

Reconsidering Virtuosity: Religious Innovation and Spiritual Privilege

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Abstract

Spiritual virtuosity is an important but neglected concept for theoretical and empirical scholarship about movements for religious and social change. Weber focused primarily on ascetic spiritual virtuosi who sought to transcend the world. We suggest that when virtuosi enter the larger society and become leaders in movements to democratize access to sanctification, their influence can be dramatic. By approaching virtuosity as a social form and focusing on activist virtuosi, we are able to consider virtuosi's individual attributes, their collective relationships, and the social contexts that shape the success or failure of their movements. We advance our argument with the help of case studies of two very different virtuosi-led movements: the central European Reformation and the American Human Potential Movement.

Keywords

religious innovation, spiritual privilege, Reformation, Human Potential Movement, Max Weber

INTRODUCTION

In his comparative sociology of religion, Weber (1963) endeavored to show that history is replete with examples of virtuoso spirituality. Greco-Roman mystery cults, Gnostics, Sufi orders, Hasidic sects, and Zen schools are only a few of myriad examples of a general phenomenon that occurs across times and cultures. But while Weber's discussion has inspired an extensive literature, most subsequent scholarship has been broadly descriptive, typological, and lacking in systematic analysis of virtuosity. Considered more dynamically, virtuosity is an important social form that often plays a critical role in the genesis of movements for religious and cultural change. We propose to develop Weber's approach and present two case studies in order to illustrate the theoretical and empirical importance of virtuosity in the study of social movements. We suggest the need for a revitalized focus on virtuosity and its importance to theories of social change.

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A general definition of spiritual virtuosity frames our discussions: Spiritual virtuosity is the combination of innate individual talents for religious transcendence (Weber 1963:162-63) with sustained intense spiritual practice that can involve prayer, meditation, self-mortification, study, and/or other activities that represent potential salvation. In order to enact spiritual virtuosity, individuals must combine talent with intense practice. In facilitative social contexts, their self-discipline and commitments to action make them key actors in movements for religious and social change.

Activist virtuosi possess not only innate talents for religious transcendence, but also spiritual privilege: the ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise personal religious beliefs and practices (Goldman 2012:2). This privilege involves material resources that support virtuosi's cultivation of their spiritual affinities, cultural capital that allows them to move comfortably within the larger society, and social capital that facilitates their access to political and economic elites (Goldman 2012:72-91).

Although Weber discussed virtuoso activism, it has been neglected in the study of social movements because virtuosity is often conflated with charisma in terms of leaders' innate excellence (Shils 1965). Descriptions of charisma focus on personal attributes that emerge "by virtue of natural endowment" (Weber 1963:2) and become amplified because of followers' emotional needs (Camic 1980). We suggest that in some cases, virtuosity may be as important to religious movements as charisma.

Aside from Weber's brief discussion of worldly ascetics who enacted their spiritual commitments in order to change their host societies (Weber 1963:166-67), there is surprisingly little discussion of virtuosi as social activists. After examining previous scholarship about spiritual virtuosity, we will consider how Weber's early discussion informs our understanding of two movements that represent extreme cases (Gerring 2006; Goffman 1963) of religious movements that reshaped their surrounding societies. Both the central European Evangelical mobilization for religious reform in the early sixteenth century and the American Human Potential Movement in the mid-twentieth century made a profound impact. While the two movements were dissimilar in their goals and means, they resemble one another in terms of a *single* important internal factor that shaped their success: the centrality of activist spiritual virtuosi within them. The two movements' extraordinary impact was also facilitated by external conditions that expedited change: economic prosperity, the corruption and secularization of established faiths, migration to urban areas, widening educational opportunities, development of new technologies, and access to political elites (Gorski 2005; Gregory 2012).

We recognize that the Reformation, despite its largely religious and spiritual impetus, contributed to seismic shifts in political power in Europe, while the Human Potential Movement had little direct political influence. Nevertheless, each movement was a major cultural force in its respective society, and consideration of both movements illuminates the ways that concerted collective virtuosity can engender consequential episodes of religious innovation and wider social change. In these cases, activist virtuosi rejected the usual ascetic path in order to spread possibilities for spiritual perfection to ordinary adherents and empower them to grasp the instruments of spirituality in their own hands and embrace opportunities to become new kinds of adepts. Moreover, both the Reformation and the Human Potential Movement valorized personal religiosity and daily practice, reflecting virtuosi's priorities and also resonating with far more widespread demands for a richer spirituality.

These cases allow us to examine virtuosity more closely and begin to develop a framework that makes it possible for sociologists to identify the roles of activist virtuosi and the structural contexts in which their movements develop. These two virtuosi movements are by

no means unique, however, and other movements may be profitably reexamined in light of our focus on virtuosi leadership.

The thirteenth-century Waldensians in France and Germany, for example, formed large-scale spiritual movements before their opponents almost entirely suppressed them (Costen 1997; Kaelber 1998), but small groups still remain active in the twenty-first century. Other lesser virtuosi movements that continue for decades include the relatively recent Sojourners, which began in 1975, when a group of virtuosi divinity school graduate students decided to leave their seminary and do God's work by facilitating economic and social justice in the United States (Wallis 1987). Another unfolding case involves contemporary activist virtuosi who started the loosely configured American "emerging church" in the early twenty-first century and whose long-term influence is not yet clear (Bielo 2011).

Spiritual virtuosity is not a universal aspiration, because individuals vary in their interest in and abilities to pursue sanctification. As Weber (1963:162) observed, "that people differ in their religious capacities was found to be true in every religion based on a systematic procedure of sanctification, regardless of the specific goal of sanctification and the particular manner in which it was implemented." Under structural conditions that Weber (1963:166-67) never fully clarified, religious virtuosi become dissatisfied with systems that restrict spiritual excellence to small circles of very talented people. Their beliefs lead them to desert their cloisters and go into the world in order to make significant changes and implement doctrines that allow individuals to seek relationships with God that require no formal intercession. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber (1930:182) noted that Reformers passionately desired to carry ascetic religion "out of monastic cells and into everyday life," allowing people with lesser religious capacities to travel on spiritual paths similar to theirs.

In the sociology of religion, a full understanding of virtuosity as a social form that can include activism is only beginning to move beyond Weber's ingenious metaphors. Definitions of spiritual virtuosity can be fluid and often ambiguous, sometimes emphasizing collective conservatism, tradition, and scriptural literalism (Hill 1973:1-5). For some scholars, virtuosity is "Heroic religiousness" that exemplifies "the highest values of religion" (Sharot 2001:11, 47). Others characterize spiritual virtuosity as a religious approach that is premised on an alternative, disciplined, and segregated set of social relations (Silber 1995:187-98) or an endogenous source of creativity and schismatic dynamism within religious institutions (Wittberg 2007:324-28).

In the two episodes we will examine, virtuosi became central actors in social movements; mobilizing other virtuosi, elites, members of the urban bourgeoisie, and ordinary people by their example, their outreach, and their bridging between different groups. In so doing, they temporarily sacrificed their commitments to personal salvation via world-rejecting asceticism and contemplation and focused on implementing fundamental religious changes that they associated with foundational "norms of religious virtue" (Weber 1963:175).

The central European Reformers imagined a virtuoso revolution of spirit such that everyone could (and should) become a priest with an unmediated relationship to God and full access to the salvific Word (Gregory 2012; Koenigsberger 2006). More than that, the Reformers insisted that all Christians should adopt "a virtuoso ethic in their daily lives" that rejected Catholic tradition in favor of greater emotional and spiritual intensity (Hill 1973:5). Centuries after Reformers tried to make the individual pathway to salvation open to all, Human Potential Movement virtuosi asserted that everyone could (and should) cultivate their own internal sparks of divinity in order to implement personal and social transformation (Wood 2008). In both cases, individual commitment and collective action were inextricably linked because activist virtuosi came together to struggle against what they viewed as the stale religious ceremonialism and moral and social corrosion that impeded everyone's access to true spirituality and ultimate sanctification.

But what explains the eruption of virtuoso religiosity from the isolated circle of privilege into popular movements dedicated to the sharing of spiritual privilege, particularly as the virtuoso ethic is ordinarily opposed both to conventional piety and to mass religion? As suggested by the social movement literature (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 2011), the activist course is facilitated by a favorable socio-economic environment that allows virtuosi movements to attract influential patrons or political sponsors and also makes it easier for ordinary people to adopt spiritual innovations. Moreover, during times of economic and social expansion, activist virtuosi's growing accumulation of the cultural and social capital that is part of their spiritual privilege enables them to pursue personal sanctification by means of opening doors to salvation for wider circles. If conventional religious authorities are opposed to or indifferent to the broader distribution of spiritual privilege that supports their direct pursuit of salvation, innovative virtuosi are compelled either to become movement activists or else to retreat back into asceticism.

VIRTUOSITY AS A SOCIAL FORM AND THE VIRTUOSO AS A SOCIAL TYPE

In a general sense, religions can be understood in terms of the underlying logic of their paths to sanctification: Different religions offer paths to salvation, the elusive goals of spiritual transcendence and personal redemption that characterize every world religious system (Weber 1963:151-65). These paths can assume various theological and cultural characters depending on their foundational doctrines and their historical contexts (Sharot 2001). Religious virtuosi, as masters of the techniques of sanctification, become the "spiritual aristocracy" who lead others along routes to salvation.

Diminishing the importance of virtuosity, some scholars influenced by Weber attribute religious change to charismatic leaders and prophets, while associating virtuosi with "spiritual inwardness and social withdrawal" (Silber 1995:2). Indeed, as Silber (1995:31) notes, Weber himself can be faulted for both blurring the distinctions between religious virtuosity and charisma and also for undervaluing the significance and impact of virtuoso religion.

Weber (1963:166-70) generally characterized virtuosity as rigid adherence to traditional religious values and commitment to rigorous methods of sanctification. He separated this intensely structured, highly disciplined religiosity from dominant religious traditions that offer adherents institutionalized conventions and less demanding modes of sanctification. Weber also distinguished between typical expressions of virtuosity through personal asceticism (Brown 1988), rigorous methods of sanctification (Hill 1973), and contemplation (Sharot 2001), on the one hand, and, on the other, the ultimate values, impulsiveness, and sweeping goals associated with charismatic religions (Erdelyi 2008; Sharot 2001). The usual Weberian treatment of virtuoso religion characterized it as a personal phenomenon or, at most, as a behavior that does not scale beyond face-to-face relations in monastic orders and intentional communities (Hill 1973:2).

In the sociological literature, virtuosity is associated with the asceticism found in institutions like monasteries or retreats. As Weber implied, it is usually cultivated in isolation from the secular world (Sharot 2001; Weber 1963:162-63). However, even when they are enacted primarily in isolation, virtuoso practices are undertaken with the implicit understanding that others seek salvation in similar ways (Hill 1973; Silber 1995; Wittberg 1996). Despite their inherent individualism and their dedication to personal perfection in daily life, virtuosi require some social guidance and implicit or explicit validation. Religion is always "a social or collective phenomena" (Stark 2003a:7) because religious practice of all types stems from a dynamic spiritual culture grounded in shared symbols. As Stark asserts (2003a:7), "purely

idiosyncratic faiths are found only, and then very rarely, among the mad, or (perhaps) singular prophets—even ascetic hermits pursue a collective faith.”

Virtuosity is embedded in actual or imagined social interaction, and it can be identified in many contexts other than spirituality, for example, in politics. The original Leninist cadre party was, in this sense, a party of political virtuosi (Hanson 2010). Thus, because of its social character and its presence in a vast variety of human endeavors, virtuosity represents a Simmelian social form (Coser 1977:179-82; Simmel [1908] 1972). It is an irreducible element of interaction that varies in terms of specific social and historical characteristics but that nevertheless remains identifiable.

Simmel failed to define virtuosity as a social form, and he also left out the virtuoso from his assortment of social types. However, the virtuoso, like the stranger, assumes an important role as a transmitter of cultural innovations (Coser 1977:182-83). Contexts may vary in terms of different types of religious, political, and cultural movements, but virtuosity as a social form and the virtuoso as a social type are still central to many successful social movements (Levine 2008; Weber 1963:162-66).

In movements for religious and social change, virtuosi function as exemplars, as selfless workers, and as brokers among various groups. When virtuosi are unavailable or marginalized, however, religious movements can rarely effect significant religious and political changes, because virtuosi support stability within their societies (Johnson 1992; Stark 1996b). Personal goals of power and recognition that often produce high tension and factionalism are incompatible with virtuosity, unless virtuosi eschew their earlier commitment to their own salvation. Virtuosi's importance to successful religious movements lies in their willingness to subjugate their own interests to collective goals of sharing their paths to sanctification. Activist virtuosi's dedication to the movement separates them from the larger society and its material rewards (Weber 1963:175) and also from the battles for eminence within their movements.

IDENTIFYING ACTIVIST VIRTUOSITY AND SPIRITUAL PRIVILEGE

In order to work toward their own sanctification, virtuosi tend to reject the mundane social world and the conformism of conventional religiosity. Seeking to master the techniques of spiritual excellence and religious transcendence, they make extraordinary personal investments that sometimes take the form of asceticism to the point of self-abnegation or ethical commitment to the point of costly self-sacrifice. Weber (1963:166) notes, “Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the ‘world’: from social and psychological ties with family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities—in short, from all creaturely interests.”

Weber, however, also observed that virtuosi may enter the world when they view themselves as instruments of God, implementing doctrines of “natural human rights” (Weber 1963:166) and sharing their ideals with lay people in order to fulfill their calling and achieve their own salvation. In these instances, activist virtuosi become rational reformers or revolutionaries as they did during the Reformation and in the early years of the Human Potential Movement. Yet because spiritual virtuosi initially achieve their special status through mastery of ascetic behaviors, sacred disciplines, and visible transcendence of everyday life that require them to shun the secular world and its rewards (Weber 1963:162-63, 166), they are almost always exemplars rather than visible leaders at their movements' forefront (Weber 1963:166).

Activist spiritual virtuosi, in contrast to world-rejecting ascetic virtuosi, implement doctrines that define the world as their responsibility (Weber 1963:166). They believe that they

must transform their host society in accord with their ideals (Weber 1963:166-67), sharing their approaches to salvation with all who are willing to invest themselves in spiritual innovation that involves unmediated relationships to higher powers. They strive to democratize their own approaches to spirituality, and they are often unconcerned with institutionalizing their innovations.

Understandably, successful leaders of movements for religious and social change tend to demonstrate both charisma and virtuosity, but one leadership style tends to overshadow the other and comes to define a movement. For example, in the 1960s, recently trained virtuosi from the San Francisco Zen Center went out into the world in order to enact their moral priorities by transforming American spirituality (Tipton 1982). The Zen Center's founder's eventual successor was among these virtuosi, but once he assumed his role as the dharma heir, he became a capricious charismatic whose personal desires overshadowed his earlier virtuosity (Downing 2001).

Over time, charismatics, like the second Zen Center leader, are commonly overthrown or rejected by their devotees, because charisma, unlike virtuosity, requires nearly constant collective validation (Camic 1980). Weber (1963:28-29) described charisma as the aura of divine authority that made particular "supernatural, superhuman" individuals appear extraordinary, emotionally exciting, and potent to their followers. When charismatic leaders lose their extraordinary appeal for their devotees or fail to deliver miracles and wonders, they can no longer function (Johnson 1992).

Weber focused on successful charismatics who commanded large, loyal followings and not on those who were challenged or deposed. Because successful charismatics intentionally break with dominant political and moral orders, Weber (1963:244-45) asserted, "Charisma is the great ground-breaking force." Over time, however, virtuoso leadership may also create massive social change.

Unlike charismatic leaders who deliberately form movements around their personal leadership, virtuosi who become movement leaders do so reluctantly. For example, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), the renowned religious teacher and mystic, displayed elements of both virtuosity and extraordinary charismatic appeal. His sponsors groomed him to lead the Theosophical Society and proclaimed him the next World-Teacher, a charismatic successor to Buddha and Jesus Christ. However, because his spiritual virtuosity impelled him to focus on his own sanctification, rather than activism, Krishnamurti rejected attempts to anoint him as a leader, and he became a celebrated virtuoso spiritual teacher without a mass following (Vas 1971).

Given the inward turn of many other virtuosi like Krishnamurti, it is not surprising that Weber (1978:114) stressed that charismatic leadership, not virtuosity, changes history. However, there are many instances of religious charismatics whose brilliance and spiritual power catalyzed great cultural and social upheavals but whose own egoism, idiosyncrasies, and private interests shattered the movements that they had inspired (Johnson 1992).

For example, Sabbatai Zevi (1626-76), the "mystical" or "false" messiah, was a religious virtuoso who became a charismatic leader. In 1666, soon after a respected Jerusalem rabbi anointed him as the next messiah, Zevi assumed the role of the Jews' long-awaited redeemer and embarked on a 10-month tour of the Diaspora, where he mobilized thousands of devotees. However, Zevi's conversion to Islam, after his capture by the Turks, triggered mass disillusionment, destroyed his charismatic appeal, and created a leadership vacuum that shattered his vital messianic movement (Scholem 1973).

The dynamic interplay of charisma and virtuosity also defined Timothy Leary's controversial, and ultimately unsuccessful, role as a charismatic leader of various movements for spiritual expansion through psychedelics (Lattin 2010). His public advocacy of LSD began

as a quest for his own redemption, but Leary thrust himself into the spotlight, sought out exotic causes, and unsuccessfully attempted to cobble together a vast social movement to promote and legalize psychedelics.

In short, charisma is inherently volatile (Johnson 1992), while activist virtuosity is not. Movements led by charismatics often gain momentum during times of dramatic, frightening social transitions, but they may not survive the return of ordinary times and the development of critical scrutiny (Madsen and Snow 1991). Virtuosi, however, are as likely to begin their intense practice during periods of relative social stability as they are during periods of sudden upheavals. And they engage in social outreach when there is economic growth and technological innovation.

As Weber clearly understood, personal salvation through sanctification implies a degree of privilege, which minimally means that the spiritual adept is free, at least for the time of intense virtuoso practice, from having to negotiate the details of daily life in the social world. Besides the opportunity to pursue sanctification afforded by some material security, spiritual privilege involves education, reflection, and personal cultivation. Thus, Weber (1963:140) observed that such pathways are “limited primarily to the circles of the elite and wealthy classes.”

External resources that facilitate the long-term pursuit of spiritual development contribute to the achievement of sustained virtuosity and the possibility of successful virtuoso activism. For the privileged, the price of pursuing ascetic virtuosity may be relatively low compared with the relative costs to others with fewer resources. However, high opportunity costs that the privileged almost always pay for the pursuit of virtuosity validate the authenticity of their motives for sanctification and affirm their sincerity to potential supporters. Little wonder that the origins of so many saints lie among social elites and that spiritual asceticism is largely associated with prior affluence (Stark 2003b).

Spiritual privilege often translates into elevated social status, at least within communities of fellow religious adherents or spiritual seekers. Privilege triggers religious change when individuals who possess it treat their special access to spiritual experience and understanding as a resource that they are obliged to share, particularly with those whom they perceive as excluded from spiritual growth because of hierarchies within established faiths. Virtuoso movements expand precisely when the bearers of substantial privilege use their access to elite centers of religious innovation as resources that enable them to spread new spiritual approaches to lay people.

Rochon (1998) observed that broad cultural change occurs when movements develop around cohesive groups of intellectuals united by their rejection of the status quo and their embrace of new ideas. Relatively isolated contexts that are not completely separated from the world, such as universities, spiritual retreats, and study centers, can become crucibles for ideological innovations that grow into social movements because they temporarily shelter spiritually privileged virtuosi and provide spaces for them to explore practical and ideological innovations together and form “critical communities” (Rochon 1998).

Once they are introduced to broader publics, religious innovations can spread rapidly because “the ideology itself is a resource—attracting recruits, donations, and political patronage to the virtuosi that espouse it” (Wittberg 1994:23). In order to disseminate their doctrine and demonstrate the rewards of their spiritual innovations, activist virtuosi become brokers, leaving the cloistered bastions of spiritual privilege and mediating between their communities of religious innovation and broader publics.

Collective spiritual innovation spawns virtuosi religious movements when relatively privileged actors with access to centers of novel spirituality are positioned to reach diverse constituencies. However, as activist virtuosi expand their audiences, their spiritual integrity

may be questioned, or they may be forced to dilute their own practice. Moreover, theologians and other spiritual virtuosi who remain in elite centers may resent the popularization of their ideas and practices, as did Aldous Huxley, the novelist and philosopher who was a trusted resource for Human Potential Movement virtuosi. He admonished Timothy Leary about widely sharing esoteric spirituality and psychedelics through the movement and urged him to confine his outreach to elites:

These are evolutionary matters. They cannot be rushed. Work privately. Initiate artists, writers, poets, jazz musicians, elegant courtesans, painters, and rich bohemians. And they'll initiate the intelligent rich. That's how everything of culture and beauty and philosophic freedom has been passed down. (Leary 1983:44)

VIRTUOSITY AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Since Troeltsch (1963), sociologists and historians have suggested the importance of virtuosity to religious innovation through the formation of higher-tensions sects. High-tension sects nominally remain within their religious traditions but exit from the established institutional and organizational structures. Although there are some exceptions, for example, the eastern European Hasidic movement (Sharot 2001:51), this route to innovation usually marginalizes them and leaves dominant religions relatively unchanged.

A second documented pathway of virtuoso religious activism moves toward the formation of high-tension voluntary groups dedicated to individual spiritual cultivation and personal sanctification. Although they operate on the social and organizational peripheries of established faiths, they remain within given religious traditions and their institutional structures, forming monastic and mendicant orders (Wittberg 2007).

Silber (1995) argues that sociologically, virtuosity exists in a field of tension between the individual's desire for salvation as a personal achievement and the need for communal integration within society. This dualism is embodied in monasticism, an institution in which the virtuosi are, in their spiritual privilege, at once "self-defined as marginal" and, simultaneously, drawn to the center by their dependence on the power of established religious and political elites that sustain them (Silber 1995:7). While authorities and patrons seek the ideological and ethical legitimacy that their support of virtuoso orders may deliver, they may at the same time be deeply ambivalent about the virtuosi and their claims to spiritual and moral authority.

Historically, monastic orders often gain material wealth and social influence in exchange for performing important functions for cultural and political authorities (Sharot 2001). Not surprisingly, if virtuoso orders depend on sustained assistance from secular elites or clerical authorities, it generally limits the monastic orders' radical potential. Little wonder, then, that, following Weber's own interpretation, scholars often regard monasticism as a conservative force (Sharot 2001; Silber 1995).

The identification of virtuosity with tradition and conservative monasticism may thus obscure religious virtuosi's potential for spiritual and cultural change. A major exception to this pattern, Wittberg's (1994) important study of Catholic religious orders, indicates how virtuoso spirituality can inspire social movements. Again, this scholarship emphasizes the "ideological power" of virtuosity. In the name of revitalization or reform, virtuosi can refashion religious ideology into frames, which resonate with a wide range of adherents, "attracting recruits, donations, and political patronage" (Wittberg 1994:23). Despite recognizing the potential of virtuosi activism in the wider society, however, Wittberg focused on groups that broke away from conventional religious institutions through cloisters, hermitages, or intentional communities and spearheaded social movements that revitalized or promoted change *within* established religions.

For Hill (1973), their tendency to revert to tradition, out of normative commitment, is the chief factor that limits monastic virtuosi, even as their frustration with the outside world mounts. This accounts for both the containment of spiritual privilege and also its radical religious implications, often expressed through monasteries' charitable or educational efforts that are directed toward popular welfare (Sharot 2001; Silber 1995). Any moves beyond the confines of monasticism require ideological innovations that define new forms of spirituality and new methods of sanctification. These innovations are *the* critical inspirations for virtuoso activism (Goldman 2012; Wittberg 2007).

Weber (1963:166) suggested that doctrinal innovation is an important impetus for virtuosi to enter the larger world in order to reform it. A doctrine of salvation motivated crusaders to sew crosses to their breasts and liberate the Holy Land in order to do penance and heed God's call (Stark 2011:222). The belief that slavery offended God inspired abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. And according to Weber, ideas, not merely material conditions, accelerated the rise of capitalism in northern Europe (Stark 2001:58-59).

At the same time, ideological innovations that challenge established doctrine and practice can increase the tension between the virtuosi and the clerical elite by augmenting virtuosi's religious capital. Should religious innovators increase the relative value of virtuosi spirituality over ritual sanctification, tension between the virtuosi and clerical professionals intensifies. In the resulting struggle for status against entrenched clerical professionals and religious administrators, virtuosi have an interest in mobilizing laypeople to adopt their innovations and serve as sources of support for their conceptualization of the truly spiritual life and its supernatural rewards.

Ideological imperatives that generate tensions between virtuosi and clerical professionals are born of intellectual community as well as formal organizational relationships. The horizons of discursive communities, the hothouses for ideological innovation, expand when virtuosi become convinced of their mission to enlighten the broader world in the context of favorable structural and institutional conditions. As Rochon (1998) observed, cohesive groups of intellectuals may initiate significant cultural change because they come together through rejection of the status quo and their embrace of new ideas.

Scholarship on innovation suggests that certain structural features help to define the roles of virtuosi and amplify their voice. The call to share spiritual privilege has special resonance for the privileged who sustain ties with the world outside of their communities. Virtuosi occupy cross-cutting social locations that are prone to close the structural gaps that isolate the spiritually privileged from ordinary people (Burt 2005). Some virtuoso activists may exploit opportunities to become brokers and mediate between communities of religious innovation and broader publics. These virtuosi "bridge gaps in social structure" and "help goods, information, opportunities, or knowledge flow across that gap" (Stovel, Golub, and Milgrom 2011:21326). Not merely conduits of information, virtuosi become important as models of new kinds of religious engagement, demonstrating to others the possibilities that stem from spiritual innovation.

Successful brokers do not only seek out the like-minded but also "have contact with different actors who conform to different norms and conventions" (Stovel et al. 2011:21326-27) whom they may eventually influence in the direction of their spiritual innovations. As the literature on new religious movements (Dawson 2006)—including Stark's (1996a) exploration of the success of the Jesus movement in the Greco-Roman world—suggests, religious innovations confined to exclusivist sects and closed, densely knit social networks cannot attract enough adherents to remake the cultural landscape.

Spiritual privilege that includes general cultural capital allows activist virtuosi to enter the larger world and spread their doctrines of spiritual empowerment. Both the Reformers and the Human Potential activists had substantial cultural capital that allowed them to bridge

various groups. The next section describes the centrality of spiritually privileged virtuosi in the growth and spread of new kinds of spirituality and social arrangements.

TWO CASES OF VIRTUOSO ACTIVISM

Our exploration of activist virtuosity and religious and social change in the central European Reformation and the Human Potential Movement illuminates the complex interactions that occur in more routine, less visible cases (Flyvbjerg 2006).¹ By examining these movements, we specify the structural factors that are expected to promote religious innovation and consider the central role played by religious intellectuals committed to the wider dispersion of virtuoso spirituality.

The two activist virtuoso movements that we describe had lasting impacts, in large part, because elements in their social environments facilitated their growth and spread. As we noted earlier, six interdependent environmental contingencies facilitated their successes: economic prosperity, the corruption and secularization of established faiths, migration to urban areas, widening educational opportunities, development of new technologies, and political opportunities.

Economic prosperity fueled the growth of new constituencies within the upper and middle classes (Stark 1996a:29-48), and both movements attracted recently affluent constituents. Moreover, internal corruption and secularization had weakened well-established religions so activist virtuosi and laypeople sought fuller, more authentic religious experience during the periods when both movements grew and spread (Stark 1996a:91-202). Urbanization associated with economic growth created concentrations of potential followers whose earlier social networks had been disrupted by migration, so they were receptive to the social networks that espoused new approaches to spirituality (Granovetter 1973). Widening educational opportunities and technological innovations that became available to activist virtuosi and their supporters also contributed to the success of two movements.

Economic growth is a powerful force that drives activist virtuosity and popular interest in new spiritual approaches. The Reformation and the Human Potential Movement expanded during periods of mounting prosperity in their respective societies. Weber (1963) noted an elective affinity between socioeconomic status and religious beliefs, but the correlation of material status with spirituality also implies a dynamic relationship. He posited that improving material welfare tends to shift individual risk profiles so that fears of immediate deprivation and misery recede, altering the demand for religious goods in the direction of greater otherworldly and spiritual concerns (Weber 1963:140-41; see also Norris and Inglehart 2004). Clerical elites' capacities to control ordinary people's religious lives are more robust in societies characterized by slow economic growth, concentrated ownership, and widespread poverty (Sharot 2001), and their power recedes as people have access to other non-spiritual rewards. In other words, sustained economic growth serves as what economists call a "demand shifter" in the sphere of religion. Established religious practices may become increasingly unsatisfying when the economy is growing, property is dispersed, and widening upper and middle classes have the means to seek spiritual enrichment through a variety of sources (Ekelund et al. 1996:113).

Economic growth also tends to be associated with at least one aspect of secularization: the increasing importance of material and worldly concerns to hierarchies within established faiths. Virtuosi are almost always among the loudest critics of the decay of religious values and the erosion of spirituality and also the most visible advocates for revitalized spiritual life (Hall 1973; Wittberg 1994). In the case of the Reformation, the perception that the Roman Church had grown too worldly, venal, and preoccupied with economics was a driving force

behind the Reformers' spiritual innovations (Ekelund et al. 1996; Pfaff and Corcoran 2012). In the case of the Human Potential Movement in the early 1960s, intellectual disdain for materialism and the spiritual impoverishment of "one dimensional man" (Marcuse 1964) created a demand for renewal of the human spirit outside of established faiths.

Virtuoso-led religious movements in both the seventeenth and the mid-twentieth centuries became rallying points for ordinary people swept up by the profound cultural shifts related to economic expansion (Dawson 2006:39-59). Activist virtuosi developed ideological frameworks that helped laypeople reorganize their lives amid the rapid change associated with economic growth and the social dislocation that is often the result of rising urbanization. (Stark 1996a:129-62). In the seventeenth century, growing international trade brought both urbanization and new occupations to central Europe, and in America in the the mid-twentieth century, there was a rapid demographic shift to the urban East and West Coasts.

Expanding literacy is another structural variable that is consistently associated with religious activism and the diffusion of spiritual privilege. Historically, the fundamental source of spiritual privilege is literacy, a resource that is typically limited to very small circles in agrarian societies (Sharot 2001:17). Substantial segregation between the religious and social worlds of the elites and ordinary people has typically limited the capacity of virtuosi to reach beyond their circles of privilege (Sharot 2001:251).

In his comparative religious history, Weber (1963) observed that expansions of literacy and improvements in writing and printing have inspired religious innovation and the redefinition of spirituality in many cultures and historical epochs. We contend that virtuoso activism cannot succeed on a large scale without broad avenues of communication that generate public awareness of and engagement with new spiritual demands. We do not suggest that literacy and mass media are sufficient conditions for virtuoso activism. Nevertheless, they facilitate the formation of activist networks, spark public awareness of spiritual innovations, and support diffuse spiritual innovations (Kim and Pfaff 2012; Stamatov 2010; Wittberg 2007).

The Reformation is a famous example of the importance of spreading literacy, since it arose during a period of improved opportunities for humanist education and growing accessibility of the printed word. More generally, the development of print capitalism has been associated with ideological innovation and activist religion worldwide (Anderson 1991; Stamatov 2010).

The importance of ideological diffusion did not diminish with the advent of nearly universal popular literacy and access to a variety of media in the twentieth century. Reforms of the 1960s, such as the deregulation of religious broadcasting and the elimination of culturally biased immigration quotas in the United States, suppressed the monopoly advantages of the mainline establishment and created opportunities for religious and spiritual innovators of all stripes to reach new audiences through print, radio, and television (Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997). New niche media dealing with alternative spirituality and humanistic psychology sprung up to serve spiritual seekers interested in alternative religions (Goldman 2012; Melton 1993). The Human Potential Movement utilized television, paperback books, and magazines to spread its influence, as it drew activist virtuosi and followers from expanding public universities. While activist Human Potential virtuosi did not contend with hostile princes or inquisitors, they did have to overcome attempts to marginalize their innovations by politicians and clergy from conservative faiths (Kelley 1972).

Comparative sociologists emphasize the importance of political opportunities in explaining the variable success of social movements. Activist challenges to incumbent elites appear to be more likely to succeed in a "facilitative" rather than in a "repressive" political context (McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 2011). Wittberg's (1994, 1996) studies of the origins of

Catholic vocational orders indicate that this insight applies to virtuoso religious movements as well. It is almost axiomatic to say that unless there is access to material resources and political opportunities, virtuoso activism will be stillborn or without lasting cultural influence. Elite patronage tends to be particularly consequential for movements for religious change, because it bestows resources and legitimacy on upstart causes (Kim and Pfaff 2012; Pfaff and Corcoran 2012).

Activist virtuosi are encouraged or suppressed depending on whether their goals are congruent with the identities and interests of elite actors. This point has already been noted by sociologists of religion, particularly in studies of the reception and institution of Protestantism (Fulbrook 1983; Gorski 2003; Stark 2003a). Patronage need not take the form of direct political and financial assistance. Sometimes it is enough that elite allies do no more than shield virtuosi from the most withering assaults, make them aware of new opportunities, or associate the cause with their authority. The fact that patronage is more about dynamic relations and position taking than it is about favorable structural locations alerts us to the importance of virtuoso activists' roles as creative and strategic actors who may reshape situations to their advantage and persuade others of the urgency and necessity of their mission.

Activist virtuosi in the Reformation and the Human Potential Movement deliberately reached out to elites. The princes of a number of small states, including Saxony and Hesse, and the patrician rulers of some free and imperial cities were important advocates for the central European Reformation. Laurance Rockefeller's Fund for the Enhancement of the Human Spirit donated close to a \$100 million to individuals and projects associated with the Human Potential Movement (Goldman 2012:142-47). Activist virtuosi possessed the social and cultural capital and the persuasive doctrine necessary for them to cultivate valuable allies who supported their missions to spread new kinds of spirituality to everyone.

Beyond the contextual factors that enabled virtuoso movements to expand, ideological innovation propelled them. The era that we now call the Reformation had its origins in an Evangelical social movement that took shape in central European towns and universities (Kim and Pfaff 2012). Although it later became a movement with profound political implications, the Reformation began with virtuosi's desire to enliven the Word and inspire a more intense spirituality inside the Catholic Church. Rather than seeking to break from the Church, humanist theologians understood themselves as seeking reforms that would restore the Church to Biblical authenticity and open up pathways for sanctification that had been buried beneath centuries of encrusted ritualism and dogma. In short, the origins of the Reformation lay in a virtuoso rejection of received dogma and the religious status quo.

As historian Helmut Koenigsburger (2006:xii) stated, "Luther and Calvin undoubtedly played the role of virtuosi" in shaping the Reformation's profound "changes in religious sensibility." However, while Koenigsburger asserted that the Reformation's great theological figures should be understood predominantly in terms of their virtuosity rather than their charisma, a sole focus on their leadership may obscure the fact that they accomplished their transformation of Christian piety by inspiring hundreds of virtuosi disciples to play vital bridging roles between the seminar rooms where the new theology was developed and the town squares where it took flight as a lay movement.

Research on the diffusion of the Reformation demonstrates that university students, all of whom were young men, helped bring the new approach to salvation to towns and cities across central Europe (Kim and Pfaff 2012). Exposed to Evangelical theology and Biblical Humanism at universities, activists formed a loosely coupled virtuoso community with extensive social network ties, common training, and spiritual zeal. Students traveled and maintained contacts between university centers and their hometowns, becoming catalysts for political mobilization and proponents of a style of religious virtuosity that contrasted dramatically with monasticism or the hierarchies within Catholicism.

Both virtuosos and their opposition understood that this new spirituality represented a direct assault on the ecclesiastical and academic prerogatives at the heart of the Roman Church's monopoly on salvation (Bagchi 1991). Their principal weapon was placing the salvific Word in the hands and mouths of the common people. Indeed, Johann Cochlaeus, among Luther's most bitter orthodox opponents, complained:

Luther's New Testament [in German] was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. . . . In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity. (Schaff 1910:196)

Luther explained that his Biblical translations were based on the simple premise of expanding access to God. He wrote of the new spiritual idiom, "We must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this. We must be guided by their tongue, the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it..." (Füssel 2003:34). Spiritual privilege and the ethic of virtuosity were to be universalized.

The activist virtuosos who spread Luther's message exemplified the worldly virtuosity that Weber believed could lead to fundamental reform or even revolution (Weber 1963:66). They viewed themselves as instruments of God, implementing doctrines of "natural human rights" (Weber 1963:166) and sharing their ideals with laypeople in order to fulfill their calling and achieve their own salvation.

In the Human Potential Movement, activist virtuosos saw themselves as messengers sharing new truths rather than as instruments of God. Unlike the Reformers, they did not challenge a single dominant church or political order but instead promoted spiritual expansion that merged Eastern traditions with humanistic psychology, so that all Americans and ultimately everyone on earth could create more vital, meaningful lives (Wood 2008). The movement, however, implicitly challenged established conservative churches and mainstream lifestyles. It almost immediately generated a countermovement that brought together conservative Christians and politicians that led to vitriolic "culture wars" a decade later (Hunter 1992).

From the early 1960s through the early 1970s, the loosely configured movement embraced myriad approaches to self-actualization, an enhanced capacity to experience transcendent moments or peak experiences that would allow individuals to recognize their connections to all humankind (Maslow 1961). The foundational doctrine did not acknowledge a single *true* God but instead described a spark of divinity within everyone that could be cultivated through myriad spiritual paths. Philosopher and poet Allen Ginsberg, a Human Potential virtuoso who was a devotee of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, articulated the movement's broad spiritual approach when he described himself as a Buddhist Jew with attachments to Krishna, Allah, Shiva, Coyote, and the Sacred Heart. He said, "I figure one sacrament's as good as the next one, if it works!" (Kramer [1969] 1997:23).

Visions of amorphous higher powers with many manifestations encouraged *bricolage*, the construction of personal mosaics of spiritual beliefs and practices that remained separate and distinct from one another (Lévi-Strauss 1966). *Bricolage* is always unfinished, so the movement embraced hundreds of spiritual and personal growth practices that might enable everyone to access their internal spark of divinity, become their best possible self, and contribute to the advancement of all humankind (Leonard and Murphy 1995).

During the two decades following World War II, unaffiliated virtuosi practiced and studied together in the Vedanta Society, Sequoia Seminars (Markoff 2005:22-26, and various groups inspired by Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga (Spiegelberg 1948). Members of these groups joined virtuosi academics to reach out to ordinary Americans in the early 1960s. Human Potential activists, like virtuosi during the Reformation, developed their doctrine around elite universities, although most were graduates or faculty rather than students at these secular institutions.

In the early 1960s, informal groups interested in personal and spiritual growth sprung up in the Boston area around Harvard, MIT, and Brandeis and in the San Francisco Bay Area around Stanford and Berkeley (Lattin 2010). They attracted other virtuosi and spiritual seekers who spread their doctrine, and by the end of the decade, a human potential trade route passed through college and university towns on both coasts and, except for a few major cities or university communities, bypassed most of Middle America. At the time, intellectuals and scholars commanded public recognition and media attention, so their efforts were acknowledged by the national media (Slater 1969; Tompkins 1985).

At Human Potential Movement centers, like Esalen Institute in California or Omega Institute in New York, activist virtuosi from diverse grassroots groups, academia, and professional associations met together briefly and discovered common goals and values across the movement. Most, however, soon aligned with only one sector of the movement and became representative agents of specific interests, such as humanistic or Gestalt psychology or alternative spirituality.

Virtuoso activists became leaders in established academic and professional groups, such as the National Education Association and the American Psychological Association. And they also founded the Division of Humanistic Psychology within the American Psychological Association (Doyle 1973). Two accredited universities that offered degrees in psychology emerged from the Human Potential Movement: Naropa Institute and the California Institute of Integral Studies. There are also several dozen independent graduate schools that offer credentials in counseling and psychology. In education, activist virtuosi founded the University of California at Santa Barbara's Confluent Education Program, and while the program closed in 1996, its graduates still influence progressive, non-test-oriented approaches to teaching and learning (Shapiro 1998). A number of new religious movements, such as the Rajneeshes, Synanon, and Arica, briefly identified themselves as part of the Human Potential Movement during the 1960s and early 1970s. The movement also influenced established liberal faiths that incorporated humanistic psychology into pastoral counseling and indirectly contributed to liberal religions' ecumenical approaches and their conceptualizations of a distant, unknowable divinity (Froese and Bader 2010).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We have examined the roles that spiritual virtuosi sometimes play in sparking widespread social changes in concert with substantial religious innovation in order to underscore the importance of virtuosity as a social form and reclaim it as a theoretical instrument. Our two cases enrich understandings of the capacity of spiritual virtuosi to act beyond narrow ideological goals and initiate religious, cultural, and structural transformations. By considering the broad impact of spiritual virtuosi in two consequential movements, we have moved beyond the limited focus on monasticism to examine how virtuosity may contribute to social change in other contexts. Whatever the ideological and organizational resources that virtuoso communities may possess, their basic inclinations ordinarily draw them toward asceticism and contemplation, not mobilization.

Virtuosity becomes a dynamic force for religious and social change when there is convergence of interests and capacities of spiritual virtuosi to act collectively behind their ideological goals. New attention to the importance of virtuosi must meet the challenge of accounting for the activist turn and the varied outcomes of virtuosi-led movements. It is necessary to ask questions about levels of virtuosity and spiritual privilege, collective doctrines and practices, critical communities, bridging, and the six external factors that we identified.

We contend that a general explanation for virtuoso activism is possible if one builds from three concrete insights that can be derived from the comparative sociology of religion. Virtuosi can be distinguished from other religious adherents through their high levels of commitment to innovation in religious ideologies and their spiritual techniques. They can be assembled into critical communities that foster activism. And virtuosi can be uniquely positioned to bridge elite centers of religious innovations with the wider society.

The centrality of activist virtuosi in the Reformation and the Human Potential Movement indicates the need for further examination of virtuosity. The Reformation created far more dramatic shifts in politics and religion than the Human Potential Movement, and that difference suggests activist virtuosi may be of considerable importance to social movements that initiate different types of religious and social change.

For example, activist virtuosi were at the forefront of three twentieth-century political movements that altered the course of history in India (Lelyveld 2011), South Africa (Gesh 2004) and the United States (Branch 1989). Virtuosi in those movements sought massive political change in terms of doctrines of universal human rights and the religiously grounded practice of nonviolence (Chabot 2012). The respective leaders, Gandhi, Tutu, and King, displayed virtuosity and charisma. Virtuosi within their inner circles, however, were their trusted advisors, spokespeople, and bridge actors to other groups.

Along with the cases that we considered, these dramatic examples indicate the importance of virtuosity to the study of religious and cultural transformation. Our discussion of the Reformation and the Human Potential Movement ground a preliminary framework for considering activist spiritual virtuosity and the social factors that empower or impede virtuosi movements.

We identify virtuosity as the dynamic interaction of two individual attributes: talents for religious transcendence and engagement in intense, disciplined spiritual practice and study. Virtuosi possess spiritual privilege: the resources to devote time to select, combine, and revise their personal religious beliefs and practices. Successful activist virtuosi's individual resources include not only spiritual affinities and opportunities to cultivate them but also the cultural capital that allows them to move comfortably within the larger society and the social capital that facilitates their access to political and economic elites.

In their search for personal salvation, activist virtuosi assemble into critical communities, such as monasteries, spiritual retreats, and universities. The critical communities they develop can foster their engagement with religious innovation and facilitate their bridging to sources of political and economic support within the larger society. Virtuosi in critical communities become activists, however, only when they develop doctrines that define their spiritual experience and understanding as resources that they must share with everyone. They enter the world beyond their communities because they view themselves as instruments for some higher power that calls them to share spiritual innovations and new paths to salvation with laypeople.

Ideology both motivates activist virtuosi and generates popular support for their goals. The doctrines of the Reformation and the Human Potential Movement that activist virtuosi brought to their respective societies empowered ordinary people to pursue salvation without intercession and helped them form their own supportive and sustaining spiritual organizations.

No matter how compelling their doctrine, activist virtuosi rarely create enduring religious and cultural transformations unless their movements arise during periods of economic growth and social instability that facilitate popular receptivity to their spiritual innovations. Mass education, literacy, and new media can also support the growth of virtuosi movements by making their spiritual innovations more accessible. These environmental variables interact with virtuosi's abilities, the attractiveness of their doctrine, and their access to political and financial support to nourish their movements.

Our discussions of activist virtuosi in two movements that generated lasting religious and cultural changes are grounded in classical sociological theory and qualitative methodologies. By approaching virtuosity as a social form and focusing on activist virtuosity, we draw from history and sociology to advocate for more scholarship to sharpen this neglected theoretical lens. Our brief case studies represent an invitation for theory building and empirical scholarship that incorporate spiritual virtuosity and interrogate its importance in a variety of contexts.

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NOTE

1. In order to consider the central European Reformation, we draw on extensive historiography as well as primary data on hundreds of Evangelical activists coded from entries in a standard biographical dictionary of the Reformation (Stupperich 1984). Data about the Human Potential Movement were gathered from twenty-three interviews at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, from 1999 to 2003; participant observation; and analysis of documentary materials at Esalen and in the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur. The Humanistic Psychology Archives at the Davidson Library at the University of California, Santa Barbara, offered over two hundred collections that include personal papers, institutional records, photographs, unpublished manuscripts, and the Anderson Collection of digitally reformatted interviews and documentary materials that trace the growth and spread of the Human Potential Movement from 1962 through 1983.

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