems from their most concrete *Primitive* form to their highly abstract, differentiated, and (relatively) secular *Modern* form. True to his Parsonsian roots, religion is a subsystem of society functioning to provide meaning; as societal complexity 'evolved', religion followed suit to better adapt human societies. He remarks, for example, that evolution is the 'process of increasing differentiation and complexity of organization that endows the organism [or] social system … with greater capacity to adapt to its environment' (Bellah 1964: 358). Explicitly rejecting progressivist theories, Bellah falls into the teleological and unidirectional traps of functionalism and old evolutionisms when he contends that 'religious symbolization … [and therefore religious action and organization] change over time … [moves] in the direction of more differentiated, comprehensive, and in Weber's sense, more rationalized formulation' (*Ibid.*: 360). Hence, each stage was characterized as having a symbolic system more differentiated from other systems than the previous stage. Bellah, though, does

not ask or answer the questions central to biological evolution, and thus the actual process and mechanisms of religious evolution are notably absent. As such, questions arise. If the Hebrew religion is a *Historic* religion, has it 'evolved' to an Early Modern or Modern religion? If so, how and why? If not, are the Jews frozen at some ancient stage? Or, is it possible to define a stage by a *single case* (*e.g.,* the Early Modern stage belongs solely to Protestantism)? The model is parsimonious and the ambition is excellent, but as a work on evolution which would have to examine selection, variation, and retention, it falls short.

Recently, Bellah (2011) has come full circle, producing a monumental work on the evolution of religion from *Tribal* religions to the so-called Axial Age (Jaspers 1953). He begins by focusing on the co-evolution of biology and culture, positing a plausible explanation for the *origins* of religion as predicated on the evolution of certain biological-cognitive capacities such as empathy and parental care along with the socioemotional consequences of a ritual (Durkheim 1912; Rappaport 1999; Collins 2004). From here, he links sociocultural changes in political complexity and, consequently, 'the enormous differences between social strata' as necessary conditions for the 'evolution' of religion (Bellah 2011: xix). To be sure, the underlying aim is *Verstehen* – for example, a 'narrative of narratives, a story of stories'. The problems of selection and variation remain undertheorized, because his goal is to get at how the 'evolution' of religious systems took over for biological evolution as a means for expanding human's capacity to create more complex societies, understand their environment and their place in it, and deal with power differentials and stratification. That is, religion as a monolithic, necessary human institution evolves over time to meet the adaptive needs of the human race, or at least those societies evolving towards greater complexity. To be sure, this assessment is not meant to be critical, but rather throw in sharp relief the differences between Bellah's aims and those of this paper. Bellah is a vital figure in the macro-historical study of religions, and is important for legitimating the study of religion in the context of evolutionary theory as well as stimulating the sociological imagination at numerous levels, but his goal is not to posit a theory of religious *evolution*.

The Sociology of Rodney Stark

One should take into account the work of Rodney Stark as he is one of the preeminent scholars considering religious change as evolutionary. Stark's work is quite broad, but a theme that runs through most of it is a sociologically-informed rational choice (Finke and Stark 1988; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). Religion 'consists of explanations of existence (and ultimate meaning) based on supernatural assumptions and including statements about the nature of supernatural, which may specify methods or procedures for exchanging with the supernatural' (Stark 2007: 46). Furthermore, people 'adopt and retain images of God(s) that appear to provide *greater satisfactions*, both subjective and material' (*Ibid.*: 10). Competing religions offer a 'menu' that is predicated on a conception of the supranatural, the goods and services offered by the supranatural, and the terms of exchange (Stark 1999); employing a sort of Darwinian perspective, through the aggregation of individual choices, some religions survive while others grow weak and eventually die. Stark is not a naïve utilitarian though, and always maintains broader sociological forces as shaping preferences. For example, Stark's (1996) explanation for the rise and spread of Christianity against the Roman religion was premised on choices, but those choices were shaped by historical forces. He reasons that more Christians survived the two plagues that ravaged Rome because their belief system made it an imperative to care for the sick, which made them more likely to fight off the affliction while pagans were far more likely to remove their sick. Not only did this mean more Christians survived, but it also potentially made Christianity appear 'better' to those pagans who survived as well as those who were helped by their Christian neighbors. Hence, it was not purely choice but choice shaped by context.

Ultimately, Stark's models are insightful for their ability to build a religious change from the 'bottom-up', and because they consider some of the macro-level forces shaping religious markets and preference. Stark's focus is, indeed, on the success and failure of religions, but the decision to use aggregated individual preferences as the mechanism of selection conflates the process of selection with that of diffusion or transmission. Thus, Stark's efforts are important and will help enrich the contours of the theory posited

below, yet theoretical work at the macro-level of analysis will be required to reveal how selection and variation operate.

TOWARD A THEORY OF RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION

The theory below proceeds from the assumption that the *units of evolution are institutional domains* (Turner 2003, 2010). Institutional domains are real sociocultural and structural milieu for congeries of individual and corporate actors; that is, they are manifest in the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces characterized by corporate units that evolved to address the selection pressures or problems of adaptation encountered by population (Abrutyn 2013), and as this set of corporate units evolves, it develops a distinctive generalized symbolic medium used to form an intra-domain culture, a distinctive set of corporate-unit formations, and a distinctive configuration of mechanisms for integrating relations among its constituent corporate units and, at times, the relations of these units and their culture and symbolic media with units in other institutional domains (Abrutyn and Turner 2011: 304).

Hence, they are the largest structural and cultural sources of organization below the societal level and reflect the adaptive efforts of past institutional entrepreneurs, their successes and failures, the reactions of extra-institutional actors, and the goals and interests of present institutional entrepreneurs (Abrutyn 2013; Abrutyn and Van Ness n.d.). Socio-cultural evolution, then, is the process by which these domains are qualitatively transformed in terms of (1) increasing (or decreasing) *institutional autonomy* (Abrutyn 2009) – and, thereby, reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and/or symbolic milieu of individual and corporate actors; (2) internal structural differentiation of institutional space and thus the emergence of new and *differentiated corporate actors*, as well as *their distribution* within the domain's divisions of labor, and the *mechanisms integrating* corporate units; (3) differentiation/de-differentiation of *intra-institutional culture* via the development and monopolization of discrete *generalized symbolic media of exchange*; (4) propagating *new cultural orientations* facilitating and constraining the goals, decisions, strategies, and ideologies of a significant proportion of institutional and extra-institutional actors. Six institutions appear ubiquitous: kinship, polity, religion,

economy, law, and education (Turner 1997, 2003; Nolan and Len-
ski 2009); arguably, recent 'secondary' domains include, though
are not limited to, science, medicine, art, and, perhaps, sports
(or entertainment) (Abrutyn and Turner 2011).

As noted, institutional domains are the *largest unit* below the
societal level – that is, institutional domains are typically territori-
ally, politically, and culturally bounded.[1] When we talk of the
American education or religion, we are referring to the institutional
domain, or the conglomeration of actors, resources, and rules asso-
ciated with education or religion in the USA.[2] Institutional domains
are not stable structures or cultures, but rather are arenas of con-
flict/contention as well as reproduction; while *religious domains
'endure', the elements of religious institutions rarely remain the
same for more than a generation*. Ecologically speaking, institu-
tional domains are composed of various resource niches, the most
important of which are termed the *core* niche, or the space where
entrepreneurs produce and distribute institutional resources. Sur-
rounding these cores are *institutional environments* comprised of
niches or fields of corporate actors distributed by their relative ac-
cess to key resources; the closer an actor or its niche is to the core
niche, the greater are the actor's (1) share of institutional resources
and (2) exposure to institutional mechanisms of control. Restated,
then: sociocultural evolution is the process by which a given insti-
tutional domain's core grows more or less bounded relative to other
domain's cores, and/or, (a) the distribution of corporate actors and
the niches they are located, as well as the mechanisms used to inte-
grate disparate actors/niches is discrete to the institutional domain
and/or (b) the *intra*-institutional culture grows more or less discrete
vis-à-vis other domain's cultural space. Qualitative transformation
is either at the institutional level through the process of autonomy
(Abrutyn 2009) or within the institutional domain as discrete struc-
tural and/or cultural mechanisms of integration (Abrutyn and
Turner 2011) emerge to constrain and facilitate the actions, atti-
tudes, and orientations of a significant proportion of the institu-
tional and extra-institutional population.

Why are institutional domains the unit of evolution that matter
most? First, while meso- and micro-level behaviors are 'easier' to
see, the structural and cultural context in which these phenomena

make sense are institutions. That is, the 'cultural tool kits' (Swidler 1986), or goals, means to achieving them, strategies, and ideologies, employed by actors are not randomly acquired or distributed; actors *are not* determined by their milieu, but their tool kits are facilitated, constrained, and ultimately shaped by these larger structural/cultural spaces. Second, shifting the lens to the macro-level allows us to examine the way macro-level forces shape meso-level reactions, and reciprocally, how these reactions affect the enduring structural/cultural spaces that shape populations. Indeed, institutional entrepreneurs are the source of variation and adaptation because they are involved in (1) the creation and propagation of new cultural orientations and goals for actors to pursue and (2) the reconfiguration of resource flows, both within specific institutions as well as across (Eisenstadt 1971), as well as (3) the carving out of autonomous institutional space and, thereby, new centers of domination alongside new paths to social mobility (Abrutyn 2009), and, ultimately, (4) the *reconfiguration* of macro-institutional physical, temporal, social, and/or symbolic spaces in a way reconfigure the structural and cultural realities of myriad actors, and thus their 'understanding' of reality.

Religious Institutions

Relatively autonomous religious institutional domains are the spheres of social action and organization related to action, goals, ideologies, and decision-making organized by and around the supranatural (Durkheim 1912) as reflected in the generalized symbolic medium of religious exchange, *sacredness/piety*. Religious institutions, when autonomous, are defined by one or more core niches comprised of religious entrepreneurs who produce and distribute *sacredness/piety* and other discrete religious resources, as well as resources with society-wide value – for example, wealth or prestige. Based on our definition, religious institutions are *not* churches, congregations, prophets, or entire religious systems. Only within the simplest societies is religion so deeply embedded within kinship, as are all institutional domains, that religion and group are synonymous with each other. Over time, religious institutions grow increasingly differentiated in terms of role / status-positions, distribution of resources across individuals and groups, and eventually differentiation of corporate units; that is, by about

10,000 years ago, religious institutions no longer overlapped perfectly with the entire group we would label a 'society'.

Religious domains become reservoirs of resources that individuals and groups could select from (or, as is often the case, selection could be constrained from elites) in creating and recreating their structural and cultural forms; few actors, if any, use all of the institutional domain's elements because they have no need for all of them, some contradict each other and would produce ontological uncertainty, or because access to some is highly restricted. Thus, the religious domain becomes the arena and space that coordinates the flow of resources associated with the *supranatural* via the circulation of *sacredness/piety* as a generalized medium of exchange; access to these resources becomes the central narrative of struggle for religious actors, as well as the means and ends for religious behavior, the mechanism of social control, and the source of integration.[3] Hence, they are very real things because the increase in autonomy does indeed alter the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic landscape with which humans in a society must contend, while decreases in autonomy also reconfigure the space; though, the difference is found in the sharpening or blurring of boundaries.

The Adaptive Unit
It has been repeatedly stated that institutions evolve because of *adaptive responses* by specialized corporate units labeled *institutional entrepreneurs*. The evolution of a religious institution, then, is primarily predicated on the past and present efforts of *religious entrepreneurs*, though other entrepreneurs have often directly or indirectly reconfigured religious institutions (Eisenstadt 1963). Therefore, religious groups and, more importantly, their cultural (organizational, symbolic, and/or technological) traits are what sociocultural selection mechanisms work on (Wilson 2002; Bowles and Gintis 2011), and success can only be defined by the group's ability to survive and reproduce its cultural traits. In particular, the traits that enhance a religious group's solidarity as well as channel self-interest into collective interest are more likely to be fit in the face of selection pressures than those which do not.

Ultimately, religious evolution occurs when successful groups become entrepreneurs, collectives Eisenstadt (1964) deemed anal-

ogous to 'mutations', and alter the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space of a religious institution one way or another.

The process is not automatic. As we shall see, variation is a *constant* though selection pressures are not. In addition, entrepreneurship is not just related to cultural traits, but to innovations and efforts by entrepreneurs to make their traits appealing to non-members, draw larger bases of human/material resources, and become indispensable to extant elites (Abrutyn 2009). Entrepreneurship is both cause and consequence of leveraging indispensability and power-dependency in exchange for greater independence vis-à-vis other social units and, thereby, the ability to reshape institutional space. The greater the degree of autonomy, the greater is their access to desired resources, and the greater is their control over the religious domain, the production and distribution of religious resources, and the legitimate right to shape the vision of religious reality. Moreover, greater autonomy means greater influence over larger swaths of the population which generates more human and material resources to meet their self-interested and collectively-oriented interests as well as more 'say' in steering society.

Perhaps, then, it is best to talk of fitness as a group's ability to survive and reproduce itself (Bowles and Gintis 2011), while success is closer to the group's ability to become entrepreneurs and 'install' their vision of reality and reconfigure the institutional space (Abrutyn 2013). Adaptation, by the way, has little to do with a *society's fitness in its environment*, as many institutional domains have proven maladaptive for entire societies, exploitative for some groups and beneficial for others, and sometimes maladaptive for the group in question (*e.g.,* groups like the Essenes of ancient Israel which were celibate and, in the long run, unable to biologically reproduce their culture).

Selection Processes

Biological evolution is the process by which certain forces, most notably natural selection, work on phenotypic variation; organisms with traits enhancing their reproductive capacities are more fit than those with weaker or neutral traits. Though the questions are the same, sociocultural evolution is slightly different than its analogous counterpart. The fundamental difference is that social structures evolve in Lamarckian fashion and not in Darwinian, as

'the … structure of society can be changed within a short period of time' (Turner and Maryanski 2008: 3). The second and third differences have already been discussed above: groups and not individuals or their genes are selected on, and it is social structures – for example, *institutions* – that evolve and either prove resilient or collapse in the long-run. The final difference is important: two types of selection processes – that Turner and Maryanski (2008) have termed *Spencerian* and *Durkheimian* – are operative as opposed to *Darwinian* selection in biological evolution.

Spencerian Pressures. Spencerian selection is the process by which actors face new problems of adaptation that require the creation of *new sociocultural formations* in the absence of existing adaptive structures (Turner 2010: 24); there is no equivalent to Spencerian selection in biology. In terms of institutional evolution, Spencerian pressures generate conditions ripe for entrepreneurship. On the one hand, where existing institutional domains whose role is to address said exigency is absent, the aspiring entrepreneurs can actively innovate and carve out this space. As an aside, whether or not these pressures are real or perceived, the resources are available to innovate or not, power structures allow entrepreneurship or not, and these pressures are even perceived by people are all empirical questions and underline the very real possibility of collapse in the face of selection. Spencerian selection pressures merely open structural opportunities for upstarts to innovate, secure more members who consider their innovations desirable (as well as 'advertise' and persuade non-members), and possibility become mobile and transformative. On the other hand, where autonomous institutional domains already exist, entrepreneurs *within* the domain may sense the domain is under pressure from the environment or from within the environment and adjust, adapt, and innovate in ways that immediately or over time reshape the institutional space. That is, new formations may be the institutional domains themselves or they may be new elements within already autonomous domains.

In terms of the former type, we can point to the Axial Age as a perfect example (Eisenstadt 1986; Bellah 2011). In India, China, ancient Israel and Greece existing politico-religious structures proved futile in the face of demographic, economic, and sociocultural pressures that provided ripe conditions for symbolic innova-

tion and, eventually, the nascent (partially) autonomous religious institutions. To be sure, the level of autonomy remained low in all of these cases and in some, such as the Chinese case, religion and polity were quickly fused together again. Yet, the blueprint for future entrepreneurs such as the Christians and Muslims had been created. An example of the latter type can be found in the Gregorian Reformation which began with Pope Gregory VII and his inner circle innovating in ways that defined the boundaries of the religious institution and its political counterpart and culminated in Henry IV's solemn walk to Canossa (Berman 1983). The point is that institutional elements previously absent were instituted in ways that reshaped the religious institution across each European state and which had powerful reverberation for other domains like polity and, eventually, economy and law.

Durkheimian Selection. Durkheim (1893), following Darwin, emphasized population, scarcity, and competition as key forces of evolution, but diverged by emphasizing that in sociocultural evolution individuals and groups specialize and generate more complex divisions of labor instead of become extinct (Turner 2010: 24–25). Unlike its Spencerian counterpart, then, it is not the *absence* of structural/cultural adaptations, but competition between groups for scarce resources that generates innovation of new traits and, often, leads to one group dominating others and thus being in a position to reconfigure institutional space as reward for its 'success'. To stay consistent with the terminology used above, Durkheimian selection is most often seen within a given resource niche in an autonomous institutional domain, though it is also plausible to see niches themselves competing for resources (especially where institutional domains are losing autonomy and thus resources overall are becoming scarce). Drawing from Chaves (2004) and Finke and Stark (1988), five general outcomes can be identified in the Durkheimian process: organizations within a niche (1) can accept subordination and try to get by on lesser amounts of resources, (2) find less dense niches to occupy, (3) carve out new niches, (4) form coalitions of the 'oppressed' and press for a more even distribution of scarce resources from the dominant, or (5) become extinct (cf. McPherson 1983).[4] Thus, sociocultural evolution is either the result of the dominance of a new entrepreneur and the reconfiguration of

the institutional domain, the creation of new spaces within a domain and thus the need for new mechanisms of integration, the push for pluralism and the proliferation of complex and specialized sets of cultural elements, or the elimination of competitors and the emergence of a singular set of cultural traits. There is one final dynamic of Durkheimian pressure worth elucidating. When competition becomes intensified and none of five outcomes appear, Durkheimian pressure may generate Spencerian pressures and the need for entirely new sociocultural structures. This happens, for example, when religious entrepreneurs who are embedded in and dependent on the political institution struggle for their independence and, in the process, tear the religious institution apart from its political counterpart.

Summary. It may be useful to review the discussion thus far. It has been argued that religious institutions are the unit of evolution, and religious evolution is the process by which the religious domain grows more (or less) autonomous from other domains; or, by which an autonomous religious sphere grows structurally and/or culturally more discrete and bounded from other spaces. Institutions are key units of analysis because they are the most enduring structural and cultural milieu that individual and corporate actors operate within. They shape the goals, means to achieving them, strategies and ideologies, norms and values, and interests and preferences of actors, as well as determine the distribution of these cultural elements. Institutions, however, do not adapt and are not selected upon, but rather religious groups and their cultural traits – for example, organizational, symbolic, and technological elements – are the unit of adaptation. It is their cultural traits, or organizational, symbolic, and/or technological elements, that either enhance or weaken their ability to survive and reproduce their culture generationally, and it is their traits which prove desirable and indispensible to a significant proportion of the population and intensifying the selection process.

Entrepreneurship, thus, becomes a force of religious evolution via the (1) innovation of new traits in the face of macro exigencies and the absence of existing structures (*Spencerian*), (2) reconfiguration of structural and/or cultural elements within an extant institution – either rapid qualitative shifts or a series of quantitative

changes reaching a threshold and a qualitative 'leap' (*Durkheimian*), and (3) the creation of new groups or niches due to competitive pressures (*Durkheimian*). Additionally, (4) 'foreign' entrepreneurs may encroach on autonomous institutional domains by invading, colonizing, or simply offering similar goods/services and drawing resources away thus either destroying the indigenous entrepreneur's traits or forcing them to innovate and adapt (*Spencerian*). A final process must be considered as we have only focused on the dynamics of macro-institutional forces and entrepreneurial efforts to adapt and change these dynamics. That process can be called *selective diffusion*, or the transmission of cultural traits across populations.

Selective Diffusion

There are forces that can speed up or slow down religious evolution; these particular forces will be called *forces of transmission*, as they relate to the types of dynamics that encourage the dissemination and diffusion of an entrepreneur's vision of reality, increase and diversify the base of human and material resources they have access to, and increase their chances of survival. In many ways, we are shifting the focus, then, from the 'top down' to the processes occurring from the 'bottom up', or the micro-level where 'the decisions, choices, and preferences of [significant numbers] of individuals accelerate the evolutionary process of selection' (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 51). As cultural traits are deemed desirable and conversions begin, transmission accelerates in an S-curve as greater and greater numbers join until it decelerates due to fewer non-members than members (Henrich 2001: 997–998; cf. Stark's 1996 discussion of Christianity's growth). The initial converts typically join because they are kin – for example, the pattern found in the cases of Buddha and of Mohammed. However, entrepreneurs need far broader and diverse sources of sustenance. While they proselytize, there are three other ways traits are transmitted across populations.

Direct transmission involves the non-members joining based on their evaluation of the benefits a group offers vis-à-vis other groups and according to culturally conditioned or social psychological criteria. Conversion occurs because the 'menu' of one religion is deemed better than another's regardless of the objective accu-

racy (Henrich 2001: 997). *Prestige* based transmission sees conversions occurring because an individual (mis?)attributes a person's elevated status as related to their membership in a religious group. A person, for instance, may join the Church of Scientology because celebrities belong and he/she may be 'touched' by the charisma of the group. The third type is *conformity* based transmission, or the process by which 'humans preferentially imitate ideas and behaviors that are expressed by the majority of the group over traits expressed by the minority, even when their personal opinions or behavior will not be known by the other group members' (Henrich 2001: 997). The degree to which a group and its practices are salient and visible can have powerful biasing effects on choice because people often perceive 'the most advantageous [trait as being] the commonest' (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 69). This third type tends to become the most important driver of selective diffusion, as one entrepreneur captures the attention and resources of a significant proportion of the population and becomes a true force of evolution.

The Sources of Variation

The source of all sociocultural variation is found in the technological, organizational, and/or symbolically innovative efforts of the actors we have called *institutional entrepreneurs* (Eisenstadt 1980; Abrutyn 2009). Institutional entrepreneurs are distinguished from other types of corporate units for a couple of reasons. First, they are the force behind institutional projects that 'seek to crystallize broad symbolic orientations in new ways, articulate specific goals, and construct normative and organizational frameworks to pursue [entrepreneurial] ends' (Colomy and Rhoades 1994: 554), which result in the 'self-interested construction of an … institutional niche' (*Ibid.*: 555). Second, institutional projects are not focused just on survival or creating new niches, but rather on either constructing discrete physical, temporal, social, and symbolic spaces or reconfiguring existing ones by (a) shifting the 'global' worldview held by those around them on the social and cultural order; (b) supplementing established group goals with new goals; (c) pushing collective goals above self-interested goals held by individual members; and/or (d) dissuading the pursuit of certain goals (Eisenstadt 1971: 54–55). For our purposes, the institutional entrepreneurs are defined as *bounded corporate units who (a) oc-*

cupy or seek to occupy strategic locations within an autonomous institutional domain; (b) develop distinct cultural orientations reflective of their activities, position, and social relationships; and (c) pursue innovative projects which allow them to secure structural and symbolic independence vis-à-vis other entrepreneurs, reconfigure the physical, temporal, symbolic and social space they are embedded in, and, where possible, carve out autonomous institutional space of their own.

In particular, religious entrepreneurs are in the subset of cosmological entrepreneurs and, as such, pursue monopolies over the legitimate use of symbolic power and violence, psychic coercion, and the means of *mental* production. Their innovations may be technological – for example, new rituals designed to procure rain or other natural effects, organizational – for example, new conceptualizations of the 'moral' community, or symbolic – for example, new soteriologies or eschatologies; more often, these innovations emerge inextricably together as new organizational structures or technological inventions require symbolic meanings that explain, justify, and make sacred. Their projects may be oriented towards religious goals and decisions, towards the production and distribution of the religious symbolic medium of exchange *sacredness/piety*, or in cases where entrepreneurs have not yet secured independence from the political elite, their projects may be orientated towards reconfiguring the political institution, political goals and decisions, and the production and distribution of *power*. At nearly any moment in time, there is variation in the sociocultural environment in the form of religious entrepreneurs offering new visions of reality; however, the selection processes are detached from variation and, therefore, these variations are not always forces of change. Below, we will consider three types of religious entrepreneurs. Because of space concerns, this list is not likely to be exhaustive, but rather an authoritative examination of the most prevalent types in history.

Religious Innovators. Religious innovators are defined as 'very gifted individuals who appear from time to time and introduce new religious culture' (Stark 2007: 44), and thus, like mutations in biological evolution, rarely appear or effect evolution. Innovators feel as if they '[are] raised up to do their work' (Rowley 1956: 26) and

'have the capacity to perceive revelations, whether this be an openness or sensitivity to real communications from the supernatural or consists of unusual creativity enabling them to create profound new religious truths' (Stark 2007: 50–51). Additionally, while entrepreneurs are *corporate units* and not individual actors, innovators are the fount of charismatic authority and genuine cultural innovation that generate groups, provide solidarity, and transfer charisma. That is, 'the test of any great charismatic leader lies not only in his ability to create a single event or great movement, but also in his ability to leave a continuous impact on an institutional structure – to transform any given institutional setting by infusing into it some of his charismatic vision' (Eisenstadt in Weber 1968: xxi). They are indeed rare in the sense that innovation is always risky, and religious virtuosity is a talent like any other talent: unevenly distributed across populations. Innovators are more likely to emerge, or at least be heard, in times of real or perceived crisis such as those predicated by Spencerian pressures. However, there are no hard and fast rules.

Charismatic Carriers. The most classic source of variation are what Weber (1964 [1922]) originally called 'carrier' groups, because they are the purveyors, propagators, and modifiers of cultural traits. Their institutional projects vary tremendously in content, but charismatic carriers are often devoted to critiques of the profane and the elevation of the sacred. Historically speaking, they have been the overwhelming source of religious autonomy whether they are the prophetic or philosophical circles in Israel and Greece respectively, or the Confucian literati in the Han and then Tang dynasties, or the Puritans who shaped New England politics and religion and eventually had a powerful hand in shaping the United States' historical trajectory.

Thus, we can conclude that while innovators are responsible for the initial burst of innovation, entrepreneurs do most of the work in developing the innovations in ways that selection may favor; their efforts are what facilitate diffusion, erect organizational structures, and concretize the innovator's abstractions. And while innovators are responsible for the initial impulse, it is in the crucible of small groups of intellectuals debating, interpreting and reinterpreting, and dealing with increasingly pragmatic problems that

religious innovations become real forces *sui generis*. Oftentimes, the innovator's death forces his closest confidants to come to terms with the mortality of a person touched by the supernatural, explain his death to others, and codify his teachings; in the process of doing so, rifts form over interpretation and competing entrepreneurs work very hard to defeat their competition, which leads to even more sensitive efforts to convert people (Eisenstadt 1986). Finally, the early schisms follow the innovator's death come to demarcate the dynamics of religious institutions like Islam or Buddha lead to fascinating twists and turns, that create complex dynamics as religious actors must not only deal with entrepreneurs from other domains like policy or economy, but also with rival factions claiming authenticity.

Theologians and Reformers. Some sources of variation emerge within already established institutional domains either in the guise of theologians committed to reinterpreting the texts in ways that do not challenge the dominant systems authority, values, or norms or as agents of reform who may indeed challenge the status quo. Outside of established and autonomous religious institutions, we would likely call these actors innovators; inside, though, the dynamics and structural conditions they must contend with are slightly different. And while history celebrates the famous notables such as Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine, the theologians and reformers often appear in bunches as powerful Durkheimian selection pressures challenge the religious systems' organizational or symbolic structure.

Perhaps, what distinguishes these actors from their innovator/carrier counterparts is the degree of self-reflexivity or second-order thinking attributed to their efforts (Elkana 1986). Theologians are committed to adaptive innovations meant to adjust parts of the religious institution to better integrate them into the greater religious space itself, while reformers innovate in ways meant to adjust the religious system to its sociocultural and biotic environment. They work out contradictions or reinterpret revelations; occasionally, they have revelations of their own, which drive them to change the symbolic system within the strictures provided. Theologians and reformers focus their intellectual efforts towards exploring existential questions, elucidating the relationship between

the supranatural and humans (as well as between fellow humans), and adapting to the various threats and changes pressing against the walls of their religious system in the *service of the religious symbolic system* they served and its survival.

In contrast to the other sources of variation, these 'endogenous' entrepreneurs often make gradual changes that require time to accumulate to the point where qualitative shifts in the religious institution occur. In some cases religious *virtuosi* (as individuals or groups) emerge in ways that speed internal changes (Weber 1964 [1922]: 162–163). But, these types of actors are the exception to the rule: more often than not the goal of these entrepreneurs is not to radically alter the religious institution but rather to highlight elements that make more sense given the current sociocultural context, deemphasize elements which are arcane or antiquated, and to add or 'read between the lines' in ways that make the institutional sphere more dynamic.

The possibility, however, that heterodoxies, new sects, or new denominations form because of the efforts of these entrepreneurs always remains a possibility. Martin Luther was a Catholic who rejected the overly complex nature of the Church and its propensity towards corruption because of this complexity; likewise, the Buddha and Mahavira were both operating within the theological strictures of the older Vedic religion when they branched off due to their emphasis on particular elements of the old doctrines and soteriological innovations, while their heterodoxic threat eventually caused the Brahmanic class to formalize their teachings. Thus, gradual changes can lead to massive tipping points or can lead to punctuated schisms with strange evolutionary outcomes.

Structural Conditions

There are some conditions beyond the control, to some extent, of potential entrepreneurs that speed up, slow down, or completely constrain the evolutionary process. Three dimensions, in particular, concern us here though the list may be longer: (1) the openness and willingness of a significant proportion of the population surrounding these entrepreneurs; (2) the existing political economy; and finally, (3) the efforts and interests of other cultural or cosmological entrepreneurs. In essence, these are conditions for selection,

and while there are likely more, these three seem most relevant to religious evolution.

A Willing and/or Able Population. The process of cultural transmission should not be taken for granted. Ultimately, the best efforts can be thwarted by a populace unmotivated to change their beliefs, unwilling to accept new symbolic or organizational innovations, and/or structurally unable to join because of extant socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, what constitutes a significant proportion of population at one time does not ring true for another. For instance, Joseph Smith converting a small number of people and Brigham Young moving this group to Utah territory where they could grow somewhat unmolested, and fortuitously finding themselves within a political economy that does a pretty decent job of not infringing on new religious movements was enough to reproduce his group. The same situation, however, would not work in other cases such as Pythagorean cult which moved to eastern Italy and was bereft of a significant enough human resource base.

In nearly every major world religion's nascent stages, the masses either failed to join, pay attention, or maintained the traditional religious ways in combination with the new ways. Archaeological evidence as well as Prophetic writings (and later the Deuteronomic writers) support the fact that the Israelite masses retained their polytheistic beliefs long after the onset of the evolution of Judaism (Albertz 1992). Another example may further illustrate. The Catholic Church, as it attempted to make use of the power vacuum left in the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire and impose itself on the Germanic tribes, had to contend with the tribes' unwillingness to part with local gods (Berman 1983). The solution was syncretism: the doctrine of the Church was strongly defended on theological grounds while the priests made allowances for local 'deities' or 'cultural heroes' to become patron saints (Chadwick 1967). In both cases, groups found ways to 'encourage' the diffusion of sociocultural variants.

While these two cases ultimately proved successful, we can demonstrate how this condition can lead to extinction as well. Akhenaten (*c.* 1353–1336 BCE) attempted to establish an Egyptian monotheism by first expelling the priests and then erecting new temples devoted solely to the sun god (Aten) in a new capital. His

strategy not only lacked popular appeal, but he kept hidden from the people the ritual elements and beliefs, as well as the tangible benefits that could be derived from monotheistic worship. Moreover, he did not work to create an entrepreneurial unit capable of developing and disseminating his innovations; thus, the religious system, and the group consisting of himself and a few others, were wiped away upon his death.

Political Economy. Evolutionary success or failure is also predicated on the existing sociopolitical and socioeconomic context. Where differentiated from other entrepreneurs, political entrepreneurs, and later economic entrepreneurs, monopolize the production and distribution of two key material and symbolic resources: power and money/wealth. Either one of these resources can be withheld or used as a weapon against religious actors in ways that prevent innovation, entrepreneurship, or competitive heterodoxy. Lenski (1966) noted that religions in early or simple agrarian societies had priests who lacked structural independence because of their tremendous dependence upon the political class for land, wealth, and protection (cf. Oppenheim 1975). One could argue these religious actors were more often politically-oriented than religiously in that their ultimate role was to ideologically maintain the stratification system and legitimate the king's claims (Postgate 1977). And while they facilitated communication with the supranatural, not only was the king often the highest priest – and in some cases, a deity – but their rituals and communications were highly secretive and of little benefit to the people aside from assuring a good harvest (Kramer 1963). That political entrepreneurs found in states monopolize the legitimate claim to violence means it can be used to suppress religious innovators mobility.

There are cases, though, where religious entrepreneurship led to reconfigurations of power-dependent relationships. The Deuteronomists were likely writing and redacting much of what we take for granted as the Pentateuch today long before they found political legitimacy. But, with King Josiah's reign their 'lost' texts found in a temple during a cleaning session sparked a reformation project which eventually canonized their innovations – for example, the Decalogue (Albertz 1992). The same type of situation happened under Ashoka's reign (304–232 BCE) in ancient India where

he promoted Buddhism as the state religion. Of course, political support can be withdrawn in devastating ways as well: the fall of the Mauryan empire was followed by the de-elevation of Buddhism and, eventually, its 'extinction' in India.

Economic actors, as Weber reminds us, also have important impact on religious evolution – albeit somewhat later in the historical tale. Weber points out that the economic actors have specific needs depending upon (a) their actual activities and (b) their social position relative to other types of actors. The Protestant Reformation was fueled, in part, by the rise of the merchant middle class in European cities. Weber also makes strong distinctions between the type of religious ideas and groups that warriors would be interested in, the aristocracy, the 'disprivileged', and other economic categories (Weber 1946: 276–301).

Cosmological Competitors. Other cultural entrepreneurs such as scientists, professors, and artists can and often do compete with religious entrepreneurs for the time, energy, and human resources necessary to be structurally and symbolically independent from other social units such that entrepreneurial activities can be undertaken and completed. Cultural entrepreneurs, as opposed to political or economic entrepreneurs, are more likely to innovate symbolically and organizationally around notions of truth, beauty, morality, and knowledge. Therefore, competing in the same resource niche as religious entrepreneurs implies competition for scarce resources. Moreover, 'cosmological' entrepreneurs may be backed by powerful political or economic entrepreneurs in ways that secure their legitimacy vis-à-vis other cosmological entrepreneurs, further weakening the possibility of religious entrepreneurship. Scientific entrepreneurs, for example, are not inherently opposed to religion, but some like evolutionary psychologist Richard Dawkins overtly struggle for scientific supremacy; where economic or political entrepreneurs – or a significant proportion of the masses – find scientific innovations more beneficial to their projects, religious entrepreneurs notably suffer.

In sum, the environment in which religious entrepreneurs act and provide potential variation has ramifications for religious evolution. The desire or willingness of the masses, the sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts, and the presence, strategies, and suc-

cesses of rival cosmological entrepreneurs all provide independent (but strongly related) conditions that activate or make dormant the selection process. What does not change is the fact that variation is relatively normal, even if innovation itself is rare. That many religious actors and groups have left little indelible of a mark on history attests to this, as do the numerous failed cults or sects which made left watermarks and little else. Moreover, archaeology, anthropology, and history have become storehouses of extinct religions, preserving some variation for potential future use in ways that the bones and DNA of extinct animals do for genetic engineers. Ultimately, religious entrepreneurs must find ways to become independent in relation to other elite social units. Once independent and embedded within accepted religious systems, they must further contend with tradition and the political structure of the religious hierocracy if they are to make internal adjustments and changes that have lasting impact. Changes are not always accepted by the masses and sometimes they take a long time to spread throughout the laity.

Final Thoughts
Religious evolution is defined as a qualitative transformation of the macro-institutional level in ways that (1) reconfigure physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space and, subsequently, (2) the cultural and structural mechanism of integration of corporate actors as well as conglomerations of corporate actors (*e.g.,* fields) and (3) the goals, means towards achieving goals, interests, strategies of interaction, norms, and ideologies employed by a significant proportion of actors. Evolution can be towards greater religious autonomy – or more discrete space, mechanisms of integration, and cultural tool kits – lesser autonomy, uneven development, and even the subordination of religious domains to other domains. Religious evolution may be rapid as witnessed in the process of schisms or periods of sectarianism, or it may be gradual as is often the case in enduring religious institutions that adapt and adjust slowly to environmental changes. Finally, religious evolution may lead to 'adaptivity' for an entire society as would seem to be the case in hunter-gatherer groups where a shared religious system reduces conflict, allows for greater cohesiveness, and protects against various exigencies (Bellah 2011; Durkheim 1912); other times, religious evo-

lution may also be maladaptive as it fosters religious economies that produce more confusion than ontological certainty, more division than solidarity. It may also be the case that religious evolution institutionalizes a highly stratified order that is 'adaptive' for a small segment of the elite, but in the long run, maladaptive for the society as it fosters untenable levels of resource appropriation and reduces integration (Eisenstadt 1963). Finally, religious evolution may lead to myriad resource niches, which are adaptive in the sense of allowing multiple religious groups to survive but also encouraging internal diversity to such a degree that competition creates more division than solidarity, opens up the real possibility of violent conflict, and may seep into struggles of political power (Brint and Abrutyn 2010).

Essentially, religious evolution is a process by which various sources of religious variation are selected upon in ways that either enhance, or weaken, or maintain a religious group's social position and thus its ability to survive. Variation is a constant, though selection pressures are not; put another way, one could travel throughout Los Angeles and find myriad sources of new religious traits, but without the pressures for selection coming from macro-level forces, the groups are just groups struggling for resources and with little chance of becoming entrepreneurs, or the forces of institutional reconfiguration. Entrepreneurship becomes a real possibility only in the event of real or perceived exigencies. If a group that enhances its own survivability can attract greater shares of human and material resources and/or is elevated and legitimated by the extant (typically political) elite, then the group can leverage its position by making its 'goods and services' indispensible and securing power-sharing agreements with the elite and power-dependence with other strata. These processes of enhancement are directly related to the processes of transmission. With structural and symbolic independence religious entrepreneurs can either carve out an autonomous religious domain for its activities, reconfigure existing physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space to expand the autonomy and, thus influence, of the religious domain, and/or can reconfigure the space of other domains and subordinate their logic and entrepreneurs to that of religion.

In the process of altering the macro-institutional space, or in the negative case where other elites encroach and alter the religious

domain's macro-configuration, qualitative transformations change the meso- and micro-levels of social reality. On the meso-level, intra-institutional structural or cultural changes effect the niches and the organizations within those niches, as new goals, organizational forms, and resource flows create new environments and problems for organizational adaptation; on the micro-level, the cultural toolkits (Swidler 1986) available to a significant proportion of actors is altered: for example, the goals and means towards achieving these goals – as well as their distribution across categories of individuals, the ideologies and their distribution, the norms that shape behavior, the values that shape evaluation of behavior, and various other cultural elements are meaningfully different.

CONCLUSION

The present article sought to reduce the confusion surrounding theories of religious evolution by precisely identifying the unit of evolution (the institution), the unit of adaptation and selection (the religious group and its organizational, symbolic, and technological traits), the mechanisms of selection (Spencerian and Durkheimian), the sources of variation (innovators, carrier groups, and theologians – for example, *religious entrepreneurs*), and, at the very least, a few conditions facilitating or constraining the evolutionary process (a willing population, the extant political/economic structure, and the prevalence of other cosmological entrepreneurs). Although this theory was induced from historical cases, in the future, a systematic examination of various cases would be prudent and useful to outline the contours of the theory, as well as adding and subtracting components.

NOTES

[1] While institutional domains *generally* exist *within* a society, it is plausible to imagine inter-societal institutions. World-systems theorists conceptualize the economy as an inter-societal institution, and one could plausibly ask whether members of western Christendom were once linked by an inter-societal religious institution. However, while all societies in either case share certain elements (capitalist and Catholic elements respectively), the configuration of any single institution in any given society will not look the same as another in another society. Some aspects will reflect inter-societal isomorphic forces and be similar across groups, but many aspects of an institution reflect the local historical and sociocultural conditions under which it was constructed and reconstructed. Thus,

in the face of power convergent forces, institutional domains will still exhibit variation reflective of the unique circumstances under which their entrepreneurs adapted and continue to adapt.

[2] It should be further noted that variation *within* a society, based on historical, sociocultural, and demographic variation across communities, adds a layer of complexity to our discussion. Thus, in the USA, policy, economy, and law are all relatively autonomous institutional domains, yet in a small town they may be experienced as highly overlapping. In part, the physical location of town hall, main street, and the oldest and most dominant church makes the boundaries blur for those townspeople. This fact does not alter the point that economy is a discrete sphere of social action, but rather people cognitively differentiate the local and national much as Luhmann (1984) conceptualized the widening gap between co-present interaction and society-wide systems.

[3] While beyond the scope of this paper, autonomy is never complete or total (Abrutyn 2009). One type of evolutionary pattern can be understood as the *loss of religious autonomy* and the 'colonization' of religious space by foreign institutional elements (Abrutyn and Turner 2011). Thus, religious action no longer is about *sacredness/piety*, but could become about *power* from political colonization or *money* via economic invasion. Likewise, evolution could be understood as the penetration of the domain and the differentiation of the internal space such that some niches are about *sacredness/piety* while others about *power*. The qualitative transformation of the institutional domain is the underlying factor across cases.

[4] Note, 'extinction' in socio-cultural evolution is used with caution. In some cases, such as a preliterate tribe being wiped out, extinction fits. However, just because the Mesopotamian priesthood and Sumerian language no longer exist, the ability to externally store cultural traits means that they could very well re-enter the 'culture pool'.

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