

# Diversified Power: The Rise of New Leaders in Bourdieu's Religious Field

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## Abstract

Using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the religious field, capital, and habitus as theoretical frameworks, this article highlights emerging sources of influence within contemporary religious fields, as well as factors leading to their rise within our current culture. Specifically, the pre-reflexive nature of the individual agent will be re-considered in light of mass migration, globalization, and digital technology. The increasing influence of lay and digital leaders will also be considered, and their impact on traditional forms of religious authority discussed. What becomes apparent through this analysis is that once privileged religious elites have less control over dispensing spiritual capital.

**Key Words:** Bourdieu, religious field, habitus, spiritual capital, social power, authority, religious elites

## Introduction

While religion has always undergone change, the vast majority of that change has occurred slowly through the process of historical evolution. Crisis was unusual, allowing most religious fields to enjoy stability and autonomy. However, this pattern has changed in recent history, causing new shifts in thinking about Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the religious field and those who hold power to dispense spiritual capital. This paper examines emerging forms of power within modern fields of religion. First, the concepts of religious field and religious habitus as developed by Bourdieu will be investigated. Then, the impact of modernity on these two ideas will be considered, and the implications discussed. Finally, recent research which explains some of the ways that authority and influence are becoming more diversified within the religious field will be reviewed.

## Bourdieu and Religion

Over his lifetime, Pierre Bourdieu developed a highly sophisticated understanding of social power. His well-developed ideas of field, habitus, and capital have profoundly impacted the study of religion in recent decades. To understand how modernity is changing the pursuit of power within religion, Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus must first be overviewed. Furthermore, it is helpful to understand how Bourdieu viewed the individual agent within the religious field. Doing so will offer a point of reference in considering the implications of emerging research on Bourdieu's theories.

### *The Religious Field*

According to Bourdieu, a field is the setting in which individual agents, along with their social positions, are located (1993). Each field is a “relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to the rules of the institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among its agents” (Hilgers and Mangez 2014:5). Each field also has a unique set of rules which govern the interactions between its agents. As a field gains its autonomy from other spheres, an elite develops which is responsible for protecting the autonomy of the field. Over time, Bourdieu maintains, these elites create a form of capital which they both control and dispense that maintains the autonomy of the sphere. In so doing, the relationship among those within the field is transformed. Thus, a field is comprised of elites such as priests and artists plus the laity. The elites are those who have mastery over the capital and the right to dispense it. The laity are those who legitimize this capital and its distribution by acknowledging both that they do not have it and that they want it.

For Bourdieu, there are two primary reasons for the existence of a religious field. First, religion seeks to legitimize social order. Second, religion justifies the place of people within that social order (1971). In other words, the religious field aims to teach a particular form of morality and conformity within society which can only be understood and taught correctly by the priest (Grusendorf 2016). In many ways then, Bourdieu's original conception of the religious field was one which viewed religion in general and the church in particular as a dominating institution.

### *Religious Habitus*

Fundamentally, Bourdieu argued that habitus is one's “embodied history” lived out (1990:56). As such it includes the historical sum of the thoughts and actions of an individual being practiced in the present. Habitus may be further nuanced by understanding it as one's embodied history lived out within society. It informs “a sense of one's place and a sense of the other's place in the world” (Holt-Jensen 2009:170). It is made up of those principles which

generate and organize one's practices and representations in the world (Hillier and Rooksby 2005). Margolis (1999) suggests imagining an actor on a stage as a way of visualizing Bourdieu's conception of habitus. In this way, habitus may be understood as a certain 'way of life.' Different stages will have different actors playing different parts. Rey (2007) discusses how field and habitus interact. He states that "*various* fields shape the habitus throughout the course of its individual and social development, and the habitus, in turn, renders a field 'meaningful' through its developmental influence on an agent's appreciation and consumption of capital" (2007:46).

Bourdieu posits that what is unique about religious habitus is that it is the foundation of an agent's worldview. He states that religious habitus is the disposition of an agent to "act and think in conformity with the principles of a systematic view of the world and human existence" (1987:126). As such it is religious habitus which justifies an agent's existence and social position within the world.

#### *Bourdieu and the Pre-reflexive Agent*

Bourdieu suggests that, from the agent's perspective, one's habitus is "spontaneity without consciousness or will" (1990:56). However, upon deeper inspection, it is clear that Bourdieu is not arguing that the choices one makes are free. Rather, Bourdieu makes two points that lead to a different conclusion. First, he contends that what is unconscious is "never anything other than the forgetting of history" (1977:79). Second, he claims that logic obliges a commonsense world. A world which displays a consensus of meaning can only be the result of a society where there is an orchestration of habitus. As such, Bourdieu asserts that habitus is the practice of the sum of an individual's thoughts and actions which have been reinforced within and by society in general and a field specifically. It is this "homogeneity of habitus...which causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable...*yet also* taken for granted" (1977:80). Bourdieu, it seems, consents to the idea that individuals are "generally informed agents" (Grusendorf 2016) who react rather than respond to the field in which they find themselves.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu himself is no strict determinist. Instead, Bourdieu argues that individual agents experience tension within their particular field as a result of ever-developing social structures. Reay (2004) agrees, maintaining that the agent's field creates both the norms and the tensions they will experience in forming and maintaining their habitus, because the field is where an agent interacts with others. Costa and Murphy also concur, stating that "habitus is more than accumulated experience, it is a complex social process in which the individual and the collective are ever structuring dispositions that develop through practice to justify individuals' perspectives, values, actions and social positions" (2015:4).

What exactly is the tension experienced by agents in the exercise of their habitus? Furthermore, what does this tension accomplish in the life of the agent? Bourdieu saw this

tension as the boundaries of freedom and constraint within a field. Using gaming language, he stated that “nothing is freer or more constrained at the same time than the action of the good player. He manages quite naturally to be at the place where the ball will come down as if the ball controlled him. Yet at the same time, he controls the ball” (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986:113). The tension is the boundedness of the agent's freedom in the context of their field. Yes they are free to act, yet at the same time they are not wholly free to do as they will. This only becomes problematic if, as Bourdieu suggests, “the fish feels the weight of the water in the ocean...otherwise the fish takes the ocean for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:127). In other words, while the tension between an agent's freedom and the boundaries of their field is always present, an agent only becomes aware of them when the agent steps into a new field, or experiences a significant disjuncture within their field. These changes and disjunctures can generate change and produce nuanced understandings of power (Reay 2004; McNay 2000).

Bourdieu concluded that an agent's actions, while not determined, are pre-reflexive, in that an agent acts without taking time to consciously evaluate their situation. As such, Bourdieu felt that an agent's actions were constrained by the limits of the field. Change is possible of course, but even the transformation of an agent's habitus is often pre-reflexive. Furthermore, changes to religious habitus are not frequent; they are exceptions, not the norm (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This, it can be argued, is true in large part because Bourdieu saw class and habitus as being essential to each other's existence. The agent's habitus “is always and inevitably a specifically classed habitus, which predisposes her or him to perceive, appreciate and act in ways reflective of the material conditions of the class existence that contribute to her or his habitus' formation” (Rey 2007:50). As Mellor and Shilling (2014) note, this view is not without merit, as, historically, both the field and habitus of religion have reinforced divisions and inequalities within society.

### *Of Crisis and Historical Evolution*

Bourdieu argued that most changes within a field were the result of either one of two realities. The first, and far less frequent, is crisis, which has the possibility of creating reflexive change. The second, and far more common, is historical evolution, which produces pre-reflexive change. In addressing the subject of historical evolution, Bourdieu argued late in his career that:

What today presents itself as self-evident, established, settled once and for all, beyond discussion, has not always been so and only gradually imposed itself as such. It is historical evolution which tends to abolish history, in particular by relegating to the past, to the unconscious, all the ‘lateral possibles’ which have been excluded; it thus comes to be forgotten that the ‘natural attitude’ that the phenomenologists refer to, that is, the primary experience of the world as self-evident, is a *socially constructed relationship*, as are the perceptual schemes that make it possible. (1997:174)

What Bourdieu saw was an internally-perpetuated form of dominance that mainly went uncontested because the “dominant” were in complete control. Within the field, those who are dominant are able to construct a common, historical transcendental (through controlling social classifications such as age, sex, age, ‘competence’, the ordering of the social calendar, and social rites of passage) which, “after a long process of incorporation, becomes immanent to all its ‘subjects’” (1997:175). In this way, historical evolution generally produces pre-reflexive agents who are more likely to reinforce the social status quo than they are to resist it.

It is only in the far less common instance of crisis that an agent might experience a reflexive awakening, thereby increasing the likelihood of active change. In this setting, a crisis may be understood as an experience which leads an agent to question their personal beliefs about reality, and how society has been organized in light of that reality. Bourdieu referred to this belief as *doxa*, and noted that those with power seek to defend the integrity of *doxa*, whereas those without power seek to push against it (Bourdieu 1977).

Both historical evolution and crisis help to explain changes experienced within the various fields of religion throughout the centuries. The Protestant Reformation, for instance, serves as an excellent example of a crisis which awakened many to the need for reflexive change. It also serves as a case study in how those in power attempted to defend the integrity of the *doxa* of the Catholic Church and how those out of power (Protestants) tried to push against it. Crises of this magnitude, which create significant and reflexive change, have not been frequent occurrences in world history.

However, is the religious field still as stable as it was when Bourdieu first developed the concept? Furthermore, is the agent's habitus still pre-reflexive? Mellor and Shilling (2014) argue that a growing number of scholars would now answer with a resounding “no.” Increasingly, various scholars suggest the possibility of a new way of thinking about religious habitus (see Archer 2003; 2007; 2010; Elias 2000). In their opinion, it is not so much that Bourdieu was wrong in his conclusions about the pre-reflexive nature of religious habitus. Instead, the stability of historical evolution has so deteriorated due to certain modernistic advancements that Bourdieu’s conclusions concerning the pre-reflexive nature of religious habitus should be modified.

## Recent Impact on Field, Habitus, and Agency

The world of the third millennium is vastly different than the days in which Bourdieu developed his concepts of religious field and habitus, making his views now slightly dated. The ideas of field and habitus still have much to offer, however the pre-reflexive nature of habitus is now being questioned. “The pace of social change, the proliferation of new media and the quantities of information that circulate globally appear to militate against the maintenance of

firmly routinized disposition to action and thought” (Mellor and Shilling 2014:137). It seems that globalization and technology have each contributed to the decline of societal stability and hierarchical forms of religious power. What is more, the pace at which these changes are occurring is affecting the natural, historical evolution of the religious field. Today, change is happening at such a rapid pace that heightened pace itself is causing agents to make conscious rather than pre-reflexive decisions within the field of religion.

### *The Impact of Mobility and Mass Migration*

In recent history, the world has seen an increase in both mobility and mass migration (Castles, de Hass and Miller 2013). This has undermined the stability of religious fields by creating increasingly drastic contextual breaks in the life of the agent (Archer 2010). It has also led to a blurring of the religious field with other fields such as politics (Robertson 2006). This ever-increasing mobility within society has contributed to a general mistrust in local religious authority. Several scholars have noted how religious authority is increasingly contested today (Masqood 2014; Chaves 1994; Edgell 2012). This upturn, they argue, “increases those situations where individuals have to *choose* from where to receive religious guidance” (Mellor and Shilling 2014:138-139). This research strikes at the assumption that the actions of the agent are pre-reflexive. Instead, there seems to be mounting evidence that contemporary action is increasingly reflexive rather than pre-reflexive (Adams & Raisborough 2008; Elder-Vass 2007).

### *The Impact of Technology and Information*

Access to information has increased dramatically in the past generation due to rapid advances in digital technology. Previously in history, the church and her agents were the sole producers and protectors of spiritual capital. Access to sacred texts, for example, was often limited to those who could understand arcane languages, and there was very little impetus among religious elites to see this change. Some changes throughout history have granted increasing levels of access to the laity, most notably the invention of the printing press. However, only recently has access to sources of spiritual capital become a reality for the laity. In many ways, the earlier limitations kept the status quo intact even as the laity grew in other fields. Even as the common person became more affluent, educated, and mobile, the sacred texts of religion lay out of their reach.

Bourdieu’s comments about politics have equal application to the field of religion.

[T]he idea that the *laity* possess the to the same degree the mastery of the instruments of *religious* production, which are necessary in order to identify a *religious* question as such, to understand it and to respond to it in accordance with their interests, giving an answer that is congruent with the whole set of choices generated from *religious* principles adjusted to those interests is a presupposition. (1997:69)

Not only is this, in his view, a presupposition, but it is also a dangerous one. For to "grant *religion* to all, but in a purely formal way, is to exclude from it, under the appearance of religiosity, all those who are deprived of the means of realizing it" (1997:65). Without open access to the sources of spiritual capital, the ordinary person would never truly be able to access religion apart from religious elites. Thus, an invitation to partake of spiritual capital on one's own was an empty invitation which only served to reinforce that status quo. But technology, particularly the internet and the World Wide Web, has now created open access to the sources of spiritual capital which, in turn, have allowed for the emergence of new voices of religious leadership.

Evidently, information and communication technology has now opened the door for any self-proclaimed religious person to claim authority over the laity (Turner 2007; Herbert 2011). While a 'religious field' has never been solely a physical space, the church building has for centuries served as an active visual presence reinforcing for society the concept of a religious field. That technology has created a church without walls only increases the complexity of the religious field, thereby making religious habitus more complicated as well. "Recent issues regarding the proliferation and credibility of religious authority have, moreover, moved centre stage at a time when political changes, new technologies and modes of intervening in and extending human life and reproductive capacities have flourished" (Miller and Shilling 2014:151). The increase of voices clamoring for authority within the religious field has given rise to a more reflexive approach to accepting and developing the religious habitus. Agents must now choose between competing voices of supposedly religious elites.

Globalization and technology seem to be two hands that are turning the flywheel of change. Unlike the days when Bourdieu conceived his ideas, agents do not live in a predominantly stable and coherent world. Instead, they live in a world of constant change, filled with a myriad of competing voices peddling their religious wares to the migrating masses. These changes are both crowding and diversifying the group of those who claim to be elites within the field of religion. Gone are the days where priests held complete control over the masses. In this new and emerging world, there are now new voices which are growing in their ability to influence those who live in a religious field and who are forming religious habitus therein.

### **Emerging Voices in Today's Religious Fields**

Two significant sources of influence are altering modern fields of religion. What remains to be seen is how current religious elites will react to the emergence of these new forms of influence. The first form of influence encroaching on religious elites are leaders from within the religious laity. These are non-professional persons who are growing in their ability to exert influence over other laity. The second form of influence is the relational influence exerted

through social networking sites. These two influences are displaying an ever-increasing ability to affect how spiritual capital is distributed today.

### *The Increasing Influence of Lay Leaders*

While it has employed various methods and tactics throughout history to both gain and keep its members, the church has always been primarily a voluntary organization. Thus, while the religious elites, that is, the clergy, have always led it, lay leaders have also always been an influencing force within religion as well. Throughout the generations, lay leaders have exercised varying levels of influence within religion. How much influence do lay leaders have in religion today? Furthermore, what are the contributing factors that may account for their influence?

The sheer number of lay leaders involved in religion is higher today than in most other previous generations. Miller (2006) observed that in 1965 there were 180,000 religious sisters within the US Catholic Church. By 2006 that number had dropped to less than 75,000. This decline has had significant implications for Catholic education, where, as of 2006, the professional staff of Catholic schools in the US was comprised of less than 4% of these religious sisters. A significant implication of this change is that there has been a dramatic shift in those who hold a position that has been historically understood to be one reserved for the religious elites. The vast majority of Catholic educators are now recruited from the laity, not the elites, and this new reality is not limited to the US.

Grace (2010) noted a similar shift among Catholic educators in the UK. She observed that, while many Catholic educators in the UK come from the laity and not the elite, the current generation of lay leaders still has a sincere appreciation for and understanding of the unique spiritual capital dispensed by Catholicism. Grace suggests that this can be traced back to the fact that many within her sample group came from deeply religious homes and were brought up with a Catholic education (Grace 2010:24). Grace offers an excellent summary of the implications of these changes.

“What is happening to Catholic school education internationally now is that with the decline in the numbers of consecrated persons as leaders and teachers in the schools, the spiritual capital of these religions has been passed on to a first generation of lay leaders and teachers who have experienced the formative influence of their charisms...The reconstitution of spiritual capital in Catholic education has therefore, in many locations, completed (for better or worse) its first stage transmission process. (2010:124)

In essence, the laity is gaining the upper hand in holding and dispensing spiritual capital within Catholic education.

Furthermore, this phenomenon is not only limited to the Catholic church. The increasing influence of the laity is seen in American Protestant churches as well. Over the past fifty years,



there has been a dramatic increase in the number of mega-churches in the US (Bird and Thumma 2011; Thumma 2001; Thumma and Bird 2009; 2015; Thumma, Travis, and Bird 2005). With the increase of large churches came an increase in the complexity required to lead these churches. One of the fundamental ways that many of these churches have adapted to both growth and complexity is through the use of small groups as a core organizational structure (Thumma and Travis 2007; Wuthnow 1994). Small groups have two significant implications relevant here. First, they increase the distance that exists between the general laity and religious elites. This is based on the fact that the vast majority of small groups are led by laity and not by religious professionals of the church. Second, small groups increase the influence of the laity as those who dispense spiritual capital within the religious field (Whitehead and Stroope 2015).

The growing influence of lay leaders within the church, small group leaders or otherwise, has become a focus for scholars in recent years. Bean and Martinez (2015) argue that “because American congregations have a constituency-based leadership structure, lay leaders arguably have greater power to shape the stereotypical attributes at the core of the group identity” (2015:136). The direct focus of their research relates to the arena of politics specifically, but their comments ring true to topics beyond the ballot box. “Pastors are not the only important religious leaders who shape the...attitudes of church members” (2015:134). Specifically, Bean and Martinez suggest three key ways that lay leaders influence those within the religious field. First, lay leaders justify for others certain actions and attitudes through their behaviors. These actions may reinforce or erode the teachings of the clergy within a given church setting. Second, lay leaders function as prototypes for what it means to a “good” religious person. Third, lay leaders function as those who “authenticate” or in other words normalize what it means to be religious in a given context.

Overall, the number of religious professionals engaged in full-time vocational ministry, at least in the US, is clearly declining. In some instances, this is the result of a slow labor market for religious professionals, causing professionally trained clergy to look for alternative forms of work (Nesbitt 2007). In other instances, this is due to a declining number of individuals responding to the call to join other religious elites in the first place (Nesbitt 2007). This waning of the religious elites has been met with a rise in the influence of the lay leader. The long-term impact of such a surge remains to be seen.

### *The Increasing Influence of Digital Leaders*

Historically, organized religion has recognized the importance of controlling information as a means of retaining power. In the past several decades, the ability to manage information has been significantly impacted by digital information and communication technology. So how has technology in general and social networking in particular changed the locus of religious influence within a modern culture? Campbell (2007) suggests that technology has displaced the

religious elites as central figures in the discussion of theological interpretation. This can be seen in the increase of religious laity interpreting, defending, and advancing their own religious beliefs apart from the direct sanction of a priest, imam, or pastor (Abdel-Fadil 2017; McCully 2014; Zaki 2017). Technology has given birth to digital leaders.

Changes in communication are nothing new; the church has had to deal with them before. However, technology presents a unique challenge to the religious elites. The increased connectivity of individuals via technology is changing the rules of the religious field. It is creating new and necessary credentials from which religious authority is derived. As Hjarvard suggests, “authority is reflected by the ability to command an audience” rather than through former credentials such as education or ordination (2016:14). Such changes are shifting the priestly role of religious elites away from that of administrators to that of referees, because more and more of the religious laity feel empowered to make their own interpretive conclusions (McCully 2014). This implies that the hold religious elites once had on spiritual capital is eroding and being replaced with the voices of more influential digital leaders.

One example of the emerging impact technology is having on the power dynamic within religion can be seen in the research of McClure (2016). His analysis indicated that, among young adults, those who use social network sites are more likely to report that it is acceptable for someone to pick and choose which religious beliefs they adopt, regardless of what their religious tradition teaches. Further, his research also indicated that, among young adults, those who use social network sites are also more likely to report that it is acceptable for a member of their religious tradition to practice other religions. His findings led McClure to suggest that, “the Facebook effect on religion is that all spiritual options become commodities and resources which individuals can tailor to meet their individual needs” (2016:831). Increasingly, social networking sites are becoming arenas where spiritual capital is bartered without the aid of the spiritual elites.

Technology is sapping influence away from religious elites. As McCully put it, “religious leaders are granted an organic form of respect...but *they* are not viewed as exceptional members in the conversation” (2014:96). Of course, this does not mean that religious elites are unable to adapt. In fact, many religious leaders have modified and become digital leaders themselves, leading some to suggest that new technologies in the digital age create almost equal opportunities to strengthen or weaken traditional sources of religious authority (Cheong 2012). It is also true that, while research is still emerging as to the prolonged effect technology is having on the religious elites, technology is forcing the religious elites to adapt in order to retain their authority. The field of religion is becoming more crowded with those exerting influence.

## Conclusions

Bourdieu's conception of how power is exercised and protected still provides scholars with a helpful paradigm with which to understand the world around them. However, what was once envisioned as a somewhat stable, ingrained social reality has, in the past decades, experienced tectonic shifts. In an ironic twist, these changes haven't challenged Bourdieu's theories themselves. Rather, these changes have altered the fields of which Bourdieu theorized. Mass migration, ready access to information, globalization, and technology have each had such a profound impact on our society that the pre-reflexive nature of human agents assumed in Bourdieu's conceptualizations is quickly disappearing. The fish are feeling the weight of the water in which they swim!

This awakening has led to a new and emerging landscape within religious fields. Increasingly, the laity are exerting greater ability to hold, keep, and even dispense spiritual capital without the direct sanction of religious elites. Digital leaders are also eroding the once stable and privileged position held by religious elites to be the keepers of spiritual capital. Social networking sites are increasing the number of relationships individuals have with others, as well as changing the pre-requisites necessary to exert religious authority. With stability gone, new voices outside the traditional roles held by religious elites such as pastor, priest, and imam, are emerging within religion, and these voices are becoming increasingly influential. The field of religion is experiencing both an increase in and a diversification of the types of agents who can win, exercise, and hold onto power.

What does this entail for the field of religion and for those who have historically held power within the field? Increasingly, it means that they will need to adapt their habits to retain religious authority. If the rules of the game are changing, then as players, religious elites must learn to play the game differently. Notably, religious elites will need to learn new ways of connecting with laity via technology and social networking sites to stay connected. Furthermore, they will need to rely increasingly on a changing set of credentials to gain and retain authority over a populace which frequently connects via social networking sites. These religious elites will also need to develop stronger relationships with lay leaders within their churches and temples and with digital leaders online to ensure continuity of both message and authority is maintained. While complete change cannot just be assumed – the resolve of those who hold power to retain their power must never be underestimated – notice must be taken of the fact that authority within the field of religion is, at the very least, becoming more diversified.

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