Religious Marketing Revisited:

What Recent Scholarship on Calvinist Evangelical Leaders Tells Us

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Abstract

In the social sciences, religious marketing, branding, and entrepreneurship are closely associated with the religious economies paradigm, which suffers multiple troubles. This article argues that the agentic side of religious organizations can be helpfully reformulated as strategic action within religious institutional fields—not markets. Traditional religious leaders can and do skillfully work for their own success in the modern world. To illustrate this point, the article draws from recent work in sociology on contemporary Calvinists in the United States—namely, William McMillan's Yale dissertation *Cosmopolitan Calvinists* and Brad Vermurlen's *Reformed Resurgence*. The article concludes with a reiteration of its distinct contribution to studies of religion as well as addresses the question of generalizability by giving non-exhaustive examples of religious groups other than present-day Calvinists which can be understood vis-à-vis intentional strategic actions. This new thesis aligns well with recent scholarship on the "post-secular" character of contemporary societies.

Keywords: Clergy/Ministers/Religious Professionals, Strategic action, Field theory, Post-secular, Conservative Protestantism, Marketing

Concurrent with the rise to dominance of seeker-sensitive megachurches in American Protestantism (Ellingson 2009), a burgeoning body of literature began to develop focusing on the marketing and managerial side of contemporary religious life (e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1988). By 1993, sociologists wrote of a "new paradigm" for the social scientific study of religion, an explanatory paradigm in which pluralistic religious settings *fostered* religious participation and vitality rather than undermined it (Warner 1993), largely through the dynamics of unregulated religious markets (Stark and McCann 1993).[1] This new

[1] Smith et al.'s (1998) subcultural identity theory also argued pluralism fosters religious vitality but did not depend on economistic or market-based theorizing.

paradigm, undergirded by a rational choice theory of human action, was most prominently spelled out in Stark and Finke's (2000) *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Today, any mention of religious marketing, management, or branding immediately and understandably calls to mind this milestone framework in the sociology of religion.

It is time for an update. Developments in both sociology of religion and sociological theory (broadly conceived) since the early 2000s make the time ripe for reconsidering the marketing, management, and branding aspects of contemporary religion. Major review articles in sociology of religion point to the importance of ecological contexts, institutional fields, and religious leadership (Smith 2008; Edgell 2012). More broadly (i.e., outside the subfield of religion), works on institutional and organizational fields (e.g., Scott [1995] 2014; Greenwood et al. 2017), social skill and strategic action within fields (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2012), institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2012; Yu 2015), and the resonance of cultural messages (McDonnell et al. 2017) together point the way to a new vision of religious marketing, management, and branding that does not hinge on the economistic, supply-and-demand view which typically springs to mind when sociologists of religion hear the word "marketing."

Toward that end, this article highlights an aspect of religion remarkably absent from sociological treatments of religion: *the agentic capacity of religious leaders to gain a hearing among target audiences for their organizations, movements, and messages by use of strategic positioning and cultural savvy*. Such cultural work can be as straightforward as making reasoned arguments that (some, not all) lay people find convincing, but it also includes less overtly verbal work such as how a pastor presents himself publicly, regional contextualization, generating "buzz," framing processes, aesthetic choices, and countless other factors. Social analysts might have an intuitive sense that religious leaders engage in such activities, but these acts, as contributors to religious strength, remain all but ignored in social scientific research on religion. While such efforts could in principle be seen as calculated branding within an unregulated religious market, the thrust of sociological theory over the last twenty years suggests we see this cultural work instead as *strategic action within religious institutional fields*.

To illustrate this point, after an articulation of theoretical considerations, this article draws from recent work in sociology on contemporary Calvinists in the United States—namely, William McMillan's Yale dissertation *Cosmopolitan Calvinists* (2018) and Brad Vermurlen's book *Reformed Resurgence* (2020). Simply highlighting the main arguments of these two monographs on American Calvinistic clergy, both of which used field theory to explain religious success, demonstrates how religious marketing, management, and branding can be fruitfully recast as agentic capacity of religious leaders to gain a hearing among target audiences for their

organizations, movements, and messages by use of strategic positioning and cultural savvy; in short, as strategic action within religious institutional fields.[2]

The payoff has the potential to be a significant new perspective in the sociology of religion, particularly as the subfield addresses the continuing tensions between secularism, secularization, and religious strength in the modern Western world (e.g., Smith et al. 1998; Bruce 2011; Voas and Chaves 2016; Schnabel and Bock 2017; Voas and Chaves 2018; Schnabel and Bock 2018). This field-theoretic, cultural approach to religious "marketing" operates with all the requisite complexity of open systems and yet can be summarized succinctly, as Vermurlen (2020:2, 21) puts it, as the recognition that, given certain cultural and structural conditions, late-modern religious success still can be "fought for and won." The article concludes with a reiteration of its distinct contribution to studies of religion as well as addresses the question of generalizability by giving non-exhaustive examples of religious groups other than present-day Calvinists which can be understood vis-à-vis intentional strategic actions.

Literature and Theoretical Development

The Religious Economies Paradigm and Its Discontents

Providing an alternative to the received orthodoxy that the religious pluralism of the modern world poses debilitating challenges for religion (Cox [1965] 2013; Berger 1967), sociologists and economists beginning in the mid-1980s argued that religious belief and practice can thrive precisely *because of* religious pluralism (e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1988). The reasoning rested on the idea that religious "products" function much like any other commercial product, and specifically that consumer activity increases in the context of greater competition in an unregulated, open market (Finke and Stark [1992] 2005).

Despite its evident good sense, the religious economies paradigm has garnered at best inconclusive empirical support over the last quarter-century. An early review of the universe of existing research (26 articles including 193 analyses) concluded: "The empirical evidence does not support the claim that religious pluralism is positively associated with religious participation in any general sense" (Chaves and Gorski 2001:261).

The next year, Voas, Crockett, and Olson (2002)—drawing out earlier related observations (Olson 1999; Chaves and Gorski 2001)—identified a logical/statistical problem besetting almost all the empirical work up to that point. The problem revealed that any correlations between religious pluralism/diversity and religious participation (whether positive

[2] Thanks to William McMillan for granting permission to summarize his unpublished dissertation.

or negative) were likely a statistical artifact and not a reflection of a real causal influence. Their observation functionally invalidated most of the existing empirical research on religious markets, leading the authors to conclude that "currently there is no compelling evidence that religious pluralism has any effect on religious participation" (Voas et al. 2002:212). As Hill and Olson (2009) highlighted, subsequent studies either repeated this statistical problem or produced mixed or disconfirming results (Montgomery 2003; Koçak and Carroll 2008).

Another issue: One of the main hypothesized dynamics of religious markets is that religious bodies in contexts of greater pluralism will put in more effort and work more creatively to attract adherents and stir commitment (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2003). However, using U.S. survey data, Hill and Olson (2009) show that religious organizations with small market share or in contexts of greater competition (measured in a variety of ways) in fact do not try harder in outreach efforts, services for current adherents, or clergy working hours. Thus, one of the two main proposed mechanisms of the religious economies framework (the other being what Hill and Olson name the "demand-matching mechanism") garners no empirical support in the only published research testing its operation.

More broadly, the dominant, supply-side approach to religious marketing adopts wholesale a strict market logic—"an economistic theoretical ontology" (Petzke 2019:324)—that has met criticism for its lack of applicability to religion, a domain of life typically viewed as involving not just supply and demand, "winners and losers," or instrumental rationality but also complex influences of identities, emotions, boundaries, commitment, and morality. The religious economies approach to religious markets, employing rational choice theory, presumes that religious actors are cost-benefit calculating utility-maximizers. Multiple sociologists have argued that an approach to religious organizations and religious adherence animated by rational choice theory is inevitably a reductionistic approach, one which cannot do justice to the full texture and meaning of the religious sphere (Ammerman 1997; Bruce 1999; Archer and Tritter 2000; Bryant 2000; Jerolmack and Porpora 2004).

A final problem for the religious economies paradigm—linked to its positivist and rational choice theoretic underpinnings—is its ambitions to provide a theory of religious markets and marketing that is universally applicable. The intent was never to deliver ideographic explanations or portraits of religious markets that take into consideration sociocultural nuances, national contexts, or historical particularity; the goal instead was to unearth nomological covering laws concerning the constant association between religious pluralism and religious participation—general linear patterns which would apply to all cases and populations. The market-model sought to overturn classical secularization theory while running with the assumption that *either* one theory *or* the other would ultimately be vindicated by the empirical evidence. That presupposition turned out not to capture the complexity of the

actual social world (for this critique, see Chaves and Gorski 2001:274-279; Smith 2008:1577-1581).

All told, while certain of its proposed mechanisms may be true in some contexts under certain conditions, the religious economies framework has been less than a homerun. Nevertheless, it remains clear that many religious organizations do engage in marketing, branding, strategic planning, and competition. So how might these agentic aspects of religion be understood without the trappings and failures of an economistic market-model?

Religious Marketing in Other Literatures

As sociologists focused on the religious economies paradigm, scholars in business administration, management, marketing, and organizational studies were likewise taking interest in the marketing and management aspects of religion. An early comprehensive review revealed only 35 articles in marketing journals dealing in any way with religion over the 30 year span from 1959 to 1989—29 of which were published in the 1980s, leading the author to note the increasing attention to religion and marketing (Cutler 1991). Also indicative of this growing interest was a new peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the topic, *Journal of Ministry Marketing and Management*, which launched in 1995 but closed in 2002.

A good portion of this marketing literature, largely unnoticed by sociologists, grappled with the uncertain and contentious prospects of applying ostensibly secular marketing and management principles to religious organizations (Moncrief et al. 1986; Wrenn 1993; Cutler and Winans 1999; for a review, see Wrenn and Mansfield 2001), including the perceptions of young adults (Rodrigue 2002) and how "religious marketing is different" from other marketing (Wrenn 2010). Others focused on the benefits a religious congregation can expect when it adopts a marketing-orientation, including clearer vision, increased involvement, a positive image in the community, and numerical growth (Considine 2001). Subsequent research using questionnaire data on 13 Assemblies of God churches in Australia showed that employing a market orientation is positively associated with perceived spiritual and social benefits of church activities and thereby indirectly tied to higher church participation (Mulyanegara et al. 2010).

Some writers in the marketing and religion research literature also produced practitioner-oriented books which sought to help congregational leaders adopt marketing methods and principles, especially in the 1990s when the "seeker sensitive" trend was gaining steam (e.g., Shawchuck et al. 1992; Considine 1995). These books led the way in a now-crowded industry of evangelical Protestant books instructing pastors on church marketing and strategy (e.g., Reising 2006; Damazio 2012; Malphurs [1999] 2013; Parkinson with Lewis 2015).

Abreu defines marketing as "the analysis, planning, implementation and control of programmes to better accomplish the relationship between the organisation and target groups" (2006:140). Adopting this definition, the marketing of religious organizations is closely related, both conceptually and practically, to other dimensions of the agentic side of religious leadership, including branding (Abreu 2006; Einstein 2008, 2011), church strategy (see Coleman 2002; Miller 2002; Vokurka and McDaniel 2004; Grandy 2013), and the many managerial aspects of pastoral leadership (Kuhne and Donaldson 1995; McKenna et al. 2007a, 2007b). In fact, it is nearly impossible to disentangle entirely these multiple aspects, and they all fit broadly under the topic of "religious marketing" as the term is employed here.

Worth emphasizing is that these publications and others like them, written largely by professors in marketing, business, and management, typically do not impose the rational choice assumptions or strict market logic which sociologists opted for in the religious economies paradigm. And despite the evident fact that many religious leaders and organizations nowadays are engaged in marketing, branding, and strategic management, this literature has been all but ignored in sociology of religion, a negligence Voas (2014:xvii) has identified as a "communication gap." More recent work, however, might be starting to integrate marketing and managerial research on religion with sociology of religion (e.g., Usunier and Stolz 2014).

From Religious Markets to Religious Fields

Analyses of religious marketing, branding, strategy, and management in sociology have primarily relied on the religious economies paradigm, and therefore have (sometimes unwittingly) depended on the assumption that the religious sphere in any given context operates *as a market*. For this to be a feasible assumption, a handful of structural arrangements would need to be the case, including the extensive commodification of religious beliefs and services; psychological egoism driving religious commitment (rather than normative or emotional considerations); the existence of some generalized medium or currency to establish exchange-values; widespread sufficient knowledge of the religious choices "on the market"; and zero-sum competition between religious producers and consumers (Bryant 2000:526).

However, as critics of a rational choice approach to religion have long argued, such a strict market logic does not describe the institutional arrangement and actual practice of the religious sphere in the United States, in Europe, and likely anywhere (e.g., Ammerman 1997; Bruce 1999; Archer and Tritter 2000; Bryant 2000; Jerolmack and Porpora 2004), not to mention the potentially objectionable neo-liberal capitalist ideological trappings involved in seeing the market encroach on religion (McKinnon 2013).

In contrast to a market metaphor, works on institutional and organizational fields (e.g., Scott [1995] 2014; Greenwood et al. 2017), social skill and strategic action within fields

(Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2012), and institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2012; Yu 2015) provide a bright path forward for an approach to the agentic and managerial side of religion without the need to assume market dynamics—which is to say, *religious marketing without religious markets*. A broad-looking, institutionalist or field approach to religions does not logically demand the use of market principles (Edgell 2012). At least since Swartz's (1996) article on Bourdieu and religion, there has been much work on "the religious field" (e.g., Braunstein 2022) and specific religious fields, including Catholicism (Wilde et al. 2010), Anglicanism (McKinnon et al. 2011), American evangelicalism (Markofski 2015), and Islam (Yusupova 2020). However, existing field-based work on religion focuses on religious *change* and hardly ever uses field theory to explain religious strength or vitality.

Cultural Resonance and Social Skill

Marketing and branding of religion entails an explicit effort to help make religious messages (or objects, experiences, affiliations, etc.) *resonate* with intended audiences, even if the desired audience is "all who may come." Resonance is relational (Emirbayer 1997). Things aren't "resonant" or "not resonant" in and of themselves (as some static or inherent property), but instead are *experienced as* more or less resonant as an *emergent process* in light of the contingent relations among people, messages, objects, and situations (McDonnell et al. 2017). Crucially, cultural resonance need not be the result of sheer happenstance but can be intentionally facilitated to greater or lesser affect by skilled cultural producers. Such facilitation of resonance which in turn leads to action (e.g., purchasing) is the *raison d'être* of marketing. Within contemporary religious fields, religious leaders as cultural producers can craft their messages, the aesthetic and "feel" of their organizations, and even themselves as public "objects" in hopes of facilitating the prolonged experience of resonance among a segment of the public.

When cultural resonance is experienced by individuals, it is the product of both head and heart—cognition and emotion. As McDonnell et al. (2017) suggest, the cognitive aspect of resonance involves the analogic relation between two poles or terms, such as when a metaphor (equating two things) "makes sense," or when an object (a color, an idea) solves a situational problem in an "Aha!" moment. "[R]esonance occurs as actors successfully incorporate or transpose a way (or schema) to make sense of a new situation or problem that differs from problems that a schema routinely solves" (McDonnell et al. 2017:4). During such occasions, the "cognitive distance" between two things—two terms in a metaphor, a problem and its solution—is neither too far/resistant nor too close/familiar. Their point echoes the argument in cognitive science of religion that it is "minimally counterintuitive concepts"—not plainly intuitive, not too fanciful—which persons find most powerful and memorable (Boyer 1994), and particularly later expressions which take cultural contexts seriously (Upal 2010).

Resonance likewise has an emotional aspect. Emotions as diverse as anxiety, shame, frustration, fear, anger, excitement, and joy may contribute to which objects and messages, given a particular situation, resonate with certain audiences and which do not (McDonnell et al. 2017:6). This is also the case for religious practices and messages (Corrigan 2017). Pertinent to contemporary American Calvinists, Johnson (2018), in her ethnographic study of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, reports how leaders of the megachurch created an organizational atmosphere rich with militarized and sexualized affect in order to facilitate the "carnal resonance" of religious conviction. "Affective labor" is the term Johnson gives to the strategic emotion work done by people at Mars Hill to cultivate the megachurch's growth and visceral, grabbing appeal.

The ability of religious leaders to craft messages, organizations, or experiences in ways that resonate with and appeal to (some but not all segments of) the public might be considered an expression in religious fields of the more general concept of "social skill" (Fligstein 2001). In their more recent articulation of this theory of agency in institutional fields, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam define social skill as "the capacity for intersubjective thought and action that shapes the provision of meaning, interests, and identity in the service of collective ends" (2012:4). Social skill is the capacity, possessed more by some persons than others, to take on the perspective of other people and thereby provide them shared meanings and collective identities, which in turn serves to induce their cooperation toward some collective end. If that collective end is joining the membership ranks of a religious congregation or becoming a devotee of a particular religious movement or denomination, then it is not difficult to see how the agentic skill and savvy theorized by Fligstein and McAdam can describe contemporary religious leaders, especially those most adept at contextualizing their ministry, casting vision for their people, creating appealing worship experiences, and articulating compelling arguments.

Skill and Agency Among American Calvinist Clergy

Professional-Class Presbyterians in Manhattan

The above theoretical argument is demonstrated through two recent monographs about American Calvinist clergy and organizations. First, McMillan's (2018) dissertation at Yale, *Cosmopolitan Calvinists: Global Religion in a Secular Age*, provides an extended case study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, a highly regarded conservative Protestant megachurch in Manhattan.[3] Redeemer belongs to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the second largest Presbyterian/Reformed denomination in the United States, and the largest conservative

[3] In 2017, Redeemer "spun off" its four campuses across Manhattan into particularized churches. The centralized homepage now describes Redeemer not as a single multisite church but as "a family of churches and ministries for the good of the city."

one. The church is prominent in and among the religious landscape of New York City, and is known nationwide among evangelicals. Through the use of ethnography and various kinds of publicly available discourse, McMillan paints a portrait of the megachurch as a religious organization that fosters its own success—its own religious vitality and influence—by way of measured intention and skill in relation to its largely secular, professional Manhattan context.

The two dominant explanatory concepts in McMillan's project are "cultural work" and "interactional style," both referring, despite slight differences in angle, to the strategic choices made by Redeemer's pastoral staff and other leaders, choices which allow the church to interface with its secular urban context in a way that is winsome, compelling, and effective.

The main argument, McMillan explains, "is that Redeemer Presbyterian Church has cultivated a style of interaction—discernable at the institutional, ideational, and material/experiential levels of culture—that recognizes the imagined skeptical New Yorker as a ratified hearer" (2018:41). By this he means that leaders of the megachurch, over many years, have intentionally developed and cultivated a certain way of doing things organizationally (a "philosophy of ministry," to use the indigenous vocabulary), and that this way of doing things (1) crucially involves the church presenting its public face not only to committed Christians but simultaneously to secular urban professionals, which (2) explains how and why this conservative church has thrived in its pluralistic, largely secular urban environment.

Through an in-depth examination of Redeemer and its activities and discourses, McMillan seeks to make sense of a theologically and morally traditionalist Presbyterian church and how it thrives in a diverse and largely progressive, secular context. He places special, although not exclusive, emphasis on the church's worship services. "Redeemer attracts young professionals in the heart of Manhattan, even though it adheres to a conservative theology. Its worship services are surprisingly traditional, following a simple ordered liturgy comprised of hymn singing, corporate prayer, the reading of scripture, and a 30 minute sermon" (2018:22). Across its four locations, Redeemer draws more than 5,000 adults on a typical weekend. "Most of Redeemer's attendees are highly educated young professionals and artists in their 20s and 30s" (2018:21). The church is also multiethnic, with white people and Asians making up the two largest segments. Nationwide and in New York City, the church has a "generally favorable reputation" (2018:41) and has received friendly media attention in secular outlets like *The Atlantic*, *New York Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

What accounts for the success, positive image, and wide influence of Redeemer? If McMillan is right, it is not an economistic calculus of religious supply and demand in the city, nor strict demands and teachings driving away free riders, nor laypeople's economic or status anxiety, nor direct marketing techniques like radio ads and billboards. It is, instead, the

intentional cultural work of religious leaders and a carefully cultivated interactional style that fits ecologically with Manhattan. "[T]he puzzle of these cosmopolitan Calvinists," McMillan suggests, "is solved by appreciating a few surprisingly simple deployments of religious culture" (2018:11). Stated differently, "Navigating this environment demands from religious leaders strategic discourse, skillful claims-making, and thoughtful forms of engagement" (2018:32).

One example of the church's intentional self-presentation at the level of discourse involves how it relates to the label "evangelical." As a theologically and morally conservative Protestant church, Redeemer is technically evangelical. However, the leaders of the church avoid the term due to its political and cultural baggage. As McMillan explains, "[W]hile using the language of 'evangelical' internally or in its efforts to work with others to start churches in the city, the church refrains from using it publicly in NYC." He goes on: "Even though Redeemer is an evangelical church, it knows the problematic nature of the label, especially in Manhattan where evangelical Christianity is associated with a particular form of politics and, rightly or wrongly, bigotry and provincialism. Thus, instead of 'evangelical,' Redeemer prefers 'historic Christianity' or 'orthodox Christianity,' or in some cases, falls back on the tradition inherent in its name, emphasizing that it is a church in the *Presbyterian* tradition" (2018:56).

The same thoughtfulness and intentionality goes into the music at weekend services. With such a young crowd, one might assume the church uses loud, exciting music, but that is not the case. Most of the music at Redeemer is either classical or an eclectic blend of jazz and contemporary music. McMillan highlights "the subdued nature of the church's contemporary music" (2018:61). Tim Keller, the church's founding pastor and major figure, has said about the music, "It's toned down. It's much more New York. It's certainly not your typical evangelical contemporary music." Being "much more New York" points to the way the music is strategically crafted to resonate with the tastes and sensibilities of its Manhattan audience.[4]

In the heart of the project (chapters 3 through 5), McMillan turns to sociological field theory to explain Redeemer's success. In particular, he draws pragmatically from a "light version" (2018:82, 92, 100) of bourdieusian field theory coupled with the more recently articulated apparatus of "strategic action fields" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). The field in question for McMillan is neither American religion nor American evangelicalism, but instead the geographically bounded field of religion in Manhattan. Of particular relevance is Protestant Christianity in Manhattan, what he calls a religious subfield. He describes "Redeemer's initial positioning in Manhattan's Protestant religious subfield" (2018:91), from its beginning in 1989, arguing that the church "took up an open, in-between position" (2018:106) in the subfield

[4] McMillan (2018:99) quotes Keller saying, "The dignity of historic service and classical music would appeal to cultured Manhattanites, who also would probably fear the emotional intensity of contemporary Christian worship."

between theologically assimilated mainline liberal Protestants and self-concerned, insular conservative Protestants. That evangelicals are positioned between assimilated liberals and insular fundamentalists is not a new insight, but it demonstrates how a religious organization under the guidance of its leaders can stake out a strategic position in its field—a position which the leaders believed would resonate with a significant population segment.

McMillan emphasizes three "creative strategies"—combination (of features in the Protestant subfield), conversion (of capitals from neighboring fields), and conversation. He tells of how the church engages in the conversion of capitals from neighboring fields—the intellectual, the cultural, etc.—to increase its religious capital in Manhattan. At Redeemer's weekend services and other teaching events, the leaders don't just "preach" but try to reason and persuade by offering concise, compelling arguments for a traditional Christian worldview (2018:157-160). "In proclaiming its religious message," McMillan explains, "the church soon realized the need to venture into neighboring fields, such as the cultural and intellectual—not as a player with a position, but simply to bolster its cultural and intellectual credentials—all with the aim of recommending its particular religious message" (2018:119). He goes on: "The church often uses secular cultural voices to validate major points that it seeks to make. It also highlights the implications of competing secular assumptions to enhance its religious message" (2018:120). For instance, to gain a hearing, Keller might discuss a topic by appealing to Friedrich Nietzsche, or Jean-Paul Sartre, or Aldous Huxley, or even all three (see pp. 119-120).

If there is a dominant feature to Redeemer Presbyterian Church, aside from its conservative Protestant theology and ethics, it is a noticeable feel and way of doing things. The church, in large measure owing to the competencies and temperament of Tim Keller, is shot through with an ethos that is intelligent, measured, dignified, and winsome. This ethos is maintained not merely for the sake of Christians attending the church but for the "imagined skeptical New Yorker" (2018:126, 152) who might be there, too. This is what McMillan calls the church's "interactional style," a concept drawn from Lichterman (2005, 2012), and which he presents in field-theory terms as a particular group habitus (pp. 138-197). This ethos/habitus characterizes the church to the extent one might think of it as the church's "brand."[5] Is this religious marketing? Not if that means billboards and radio advertisements; that likely would not have worked anyway. But McMillan's case study of Redeemer shows how a religious organization with traditionalist beliefs, under the direct guidance of its leaders, can craft their organization and its message in a way that resonates with a target audience—even the secular

[5] The church, McMillan says, "is fully aware of the dominant stereotypes regarding conservative, evangelical Christianity in Manhattan and wants to strategically adapt to connect with its surrounding culture where it can. On the other hand, the church wants to uphold what it understands to be the core message of historic Christianity and, thus, maintain its vibrant difference" (2018:137).

and diverse population of young professionals in Manhattan. Doing so requires thought, cultural savvy, and social skill in relation to the Manhattan religious field (Fligstein 2001).

Calvinists Gaining the Competitive Edge Nationwide

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is part of a bigger movement within American evangelicalism, a sort of theological "strong program" known variously as "the New Calvinism," the "neo-Reformed," or the "Young, Restless, Reformed." This conservative Calvinist sub-movement is the topic of Vermurlen's book, *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle Over American Evangelicalism* (2020). Using participant observation at three Calvinist megachurches (Redeemer among them), interviews with evangelical leaders, and content analysis of printed and online materials, Vermurlen describes and explains this religious movement, ultimately showing that it is "real and strong and nevertheless relationally constructed" (2020:2).

The New Calvinism is not simply all organizations and leaders embracing Calvinist soteriology and traditional social views in American evangelicalism. Instead, it consists of an identifiable cluster of nationally known churches, pastors, seminary professors, writers, networks, conferences, and councils. In addition to Redeemer Presbyterian Church—the subject of McMillan's case study—this movement likewise includes Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis (pastor John Piper), the now defunct Mars Hill Church in Seattle (pastor Mark Driscoll), the Acts 29 Network, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (led by Al Mohler), Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC (pastor Mark Dever), The Gospel Coalition, Together for the Gospel, and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, among several other organizations and leaders, including Kevin DeYoung, D. A. Carson, Tim Challies, Matt Chandler, Collin Hansen, Justin Taylor, and Wayne Grudem (2020:23-39).

The movement consists mostly of Baptists and non-denominational evangelical Protestants, but also some conservative Presbyterians. Also, it is not quite accurate to say the New Calvinism is just the combination of the relevant organizations and leaders, or even the religious and social beliefs they embrace and promote. Instead, the New Calvinism is "*the increasing presence and prominence* of those convictions and leaders, all held together, in American Evangelicalism since the turn of the new millennium" (2020:54, italics in the original). Journalists have profiled the movement in *TIME* magazine, *The Economist*, and *The New York Times*. Vermurlen suggests this Calvinist movement amounts to somewhere between 5 to 15 percent of evangelical Protestantism, or between 3 and 9 million adults, in the U.S. (2020:79).

However, the headcount of the New Calvinism, aside from being difficult to determine, "is ironically the least important dimension of this movement" (Vermurlen 2020:79). What is more significant is "the cultural struggle going on in the Evangelicalism field for symbolic capital

and symbolic power" (2020:79). More than merely finding more Calvinists today than twenty years ago, to explain this religious movement sociologically it must be placed within the context of the whole landscape of evangelicalism in the United States, especially evangelicalism's other pockets and expressions.[6] This New Calvinism enjoys "strength beyond numbers" (86-87)—a relationally constructed and qualitative vitality. The movement's success is about prominence, visibility, recognition, and influence more than a numerical resurgence. What is called for, then, is "an explanatory model of institutional religious strength that relies more on the strategic and conflictual actions of religious leaders to gain symbolic power in and over their field than on simple additive growth" (2020:58).

In a theory-packed chapter, Vermurlen develops "a field-theoretic model of religious strength (2020:88-122). Similar to McMillan, Vermurlen relies mostly on the framework of "strategic action fields" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) but also draws concepts from Bourdieu, like "classification struggle" and "symbolic power." The upshot is this: Leaders of the New Calvinism skillfully worked in various ways to create and fortify their own religious success in the modern world. Through a host of mechanisms and processes, Calvinist leaders engaged in "game-like contestation" in relation to their field-competitors—both strategic positioning and outright conflict—for a more advantageous position in the evangelical field, which is defined by the possession of symbolic capital (i.e., recognition, esteem) and power (2020:88).

After detailing many precipitating causes and ecological factors—the sexual and gender revolutions, the triumph of the therapeutic in American culture, the advent of the Internet and digital media, September 11th, and the multivocality of the Bible, among others (2020:123-158)—the focus turns to the "episode of contention" in which Calvinist leaders fostered and fortified their own religious strength. It starts with strategic positioning in the American evangelical field, especially in ways that are attractive and compelling to (some) American Christians in their twenties and thirties. For one thing, New Calvinist leaders position themselves as offering the weight of historical rootedness within a centuries-old religious and moral tradition, especially as a contrast to current American society as a rootless world as well as alternative expressions of the evangelical field as sentimentalized or unmoored. Such theological and moral traditionalism is paired with efforts at cultural engagement and even sometimes innovation. In short, this pairing of "tradition with innovation" appears to be

[6] Vermurlen shows that "although the New Calvinism has indeed grown numerically since the late 1990s, the other expressions and tribes of American Evangelicalism either (a) are large enough to match and overshadow the organizational and leadership following of the New Calvinist movement (as with the mainstream of Evangelicalism) or (b) are significantly smaller but have themselves only emerged since the late 1990s and therefore have 'resurged' percentage-wise just as much (i.e., neo-Anabaptist and progressive Emergent Evangelicalism)" (2020:58).

strategic, which is not to say disingenuous, for reaching many younger evangelicals (2020:169-172).

Another strategic move is that New Calvinist leaders present "themselves—especially publicly—as if they were taking consensually valued elements and topics (such the Bible, God, and theology) more seriously than do their field competitors" (2020:173). They sometimes give off the sense that their biblical interpretations and religious convictions are simply the best, most rigorous views, and that any young evangelical who wants to be serious about God and theology is inevitably going to end up among the Reformed crowd. This is a powerful public message to send, and many evangelicals in the early 2000s took it to heart (2020:173-177).

New Calvinist leaders also tend to be in and focus on cities, rather than small towns or suburbs. In part taking their cues from Tim Keller, they see cities as strategic for reaching unbelievers and influencing broader cultures and values. They therefore position themselves—physically but also in social space—in cities. "[N]ot only are neo-Reformed Evangelical leaders not afraid of the supposedly religiously corrosive effects of multiculturalism, rationalization, and (post)modernism in urban settings, as 1960s Bergerian secularization theory would have it. They are convinced that—with a little thought and work—Christians can 'hold their own' in cities, intellectually and culturally" (Vermurlen 2020:180). Although not the principle reason for their city-focus, this approach also has the effect of giving the neo-Reformed movement the feel of being the type of religious community that is suitable for smart, college-educated, city-dwelling people, itself a powerful branding tool in the American evangelical field.

Leaders of this evangelical sub-movement, moreover, think and act strategically when it comes to politics. They tend to present "themselves and their message as apolitical and nonpartisan, particularly in light of the negative associations many Americans, and especially Millennials, have with the political ambitions of the Christian Right" (2020:180). Neo-Reformed leaders are conservatives on contentious issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, transgenderism, and religious liberty, so "[t]he way they tend to vote is perhaps the most poorly kept secret in American Evangelicalism" (2020:185). Still, even when they address such issues publicly, their positions are framed as theological and moral, not mainly political. Their vision of public engagement is distinctly non-triumphalist (e.g., Hunter 2010); they have no interest in "taking America back for Christ." Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition (not to be confused with the Gospel Coalition), and similar conservative political co-conspirators are seen as a bygone era, helpful only as a negative reference group against which to define themselves and their kinder, less-political message (Vermurlen 2020:152-154). Also, the neo-Reformed movement, with a few notable exceptions, constitutes one of the most pronounced "Never Trump" contingents among evangelicals. Some have been vocal critics of Trump and the nationalist/populist approach he represents, or "Trumpism" (2020:185-191). So,

while New Calvinist leaders genuinely think the Christian Right was the wrong approach, their gentler approach to politics is an intentional, strategic action in the contemporary evangelical field that, they hope, will appeal to and resonate with many Americans.

But the New Calvinists also know how to fight. Strategic positioning blends into ideological conflict, because some Calvinist leaders position themselves as theological and moral gatekeepers in and for the broader landscape of evangelical Protestantism in the U.S. (2020:191-192). For instance, in 2011, an online firestorm erupted regarding progressive writer and former megachurch pastor Rob Bell and his questioning the reality of hell. Bell was effectively expelled from the evangelical fold (2020:193-198). In March 2014, the evangelical humanitarian aid organization World Vision announced a change to its employee conduct policy, redefining marriage to include gay and lesbian couples. An online pushback from Calvinist leaders resulted in World Vision walking back its policy change less than forty-eight hours after it was announced, to the dismay of many left-leaning evangelical leaders (2020:198-206). Turning to books authored by Calvinist evangelical leaders, Vermurlen shows that they provided detailed critiques of the postmodernist-inspired "Emergent" progressive pocket of American Christianity (2020:206-207); of "open theism" which posits, roughly, that God doesn't know the future (2020:207-208); and of LGBTQ affirmation in the church (2020:208-209).

There are multiple lessons one can learn from these episodes. One has to do with boundary-drawing and institutional power in American evangelicalism. But another is that such publicly viewable squabbles among evangelical Protestant leaders demonstrate their attempts at forcefully articulating their own religious beliefs and convincingly critiquing competing beliefs. Religious leaders set forth ideas and arguments. Even if few people will have their minds changed by such episodes of contention (confirmation bias and running to predictable corners is the likeliest outcome), New Calvinist leaders act by trying to give good reasons for their moral and religious worldview and showing the inadequacies of less conservative alternatives.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have emphasized the strategic, adaptive, thoughtful, inventive, skillful, agentic aspect of traditional religion, especially at the level of religious leadership, and demonstrated that such religious agency can facilitate religious vitality. Traditional religious leaders can and do skillfully work for their own success in the modern world. This observation is oddly absent in social scientific thinking about religion. Bearing in mind previous work that broached such matters, namely, the religious economies framework, I spoke of these facets of religious action as marketing, branding, and entrepreneurship. However, the religious

economies framework suffers multiple troubles, and it was suggested that religious agency is better understood as strategic action within religious institutional fields.

This argument makes a substantive contribution as well as a formal contribution to the sociology of religion. Substantively, in the study of religion, the strategic, skillful actions of religious leaders tend to go toward one of two pitfalls. On one side, they are ignored or dismissed, leaving clergy as agentless religious specialists doing who knows what at the whims of the modern world. On the other side, when the intentional acts of religious leaders are acknowledged, it is typically in the language of economics and the commodification of religion. The present approach avoids both these pitfalls and salvages the agentic side of religion in a way that recognizes the inevitable *cultural* features of the religious sphere (Edgell 2012). Building from this, the bigger and more provocative suggestion is that traditional religions can hold their own in the modern world, putting forward messages and experiences that resonate.

The formal contribution is that this approach connects the study of contemporary religion—insofar as it still addresses secularity and religious strength (Smith et al. 1998; Bruce 2011; Voas and Chaves 2016; Schnabel and Bock 2017; Voas and Chaves 2018; Schnabel and Bock 2018)—more securely to theorizing in the rest of the social sciences, especially on organizations, movements, and the explosion of interest in fields (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Hilgers and Mangez 2015). Stephen Warner, in his new paradigm article, argued: "Researchers in the field agree that sociology of religion should not be sealed off from the rest of sociology" (Warner 1993:1081), and it remains the case 30 years later that studies of religion should keep up with the theoretical times. From the study of movements, sociology of religion could integrate insights from that subfield's main explanatory triad: opportunity structure, resource mobilization, and framing by leaders. Of particular help is work on institutional and organizational fields (e.g., Scott [1995] 2014; Greenwood et al. 2017), social skill and strategic action within fields (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and McAdam 2012), institutional logics (Thornton et al. 2012; Yu 2015), and the resonance of cultural messages (McDonnell et al. 2017).

It is not only Calvinistic evangelical leaders who act intentionally and strategically in institutional fields to drive their religious success. This observation is generalizable to other religious groups and traditions. The Catholic Church in the U.S., for instance, enjoys a number of avenues intended to advance their message within the broader religious field, hoping to make their tradition compelling to religious inquirers. Recognizable outlets would include the apologetics ministry Catholic Answers, Bishop Robert Barron and his Word on Fire ministry, and Matt Fradd's popular video podcast Pints With Aquinas, among several others. The United Methodist Church, a moderate-to-liberal Protestant denomination, in 2009 launched a $20 million campaign to air commercials on TV and online in hopes of making their church attractive and reasonable to young adults (Einstein 2011:334-336). Zeynep Ozgen, a sociologist at NYU

Abu Dhabi, is doing as yet unpublished work on how Islamic leaders act strategically in institutional fields to advance their religious interests in Turkey (Ozgen n.d.). Seeker-friendly, non-Calvinist evangelical megachurches across America provide demographic-targeted programming, well-executed musical experiences, comfortable physical spaces, and engaging textual teachings that many people find compelling (Wellman et al. 2020). Such strategic actions are not limited to traditional religions. Non-traditional religions, such as the Church of Scientology, have launched media campaigns in efforts to make their organization and message seem cool and relevant to a broader public (Einstein 2011:332-334).

What does the present approach do with secularization theory? The religious markets perspective casts itself as the great defeater of secularization theory—"Secularization, R.I.P." (Stark and Finke 2000:57-79). The approach described in this paper, in contrast, leaves room to recognize the reality of secularization—i.e., tensions between traditional religion and modernity—conceived in various ways. There are limits to what clergy can do, and even the most thoughtfully crafted messages, arguments, and experiences will resonate only with some people. As Ryan Burge writes, "The best apologists, the most charismatic speakers, or the catchiest praise and worship bands would not have held secularization at bay" (2021:128). He is right, but in some cases such tactics convince people and win adherents. Religious vitality versus secularization should not be seen as a zero-sum war, but instead as a never-ending (and sometimes acrimonious) dance, characterized by historical and structural contingencies, important differences in local and national contexts, and complex social realities in which conjunctions of multiple and potentially counteracting causal mechanisms are at play (Smith 2008).

A theory of traditional religion that hinges on strategic action, social skill, and cultural savvy among clergy in institutional fields, finally, aligns well with observations that some contemporary societies are "post-secular." Although difficult to pin down definitionally, the key move for the post-secular is to acknowledge the continuing, uneasy coexistence of both traditionally religious and secular ways of doing and seeing things at the same time (Molendijk 2015). Religious leaders—whether Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Jewish, or something else—can and do skillfully work for their own success in modern and secularizing contexts. Vitality at institutional and organizational levels of religion is typically neither happenstance nor the result of impersonal forces in a religious market, but can be sought and achieved. Some segment of modern populations, however small and diminishing with time, will find old-fashioned faiths compelling and resonant if clergy exercise their agentic capacity for thought, care, social skill, and savvy. Seeing this reality through a post-secular lens reminds us to consider futures in which traditional religion and secular modes of being exist together.

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