

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction to the special issue on the economics of religion

Jared Rubin 

Chapman University, Argyros School of Business & Economics, Argyros School of Business & Economics, One University Drive, Orange, California, 92866-1005, USA
Corresponding author. E-mail: jrubin@chapman.edu

(Received 8 July 2020; revised 8 July 2020; accepted 8 July 2020)

The economics and political science of religion have blossomed into full-fledged fields in the last decade and a half. What was once a field on the far outskirts of economics and political science now regularly publishes in its top journals (see [Figure 1](#)).¹ By 1998, the field was large enough for Iannaccone (1998) to write a survey of the shape of the field. The field was very much at its infancy at that time, and most of the best work was done by sociologists and/or published in sociology journals. This has changed significantly in the 22 years since Iannaccone's survey. While the sociology of religion is still thriving as a field, the economics and political science of religion has become a distinct and impactful field of its own. Institutionally, this change is mirrored by the growth of the ASREC (Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture) annual meetings. ASREC, founded by Iannaccone in 2000, met for a few sessions at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion until 2009. Since then, it has held its own annual meetings, and it is mainly attended by economists and political scientists. The meetings have anywhere between 50 and 100 papers presented, most of top quality. Indeed, most of the data points in [Figure 1](#) were presented at ASREC.

There have been a number of sources of growth in the economics and political science of religion, but two stand out: economic history and Islam. Researchers in both areas have been active enough to warrant surveys of the specific fields *within* the economics of religion. Kuran's (2018) "Islam and Economic Performance: Historical and Contemporary Links" overviews recent works in the economics of Islam, while Becker et al.'s (2020) "Religion in Economic History: A Survey" analyzes recent work done on the economic history of the three major Abrahamic faiths. These trends were also noted in Iyer's (2016) survey updating Iannaccone's (1998) survey. Some of these trends have to do with data availability, advanced econometric techniques, OCR, and the capacity to store massive amounts of data. There is simply much more we can say about religion, religious activity, and their interactions with economic and political phenomena than we could 20 years ago. Indeed, at least half of the articles in this special issue would have been exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to write 20 years ago. I believe there is a generational element to it, as

¹A reference list of the papers in [Figure 1](#) is available at my website, <https://www.jaredcrubin.com/links>.

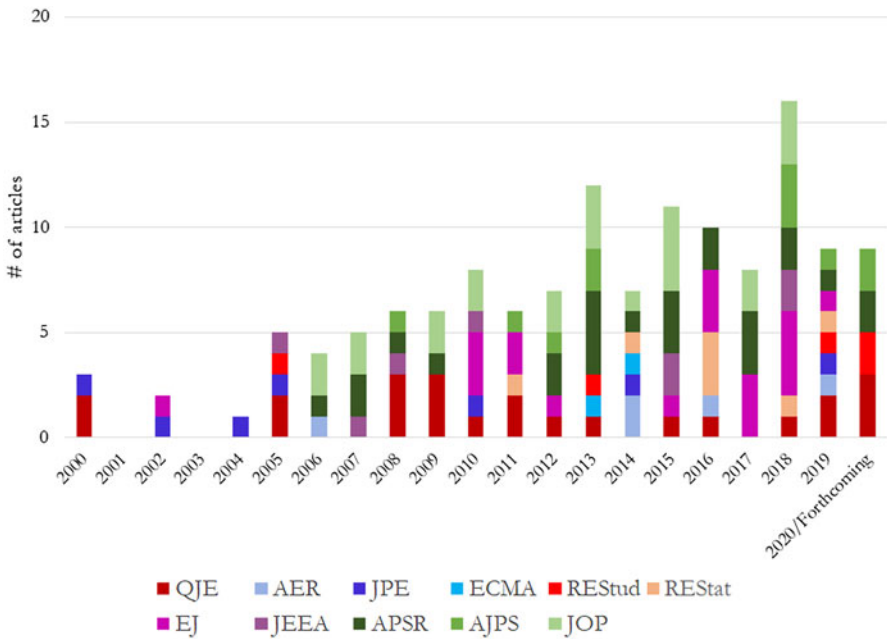


Figure 1. Economics and political science of religion articles published in top journals, 2000–2020.

well. As the pioneers in the field—Larry Iannaccone, Roger Finke, Rodney Stark, Eli Berman, Avner Greif, Rachel McCleary, Robert Barro, and Timur Kuran—showed that it was possible for the very best work to be well published and influential, graduate students slowly caught on to the fact that they could make a career out of studying the economics or political science of religion. I was one of those students (I received my Ph.D. in 2007). The next generation of students—including, but certainly not limited to, Sriya Iyer, Daniel Hungerman, Sascha Becker, Chris Bader, Mark Koyama, Noel Johnson, Jeanet Bentzen, and Jean-Paul Carvalho—built on the success of their predecessors, publishing important work while also helping to build the field. This has become a self-perpetuating cycle. The demand to study the economics and political science of religion has always been there for students. The problem used to be that it was an extremely risky career move. Now, however, as more and more graduate students see the field as a path to a successful career, many of the best young minds are entering the field. In short, the state of the field is as strong as ever.

One area in which relatively little recent work has been done in the economics and political science of religion is *demography*. There has certainly been some excellent work done in the economic demography of religion; Iyer’s (2002) book *Demography and Religion in India* comes to mind. Yet, the field as a whole has not taken off. This is a bit surprising, since demography was long one of the primary areas of study when the field was located closer to the sociology of religion. The effect of religion on family, fertility, gender, migration, and so on has long been a source of fascination. And with good reason. Demographic characteristics are among the most important and direct mechanisms through which religion impinges on daily

life. There are so many unanswered, important questions out there that volumes could be written. This special issue is an attempt to begin to fill this void.

This special issue contains seven articles, all of which are of extremely high quality. To be honest, I did not know what to expect when I agreed to edit this issue. I knew that there was a lot of work that could (and should) be done at the intersection of religion, demography, and economics or political science, but I was not sure how much was out there. To say that I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of submissions would be an understatement. The seven articles in this issue are all of the highest quality; some of them could have easily been published in the top journals in their discipline. They are all the types of articles I love: they address important questions while opening up many new ones.

Julia Cagé and Valeria Rueda's "Sex and the Mission: The Conflicting Effects of Early Christian investments on sub-Saharan Africa's HIV Epidemic" addresses an incredibly important issue: what is responsible for the spread and persistence of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa? HIV/AIDS has contributed to a demographic crisis on the continent; understanding its causes is of first-order importance. While there are many socio-economic causes, Cagé and Rueda look at the important historical legacy of religious missionaries. They hypothesize that missionaries may have had two counter-vailing effects that are still with us in the 21st century. On the one hand, they promoted the spread of religious norms that discouraged safe sex. On the other hand, they built health clinics and the health institutional infrastructure persisted. Cagé and Rueda find evidence in favor of both mechanisms; they sometimes offset, they sometimes do not. It is an important work revealing how historical legacies continue to impinge on health, demographic, and economic outcomes.

Two related papers that also address historical demographic issues are Sascha O. Becker and Francesco Cinnirella's "Prussia Disaggregated: The Demography of its Universe of Localities in 1871" and Ran Abramitzky and Hanna Halaburda's "Were Jews in Interwar Poland More Educated?" Both of these papers are somewhat descriptive in nature, revealing the demographic patterns of different religious groups late-19th and early-20th century Europe. One fascinating finding common to both is that the relationship between religion and education can switch depending on the urban-rural divide of adherents. Indeed, it is possible to have a Simpson's Paradox: Abramitzky and Halaburda find that urban Polish Jews are (slightly) less literate than urban Christians and rural Jews were less literate than rural Christians, but Jews as a whole were more literate than Christians. The reason is that Jews were so much more urban and urbanites had much higher literacy rates. Becker and Cinnirella find similar results in 19th century Prussia. These results should encourage much more work. Existing work on Jewish and Protestant literacy tends not to be disaggregated. These papers suggest that this may lead to misleading results.

Lisa Blaydes and Melina Platas's fascinating paper, "Religion, Family Structure, and the Perpetuation of Female Genital Cutting in Egypt," explores the role religious leaders have played in slowing the spread of female genital cutting in Egypt. Comparing Muslims and (Christian) Copts, they find that anti-FGC attitudes tended to become more common over time in both communities, but the rate of decline was much sharper among Copts. Blaydes and Platas find that attitudes of religious leaders help explain these differences. More Coptic leaders have come out against FGC, and more Coptic women believe that their religious leaders do not favor FGC. These are important findings. They reveal the power that religious leaders can have to shape the attitudes of their members.

Sriya Iyer and Melvyn Weeks present a new theory, supported by a data analysis, for how to think about fertility and religion/ethnicity in “Social Interactions, Ethnicity, Religion and Fertility in Kenya.” They argue that ethnic spillovers swamp out religious and many other effects when it comes to fertility decisions. What is meant here by spillovers is that the fertility choices of one person tend to be influenced by what their co-ethnics choose. This is an important insight, and Iyer and Weeks provide an econometric methodology for teasing out the “direct” effects of ethnicity from the spillover effects.

Eli Berman and Zaur Rzakhanov present another paper at the intersection of fertility and religion in “Fertility, Migration, and Altruism.” Their paper attempts to provide an explanation for why early Jewish migrants to Israel had much higher fertility rates (nearly one child per family!) than post-Soviet immigrants. There are two possible reasons for this difference: selection (the two cohorts were different for some reason) or a behavioral response to the new environment (once in Israel). Berman and Rzakhanov are able to decompose the two effects and they find that nearly all of the differences between the two cohorts can be explained by selection. They provide highly suggestive evidence that differences in intergenerational altruism can explain this result: earlier cohorts had greater levels of altruism, which in turn encouraged them to seek a better life for their offspring.

The final paper, Choon Wang’s “Religious Prohibition and Sacrifice: Evidence from the Amish Restriction on High School Education” harkens back to the canonical models in the economics of religion [especially Iannaccone (1992)]. Wang asks why the Amish have major restrictions on secondary education (past 8th grade), and whether these restrictions serve the welfare-enhancing purpose often found in religious groups. He presents a theory which shows how education restrictions can be welfare-enhancing by inducing those with the highest shadow price of religious investment (i.e., those with profitable outside opportunities) to leave the group. He tests this theory with an empirical analysis that exploits the 1972 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*, which exempted Amish children from compulsory high school education. This decision made it possible for the Amish to use education reduction as a screening mechanism. Wang finds that the Amish (who remained Amish) who were of high school age after the decision in fact have lower levels of education, higher fertility, and lower earnings.

These are all wonderful papers. It is an honor to have them in the special issue, and I hope they are only the beginning of what should be important research programs. I thank David de la Croix and Murat Iyigun for allowing this special issue to happen. I did not know what to expect coming in, but I am thrilled with the end result (and I hope they are too!). I would also like to thank Sébastien Schillings for excellent and responsive copy-editing. The entire team at the *Journal of Demographic Economics* has been excellent and supportive throughout the process. I hope you enjoy reading the articles in the special issue as much as I did.

References

- Becker, Sascha O., Jared Rubin and Ludger Woessmann (2020) Religion in economic history: a survey. In Alberto Bisin, and Giovanni Federico (eds.), *Handbook of Historical Economics*. New York: Elsevier, forthcoming.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. (1992) Sacrifice and stigma: reducing free-riding in cults, communes, and other collectives. *Journal of Political Economy* 100(2), 271–291.

- Iannaccone, Laurence R. (1998) Introduction to the economics of religion. *Journal of Economic Literature* 36(3), 1465–1495.
- Iyer, Sriya (2002) *Demography and Religion in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Iyer, Sriya (2016) The new economics of religion. *Journal of Economic Literature* 54(2), 395–441.
- Kuran, Timur (2018) Islam and economic performance: historical and contemporary links. *Journal of Economic Literature* 56(4), 1292–1359.