RELIGIOUS CAPITAL AS A CENTRAL FACTOR IN COPING WITH THE COVID-19 CLUES FROM AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY

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Abstract

Religious or spiritual capital has been described in terms of resources provided by religious organizations, and which individuals 'purchase' through attendance, learning and commitment. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and its related experience of lockdown, loneliness and high uncertainty has offered a unique context in which the extent and effects of religious or spiritual capital could be tested against alternative attitudes or resources. An extensive survey undertaken by an international research team at the height of the pandemic in four European countries has provided data that allows for a better assessment of the extent to which the factor might be related to the way people cope and project meaning in critical times. The aim of the paper is to find out to what extent religious capital still holds among Europeans in their struggles to cope with harsh circumstances. The results point to the effective impact of religious capital and at the same time introduce nuances that help to better understand its complex dynamics.

Keywords: religious, capital, spiritual, coping, meaning

1. Introduction

A recurrent issue in the study of religion in many societies is to what extent it still provides useful functions or performs activities that help a significant sector of population in their lives and relationships or increases their living standards. To analyse such a positive impact, a scientific approach needs to find out indicators, proxies and the right theoretical frameworks that could allow to assess the real influence and effect of religious beliefs and practices in highly developed societies. What is at stake is whether religion is still useful and

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makes sense when many voices claim that we could afford much better and fitting means to tackle the functions or needs traditionally assumed by religious agencies.

The current Covid-19 pandemic, with all its perceived risks, personal and social disruptions, lockdown and the entailed solitude, have stressed several social systems requiring higher levels of commitment to deliver their expected services or assistance. Such a special and unique context raises questions about the efficacy of those systems, called to adapt to the new conditions in an urgent manner. The emergency we live through can be seen as a test for every social instance involved in struggling or coping with the current challenges, from health systems and psychotherapeutic practices, to the economy and the welfare system. Surely religious institutions can play a role too in this distressing panorama, as meaning providers and coping agencies, even in very secularized societies in Western European areas, where religious agencies could be dismissed or neglected at various levels.

In any case, the pandemic offers an important occasion to test to what extent religion still plays a significant function in those societies, where it has been deemed as almost redundant, and to check out how this hypothetic function could be described or even measured in more accurate terms, at least in exceptional conditions of a health emergency beyond the usual parameters these societies were used to live. To that end we need to get significant data and to apply the most fitting theoretical frameworks to analyse them. We consider the notion of 'religious capital' an interesting heuristic tool that can better reveal religious meaning and functions in struggling times. For that reason, the article will try first to retrieve that idea and to update it to be fitting to be applied in the new situation. Our team is trying to test to what extent the data collected in an extensive survey during the pandemic first wave might make more sense inside this theoretical framework.

2. Revisiting and upgrading a discussed concept

'Religious' and 'spiritual' capital have drawn attention since the nineties of the 20th century and especially in the wake of rational choice or economic models applied to the study of religion in those years. However, that model has raised many questions ever since and was quite discredited after theoretical frameworks failed to provide the explanatory adeptness they promised. Despite some setbacks, this concept is still broadly used, as attested by statistical analysis. (The Google Books Ngram Viewer shows a clear steady growth in the use of 'religious capital' [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Religious+capital&year_start=1980&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3] and something similar happens with 'spiritual capital' at least until 2013; then drops to start again to grow from 2017 https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?smoothing=3&corpus=26&year_end=2019&year_start=1980&content=Spiritual+capital&direct_url=t1%3B%2CSpiritual%20capital%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2CSpiritual%20capital%3B%2Cc0].) Nevertheless, probably this notion

needs some upgrading to better display its heuristic capacity and help to analyse religious dynamics on a social level.

The idea that religion might be represented as a 'capital' or some value that can be purchased, accumulated, traded, and increased or lost, is quite intriguing, since religious beliefs and experiences being rather abstract, intimate and beyond any materialistic reduction, appear as quite alien to these economic categories. However, probably those who were launching this concept were not so much interested in religion *per se*, as on its particular effects and functions. Religion could be conceived as an activity based on an exchange between a supply side - churches and other religious agencies - and a demand side or customers who looked for those services for their own interest. Since that model entails some goods to be exchanged, it would be better to define the kind of goods to be traded in such approach. Insofar as the theological terms like *grace*, *forgiveness*, or *salvation*, were of little use from a sociological perspective, the idea of a special 'capital', with some adaptation, could be fitting for those observing these social phenomena. The intangible nature of such goods is clear at the outset, and its relatedness to other similar concepts like 'social' and 'cultural' capitals is evident. Now the pending question is to what extent such concept is helpful in better describing the religious dynamics in contemporary contexts, wherein a significant portion of the population values such services or whatever religious agencies still provide. In economic terms, 'to value' something means that a subject would be able to spend time or other resources to acquire it.

To proceed systematically, some definitions are helpful. A systematic review has been published a decade ago elucidating the use and application of religious and spiritual capital [1]. Definitions of 'spiritual capital' are provided by some prominent names and organizations within sociology of religion at the beginning of the new century. Woodberry sees spiritual capital "as the resources that are created or people have access to when people invest in religion as religion" [2]. Berger and Hefner understand that capital as "referring to the power, influence, knowledge and dispositions created by participation in a particular religious tradition" [L.P. Berger and R.W. Hefner *Spiritual capital in comparative perspective*, Paper presented at the Spiritual Capital Planning Meeting, 10-11 October 2003, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 3]. The *Metanexus* organization, which promoted an ambitious research program built around that topic, defined it as "the effects of spiritual and religious practices, beliefs, networks and institutions that have a measurable impact on individuals, communities and societies" [D.A. Palmer and M. Wong, *Clarifying the Concept of Spiritual Capital*, Prepared for the Conference on the Social Scientific Study of Religion The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 10-13 July 2013]. The reviewers analysing and comparing 'spiritual' and 'religious' capital come across some difficulties, and the recorded definitions are of little help in this respect. For Baker and Miles-Watson, the emphasis of 'spiritual' seems to relate more to the personal sphere, while the one associated to 'religious' is more communitarian and social, with even economic implications, and combining

with the notion of social capital [1]. The authors make a good attempt at reconstructing the origins of that idea, linked to renowned names like Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, and the current applications in USA and Britain, mostly in studies concerning voluntarism, social engagement and issues related to identity and status, among others. In fact, several studies have applied these notions and axiomatics to discern how religion affects volunteerism and other forms of social engagement [3, 4].

The sociological applicability of the idea of 'religious capital' depends on the further refinements and the possibility of linking it to recent developments regarding the functions of religious faith and praxis in advanced societies. To some extent, the concept will remain blurred and fuzzy if the advantages that entail such capital are not made explicit. After all, for what reason should anybody purchase with relative costs in terms of time, attention and even money something that is useless or offers very limited rewards? We propose to refine and distinguish further between 'religious' and 'spiritual' capitals in terms of the greater or lesser connection to institutional religious bodies, with their formalized ways to access, belong, practice and assume behaviour codes. In that sense, 'religious capital' would require an investment in a recognized religious institution through frequent participation and commitment; while 'spiritual capital' could be gained through more informal means, or private practice, like personal study and meditation, in a more autonomous or unaffiliated way. We deem it important and useful to maintain that distinction in order to better assess different religious effects and performances.

The second move we propose is to link that concept to recent developments in the study of religion and its effects, which - in our opinion - have been somewhat neglected in the first wave or application of the concept. Obviously, institutionalized religion, with its communitarian forms, provides more 'social capital' than spiritual individualistic forms with little social connections. However, the implications of 'religious capital' probably go further and become crucial for religious coping; for the related field of meaning provision; and perhaps for the less related one of empathy, compassion and prosocial attitudes. Our intention is precisely to revisit and upgrade that concept to expose its relevance and utility better in those other fields, especially in coping and meaning making.

Taking up the two approaches, we aim at discerning to what extent 'religious capital', more than 'spiritual capital', might exert a positive influence on those who 'purchase' it, making them more resistant and resilient before adversity, by resorting to stronger sources of meaning [5]. We also wish to determine to what extent this capital has an effect in social relationships increasing empathy and compassion. After a short review of the relevant research, shall we introduce our survey designed and carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, to explore the issues related to meaning and coping during these exceptional circumstances and to assess the impact of religious beliefs and practices in the process.

3. Coming to terms with religious and spiritual capital through their respective forms and effects

Recent times have raised the question about the role of churches and other religious institutions in mediating religious or spiritual needs of the laity and building a consistent belief system that helps to live that experience more profoundly and benefit from it. Several voices - during the last decades - claim that such role is clearly weakened and out-dated in advanced societies, since many individuals manage to organize and express their spiritual experience outside and far from the churches, which seem less useful, or even harmful, when trying to live and project their deepest feelings and views [6-8]. Furthermore, existing religious traditions may become a confusing factor for many who refrain from 'choosing', and instead lean towards a general and borderless religious approach. A different argument points to the destructive influence of many religious traditions, especially in their fundamentalist forms, in the sphere of moral judgment and behaviour, throwing a shade on the institutional religion [9].

Nevertheless, other studies on religion underscore how difficult it is to channel and give expression to religious or spiritual experience outside of a religious community or institution that can support, encourage and educate such dimension, and prevent it from becoming too wild or distorted [10]. The issue seems rather practical, or at least needs to be addressed in practical terms. It necessitates an assessment regarding the extent to which religious attendance and institutional commitment are useful and play a positive role in the believer's life, instead of being a factor of alienation or an obstacle to the many possibilities that religious experience entails for most people. It requires data and evidence that could assist in determining whether a more specific form of 'religious capital' - as linked to religious institutions and attendance - might signify a greater advantage, and in which cases or fields, for those who resort to it, compared to alternative options - non-affiliated ones - that could work equally well, at least in providing some of the expected functions and benefits linked to religious capital.

Several attempts to date have been made to address such a question, which clearly involves different aspects and research programs. For instance, recent studies have tried to assess some of these relationships resorting to the vast amount of data provided by the European Social Survey (ESS) [11]. The results show a rather negative relationship between religious and ethical variables when applied to the economic sphere. Educational or developmental research also helps to clarify this issue by adding more factors or relevant variables [12, 13].

Yet, every program aimed at discerning between 'religious' and 'spiritual' capital and their respective effects faces big challenges. Indeed, several studies to date have pointed to the difficulty and heuristic limitations of distinguishing between institutional religiousness, personal spirituality and morality [14-16]. It seems, therefore, that the planes of religiousness and spirituality often overlap,

which does not help to render them operative when trying practical applications. Nevertheless, it is also worth mentioning about studies that distinguish the value of 'spirituality' as a separate dimension [17-23].

An area in which the proposed distinction and its practical consequences clearly apply is the field of 'religious coping' studies, a broad and very fruitful research program that has quite extensively explored the capacity of religious beliefs and practices to cope with distress and prevent negative behaviours. The question here is whether one form of capital works better than the other, when trying to cope with stressors or to avoid risky behaviours. A bibliographic survey gives the general impression that the available research has paid rather scarce attention to that distinction. In several published articles both factors - institutional religion and unaffiliated spirituality - were measured to assess their effects on coping strategies, but the distinction seems to be mostly ignored, and in our opinion, needs to be addressed in order to specify the contents of an updated concept of 'religious capital' better [24-29].

The meaning provision is deeply linked with religious coping, as religions assist individuals and groups to build meaning and propose schemas to guide personal life and help to make sense of negative events [30, 31]. In any case, these abilities could be less linked to the religious institution and more to other spiritual or non-affiliated expressions. Probably this question might be related to the capacity of achieving deep spiritual experiences, independently of institutional religious forms or churches. Indeed, a suspicion lingers that such experiences can be better lived outside those institutions, which could endanger their fixed models and constraining patterns a freer and more creative spiritual expression.

The last research field clearly involved in the attempt to specify religious capital and its distinctive effects or advantages concerns prosocial attitudes and how they may be implemented by religious forms or styles. An immediate and obvious answer would point to the traditional connection between religious and social capital, something well observed and studied. It can be expected that those who attend religious services will be able to expand their social networks. However, a different research strand has tried to dig deeper into the apparent relationship between religious beliefs and prosocial behaviour, a program well pursued by cognitive and evolutionary studies of religious behaviour [32-34]. This broad and ambitious program has featured religion mostly in general terms, and without much distinctions regarding religious style or expression. In this regard, one of the most successful theories has advanced the so called 'costly signalling' effect of religious commitment [35-38]. This would provide a better explanation regarding religious practices that involve a greater 'cost' in terms of material, time or body investment, 'signalling' greater commitment, trust and reliance. Nevertheless, an updated version of religious capital could complement that theory in a more fitting way, or at least would provide an additional rationale when trying to spot the content and reach of such capital.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered an exceptional opportunity to test such issues and to find out to what extent people who possess higher levels of religious capital, that is, were more closely related to churches, could cope better with and make sense of such extraordinary and difficult times. Clarification of the concept of 'religious capital' with its multiple implications brings us to the empirical research to explore the extent and implications that the concept displays in concrete situations of real dangers or uncertain circumstances.

4. Collecting data

The idea of surveying a significant number of people during the pandemic emerged in contrast to other surveys that have been launched during this time, but which were paying little or no attention to religious factors. During the second half of March 2020, when the pandemic was raging in Italy and Spain, a group of researchers linked to the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT) decided to create an *ad hoc* questionnaire for a survey with the aim of testing how people in confinement found a meaning within those exceptional circumstances, and to what extent religious faith played a role in that process. A team of researchers from four countries worked on the questionnaire, which was then translated into five languages (English, Spanish, Italian, Finish and Polish). The selected countries - Spain, Italy, Poland and Finland - reflect a clear convenience pattern, connecting scholars affiliated to ISERT and sharing an interest in the empirical research applied to theological and religious studies. However, the sample presents some advantages. It is quite homogeneous in being focused to four Western European countries, all inside Christian tradition, and - at the same time - it offers some specificities that allow to contrast data and to compare distinct cultural and religious environments. Indeed, from these societies, three are mostly Catholic and one - Finland - clearly Lutheran. Two of them are Mediterranean or meridional, while the other two are clearly Northern European countries. Furthermore, we can register different secularizing levels: from a high level in Finland to a lower level in Poland, being Spain and Italy being somewhere in between. These conditions allow to expect some degree of representativity in this sample when trying to focus on different religious attitudes and styles across distinct cultural areas in Europe.

The questionnaire comprises 68 items, besides the demographics. It includes several scales: on religious and/or spiritual dimensions (24 items), on possible religious explanations of COVID-19 (17 items), on empathy and compassion (4 items), on sources of meaning and meaning in life (19 items) and a brief scale on religious coping (4 items).

The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms Page format and distributed through emails and social networks to our respective groups of contacts, using a snowball approach, from the end of March through April 2020. With the different versions, the research team was able to gather a total of 1162 cases of online responses to the questionnaire. Most data correspond to Finland,

Spain, Poland and Italy. A fifth, country cohort was formed for the minority who were not born or living in these four countries (11% of the respondents).

4.1. The results

4.1.1. Descriptive

As can be expected in this procedure, the sample cannot be homogeneous or representative. Some imbalances can easily be detected, especially the data about sex: 69.8% of the respondents were women. The same can be observed with levels of religious practice: 39.3% attends very often, 32.8% 'occasionally' and only 19.6 % never. This is something that clearly contrasts with general trends in most European countries, where those attending religious services regularly hardly reach 10%, Poland being an exception. As for the level of studies, our respondents represent those with superior studies (75.1%). Age is found to be better represented (M = 42.2, Std. Dev = 17).

4.1.2. A proxy of religious capital and the related items

The most clear indicator in our survey on religious capital is the item that concerns the frequency of attendance at religious services, with a 5-point Likert scale from 'always' or 'very often' to 'never'. It can be assumed that people attending more church or other religious services acquire more of that capital, that is, they dedicate more time to it, are more committed and can purchase more of that capital in exchange.

We have applied a factor analysis as a habitual procedure to reduce variables in our survey - principal components - and to have a first impression on how the different items load into few general factors (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected factors from a factor analysis of the main components and Varimax rotation

F	Label	Cronbach Alpha	Selected Items	Var.
F1	Religious commitment	0.954	21	23.98
F2	Spirituality	0.710	4	7.41
F3	Full meaning	0.764	4	4.26
F4	Empathy	0.698	4	3.17
F5	Yoga	0.639	4	2.77

It is very interesting that the first factor, the one that explains most of the variance corresponds to a broad set of items that describe attitudes linked to religious practice and devotion.

It is important to consider that all these items present a high level of reliability, or in other words, they are all very highly correlated (Cronbach Alpha = 0.950). Item 8 'I attend mass or another religious celebration' is clearly related to many others that express religious commitment, and contains an explicit reference to God (Table 2). Obviously, several other references could help to

address the questions we posited in the theoretical part of our research: to what extent religious capital, measured through attendance levels, might be related to coping strategies; is a source of meaning; and is related to prosocial attitudes.

Table 2. Items saturating into the first factor, *Religious Commitment*

No.	Item formulation	R
1.	I generally seek God's love and care	0.887
2.	I try to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation	0.884
3.	Our lives are in God's hands, and I trust his providence, since He knows what is better for us	0.882
4.	Faith provides me with a source of meaning and tranquillity while being afraid of the pandemic	0.879
5.	Religion plays an important role in my life	0.872
6.	I have been praying for others to keep safe during the pandemic	0.855
7.	I am a religious believer	0.847
8.	I attend mass or another religious celebration	0.820
9.	Praying for myself brings me comfort during the pandemic	0.814
10.	I know that others have been praying for me during the pandemic and it feels comforting	0.791
11.	I live through this whole crisis with hope since divine grace is perceived more in times of suffering	0.787
12.	I have been praying more in these last weeks, after the pandemic outbreak	0.760
13.	There is something in us that is immortal	0.743
14.	It is important to cultivate a spiritual life to be happy	0.740
15.	During the pandemic, my religious community has been able to find new ways to contact the members and I enjoy this connection	0.723
16.	I see this pandemic as a time of trial which invites me to spiritual/religious conversion	0.705
17.	I feel I belong to something bigger than myself	0.668
18.	Religious faith plays a BIG role in this war against COVID-19 [*it was formulated in negative terms*]	0.626
19.	I consider myself a spiritual person, whether or not I attend religious events	0.612
20.	Life would not make sense without strong hope	0.594
21.	There are certain things in life I consider sacred.	0.568

With regard to the first question, a clear answer seems to emerge: people who attend more church services score very high on the items from Table 2.

These findings reveal to what extent religious faith expressed in community works in order to provide coping ways in difficult times and in isolation. This is revealed in the item 'During the pandemic, my religious community has been able to find new ways to contact the members and I enjoy this connection' (M = 3.22, St. D. = 1.57, R with church attendance = 0.695**, where the 2 asterisks mean high significance i.e. sign or ρ (the Greek Rho) < than 0.001). This shows how important community connection has been and the central role it has played in keeping hope and encouraging a positive attitude in

that time of forced isolation. In that sense, religious and social capital appear as closely related. This data supports the thesis that religious coping can work much better when supported by a church or a religious institution and community links, better than in individualistic or autonomous ways. Another highly interesting item linked to Church attendance is: 'I have been praying more in these last weeks, after the pandemic outbreak' (M = 2.82, St. D. = 1.52, R with Church attendance = 0.603**), which expresses that praying as a coping strategy is more of a resource for those who attend mass or hold a religious capital that can be resorted to when most needed (Table 3).

Table 3. Relevant items with means, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation with item on church attendance.

Item	M	St. D.	R with church attendance
Faith provides me with a source of meaning and tranquillity while being afraid of the pandemic	3.37	1.54	0.743**
Praying for myself brings me comfort during the pandemic	2.95	1.51	0.676**
I know that others have been praying for me during the pandemic and it feels comforting	3.29	1.53	0.629**
I live through this whole crisis with hope since divine grace is perceived more in times of suffering	3.22	1.57	0.649**

As for the items concerning meaning in life, we have already referred to some that show how people attending church celebrations are finding meaning and hope in their faith during the pandemic. However, meaning was underscored in other items unrelated to religious practice. An enquiry into those items reveals some correlations - not too high - but significant between the item of church attendance and the items expressing meaning (R = 0.246). Again, this result does not mean that committed religious people are not finding much meaning in their life, but that a meaningful life can be achieved by both believers and non-believers. When we compare the mean scores of believers and non-believers (an analysis of variance), we find a significant difference between both groups which indicates that believers find more meaning: self-declared religious people scored a mean of 4.30 (a scale from 1 to 5) in the factor 'Full meaning in life', while non-religious people scored a mean of 3.90 and those spiritual but not religious 4.00 (all variances are highly significant ($P \leq 0.0001$).

Probably meaning in life depends more on variables and not just religious faith and commitment, which emerge in our survey as powerful means of coping in times of high uncertainty and crisis, but surely other variables are at stake, like the quality of our personal relationships, physical and mental health and balance, or the level of our intellectual investment, among other possible factors (financial, aesthetic, familiar, entertainment…). Probably**,** we cannot isolate religious faith and practice as a source of meaning from the other factors.

It is entangled with them, and maybe meaning in life reflects a set of variables that work much better together than isolated. In other words, acquiring religious capital through attending mass helps to find meaning in one's own life, but it cannot be the only source of meaning, which depends on and is entrenched in other variables, probably more on the quality of personal and family relationships.

A related point to test is the relationship between church attendance and spiritual sensitivity. Things here appear a little bit more complex. The questionnaire comprised a scale with many items to measure this aspect. Church attendance correlates rather low with several of them, but higher with others, as the Table 4 shows.

Table 4. Relevant items on the spirituality factor with Pearson correlations and the item on Church attendance.

Item Description	R	Sign.
Sometimes I feel the presence of a mysterious force in me or in others	0.342	≤ 0.0001
There are some values and ideals that I consider absolute	0.349	≤ 0.0001
There are other dimensions or unknown forces that also influence our reality	0.378	≤ 0.0001
The world is nothing more than what we see and know	-0.277	≤ 0.0001
Life would not make sense without strong hope	0.479	≤ 0.0001
Our hope depends only on human achievements	-0.407	≤ 0.0001
I consider myself a spiritual person, whether or not I attend religious events	0.479	≤ 0.0001
There is a mysterious force in Cosmos (the Universe) that guides us towards the good	0.415	≤ 0.0001
There is something in us that is immortal	0.600	≤ 0.0001
It is important to cultivate a spiritual life to be happy	0.549	≤ 0.0001
I meditate to keep my mind still (during the pandemic)	0.155	≤ 0.0001

The above correlations table shows that attending mass is well correlated with all those items, with coefficients above 0.3, except the last item in Table 4 - on meditation - which seems less of a spiritual resource for those who usually attend religious services, and more with 9 and 10, which point to faith in immortality - a spiritual belief more related to Christian faith - and with the need to live a spiritual life. These results can be understood as a confirmation that people with more religious capital in the traditional sense - that is, attending mass frequently - are not less spiritual. Indeed, they are more, especially when spiritual life is understood in some way akin to their Christian faith.

The last issue at stake was how religious capital might be related to prosocial behaviour. The data shows an interesting contrast. The questionnaire scale on empathy and compassion offered 4 items (Table 5).

Intriguingly, the first item is more correlated to the one that measures church attendance, even if not at a very high level (R = 0.248), while the other 3 items, are weakly correlated. It does not mean that people with higher religious capital are not empathic, but that such attitude does not merely depend from religious attitudes: believers and non-believers can feel a similar sense of empathy - quite high in our sample when considering the means (M = 4.17, S.D. = 0.646, in a scale from 1 to 5). Nevertheless, it appears that those who attend religious services more frequently are more identified with the idea of helping others as a source of meaning. This outcome could indicate that not every religious or spiritual style, but just one linked to religious capital in some traditions is able to incentivize prosocial attitudes, beyond or besides the felt empathy.

Table 5. Items on empathy and Pearson correlations with the item on church attendance.

Description	R	Sign.
One of the things that makes the most sense in my life is helping other people	0.248	≤ 0.0001
I prefer to suffer before seeing another person dear to me suffer	0.094	≤ 0.0001
I feel very affected by family and friends who are in need	0.092	≤ 0.0001
I like to be close to others in times of difficulty	0.098	≤ 0.0001

5. Discussion - is the concept of 'religious capital' still useful?

The attempt to develop and apply the idea of 'religious capital' as a heuristic tool still raises many doubts in its application within sociology of religion. Besides the traditional concerns about its feasibility at translating in economic terms what is *per se* more abstract and transcending, the greatest issues are probably linked to its practical application. The limits are more apparent when trying to define it, to distinguish it from other closely related intangible 'capitals' - like social capital - and to quantify it as an operative variable, which can be measured from a series of indicators or proxies. To some extent, the problem is always similar: trying to render religious experience or its social expressions as something more available to empirical observation and testing entails overwhelming difficulties, given the nature of that very intimate and socially complex feature.

The other concern is more semantic and invites some change in the expression. Indeed, the term 'capital' has some resonance in the specific economic theory, instead of being traditionally viewed as suspicious. Possible alternative terms could be 'capabilities' and 'affordances', that have been developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum [39, 40]. The proposed alternative does not match exactly with the content of 'capital' when applied to religious or spiritual goods. However, it comes quite close, in the sense of abilities and interacting tools with one's own environment that facilitate engagement and provide higher quality of life. In any case, further research

could explore the application range of such heuristics or frameworks to religion and its provisions, to avoid the pitfalls associated with the old idea of 'capital'.

However, our development and application has shown some ways that could help to describe better and fruitfully use 'religious capital' as a heuristic tool, provided that we can associate it to some more empirically observable goods, and connect it with alternative paths in the scientific study of religion. Obviously, such attempts will always be limited in their scope, and subjected to critical scrutiny, since the 'gains' that religious commitment could entail are always linked to subjective appreciation, and hard to recognize at a sheer functional level.

The second point under discussion concerns the concrete application the present research has made of 'religious capital'. The sample is broad enough, but not homogeneous, with limited representativeness, and reflects a very particular circumstance, when most surveyed subjects were under lockdown. To justify this research and its method, it is necessary to remind how hard those circumstances have been and how difficult it was at that time to collect data, and at the same time how important it was not to miss the occasion, given the extraordinary time and context. Indeed, it has been a unique opportunity to test the reach and effects of religious beliefs and practices when dealing with such difficult times. The only alternative to collect a more representative sample was a costly phone survey, done in a random way.

In any case, the exposed outcomes offer an exploration that can help to understand better how religious beliefs with their respective practices and social networks become a useful resource for coping in a particularly demanding situation. This very approach offers a possible strand to better represent the function and meaning religion exerts in advanced societies.

6. Conclusions

A big issue for the social study of religion in the last years regards the extent to which religion still plays a role in contemporary societies, highly secularized, relying more and more on science and technology, and where the traditional religious idea of 'salvation' makes ever less sense for younger cohorts. A general impression is that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the game rules in these societies, and hence it invites us to better explore alternative scenarios, as well as available coping and meaning systems that can assist in harsh times and ensure resilience at a personal and social level. This new and unexpected context is an invitation to analyse the existing social systems, their functions and performance under a different light, in conditions of greater stress, and to find out which 'capitals' become more available and needed in this new context. Indeed, it is apparent that the value of intangible capitals essentially depends on their respective context: social capital value grows when people experience more harshness and trials. The same can be said about 'religious' and 'spiritual' capital: its value increases when other coping resources become scarcer, and environmental pressures demand a greater effort.

In any case, our research has attempted to show that in difficult circumstances institutional religion can be perceived more as a 'capital', that is, as a feature that requires investment, some storage, and availability. We have found that it is relatively measurable: people can hold more or less of it, depending on previous investment and actual reliability, as it happens with cultural and social capital as well. The data we have collected point to a clear utility of religious capital to cope with distressing and demanding times and to project meaning as part of broader coping strategies. Such strategies probably are built by combining religious and non-religious dimensions and resources. Religious faith and commitment contribute to integrate and project a set of beliefs, values and distinct coping strategies into a whole giving a sense of ultimacy and special intensity. In any case, the suggested approach and data invite to more extensive surveys and to broader applications that could help to better assess the expected functionality of traditional religion in contexts that could dispense with it. Indeed, the issue we raised from the beginning of our study - to what extent religion still plays useful functions in Western societies - is far from being settled, but the suggested method and framework could probably contribute to build models aimed to further verification and testing. Sociology of religion can fruitfully use this heuristic tool, especially in difficult times, and connect better to coping and related dimensions, which have been the object of extensive research in recent times.

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