

# Bourdieu's Field, Capital, and Habitus in Religion

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## Abstract

Over his lifetime Pierre Bourdieu developed a highly sophisticated scheme by which he sought to explain how power was developed, kept, and transferred within society. Among his many contributions to sociology, the concepts of field, capital, and habitus loom large over the landscape of his achievements. This work seeks to uncover the various ways in which these three concepts have been understood to relate to religion. First, a brief summary of each of Bourdieu's concepts will be presented. Next, the literature related to each of Bourdieu's three concepts will be reviewed and synthesized in order to offer an organized view of how the various approaches to each relates to religion specifically. It is the ultimate aim of this work to offer the reader and religious organizations a clearer understanding of how Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus shape their understanding of the various forms that religion takes within society. As will be demonstrated from the work of Bourdieu and others, religion can be understood as a place to belong within society, a promise of credit within society, or a lifestyle to adopt within society.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, power, religion, field, capital, habitus

## Religion and Field

In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu offers the following definition of field. A field is "an objectively defined position defined by its objective relationship with other positions" (1996, p. 231). What does this mean? A field is a place. A field has boundaries. Yet a field has opposition as well. Because Bourdieu was chiefly concerned with understanding power, struggle is inherent to any definition of field. While the quotation above is quite harmless, one can detect a hint of quarrel as one reads that a field is known, in part, by the way it differentiates itself from other fields. Rey (2007) suggests that a social field is a "network of relations between

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individuals and institutions competitively engaged in the dynamics of capital production, pursuit, consumption, and/or accumulation” (p. 44). Let the reader assume for a moment that a home is a field. It is an objective place and it has boundaries. Yet this home is situated on a city block on which are clustered several other homes. One might imagine that a homeowner could clearly delineate the limits of his or her home by placing a fence around the property. However, suppose the adjoining neighbor disputes this boundary and summarily moves the location of the fence. In this instance, the more powerful of the two neighbors will most likely win the argument and thus define the limit of the social field. Accordingly, Emirbayer & Johnson (2008) suggest that a field can also be understood as, “a temporary state of power relations within what is an ongoing struggle for domination” (p. 6). How then is religion to be understood as a field? There are three primary ways in which it might be understood.

#### Religious Field as the Dominating Institution

Some understand a religious field to be a single dominating institution. Diantieill (2003) points out how Bourdieu’s concept of this type of religious field flows out of his view of the Roman Catholic church of France. Diantieill describes the French Catholic church as a “quasi-monopolistic religion that has maintained organic links with the state for several centuries” (p. 535). This view sees the religious field in competition, not with other religions *per se*, but with the field of labor. In this case the religious field removes power from the layman and places it in the hands of professionals who dispense a form of morality that can only be received from qualified individuals who have been sanctioned by the religious field itself. These professionals in turn help the recently disqualified layman understand his or her role in greater society by teaching her or him how to act correctly within the larger societal system. This view might well be labeled a monopolistic religious field.

#### Religious Field as Diversified Space

Not everyone would agree with Bourdieu that a religious field is best understood as a monopoly. Dillon (2001) argues that the strongest religious field is one where the professionals and the laity share power equally. Using Vatican II as his example, Dillon states that “it emphasized respect for the communal agency and interpretive equality within the church in contrast to the privileging of the unilateral authority of the church officials” (p. 418). Dillon believes that all Roman Catholics, both the professionals and laity, are responsible for the direction that the church takes. He points to the ban on female priests as an example. Although Vatican II argues that women cannot function as priests primarily on theological grounds, it does not prohibit a movement for change from within. The creation of the Women’s Ordination Council, a group dedicated to reinterpreting church law on the issue, proves that there are some who, while disagreeing with the clergy, still choose to stay within the Roman Catholic

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Church in order to reform it. This view might best be called a diversified religious field because it seeks to share the power between the professionals and the laity.

### Religious Field as Marketplace

Finally, there are some who argue that the best way to understand a religious field is to view it within an organizational context. In other words, various religiously oriented fields exist that relate to each other in a wide variety of ways. This approach uses the broadest understanding of religion, and may or may not be referring to a church when it uses such terminology. Emirbayer & Johnson (2008) argue that what makes up an organization of religious fields are all those fields that are in the pursuit of a particular form of capital. Green (2012) offers an example of how a religious field overlaps with a secular field. “Catholic education in England overlaps with the field of state-funded education...competition arises from different assumptions” about a shared form of capital (p. 11). The broad definition of this approach aside, it is possible to formulate an understanding of a purely religious field within the organizational religious field approach. This type of approach would suggest that all religious institutions are in competition with each other over the shared capital of the laity. However, as Lahire suggests, “while engaged in struggle against one another, the agents of a field nonetheless all have an interest in the existence of the field, and therefore maintain an ‘objective complicity’ beyond the struggles among them” (2015, p. 66).

Thus, as Bourdieu defined it, a field is an objectively real entity. Some argue that a religious field is always seeking to become a monopoly. Others view a religious field as a place of equity among professionals and laity. Still others view religious fields as various individual entities vying for the attention of the consumer. Danto (1999) suggests that, despite which outlook one chooses, Bourdieu’s concept offers the observer an excellent way to observe how people think and how both thought and conduct change over time. Within each definition, the religious field is a place to belong. A field is a home. Perhaps not a real house with doors and shutters, but it is a real entity. This is one key way that we may understand the form that religion takes within societies both today and throughout history.

## Religion and Capital

Bourdieu discusses his concept of *capital* in a number of his works. In general, Bourdieu suggests that capital can take one of three forms: economic, cultural, or social (Bourdieu, 1986). What is of most interest to the field of religion is how Bourdieu defines social capital.

“Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a

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‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 286)

Three important notes must be made about how Bourdieu discusses social capital. The first is that it is conferred from a group to an individual. Second, social capital is a form of credit that carries the backing of the group that confers it. Finally, and this note comes not from the quote above but from the broader corpus of Bourdieu’s writings, social capital may also be understood as symbolic capital. Social capital may be understood as symbolic capital because of the very fact that social capital is, more than anything else, a credit. In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu explains what he means when he calls social capital by the name symbolic capital: “symbolic capital is credit, but in the broadest sense, a kind of advance, a credence, that only the group’s belief can grant” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 120). Thus social or symbolic capital is a form of capital granted to an individual based on their acceptance of a group’s beliefs or aims. This is why social capital, or as it will be referred to hereafter, symbolic capital, is more closely associated with religion than the other forms of capital which Bourdieu discusses. This is because, in Bourdieu’s own words, symbolic capital buys the “power of consecration” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). Much of the recent literature that seeks to apply Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital to religion finds itself in one of three camps. Some view religious capital as organizationally dispensed capital, others view it as individually accumulated capital, and finally, some in recent years have been developing the concept of a synthesized capital (Montemaggi, 2010, 2011).

#### Organizationally Dispensed Symbolic Capital

The view that most closely aligns with Bourdieu’s original concept of how symbolic capital relates to religion is the view that religious capital is an organizationally dispensed capital. This view is most often contained under the title ‘religious capital’ over and against ‘spiritual capital,’ which will be discussed below. There are varying definitions of the term religious capital, but the essentials are much the same. Baker and Miles-Watson (2010) frame the boundaries of the word ‘religious’ well. They suggest that the adjective “religious” refers to those “public activities derived from behavioral adherence to structures associated with formal or institutional expressions of faith” (2010, p. 18).

It must also be noted that religious capital is a form of capital that is guarded and dispensed by religious professionals. In his review of Bourdieu’s own understanding, Urban (2003) pointed out that Bourdieu believed that the primary role of the church is to “legitimize, reinforce, and reproduce a given social hierarchy” (p. 363). Bourdieu was deeply impacted by Marx and his view of competition. One is able to observe Bourdieu’s reliance on competition most clearly in his writings concerning capital. In regards to symbolic capital, competition can most clearly be seen in religious capital. Urban (2003) goes on to identify that in order for a particular form of social hierarchy to be legitimized, reinforced, and reproduced, religion must

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produce a “religious bureaucracy – the priests, monks, and theologians to reproduce it” (p. 363). The literature seems to reveal that one of the largest issues with Bourdieu’s view is that it is too universalistic. It is often argued that Bourdieu does not account for legitimate change that has taken place throughout history (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2010; Iannaccone & Klick 2003; Urban, 2003, 2005).

Some authors, particularly those who still embrace an organizationally dispensed capital model, do not reject Bourdieu outright. Rather, they would prefer to see a more dynamic model. Urban (2003), after studying the Bāuls, a Bengali people group, suggests that another dimension needs to be added to Bourdieu’s view in order to make it stronger. Urban suggests that religious capital is not only used to reinforce the social status quo, but it can also be used to react against the social status quo in hopes of changing it. According to Urban, religion can at times subvert the tyranny of power either within religion itself or within the larger socio-political field in which it finds itself. However, even though some would prefer to adjust Bourdieu’s view of organizationally dispensed capital, they are not interested in rejecting it outright. Consequently, those who define symbolic capital as religious capital are those who see symbolic capital in the grasp of religious professionals no matter their aim in dispensing said capital.

#### Individually Accumulated Symbolic Capital

In contrast to those who see capital in the hands of professionals, there exists another group of individuals who would argue the opposite. Some authors see the relationship between Bourdieu’s symbolic capital and religion in terms of the individual and not the organization (Verter, 2003; Zinnbauer, 1998). These authors would argue that capital, rather than being organizationally dispensed, is individually accumulated. Verter (2003) frames the distinction well. Those who hold to this view would agree with Urban and others who rightly understand Bourdieu’s universalistic and reductionist tendencies, but instead of adjusting his views, they seek to redefine them. “The problem is that Bourdieu perceives religion almost exclusively in organizational terms...this leaves little room for imagining lay-people as social actors capable, for example, of manipulating religious symbols on their own behalf” (Verter, 2003, p. 151). Those who would hold a similar view tend to define symbolic capital related to religion as spiritual capital. Baker and Miles-Watson (2010) frame the adjective ‘spiritual’ as “the area of belief or faith that actually energises or motivates our ethical and public living” (pp. 18-19). While “spiritual” is a more nebulous term than “religious,” this definition allows a responsible amount of elasticity without being academically unusable. Zinnbauer (1998) points out that spirituality means different things to different people, but this fact actually supports the very reason why some authors desire to define capital as an individualist pursuit. Verter (2003) notes the value of such a definition when he states that “spiritual capital may be regarded as a

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more widely diffused commodity, governed by more complex patterns of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” (p. 158).

Those who hold to the concept of spiritual capital see symbolic capital resting in the hands of lay-people over and against the hands of religious professionals. Their argument is not that these religious professionals do not exist; rather they argue that religious professionals do not have a monopoly on institutional symbolic capital. This view alters what symbolic capital achieves in the context of religion. Where religious capital is primarily concerned with protecting or altering the larger society in which it finds itself, spiritual capital is concerned with the individual. “Spiritual capital is a resource that people draw upon to meet challenges in their lives; for example, sickness, political oppression, ethical choices or social problems” (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2010, p. 29). Here one can see the clearest delineation between religious capital and spiritual capital. Religious capital is concentrated at the organizational level, whereas spiritual capital is concentrated at the individual level. There is one final way in which symbolic capital may be understood to relate to religion in a formal sense. This final way seeks to synthesize the religious and spiritual approaches.

#### Synthesized Symbolic Capital

More recently, one author has offered a synthesized understanding of how symbolic capital relates to religion. Montemaggi (2010) rejects an either/or dichotomy within religion. She argues that divorcing the organizational and personal roles within religion is overly reductionistic. She suggests that capital is rather the result of community building. Montemaggi (2010) refers to her research on the concept of spiritual gifts and their use within the church to make her argument. She argues that the concept and implementation of spiritual gifts creates a healthy interdependence between the individual and the community. This interdependence means that “human beings need to go beyond the dichotomy between dependence and independence to build a community of believers in relation to one another” (Montemaggi, 2010, p. 184). In referring to ‘dependence,’ Montemaggi is taking aim at religious capital. Elsewhere she argues that “the framework of religious capital is heavily reliant on a conception of human life and behavior that is, at best, reductive, where religious behavior is simply the result of a cost and benefit analysis based on stable preferences” (2010, p.183). In referring to ‘independence,’ Montemaggi is taking aim at spiritual capital. “Spiritual capital fails to identify what counts as social action or to distinguish spiritually motivated social action from politically or culturally motivated action” (Montemaggi, 2011, p.68). Baker and Miles-Watson (2011) argue that Montemaggi goes too far in dismissing both religious and spiritual capital primarily because faith groups use the terms themselves. Verter (2004) suggests that Urban’s (2003) study of the Bāuls is more in line with a synthetic view than it is with an organizationally dispensed view. Synthetic capital asks the individual and the organization to come together in

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order to develop a mutually agreeable form of capital. This capital has an agreed value that benefits the organization and the individual equally.

Thus, Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital is the value that an organization offers its members. This value has been understood differently throughout the years. Some view it as religious capital, a capital meant to support or transform society (Urban, 2003). Some view it as a spiritual capital, a capital meant to support the individual in times of challenge (Zinnbauer, 1998). Still others view it as a synthesized capital, a capital meant to be mutually beneficial for the individual and the organization (Montemaggi, 2010, 2011). However, no matter which perspective one takes, it is important to understand that each view carries with it the concept of spiritual currency. Each form of capital carries the appropriate “credit,” as Bourdieu refers to it, which allows an individual to receive the promised goods of a particular religion.

## Religion and Habitus

In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990) argues that *habitus* is defined simply as a system of dispositions. In his frame of reference, Bourdieu understands these dispositions to be lasting acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action. Habitus represents structured ways of thinking that lead an individual to act in a reactionary or reflexive manner. Habitus is the physical response of an individual to the world around them, a world which is compelling them to think, act, and live a certain way. Margolis (1999) suggests that the best way for the reader to visualize what Bourdieu is conceiving in habitus is for the reader to consider the image of an actor. In this way habitus may be understood as a ‘way of life.’ Bourdieu envisioned habitus as a sort of living history. Habitus may be understood as an amalgamation of the impact of a certain society on an individuals’ past condensed into their predisposition for the present and the future. As such, habitus can be seen “as much as an agent of continuity and tradition as it can be regarded as a force of change” (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p. 4). How much habitus is either a force of continuity or a force of change depends on one’s understanding of how informed the individual is of the “complex social process in which the individual and collective ever-structuring dispositions develop in practice to justify the individuals’ perspectives, values, actions and social positions” (p. 4). Generally speaking, there are three approaches to understanding how people exercise habitus. Some authors argue that agents are “generally informed actors” (Green, 2012, Hurtado, 2009). Some authors posit that human agents are “specifically informed actors” (Akram, 2012, Farnell, 2000). Finally, some authors see human agents as “free acting agents” (Nash, 2003).

### Habitus as Expressed in Generally Informed Agents

While it is hard to pin down Bourdieu with one single view because his own thought on the topic of habitus always seemed to be in flux, Bourdieu does seem to support most the

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notion that human agents are only generally informed actors when it comes to habitus. Those who hold this view argue that individuals' actions are generally pre-reflexive in nature (Green, 2012; Hurtado, 2009). People react rather than respond based on the field in which they find themselves, and based on the rules of that particular field. In other words, the bulk of an individual's action may be understood to simply be a pre-reflexive response to the world around them based not on their conscious decision to act in any particular way, but rather on the way in which both their body and mind have been pre-conditioned by the rules of the field. Those who argue for this position often employ the language of gaming in order to help readers better understand their position, as did Bourdieu himself (Lamaison & Bourdieu, 1986). Green (2012) argues that habitus "refers to our deeply rooted assumptions, not explicitly reflected upon but held almost subconsciously, which stem from our world-view" (p.12). Two aspects may be noted about Green's statement. First, Green implies—and later states outright—that habitus is a good visual of an individual's worldview. Thus, in order to better understand one's worldview, one must reflect on his or her actions. Second, Green uses the term "almost subconsciously." This term is of great importance insofar as it helps one fully understand the term "generally informed actor" as it is used in this paper.

Up to this point it has been argued that habitus is a pre-reflexive response to a person's environment. However, while it is pre-reflexive, it is not only pre-reflexive. Hurtado (2009) suggests that Bourdieu's concept of habitus begins as pre-reflexive but can, with some assistance, develop into a form of rational consciousness. Hurtado points out that if one shifts the field on which a human agent is engaged, the pre-reflexive activities of that agent will no longer produce the desired social outcomes. When this situation occurs, a change begins which causes the pre-reflexive agent to reflect on why his or her actions are no longer producing the desired social outcomes. Over time the agent will eventually adapt a different habitus that is in line with the new field in which they find themselves. They will not do this before they have learned, at least in some limited sense, to become rationally conscious about how their actions are informed by their environment.

Shanneik (2011) offers an example of Hurtado's understanding of habitus in her work with Islamic converts. Shanneik points out that a group of Irish women desired to break from their Catholic habitus upbringing primarily because they felt as though it was foisted upon them. At first, these women rebelled against their Catholic background by leaving their community behind and living in what Shanneik described as an "alternative scene" (2011, p. 514). This period of their life was quite secular and they did not find themselves under any particular religious banner. However, after a period of time these women chose to convert to Islam. Shanneik observes that "in the past the converts were passive and oppressed followers of the rules and standards of the Church and community" (2011, p. 514). However, moving forward these converts did little to change their ultimate habitus. As Shanneik goes on to observe, "the converts have found a *religious habitus* – that pre-sets and monitors their lives in



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the same way as the Catholic *habitus* used to control and form their lives” (2011, p. 514). In other words, these converts became aware of how the field changed when they went through their “alternative scene.” They went from being pre-reflexive to reflective and rationally conscious. However, upon making this leap they simply replaced one form of habitus with another practically identical habitus. Their reflection did not net them much gain. Most who hold a “generally informed actor” understanding of habitus will attribute this to the fact that, even though it is possible for someone to become rationally conscious, an individual is still quite limited in what they can do with any new-found rationality.

#### Habitus Expressed in Specifically Informed Agents

Not all who embrace Bourdieu’s concept of habitus see it as being so poorly grasped by human agents. Some authors hold to a view that human agents are specifically informed agents (Akram, 2012; Farnell, 2000). Individuals who hold this position do not reject outright the notion that habitus is pre-reflexive in nature. Rather, proponents of human agents as specifically informed agents do not see pre-reflexivity and rationality as being exclusive. Akram (2012) is a strong proponent of this view. Akram argues that “reflexivity, intentional actions, habit and the unconscious can operate in conjunction with each other, and one does not cancel out the other” (p. 57). Akram contends that Bourdieu never assumed that habit and reflexivity were synonymous. Rather, habits share some common characteristics with the unconscious while not having their identity completely subsumed into the subconscious world. Akram offers the topic of gender as an example of the specifically informed agent’s grasp and utilization of habitus. Akram points out that many in the feminist camp believe gender to be a socially engineered concept. However, Akram also points out that the human agent’s choice to identify with one particular gender cannot be reduced to solely a pre-reflexive choice or a rational conscious choice. It is an informed hybrid, or a fuller habitus, that ultimately drives the decision. It is a habitus that is inclusive of both the unconscious and the conscious. As Akram (2012) notes, “understanding gender through the prism of habitus, which includes aspects of the unconscious and habit, enables a much broader spectrum to understand the subtle ways in which structure interacts with agency and how agency helps to reproduce structure” (p. 62). Farnell (2000) sums up the critique of the previous approach by this approach when she asks “How do dispositions activate the generative schemas of the *habitus*, if they are beyond the conscious grasp of the agent? And if they are, how is the *habitus* not deterministic?” (p. 402). Those who hold to a “specifically informed agent” understanding of habitus expect more from the agent because, in their mind, habitus is more than just the unconscious mind at work.

In his discussion of habitus, Nash (2003) points out that there are some who argue that the concept of habitus is nothing but a myth. Nash states that Bourdieu’s habitus requires “an agent endowed with dispositions able to translate structural principles of the culture into lived practice, with sufficient autonomy to allow observed social transformations to take place, but

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sufficiently conditioned as to effect the actual reproduction of social institutions” (p. 49). Yet both Margolis (1999) and Bourveresse (1999) argue that this definition of habitus actually accomplishes nothing. It is a myth. The reason they suggest habitus is a myth is because this type of action is impossible to observe:

“A good part of the resistance to Bourdieu’s ideas comes not, as one would instinctively believe, from hostility to the mechanism, but on the contrary, from that tendency to believe that we would understand society better if only we could really find a way of seeing the social machinery in action” (Bourveresse, 1999, p. 62).

These authors who disparage Bourdieu’s conceptual understanding of habitus tend to fall in line more with seeing human agents as specifically informed agents. Margolis (1999) offers an example of one who rejects the essence of Bourdieu’s habitus as mythical while still recognizing the role of the pre-reflexive and the reflective in the life of the human agent. He suggests that, based on past performance, a human agent may consciously choose to act in hopes that the past effect may once again occur. By so doing, the individual is displaying a reflective nature that is informed by the unconscious conditioning of society. Even though there are some who disagree with the way Bourdieu envisioned his habitus, they ultimately concede that people are somehow conditioned and act accordingly. Because of that fact, these individuals may reject Bourdieu’s version of habitus, but do not reject Bourdieu’s observations as such.

Habitus is then to be understood as a part to play, a life to live, a role to be filled. Habitus is both informed by society as well as the very thing that informs society. Whether one holds to a generally informed agency or a specifically informed agency, it is important to note how habitus engages religion. In both cases the church offers a particular form of habitus to the human agent. For some, this is a habitus in which they have grown from infancy to maturity. For others, it is a new habitus presented for consideration and possible adaptation by the human agent. Yet in both instances it primarily represents a particular way of living.

## Conclusions

Through his work, Pierre Bourdieu offers to his readers a broader understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, and habitus offer the reader a keener insight into the forms that religion takes within society. Bourdieu’s understanding of field helps the reader understand that, at times, religion takes on the form of a home, that is, a place to belong. Bourdieu’s concept of capital assists the reader in seeing that, on occasion, religion takes the form of a promise, or more fittingly a promise of credit. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus informs the reader that religion will, in some instances, take the form of a lifestyle. Religion is a place to belong. Religion is a promise to be trusted. Religion is a lifestyle to be embraced. Understanding these three forms of religion will go a long way in helping people understand how they may relate to religion responsibly. These three

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forms of religion will also help religious organizations better understand what they have to offer the individual whom they are attempting to proselytize.

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