

Religion and Stratification

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Abstract

There is a strong and well-documented relationship between religion and social stratification. Social scientists have studied this connection for decades, and the field has recently gained considerable momentum. We survey recent theoretical approaches to studying religion and stratification. We then provide an overview of some of the most important empirical contributions of contemporary literature. We focus on religion's role in shaping family processes, education, work, income, wealth, immigration, and health. We end with a discussion of non-religious people. Our conclusion highlights gaps in the literature.

Keywords

1. Religion
2. Inequality
3. Stratification
4. Human capital
5. Education
6. Family processes
7. Income
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9. Occupation
10. Non-religious

Religion and Stratification

Religion plays an important role in creating and maintaining social and economic inequality, and this relationship attracted considerable attention in the early days of social science (Durkheim (1912) 1954; Sombart 1911; Weber [1905] 1930). In the 1960s, researchers revived questions about religion and stratification, but the research lost momentum when debates about socioeconomic status (SES) convergence between mainline Protestants (MP; members of a religiously liberal Protestant church. MPs typically do not accept the Bible literally and tend to be more socially liberal than Conservative Protestants) and Catholics came to dominate the literature and survey data at the time was unable to adjudicate competing claims (Glenn and Hyland 1967; Lenski 1961; Roof and McKinney 1987). The study of religion and inequality has again begun to thrive, and contemporary research is extremely rich both theoretically and empirically. In this essay, we survey recent theoretical approaches to studying religion and stratification. We then provide an overview of some of the most important empirical contributions of contemporary literature. We focus on religion's role in shaping family processes and education, work and income, and wealth (wealth is usually defined as net worth or total assets less total debts). We then address the important role that immigration and health play in these relationships. We end our essay with a discussion of processes unique to non-religious people. Our conclusion highlights gaps in the current literature.

Theoretical Approaches

Much of contemporary research on religion and stratification draws on the status attainment and life course traditions in the social sciences. Status attainment refers to the process by which individuals arrive at socioeconomic standing over their lives, and the status attainment

approach has become one of the most widely used theoretical perspectives in sociological research on social and economic well-being. The theoretical foundation of this approach is Blau and Duncan's (1967) seminal research on occupational attainment. This groundbreaking work demonstrated that achieved status (i.e., education and prior occupational prestige) was the most important determinant of attainment (i.e., occupational prestige) even controlling for ascribed status (i.e., parents' status). An extensive literature has subsequently extended the basic status attainment model to explain educational attainment, income, wealth and other measures of well-being usually as a function of family background and individual traits – like education – that are acquired over time (Campbell and Henretta 1980; Looker and Pineo 1983). Most recently, scholars of religion have shown that religious beliefs are an important part of the attainment process. Religious beliefs from both childhood and adulthood can affect the degree to which attainment of certain traits (e.g., education, family size) are important, and religion appears to be highly correlated with the likelihood that individuals attain these states (Keister 2012).

The life course perspective is another common approach used to understand the relationship between religion and inequality. Life course research represents an important theoretical approach used to understand changes that occur in individual lives over time, and it has been used effectively to understand how religion affects inequality. Life course ideas are frequently used to understand changes that occur in individual lives over time. Research in this tradition typically approaches the individual life course as a coherent entity with “multiple antecedent-consequent linkages that give it shape and substance (Kerckhoff 1993:3).” This starting point leads life course researchers to talk about trajectories or pathways over the lives of individuals and to mark these trajectories or pathways by the individuals' ages at key turning points (O'Rand 1996; Warren, Hauser, and Sheridan 2002). Life course research also typically

assumes that there are patterns or regularities across individual life courses that can be identified, explained, and used to understand other outcomes (Kerckhoff 1993). The notion of a life course captures the nuances and shape of the trajectory within which religion influences status.

Religious beliefs are dynamic and can either create or result from important turning points, and ideas from life course research have the potential to capture patterns in the resulting paths. In the following sections, we elaborate on how these ideas have come to shape the literature on religion and stratification.

Childhood Family Processes

Modern data from the United States provide powerful evidence that religious affiliation is correlated with various family processes and human capital. Childhood religion and childhood family traits, most notably family size, are strongly associated. For example, Conservative Protestants (CP; members of a religiously conservative Protestant church. CPs typically accept the Bible as the literal word of God and are more socially conservative than Mainline Protestants) and Mormons (LDS) tend to come from relatively large families. Today's adult white and Hispanic Roman Catholics also both tend to come from large families, although white Roman Catholic family sizes have become smaller in recent decades (D'Antonio, Hoge, and Davidson 2007; Keister 2007). In contrast, Mainline Protestants (MPs) and Jews tend to come from much smaller families. Family size is an important determinant of adult attainment and well-being: those from larger families tend to have lower adult education levels, incomes, and wealth because larger families have fewer resources, both material and non-material, to devote to children's intellectual development and education (Blake 1989; Downey 1995).

Adult Family: Marriage and Fertility

There are strong associations between religious affiliation and adult family processes, including marriage and fertility. Religious beliefs affect orientations toward the desirability of marriage, the age at which people should first marry, and related decisions about cohabitation (Hammond, Cole, and Beck 1993; Lehrer 2004b; Lehrer 2008; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992). Decisions about marriage and cohabitation, in turn, are closely linked to orientations and decisions regarding family, education, and work. In relatively conservative faiths, women are encouraged to focus on home and family activities, are encouraged to have large families, and are exposed to others who marry early and focus on home activities. As a result, early marriage may be perceived as both desirable and acceptable in these faiths (Lehrer 2004b). Women in conservative faiths also tend to have low education levels which limits job prospects and increases the appeal of early marriage (Hammond, Cole, and Beck 1993; Lehrer 2004b; Lehrer 2008; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992). In more liberal faiths, early marriage is uncommon, while cohabitation is relatively common, and educational and career attainment are encouraged, early marriage is less appealing. Religion also affects the choice of a spouse including whether the couple practices the same religion (homogamy) (Lehrer 1998; Sherkat 2004), marital stability and satisfaction (Lehrer 1996; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993), and the likelihood of divorce (Call and Heaton 1997; Lehrer 2008). The selection of a marriage partner is often motivated by homogamy (e.g., on education, background, and other traits), and religion is a critical dimension on which people select a partner. Religious homogamy is an important predictor of marital stability and satisfaction, and religious heterogamy can be destabilizing and lead to divorce (Lehrer 2004b; Lehrer 1998). Couples who share the same religious beliefs can share spiritual experiences, participate jointly in religious observances and activities both at home and in other settings, and develop overlapping social relations originating from religious groups. Religious

homogamy also increases the likelihood that couples are similar on a large number of demographic behaviors and processes, including education, childrearing, work patterns, and decisions about finances.

Religious beliefs – separate from the effect of religious homogamy – can also affect the likelihood of divorce. In faiths where divorce is explicitly prohibited, the social costs associated with marital dissolution are high and the decision to divorce can generate severe social and spiritual consequences. Catholicism, for instance, has a well-known prohibition against divorce. Catholic doctrine regards marriage as a sacrament, and any valid marriage between two baptized Catholics cannot be dissolved (D'Antonio, Hoge, and Davidson 2007; Tropman 2002). Until relatively recently, divorce was very rare among Catholics, adding social pressure to the spiritual pressure to remain married. Although divorce has increased in recent decades among Catholics, particularly among white Catholics in the US, the likelihood of divorce is still lower for Catholics than for those from other spiritual traditions with comparable educations, incomes, and other demographic traits (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Meyer 2001; D'Antonio, Hoge, and Davidson 2007).

Marriage and divorce are both consequential for stratification outcomes. Marriage increases earnings and wealth, while divorce has a negative impact on fortunes, particularly for women (Waite and Lehrer 2003; Keister 2005). Part of the increase in wealth reflects the tendency for married couples to combine their assets and to begin treating formerly separate assets as joint property (Keister 2005). Couples join savings and checking accounts and combine investments, they purchase homes rather than rent, and they otherwise consolidate finances into jointly-owned property. Marriage allows couples to pool risks (e.g., if one person is unemployed, the other can continue working), creates economies of scale (e.g., in housing costs), and allows

people to take advantage of a division of labor (Waite and Lehrer 2003). Marriage also creates common goals (e.g., children and children's educations, home improvements and upgrades, and retirement objectives) that encourage couples to save. Early marriage reduces attainment of other outcomes such as education, but early marriage also might increase the likelihood of early saving and homeownership.

Fertility behavior is an important part of the causal processes linking religion, education, and family processes with inequality. It is well-documented that religion influences orientations toward premarital sex and the onset of sexual activity, attitudes regarding birth control and the use of contraception, whether a person or couple has any children, the age at which people have their first child (i.e., age at first birth), family size, and even behaviors such as taking virginity and secondary abstinence pledges (Lehrer 1996; Lehrer 2004b; McQuillan 2004; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Conservative Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, and Catholics tend to have more traditional approaches to sexual activity and family formation. Some religious teachings and traditions include social and psychological rewards for having large families. In such pronatalist faiths, early fertility is approved and even encouraged both by formal teachings and rules and through norms, and having many children can provide considerable social status (Lehrer 2004b; McQuillan 2004). Mormon/LDS fertility rates have been notably high in the U.S. at least in part in response to such incentives (Lehrer 2004b; Lehrer 2008; Stark and Finke 2000). Catholicism also strongly discourages contraceptive use and abortion, and Catholics have larger families compared to Protestants in many nations, though in the US, white Catholics' family sizes declined since the 1970s, while family sizes remain large among Hispanic Catholics (Lehrer 2004b; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992). There is considerable variation in pronatalism across Protestant denominations, particularly in the US, and CPs groups have strong norms

encouraging large families when compared to MPs, Jews, and other religious groups.

Fertility behaviors have important effects on education, income, saving, and wealth. Having children early in life is particularly difficult because having a family can make it difficult to finish or complete schooling, makes career development more challenging, and can reduce initial saving and investing that can contribute to life-long asset appreciation (Keister 2005). Studies have found that the timing of family formation helps explain religious differences in educational attainment in the United States (Fitzgerald and Glass 2008). Faiths where early childbearing and large families are encouraged or simply common will generally wind up on the bottom of the stratification hierarchy.

Human Capital

There is an extensive literature documenting the important role that religion plays in human capital acquisition in the United States (Burdstein 2007; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008; Glass and Jacobs 2005; Lehrer 2004a; Sherkat and Darnell 1999), and education is one of the strongest predictors of income and wealth accumulation. Table 1 shows that there are notable patterns in educational attainment by religious group in the United States. Educational attainment is particularly high among those raised in Jewish families: both years of education and the percentage holding an advanced degree (beyond a bachelor's degree) are exceptionally high for Jews. Mainline Protestants also stand out in their educational attainment. White Catholics are similar to MPs in the number of years of education they attain, but they still lag behind in completing advanced degrees, a pattern that is consistent with knowing that education levels have only recently begun to increase for white Catholics. Table 1 also shows that CPs have relatively low educational attainment (Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Fitzgerald and Glass 2008; Glass and Jacobs 2005; Greeley and Hout 2006; Smith and Faris 2005). In contrast,

Mormon/LDS respondents have notably higher levels of education, a pattern that sets them apart from other conservative Protestant groups. Black Protestants (BP; members of a traditionally African American Protestant church), black Catholics, and Hispanic Catholics report the lowest levels of educational attainment, particularly completion of advanced degrees. Americans who hold identifications with “other religions” (mostly Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and Sikhs) also have high education levels.

There are at least three reasons for the effect of religion on education. Some researchers emphasize the importance of constraints such as family background in shaping educational decisions and outcomes (Sherkat and Darnell 1999). Others emphasize individual preferences (demand for education) and contextual or macrolevel conditions (supply of education) that determine options (Lehrer 1999; Lehrer 2004c; Lehrer 2004d). Still others focus on particular characteristics of religious groups to explain patterns in educational attainment and human capital acquisition. Conservative Protestants, for example, tend to be skeptical of the approaches taken in secular schools and universities that propagate secular humanist values and promote scientific investigation rather than acceptance of divine truths (Darnell and Sherkat 1997 ; Sherkat 2009; Sherkat and Darnell 1999; Sikkink 1999). These unique orientations contribute to low levels of education among CPs (Fitzgerald and Glass 2008; Glass and Jacobs 2005; Sherkat and Darnell 1999). In contrast, particular traits have also been cited as significant factors in producing high levels of educational attainment among Jews (Burstein 2007) and Mormons/LDS (Shaefer and Zellner 2007). Burstein (2007) points out that cultural emphasis on pursuits in this life are important contributors to educational success for Jews. Shaefer and Zellner (2007) discuss the role of educational efforts of the Latter-day Saints, including a system of seminaries and Brigham Young University, plays in producing well-educated, committed LDS adults.

(Table 1 about here)

Work, Income, and Occupations

Religious commitments also impact occupational attainment and labor force participation, and this has concomitant effect on personal and household incomes. One of the most pronounced relationships is between religious affiliation and gender differences in work behavior. There are important differences between men and women from different religious groups in patterns of working full-time jobs. Women from more conservative religious traditions are less likely to work full-time, while men from these groups are as likely as the general population to work full-time. In the US, White Catholic women from prior generations were more traditional and less likely than others to work full-time, but today's white Catholic women are nearly as likely as white Catholic men to work full time. Jewish women tend to work full time until their children are born, then they are more likely to stay at home while the children are young and return to full-time work after the first few years of the children's lives (Keister 2012).

Although researchers largely ignored the role that religion plays in shaping occupation and income, recent evidence shows that there are important connections. In the US CPs have the lowest prestige occupations, even relative to their low rates of education attainment. White Roman Catholics (RC) are moving into occupations that put them close to parity with MPs, a pattern that would have been unheard of in prior generations. At the other end of the spectrum, Jews and non-religious people have considerable occupational advantages (Sherkat 2012). Similarly, religion has important effects on income. Because religion is correlated with family background, adult family processes, human capital, work, and occupation, it is no surprise that many of the same patterns hold in the relationship between religion and income. CPs, Black Protestants, and Hispanic RCs tend to have relatively low income, are more likely than others to

have been raised in poverty (i.e., to have household income below the poverty line), are more likely to be in poverty as adults, are more likely to receive government transfer payments, and are more likely to experience extended unemployment spells (Keister 2012). In contrast, white RCs, MPs, and Jews have significant advantages on each of these dimensions (Keister 2012). These findings are consistent across studies (Lehrer 2010; Steen 1996). Research shows that the ranking above holds when various individual and family traits are controlled, and particularly the magnitude of the Jewish advantage (Lehrer 2010; Steen 1996).

Wealth: Assets and Debts

Wealth ownership is one of the most important components of social and economic stratification, and researchers have shown that wealth inequality is extreme in the United States. Wealth, or net worth, is total household assets less total liabilities. Wealth is relatively enduring—both within and across generations—and it is related in some way to most other measures of achievement. Wealth can enhance educational attainment, occupational opportunities, political power, and social influence. Religious groups with higher concentrations of wealth can solidify their advantages over other groups, and members of those groups will be better suited to deal with income interruptions, medical emergencies, and other crises such as war, accidents and natural disasters. Wealth can create more wealth when it is reinvested, and it can generate income in the form of interest or dividends. At high levels of wealth, the income it generates can make paid employment unnecessary. Yet even a small amount of savings can improve security, mitigate the effect of job loss and other financial shocks, and improve well-being dramatically.

Religious commitments help stratify societies in terms of wealth through their impact on the attainment processes described above, and religion appears to affect wealth ownership

directly. In the United States, the resulting patterns are quite pronounced. CPs, Black Protestants, and Hispanic RCs have very low levels of total net worth, real assets (e.g., tangible assets such as the home and other real estate), and financial assets (e.g., relatively liquid assets such as stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and bank accounts), and they, are very likely to have zero or negative net worth. In addition, members of these groups tend to accumulate assets relatively slowly across the entire life course, and they rarely enter high levels of the wealth distribution. In contrast, white RCs, MPs, and particular Jews are much more advantaged on each of these measures. Table 2 shows the extent of net worth differences by religious affiliation in the United States.

(Table 2 about here)

Immigration

Religion plays a particularly important, and theoretically interesting, role in the lives of immigrants, and religious stratification is very often a product of the variable fortunes of immigrants from different parts of the world. Social scientists in the United States have paid particular attention to religion's role in immigrant assimilation into the host country with an emphasis on post-1965 immigrants using religion to navigate the transition process and achieve economic mobility (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Hirschman 2004). Immigrant religious organizations may also be important because they can facilitate cultural assimilation by simultaneously functioning as cultural havens and as acculturation resource centers. These organizations can ease the shock of entry into a new culture by providing space for the expression of immigrant customs, language, and group solidarity. At the same time, they can facilitate incorporation by providing resources for adapting to the new culture and navigating the naturalization process (Warner and Wittner 1998). Similarly, religious participation can facilitate

economic incorporation. Immigrant congregations often offer classes that help immigrants develop language skills, acquire professional certifications, and obtain work permits. They also provide immigrants with opportunities to develop leadership skills, build self-confidence, and expand their social network; all of which can facilitate their search for employment (Connor 2011b; Foley and Hoge 2007). Although religion's role in facilitating incorporation can promote religious participation among first-generation immigrants, there is an ongoing debate regarding the long-term effects on immigrants. Commitments to religion may well foster segmentation rather than acculturation, and this may hinder attainment processes---perhaps especially for women in more patriarchal religious traditions.

Health

There is considerable evidence that religious involvement promotes both physical and mental health (Chatters 2000), which could, in turn, influence educational, occupational, and wealth attainment.. Scholars point to the social and psychological resources acquired through religious participation to explain this robust relationship, and they argue that religion affects health by operating through these resources. Being involved in a religious congregation can provide health-promoting social resources. Although social isolation can increase the risk of morbidity, people who attend religious services on a regular basis tend to have larger social networks and stronger network ties which reduces the risk of social isolation and increases the opportunity to receive social support (Connor 2011a; Ellison and George 1994). Despite the numerous health benefits associated with religion, religion can also undermine health. Some religious groups discourage seeking professional health care assistance, and some religious teachings proscribe specific medical procedures that are designed to promote health. Furthermore, religious belief can adversely affect health by producing serious psychological

strain among adherents who wrestle with religious doubts or guilt (Krause and Wulff 2004).

Non-religious People

The number of non-religious people has grown in most nations of the world, prompting scholars to look closely at this unique group who are often called “nones.” Between 1990 and 2010, the number of people claiming no religious preference in the United States increased from 7 percent to 18 percent (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007). In general, those who reject religious identification are more educated, and also more likely to hold professional occupations and to earn higher salaries, particularly when compared to members of conservative religious groups. In the US, those who reject religious identification are on-par with Mainline Protestants and white Catholics in terms of status attainment (Sherkat 2012). However, it is unclear whether non-identification is as strongly linked to stratification outcomes in nations where secularism is more common. Further, in highly religious nations with less meritocratic stratification systems, failure to identify as a religious person may have a negative impact on educational attainment, occupational attainment, and wealth accumulation. Finally, there is an important social scientific question about the relationship of the association---does non-identification or secularity promote attainment, or does education, income, and wealth motivate individuals to disavow religious commitments?

Conclusion

Renewed interest in religious stratification has led to several theoretical and methodological developments which have improved scholars’ understanding of how religion creates and maintains social inequality through its influence on dynamics such as family processes, human capital acquisition, occupational attainment, household income, wealth

accumulation, immigrant transition, and health-related behavior. Scholarship in this area could be advanced by combining social capital and social network theory to analyze how the content and structure of networks interact to with religious social ties to affect attainment. Further, measures of religiosity are often limited to broad categories of identification, while the impact of religious beliefs over the lifecourse is less well developed. This is particularly true for religious commitments and beliefs outside of the European Christian tradition. Most of the research on stratification and religion has used samples from the United States, and more comparative research is needed. A particularly exciting area of inquiry is the potential impact of religion on stratification for immigrants in Europe, where there has been a large influx of immigrants from Muslim nations. Until recently, widespread use of these approaches had been hindered by data limitations; however, as data sets have begun to include reliable social network information and comprehensive measures of religiosity along with attainment-related variables, scholars now have the opportunity to more thoroughly explore the complex relationship between religion and social stratification.

Table 1. Childhood Religion and Educational Attainment

	Years of education	Has advanced degree (%)
Protestant		
Conservative Protestant (CP)	13.2	10.7
Black Protestant (BP)	12.7	4.2
Mainline Protestant (MP)	14.3	19.5
Catholic	13.6	11.0
White	13.9	12.3
Hispanic	12.5	6.4
Black	13.4	4.0

Jewish	16.0	33.4
Other religion	14.9	25.2
No religious preference	12.7	9.5
Full sample	13.6	12.5

Notes: Source is Keister (2012). Total $n = 4,369$.

Table 2. Religion and Wealth: Median Net Worth

	Median net worth (\$)
Protestant	
Conservative Protestant (CP)	53,800
Black Protestant (BP)	8,000
Mainline Protestant (MP)	145,250
Catholic	141,500
White	333,219
Hispanic	187,188
Black	91,438
Jewish	392,500
Other religion	64,200
No Religious Preference	70,000
Full Sample	86,534

Notes: Source is Keister (2012). Total $n = 4,369$.

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