

*Interdisciplinary Journal of  
Research on Religion*

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Volume 3

2007

Article 2

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**Organizational Niches  
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Uniting Two Literatures**

Christopher P. Scheitle\*

Doctoral Candidate in Sociology  
Pennsylvania State University

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\* cps153@psu.edu

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# Organizational Niches and Religious Markets: Uniting Two Literatures

Christopher P. Scheitle

Doctoral Candidate in Sociology  
Pennsylvania State University

## Abstract

Researchers involved in the scientific study of religion have become increasingly aware that religious organizations face certain “external imperatives” (Finke and Stark 1988). Concepts such as religious markets and competition have become commonplace in the literature. Although the organizational ecology literature contains similar propositions and concepts, few explicit connections have been made between these two areas. This article endeavors to unite these two literatures by focusing on the concept of organizational niches. I then apply these concepts and propositions to the question of growth in religious organizations. The analysis shows that niche width and overlap affect religious organizations negatively. In conclusion, I offer further opportunities for connecting the religion literature to the broader organizational literature through the concepts of niches and organizational ecology.

The consequences of specialization and fragmentation within sociology have been a persistent concern for sociologists (Becker 1979; Moore 1981; Zhao 1993). One of the significant drawbacks resulting from this internal differentiation is the challenge of making connections between the different substantive literatures. This is clearly illustrated within the sociology of religion literature. Scholars in this field have become more attentive to the fact that religious organizations exist within a larger environmental context, or at least they have begun to view that context in different ways. Reflecting this change, it has become common to use terms such as *markets* and *competition* in speaking of religious organizations (Finke and Stark 1992). This shift in perspective has produced many insights, both theoretical and empirical, for the study of religion. However, surprisingly little connection has been made between this research and the broader organizational literature, particularly with organizational ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Singh and Lumsden 1990), which often addresses issues similar to those in the religious economies literature. This is surprising not only because the organizational literature offers much for research on religion, but also because religious organizations provide a natural test for ecological theories.

Some work has been done toward integrating organizational theory and research with the religion literature (e.g., Demerath et al. 1998). For example, Mark Chaves utilized a new institutional perspective in his study on the ordination of women in religious groups (Chaves 1996, 1997). Other work has taken a similar approach (Cormode 1998; Swartz 1998). Organizational ecology, however, presents a theoretical perspective that is particularly well suited to the so-called new paradigm (Warner 1993) for the study of religion because both literatures are concerned with similar processes, such as organizational fitness, competition, and the distribution of environmental resources. As will be shown, their shared interests have produced very similar arguments, even if they have been expressed in different ways.

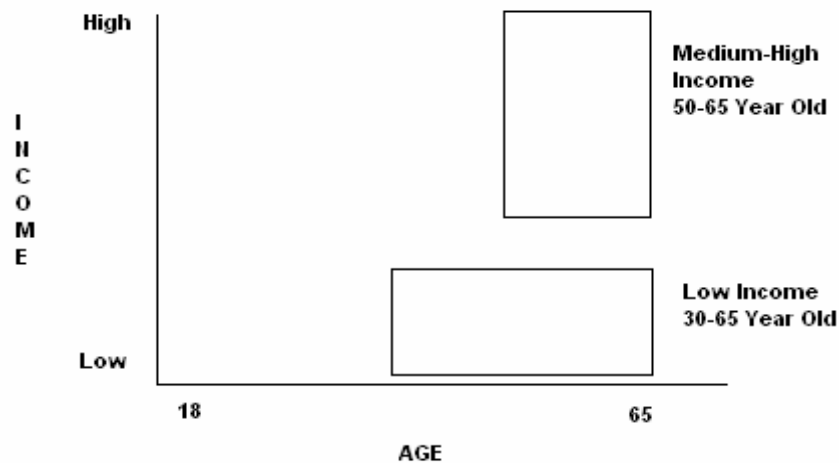
It is my goal in this article to begin to unite these two literatures. I begin by presenting some of the key concepts and propositions within organizational ecology, especially those that concern organizational niches. I then show how many of the developments and debates in the study of religion can be grounded within this larger organizational framework. Finally, I apply the concepts and propositions from organizational ecology to the question of growth in religious organizations. In short, making the connection between these two perspectives can clarify some of the debates within the religion literature and provide new opportunities for theoretical and empirical development. It is not my intent to add more concepts or reinterpretations to the literature. Instead, I want to synthesize the study of religious organizations, particularly from a religious economies perspective, with that of a broader literature and show that many of our current concepts and interpretations can be similarly integrated according to this

perspective. As a result, I hope to actually decrease the number of concepts and interpretations required to explain various phenomena and create a more parsimonious theoretical model.

### *THE ORGANIZATIONAL NICHE*

The organizational niche has been one of the more fruitful concepts in organizational theory and research (Baum and Singh 1994; Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003; Péli and Nooteboom 1999). Although it has produced many secondary propositions and lines of research, the organizational niche is a rather simple theoretical construct. It is based on the recognition that every organization occupies a social space. This space is the part of the social environment with which the organization interacts during its operations. Part of this niche is literally spatial. That is, organizations interact with different geographic parts of society. Some are localized in one city or area; others are spread across the nation. However, organizational niches go beyond geographic space. They can encompass most other standard social science variables. For instance, some organizations interact with a particular age group, some interact primarily with one gender, and others focus on a particular socioeconomic group. Typically, organizational niches are constructed from a combination of these variables. This is illustrated in Figure 1, in which age and income are considered as the niche dimensions for two organizations. One organization's niche centers on high-income individuals ranging in age from 50 to 65 years; the other organization's niche centers on low-income individuals ranging from 30 to 65 years of age.

**Figure 1: Niches of Two Organizations on Age and Income Dimensions**



It is natural to think of for-profit organizations attempting to market and sell their goods and services to a particular segment of society. However, all organizations, whether commercial or not, occupy a particular niche within society. Like for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations attempt to draw support from a particular subset of society. In fact, organizational niches can be thought of more concretely as the part of the social environment from which the organization extracts its resources. These resources could be in the form of profits, membership, time, energy, or anything else.

Niches have two qualities that are of primary importance for understanding any organization and organizational field. The first is the width of an organization's niche; the second is the amount of overlap between the organization and other organizations within its field. Niche width and niche overlap are valuable analytic tools for understanding "competitive processes and environmental dependencies" (Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003: 309). Questions concerning organizational identity, resource mobilization, and interorganizational relationships all draw on the concepts of niche width and niche overlap.

### *Niche Width*

Alluded to above in the discussion of local versus national organizations is the issue of niche width (Freeman and Hannan 1982; Péli 1997). Organizations vary in how much of the environment they attempt to extract resources from. Another way of putting this is that organizations vary in how specialist or generalist they are (Carroll 1985). For instance, in terms of age, the niche of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is narrower or more specialized than that of a political party, which attempts to gain resources from all individuals of voting age. On the other hand, in terms of geography, the AARP is much broader in niche width than is a local organization. In short, niches are multidimensional, and an organization can be narrow on one dimension and broad on another. Looking at the niches in Figure 1, we see that one organization is narrower on the age dimension than the other, but the other organization is narrower on the income dimension.

The width of an organization's niche has important consequences for how the organization operates and its chances for success (i.e., organizational fitness). The larger the niche size, the more difficult it is for the organization to serve any particular part of the niche as well as a more specialized organization could. Groups with a broad niche have two options. The first is to compromise and create services and programs that appeal at least a little to all parts of their niche. The second is to create services and programs that appeal to only one part of their niche, most likely the largest part. Neither of these options is ideal, as the first only partially satisfies (and hence partially dissatisfies) everyone, and the second

entirely dissatisfies a significant part of the organization even if just the minority. In sum, “breadth of niche comes ... at the expense of lowered appeal at some positions” (Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos: 321; Hannan and Freeman 1977). The result is that if two organizations are competing with each other, the organizational fitness of a narrow niche is higher than that of a broad niche in an environment that is fairly stable (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 947–949).<sup>1</sup>

For example, consider a radio station that attempts to appeal to everyone within an 18- to 60-year-old demographic. The station can attempt to program music that people across this age group will listen to, but it is likely that everyone will be unhappy with the music selection more often than not. This means that if there are other radio stations appealing to smaller niches that can satisfy those age groups more consistently, individuals will tend to choose those stations. That is, the specialist radio stations will tend to win against generalist stations. The other option is to play only music that appeals to the largest part of its niche, say, 18- to 30-year-olds. This option, however, will make the 31- to 60-year-olds unhappy, and if the radio station is still trying to include these individuals within its niche, it will be spending resources (e.g., advertising) on a part of its niche that is not providing any resources in return. Again, specialist radio stations will be more “fit” because they are spending resources only on the part of their niche that is returning resources.

Besides the marketing problems created by having a niche that is too broad, niche size affects organizations in other significant ways. The pressure of social homophily makes it difficult for organizations with a broad niche to fully integrate individuals into the organization (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Individuals want to form relationships and networks with individuals similar to themselves. The more heterogeneous and generalist an organization, the more difficult it is for individuals to create these relationships. That is, the more generalist an organization, the more it contains individuals who are “on the edge” of the organization or “in between” the organization and its competitors (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). These less integrated flanks of the group’s niche base are at risk for dropping out or being taken away by competing groups that provide a product more tailored to the individual. This means that broad organizational niches are of particular concern to voluntary or social organizations that rely on relationships between members.

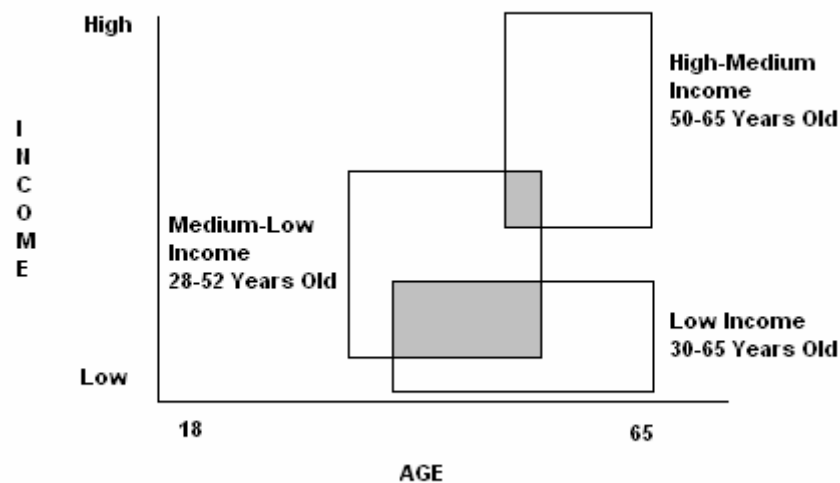
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<sup>1</sup> Broad niches can be beneficial in an environment that is uncertain and in which the amount and/or type of resources changes frequently. This might apply to some religious environments in which immigration or population mobility is high, but for the most part, I am assuming that religious markets are much more stable than the rapidly changing markets faced by other organizations, such as high-tech firms. Most religious groups can be confident that there will be some market for their goods in the relatively long-term future.

### *Niche Overlap*

The issue of competition between organizations brings us to another important quality of organizational niches: that of niche overlap (MacArthur 1972). As I noted at the beginning of this discussion, no organization exists in isolation. Multiple organizations are always competing for the resources within a niche. Hence, the fitness of any organization is a function not only of its niche, but also of the distribution of competitors within that niche (Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003). For instance, Figure 2 shows a niche overlap between the two organizations in Figure 1 and a new organization that has entered the field.

**Figure 2: Overlapping Niches**



The individual who belongs to AARP usually does not swear off other organizational affiliations. Of course, an organization that does make its members swear off other organizations could reduce the impact of competitors within its niche. This is a point that is of particular relevance to religious organizations, which often do require some sacrifice in nongroup goods (Iannaccone 1988). However, for now, we will assume that providing resources to one organization does not inherently eliminate providing resources to other organizations.

The more an organization's niche overlaps that of other organizations, the more competition it faces for the resources within that overlap (Dobrev, Kim, and Hannan 2001: 1303). This is a simple function of there being limited resources within any niche. Assuming that every organization is successful at gaining at least some resources from its niche, the addition of each organization to a niche

reduces the resources available to all other organizations.<sup>2</sup> Research has supported this proposition by showing that the density of overlap between niches increases mortality rates within organizational populations (Baum and Singh 1994; Podolny, Stuart, and Hannan 1996; Sørensen 2000).

In most environments, then, organizations will be most fit if they can create a specialized niche that does not overlap the niches of other organizations. Of course, some overlap is likely to occur, but the more this overlap can be reduced, the more resources will be available to the organization.

### *SPECIALIZATION AND COMPETITION IN RELIGIOUS MARKETS*

Readers who are familiar with research on religious organizations, particularly research from the religious economies perspective, will likely see similarities between that literature and the concepts of organizational niches, niche width, and niche overlap. The similarities are especially true in examining recent discussions about specialization within and competition between religious organizations.

#### *Religious Specialization*

The niche width of religious organizations has been discussed, though implicitly, within the religion literature. For example, in their research on multiracial congregations, Christerson and Emerson (2003) note how these groups struggle to serve all their racial and ethnic groups equally and integrate them into the life of the congregation. Multiracial congregations that have a majority racial group tend to predominantly serve that group, leaving out minority groups. This is similar to the hypothetical radio station mentioned above that starts serving the majority 18- to 30-year-old demographic at the expense of the rest of its niche. If more specialized congregations are available, these underserved members are likely to leave the more generalist multiracial congregation. Of course, the problems created by inclusiveness are not new to religious congregations (Rudowski 1995).

Others have spoken of specialized religious organizations in terms of distinct “sub-cultural identities” (Evans 2003; Smith 1998). From this perspective, narrow niches are created by the creation of strong symbolic and social boundaries between the group and other organizations. Religious groups that do not define distinct organizational boundaries are, by default, generalists. Groups that do actively define boundaries, whether through strictness or other mechanisms, are

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<sup>2</sup> The literature provides one exception to this rule: When more organizations within a niche space increase the legitimacy of that organizational form, competition could improve organizational fitness or growth (Hannan and Carroll 1992; Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003). However, this growth-by-legitimacy effect has a limit, and continued competition will eventually harm the organizations within that space.

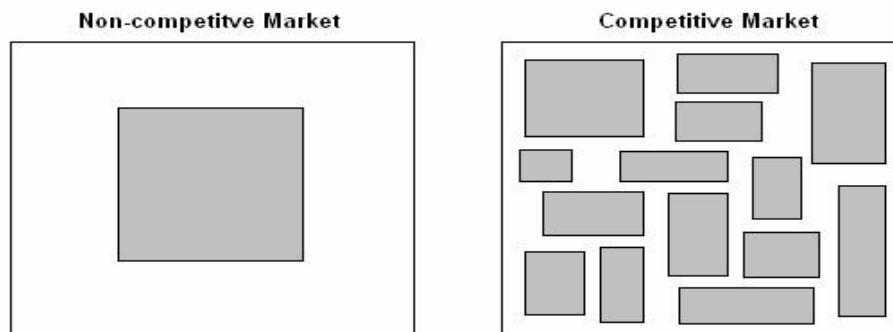


narrowing their niche and becoming more specialized. This is related to the long line of discussion about church-versus-sect differences, which could easily be reframed as a discussion of broad versus narrow niches.

Religious niches and specialization have been most directly invoked in the discussion of religious economies (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000). For example, in a regulated religious economy (i.e., state-supported and/or state-suppressed), one generalist religious organization tends to dominate. As the niche literature argues, this state of generalism tends to reduce efficiency and effectiveness across all parts of the established or official group's niche: "The fact is that a single faith cannot shape its appeal to precisely suit the needs of one market segment, without sacrificing its appeal to another" (Finke and Stark 1988: 42). This leads to inefficient monopolies and low levels of religious mobilization (Finke 1990). When regulation decreases and pluralism is free to grow, a number of more specialized religious organizations begin to fill the environment. In other words, as competition increases within a religious market, organizations tend to become more specialized.

This is, not surprisingly, the same result that has been found in other organizational fields. In his discussion of newspaper organizations, Carroll (1985) found that in uncompetitive markets, organizations tend to be generalist. This is simply because the organization will want to extract the majority of the resources that exist in the market. Hence, it will offer a product that will appeal somewhat to most of the individuals in the market, and it does not need to worry about more specialized firms serving those individuals more effectively. However, in markets that are more competitive, newspaper firms are pushed to specialize and take advantage of resources that would be ignored by generalist organizations. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which is adapted from Carroll's work (1985). As the figure shows, uncompetitive markets foster large generalist organizations, while competitive markets foster smaller specialist organizations along with larger generalists.

**Figure 3: Uncompetitive Versus Competitive Markets**



### *Religious Competition*

Now that the issue of competition in religious markets has been broached, it would be useful to address it more explicitly. One of the recent debates in the religion literature focuses on the question of whether competition in religious markets increases religious participation (Chaves and Gorski 2001; Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Finke and Stark 1992, 1998; Olson 1998; Voas, Olson, and Crockett 2002). This debate has occasionally suffered from a lack of clarity about exactly for whom or for what competition is supposed to be “good” or “bad.”

To address this issue, we can look again at Figure 3. In an uncompetitive environment, the organization that has the monopoly on the market will be relatively large. In a competitive market, organizations will become smaller as they become more specialized. However, as competition increases, more of the market is covered as organizations fill the various market niches. That is, there are fewer unused resources (i.e., the white space) in the competitive market than in the uncompetitive market. Competition, then, is both “good” and “bad.” Competition is good for the market or organizational field because it allows more of the environment to be used. On the other hand, competition is bad for individual organizations because it reduces the amount of resources available to each of them. Furthermore, competition in the form of niche overlap is bad for individual organizations because it results in even fewer resources available to each organization.

In short, we should expect competition in the form of multiple religious organizations within a market to result in more of the market participating in religious organizations. On the other hand, we should expect competition in the form of niche overlap between religious organizations to reduce the growth of those organizations.

### *APPLYING THE PROPOSITIONS*

In the preceding sections, I presented some of the central propositions concerning organizational niches. Furthermore, I showed how many of these propositions have been implied within the theory and research on religious organizations, although this literature rarely makes these connections. Of course, one could argue that these connections have not been made for good reason. Maybe the concepts of niche width and niche overlap do not actually apply to religious organizations. The next step, then, is to apply these concepts to religious organizations to determine whether uniting these two literatures is warranted. Doing so would also serve as a significant test of organizational theory, since religious organizations make up a large segment of the organizational population, especially the voluntary sector.

Before we can apply the concepts of niche width and niche overlap to religious organizations, we must first measure the niches. Methods for calculating niches have been meticulously detailed in Miller McPherson's (1983) work on the ecology of affiliation. I will review the method here.

If we look back at Figure 2, we see that each organizational niche forms a rectangular space when measured on two dimensions.<sup>3</sup> If we added a third dimension, say, education, then the organizational niche would form a cube.<sup>4</sup> This means that we can calculate niche size by using the simple mathematical formula for the area of a rectangle or volume of a cube. That is,

$$\text{Niche size} = (\text{Range } D_1) \times (\text{Range } D_i)$$

where  $D$  represents each dimension considered in measuring the organizational niche (e.g., age, income, education).

McPherson argues—and is supported by findings in animal ecology—that the niche range for any dimension is best determined by finding the mean and extending .75 standard deviation on both sides of the mean.<sup>5</sup> For instance, if the mean age of a religious group is 50 years and the standard deviation is 10, then the niche range on this dimension would be 42.5–57.5 years. If the age dimension is 15 units long, the education dimension is 5 units long, and the income dimension is 20 units long, then the total niche size is  $15 \times 5 \times 20 = 1500$ .

Looking at Figure 2, we can see that the overlap (i.e., the shaded area) between any two organizations also forms a rectangle or a cube, depending on the number of dimensions being considered. We can apply the same simple formula to calculate the overlap between organizations. For instance, if one religious group's age niche ranges from 50 to 65 years and another group's niche ranges from 45 to 55 years, they will overlap from 50 to 55 years. In other words, these two religious groups will be directly competing for the resources that individuals in those age groups offer. However, the latter group will have a monopoly on the 45–49.9 age range, and the former will have a monopoly on the 55.1–65 range. By multiplying the different sizes of overlap of the dimensions between two groups, we can calculate the total overlap size. Then, by dividing the total overlap by the total niche size of one of the groups, we can calculate a competition coefficient between the groups. That is, we can determine what percentage of the organization's total niche is overlapping with the niches of other organizations.

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<sup>3</sup> This method calculates rectangular niches. An alternative to this would be to conceptualize niches as spherical (Péli and Nooteboom 1999).

<sup>4</sup> We could keep adding more dimensions to create a hypercube.

<sup>5</sup> This assumes an equal distribution of resources within a group's niche. It would also be possible to assume an unequal distribution, but the simpler model is used here. Chaves and Giesel (2001) presented a method in which the niche is considered to have an uneven distribution of resources.

It is important to note that competition between two groups is always relative. The same amount of overlap can have different consequences for competition depending on the group's overall niche size. For example, if the size of overlap between two groups is 500, the niche size of one group is 1500, and the niche size of the other group is 2500, then the competition coefficient for the first group is .33, and that for the second group is .20. If a group's niche falls entirely within another group's niche, then the overlap equals the total niche size of the former group, and the competition coefficient equals 1.

### *TESTING THE THEORY*

#### *Data*

We now have methods for measuring both niche width or size and niche overlap. The next step is to compute these measures for a group of religious organizations. However, computing the niche measures, though descriptively interesting, will not in itself provide a test for the concepts' importance for religious organizations. We must also examine how these measures affect another outcome variable. Because niche width and overlap have frequently been used to examine organizational fitness, a natural candidate for this outcome variable would be a measure of growth or decline in religious organizations. I will use the percent change in number of adherents as measured by the 1990 Church and Church Membership Study (CCMS) (Bradley et al. 1992) and the 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS) (Jones et al. 2002).<sup>6</sup> The RCMS and CCMS were both conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, and the data are distributed by the Glenmary Research Center.

As I noted above, niche width and niche overlap should both harm the fitness of a religious organization. The following two hypotheses result from this discussion:

*Hypothesis 1:* The larger the religious niche size of a group, the less growth it will see.

*Hypothesis 2:* The more competition a group has in its religious niche, the less growth it will see.

First, though, I must compute the niche measures for religious organizations. To do this, I will need to determine the membership and religious characteristics

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<sup>6</sup> The title "Church and Church Membership Study" was changed to the "Religious Congregations and Membership Study" in 2000 to be more reflective of the increasingly inclusive nature of the data.

of different groups to measure the social space they occupy. This will be done by using a combined file of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a biennial nationally representative survey of the U.S. population conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2003). Admittedly, some theoretical assumptions must be made in using GSS data to model organizational niches. Specifically, the individuals in the GSS are not actually contained within one organization, such as a congregation; hence, it is somewhat of a hypothetical organization. Instead, I am using the data to create a profile of organizations within a population (i.e., congregations within denominations).

The analysis will be limited to Evangelical and Mainline Protestant groups as classified by Steensland and colleagues (2000) and those that have adherent data in the CCMS and RCMS. This provides seven Evangelical groups and six Mainline groups. The Evangelical groups are (1) Assembly of God (AOG), (2) Church of the Nazarene (NAZ), (3) Churches of Christ (CC), (4) Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), (5) Seventh-Day Adventists (SDA), (6) Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and (7) Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The Mainline groups are (1) American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (ABC), (2) Disciples of Christ (DC), (3) Episcopal Church (ECUSA), (4) Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA), (5) United Church of Christ (UCC), and (6) United Methodist Church (UMC). All of these groups have at least thirty-five respondents in the GSS between 1990 and 2000. This allows the estimates for each group to be based on more than a handful of cases.

### *Demographic and Religious Niches*

I will compute measures for two types of organizational niches. The first is a demographic niche representing the space a group occupies on dimensions such as educational level, age, race or ethnic makeup, income, or another sociodemographic variable.<sup>7</sup> Religious groups also occupy a religious niche; that is, they offer different types of religious goods and practices. Some may occupy a niche in which they are attempting to win adherents on the basis of particular beliefs or practices.

The demographic niche will be based on the age composition, the educational level, and the socioeconomic (SEI) scores of the groups. Previous research (e.g., McPherson 1983) has used similar variables; hence, maintaining some consistency creates the potential for building on earlier findings and creating a basis for comparison. Furthermore, there are important theoretical reasons to

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, preferences or tastes have been assumed to be a direct function of social position; hence, only demographic variables have been used to calculate niches. However, there is nothing to prevent the direct calculation of religious niches in the manner done here. Indeed, others have argued that relaxing that assumption makes sense (Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003).

consider groups as occupying niches based on variables such as socioeconomic status. Religious groups have long been seen as appealing to particular demographics and positions in the social structure (e.g., Demerath 1965; Niebuhr 1929). In his discussion of church and sect differences, Troeltsch (1961 [1931]: 331) pointed out the social class dynamic of this typology by noting that sects often attract members of the lower class and churches appeal to the upper classes. Although age is historically less important in determining the niches of religious organizations, I include it because some groups may specialize in relatively younger or older populations.

Economic models of religious behavior have also highlighted the demographic and socioeconomic niches of religious groups. For instance, Iannaccone (1988) argues that lower classes and minorities tend to prefer stricter religious groups because the higher level of religious goods offered by these groups offsets the lower level of worldly goods and opportunities of these social positions. Similarly, the movement of a group from a high-tension to a low-tension group has been partly attributed to changing class dynamics (Stark and Finke 2000: 203–204). As the members of a high-tension group begin to succeed economically, there will be a push toward a lower-tension orientation, especially if the leadership of a high-tension group is or becomes particularly wealthy, because the requirements of a high-tension group are most costly to these individuals. These theoretical ideas and propositions are supported by a long line of research that consistently highlights the relationship between socioeconomic status and religious affiliation (Roof 1979; Smith and Faris 2005).

However, demographic elements are not the only niches that religious groups occupy. They also exist within religious niches. That is, groups in the same demographic niche may provide very different religious goods, just as two automobile manufacturers may overlap in their demographic niche but not overlap in the product they offer (e.g., a company that offers electric cars differs from one that offers sport utility vehicles). Some religious groups might attempt to fill a particular niche by appealing to those who want a high level of ritual. Others will try to appeal to a segment of the market on the basis of particular religious beliefs. Some groups will try to serve those who want a religion that requires a high or low amount of participation. Because of this variation in religious goods, I will also calculate niches for each of the groups on the basis of their members' church attendance, prayer frequency, and view of the Bible. I will refer to these as *religious niches* and the previous ones as *demographic niches*. Admittedly, these measures of religious products are not flawless. However, they have the advantages of being asked throughout the GSS years we are examining and having enough variation in the response categories to provide a range of scores for each group. Furthermore, even if not perfect, these variables do provide some

measures of what individuals will be getting in the form of religious behaviors and beliefs by joining a particular group.

### *Size and Overlap of Group Niches*

Table 1 shows the demographic niche sizes for Evangelical groups during this period. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutherans occupied the smallest niche space (i.e., the most specialized), and the Church of Christ was the most generalist Evangelical group (i.e., had the broadest niche). The mean demographic niche width for Evangelical groups is 5,332.

Table 2 displays the demographic niche sizes for Mainline groups during this period. The most specialized Mainline denomination was the American Baptist Church in the U.S.A. The Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ were the most generalist Mainline denominations in the 1990s. Comparing Table 1 and 2, we see that Mainline groups were older, more educated, and of a higher socioeconomic background than were Evangelical groups.

More important, the mean demographic niche size of Mainline denominations is 6,239 units, over 900 units more than the Evangelical groups. This shows that the average Mainline denomination is less specialized and attempts to draw resources from a larger social space than Evangelical denominations do. Members of Mainline denominations come from a wider range of age, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds than members of Evangelical groups do.

The religious niches of Evangelical groups during this decade are shown in Table 3. The Assembly of God and Seventh-day Adventists occupied the narrowest religious niche space, meaning that they offer a more specialized range of religious goods. The Church of the Nazarene and the Southern Baptist Convention offer the widest range of religious goods.

The religious niches of Mainline groups are displayed in Table 4. The United Church of Christ shows the narrowest range of religious goods for mainline groups, while the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. shows the widest. On the whole, the religious niches of Mainline groups are slightly wider than those of Evangelical groups. It is important to remember that width of niche does not have anything to do with niche position. That is, a conservative or a liberal group could have a narrow niche or a broad niche. Niche width is determined by the diversity of goods offered within a group's niche, not by the type of good.

By comparing the niches of each group, we can calculate how much each group's niche overlaps the niches of the other groups. That is, we can determine how much each group competes with the other groups for members. Here, I will focus on the competition based on the religious niches of groups, since this represents the direct competition between organizations offering similar or dissimilar goods.





**Table 3: Religious Niche Components and Size for Evangelical Groups, 1990–2000 (Means and Standard Deviations)**

	Attend- dance <sup>1</sup>	Attend- ance S.D.	Prayer Frequency <sup>2</sup>	Prayer Frequency S.D.	Bible <sup>3</sup>	Bible S.D.	Niche Size
AOG	3.30	2.41	1.71	1.06	1.27	0.50	4.344
NAZ	4.40	2.85	2.14	1.28	1.49	0.62	7.599
CC	3.65	2.65	2.37	1.40	1.31	0.48	6.042
LCMS	4.76	2.28	2.59	1.39	1.68	0.63	6.770
SDA	4.00	2.41	1.80	0.98	1.69	0.62	4.904
SBC	4.62	2.62	2.33	1.34	1.48	0.59	7.013
WELS	4.21	2.11	2.91	1.42	1.65	0.64	6.436
<i>Overall mean</i>	4.14		2.26		1.51		6.159

<sup>1</sup> Coded (1) more than weekly (2) weekly, (3) nearly every week, (4) 2–3 times a month, (5) about once a month, (6) several times a year, (7) about once or twice a year, (8) less than once a year, (9) never.

<sup>2</sup> Coded (1) several times a day, (2) once a day, (3) several times a week, (4) once a week, (5) less than once a week, (6) never.

<sup>3</sup> Coded (1) the Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; (2) the Bible is the inspired Word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; (3) the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.

*Note:* Numbers in table are rounded.

**Table 4: Religious Niche Components and Size for Mainline Groups, 1990–2000 (Means and Standard Deviations)**

	Attend- ance <sup>1</sup>	Attend- ance S.D.	Prayer Frequency <sup>2</sup>	Prayer Frequency S.D.	Bible <sup>3</sup>	Bible S.D.	Niche Size
ABC	4.84	2.32	2.51	1.40	1.64	0.63	6.927
DC	3.77	2.30	1.88	0.99	1.84	0.62	4.814
ECUSA	5.24	2.43	2.59	1.44	2.02	0.60	7.090
PCUSA	5.29	2.41	2.95	1.50	1.91	0.62	7.500
UCC	4.31	2.22	2.96	1.11	1.92	0.49	4.095
UMC	5.18	2.43	2.69	1.43	1.85	0.60	6.944
<i>Overall mean</i>	4.77		2.60		1.86		6.228

<sup>1</sup> Coded (1) more than weekly (2) weekly, (3) nearly every week, (4) 2–3 times a month, (5) about once a month, (6) several times a year, (7) about once or twice a year, (8) less than once a year, (9) never.

<sup>2</sup> Coded (1) several times a day, (2) once a day, (3) several times a week, (4) once a week, (5) less than once a week, (6) never.

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*Note:* Numbers in table are rounded.

Table 5 shows the religious competition coefficients between Evangelical and Mainline groups from 1990 to 2000. The competition coefficient between two groups varies depending on the group from whose perspective we measure the competition. That is, while the overlap between two groups is the same, the overlap will mean more competition for a group with a narrow niche than for one with a broad niche. Specialists compete more with generalists than vice versa.

We see from Table 5 that the LCMS and the ABC occupy the most competitive religious niche space, while the AOG has the least competitive religious niche. This means that few other groups are offering the type of religious product or organization that the AOG offers. We should expect this lack of overlap to be positively related to the fitness and growth of AOG. The LCMS and the ABC have higher competition levels partly because they have higher competition levels with groups in the opposite classification. That is, the LCMS competes relatively heavily with Mainline groups, and the ABC competes relatively heavily with Evangelical groups. Overall, however, groups compete more within their classification than with groups outside of their classification.

### *Niches and Group Growth*

Having computed measures for niche size and niche overlap or competition, we can test the two hypotheses proposed above. The analysis will be done by using structural equation models and AMOS 5.0.<sup>8</sup> This allows for analysis of the direct and indirect effects between niche sizes, competition, and group growth.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 4 shows the structural equation model using the niche size and overlap measures to predict group growth. The analysis supports both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. As religious niches become wider and more diverse, a group's growth decreases. As was explained above, niche width harms a group's ability to serve all members successfully and makes the group vulnerable to losing resources to groups that more effectively serve their members by specializing.

Similarly, as a group's religious niche overlaps (i.e., competes) with other organizations, the group's growth decreases. Competition in the form of niche overlap reduces the amount of resources available to the organizations, since they will be splitting resources within that niche space instead of monopolizing those resources.

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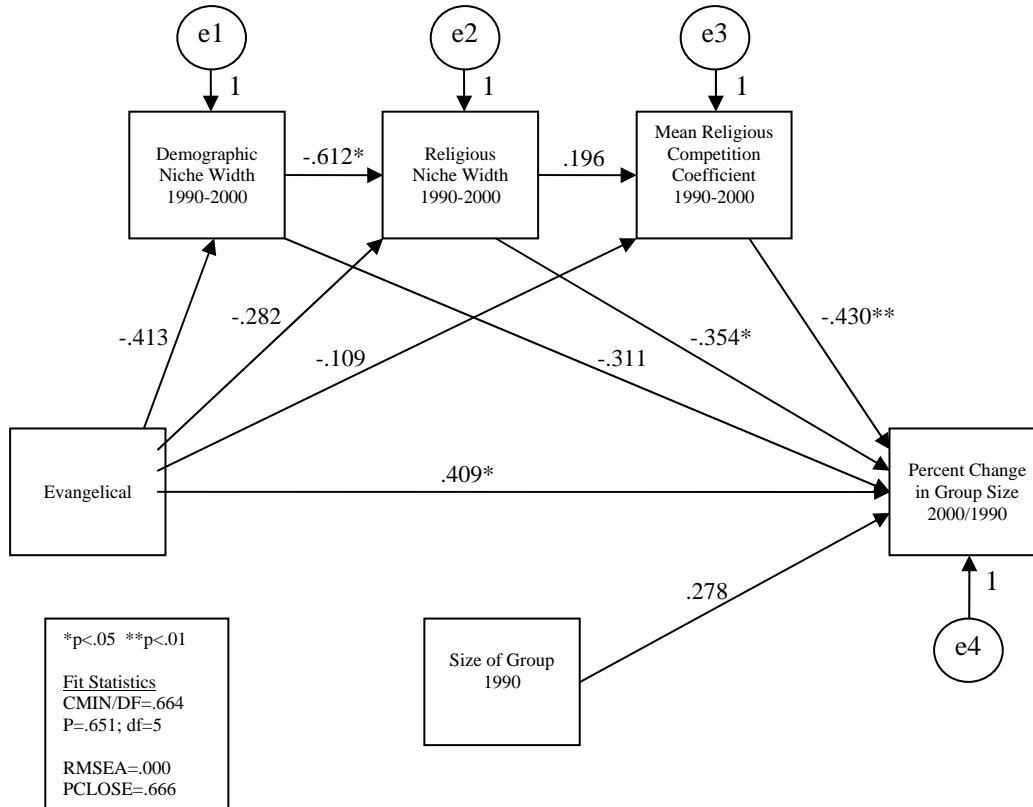
<sup>8</sup> AMOS is a program utilized for structural equation modeling that is produced by SPSS. Its primary advantage over standard regression procedures is the ability to construct latent variables and/or to diagram direct and indirect effects between predictors and outcomes.

<sup>9</sup> Growth is measured as the percent change in the group's size. This favors smaller groups, since it is easier for such a group to double in size than for a larger group, but it is not necessarily a predetermined relationship, since small groups can decline just as much as they can grow. Nonetheless, I include a control for the group's 1990 size to account for this.

Table 5: Religious Competition Coefficients Between Mainline and Evangelical Groups, 1990–2000

	AOG	NAZ	CC	LCMS	SDA	SBC	WELS	ABC	DC	ECUSA	PCUSA	UCC	UMC
<b>Evangelical</b>	1.00	0.31	0.47	0.13	0.36	0.25	0.12	0.14	0.41	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.05
	0.54	1.00	0.65	0.59	0.70	0.87	0.48	0.63	0.56	0.27	0.26	0.32	0.37
	0.66	0.51	1.00	0.34	0.38	0.54	0.37	0.36	0.28	0.06	0.05	0.11	0.16
	0.20	0.52	0.38	1.00	0.51	0.63	0.70	0.90	0.43	0.52	0.50	0.65	0.67
	0.41	0.45	0.31	0.37	1.00	0.38	0.32	0.37	0.74	0.20	0.15	0.29	0.29
	0.40	0.80	0.63	0.66	0.54	1.00	0.56	0.71	0.42	0.29	0.30	0.37	0.42
	0.18	0.41	0.39	0.66	0.42	0.51	1.00	0.63	0.35	0.34	0.44	0.73	0.48
<b>Mainline</b>	0.23	0.58	0.41	0.92	0.53	0.70	0.68	1.00	0.43	0.50	0.48	0.57	0.64
	0.46	0.35	0.22	0.31	0.73	0.29	0.26	0.30	1.00	0.24	0.18	0.32	0.28
	0.03	0.25	0.07	0.55	0.29	0.29	0.37	0.52	0.36	1.00	0.71	0.69	0.76
	0.05	0.25	0.06	0.56	0.23	0.32	0.51	0.52	0.29	0.75	1.00	0.75	0.82
	0.02	0.17	0.08	0.39	0.16	0.22	0.47	0.22	0.22	0.40	0.41	1.00	0.46
	0.09	0.34	0.18	0.69	0.40	0.41	0.52	0.65	0.40	0.75	0.76	0.78	1.00
<b>Means</b>													
Intragroup means	0.40	0.50	0.47	0.46	0.49	0.53	0.42	0.47	0.34	0.53	0.51	0.62	0.59
Inter-group means	0.14	0.32	0.17	0.57	0.39	0.37	0.47	0.54	0.46	0.24	0.25	0.36	0.35
Overall means	0.27	0.41	0.32	0.51	0.44	0.45	0.45	0.50	0.41	0.36	0.36	0.47	0.45

**Figure 4: Structural Equation Model of Niche Size, Competition, and Group Growth**



Even after controlling for niche size and competition, Evangelical groups have a significantly higher level of growth during this period. While this is not significant and is likely due to the small number of cases used in the analysis, the Evangelical dummy also shows a negative relationship to niche width and niche overlap, showing that Evangelical groups could be benefiting from specialization and lack of competition.

Finally, the relationship between demographic niche width and religious niche width shows a significant negative pattern. That is, as a group begins to draw on a diverse demographic population, it begins to narrow the religious niche that it serves.

## *DISCUSSION*

Even though understanding the niches created and shared by organizations is necessary to evaluate any system of organizations, these niches have not been adequately analyzed within religious organizational fields. Current theories of niches in religious fields are based on “religious preferences” (Stark and Finke 2000). These preferences are said to be distributed on a normal curve with ultra-strict and ultraliberal individuals representing the smallest niche sizes on the tails of the curve and theologically moderate individuals making up the largest niche in the middle of the distribution. Organizations, then, create a niche based on the type of religious product they offer. I have attempted to show how organizational theory and research offers opportunities to more adequately address the issue of niches within the field or market of religious organizations.

I computed niche sizes and competition coefficients for a group of religious organizations and used them to predict group growth. Although the sample was small, the measures of niche width and overlap functioned as previous research and theory on organizational fitness would predict. Religious groups that occupy a specialized niche that does not overlap the niches of other groups will grow faster than will groups that attempt to be generalists in a competitive market and those that occupy highly contested niches.

The analysis also showed that religious groups that increase diversity in one respect, such as demographic or socioeconomic composition, tend to compensate by increasing homogeneity in another respect, such as religious behavior or beliefs. In one respect, this is unexpected because research has shown that variables such as socioeconomic status contribute to religious preferences (e.g., Roof 1979; Smith and Faris 2005), and hence a diverse socioeconomic and demographic niche might produce a diverse religious niche profile. On the other hand, this finding fits well with the concept of social homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). If individuals tend to unite or interact on the basis of homogeneity, then a decrease in homogeneity on one basis should be met with an increase on another. If members of a religious group cannot or do not relate to each other on the basis of their race or economic status, then they can look to their religious behaviors or beliefs to find common ground. This heterogeneity-homogeneity trade-off has been found elsewhere. For instance, in their analysis of the political and theological views of seminary faculty, Olson and Carroll found that while Evangelical faculty had narrow views on theology and sexual morality, they had a wide range of views on peace and justice. Mainline and Catholic faculty had narrow views on peace and justice but wide-ranging views on theology and sexual morality (Olson and Carroll 1992). If individuals in a group cannot relate to each other on one variable, they tend to increase their agreement on others.

Having a small niche allows religious organizations to effectively market their goods to a specific segment of the population, prevents them from spending resources on segments that are not providing resources in return, and allows individuals to create strong ties within the organization. Having a niche that does not overlap the niches of other religious groups means that there are fewer organizations competing for the resources of that population.

### *FURTHER CONNECTIONS*

Although they should be considered somewhat exploratory, the analysis and results presented here offer both a test of organizational theory and a reframing of religion research in a broader organizational context. In short, uniting the sociology of religion and the sociology of organizations can benefit research in both literatures. The opportunities go beyond explaining the growth of religious groups. Some of the other potential connections are discussed below.

#### *Niche Composition and Engagement*

Beyond the influence of niche width and overlap, the model showed that Evangelical groups still grew more during this time period than Mainline groups did. There are two clear possibilities for explaining this growth in terms of organizational niches. First, this growth could be related to niche position and the amount of resources within those positions. That is, are there more resources (i.e., adherents) within the niches of Evangelical groups than within the niches of Mainline groups? A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 shows that Evangelical groups are composed of a younger, less educated population. This population is likely having more children than are the members of Mainline groups; hence, the niches of Evangelical groups are likely to be growing in potential resources relative to Mainline niches.

The second potential source of Evangelical growth beyond niche width and overlap is niche engagement. The appeal of any organization's products increases with the amount the group actively engages its niche (Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003: 318). Having a product that appeals to a segment of the population is not enough if that segment has no idea the product exists. The question becomes, then, do Evangelical groups more actively pursue or market their religious products to their niche than do Mainline groups? Considering that the word *Evangelical* is typically taken to have a "more activist, outreaching connotation," (Smith 1998: 243), it seems reasonable to think that there might be some differences in niche engagement between the two types of religious groups. Exploring both the amount of resources within the niches of different religious

groups and their engagement with those niches provides a next step in utilizing the concept of religious niches in explanatory models.

### *Strictness and Niche Overlap*

There has been a significant amount of discussion concerning the benefits for religious organizations resulting from “strictness” (Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark 1995; Olson and Perl 2001). The typical argument presented in these discussions is that strict or demanding groups increase their per capita resources by eliminating individuals who want to benefit from the group without providing any of their own resources. That is, the high entry costs of strict groups discourage free riders.

As I hinted earlier, this literature could be reframed in terms of niche overlap. All religious organizations face competition in the form of both secular and religious organizations. There are always other organizations overlapping the niche of a religious group, whether on demographic or religious dimensions. One way in which religious groups can reduce the impact of this competition, or niche overlap, is to prevent members from participating in those other organizations. If belonging to the religious group means that individuals must abandon opportunities provided by other organizations within the niche, then the negative effects of niche overlap are lessened or eliminated. Looking back at Figure 2, we see that if belonging to the low-income, 30- to 65-year-old organization means that an individual agrees not to take part in any other organizations, then the overlap with the medium-low-income, 28- to 52-year-old organization effectively becomes irrelevant.

Strictness, then, is essentially a mechanism that attenuates niche overlap. Religious groups that are not strict or do not demand exclusive access to their membership’s resources face the full negative consequences of competing with other organizations in their niche.

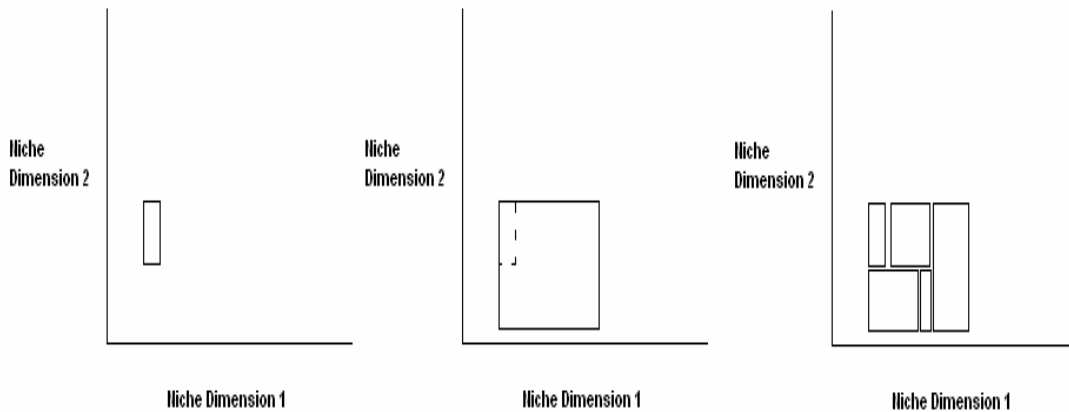
### *The Sect-Church-Sect Cycle*

It has been observed that high-tension sects tend to be successful in their early stages but that as they grow, they tend to suffer schisms and reduced growth (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000: 205–207). This cycle could be reframed from the perspective of organizational niches. A sect starts out with a very narrow organizational niche, especially when measured on religious dimensions. It has very specific requirements for beliefs and does not allow for variation from those beliefs. As was discussed above, there are many organizational benefits in having a narrow niche. This allows the sect to grow.

However, it is difficult to grow without also taking in a certain amount of heterogeneity. Furthermore, the success of the group means that the characteristics of individuals within the group are changing. Sect members and leaders might become wealthier with the success of the group (Stark and Finke 2000: 204), stretching the niche characteristics of the group. The group that used to have a narrow niche now has a broad niche because of internal changes of the original sect members and the inevitable variation brought into the organization by new members.

It becomes difficult to hold together an organization that has a broad niche, especially when the organization relies on relationships between members. This leads to schisms. The broad niche breaks into smaller niches, and some of these smaller niches may merge with other groups that already occupy that space in the organizational field. The smaller niches are now more organizationally fit, and the cycle begins again. This cycle is illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Sect-Church-Sect Cycle Illustrated Through Organizational Niches**



### *Pluralism and Competition in Religious Markets*

The concept of niche overlap provides a new way to view competition in religious markets. Indeed, this is an issue that has suffered from methodological questions (Voas, Olson, and Crockett 2002) and a lack of theoretical clarity. Niche overlap provides an alternative method for computing competition between religious organizations. The analysis showed that, as the organizational literature predicts, niche overlap harms the fitness and growth of religious organizations.

There is, however, still the danger of theoretical confusion in using this new measure. Specifically, the negative impact of niche overlap on organizational



growth should not be confused with the positive effect of competition on the total market coverage by the organizational type. Although the idea is not tested here, organizational research would expect competition within an organizational field to increase the total amount of resources mobilized in the environment. That is, even though niche overlap harms individual religious organizations, we would still expect competition to have a positive effect on overall participation within the market. This is an important distinction that has frequently been lost in previous discussions.

The above are only a few examples of how the concept of organizational niches and research on organizational ecology can help us to understand many of the phenomena in the religion literature. It is fair to ask why it is necessary to reinterpret these phenomena from another perspective and add more concepts to the literature, especially since I am not claiming that these previous explanations are necessarily wrong. However, it is my intent to synthesize the literature, not expand it. Why have a religious economies literature separate from the organizational ecology or niche literature when they can be integrated? Why have a church-sect theory, a theory of religious growth, a theory of church strictness, a theory about racial homogeneity in congregation, and so forth if we can unite these different areas into a more general framework? Given that Wuthnow (1988: 500) and others (e.g., Iannaccone 1997: 148) have noted that we currently have a lack of unifying constructs, the opportunity for synthesis is just as important as, if not more important than, the opportunity for creating new theories or concepts. It is this potential that I believe exists in the idea of organizational niches.

### *CONCLUSIONS*

The concept of organizational niches has proven to be a valuable theoretical and empirical tool for researchers studying various organizational populations. However, it has not seen much use in research on religious organizations (with the notable exception of Chaves and Giesel 2001), and when it is used, this is usually done in a superficial manner, such as references to the existence of market niches. This is rather surprising because much of the religion literature already implicitly uses many of the ideas that result from the concept of organizational niches, and the concept seems particularly well suited to helping to understand and expand the religious economies perspective. Furthermore, applying the concept of organizational niches to religious organizations would serve as an important test for those ideas.

I have attempted to unite the religion literature with the literature on organizational niches. I show how niches can be measured and utilized in models to understand religious organizations. The analysis supported the findings of other organizational ecology research. Having a broad niche—specifically a religious

niche—and overlapping the religious niches of other groups will reduce the fitness of religious organizations.

Further steps can be made to utilize niches in our understanding of religious organizations. These steps include refining the dimensions that are used to calculate the demographic or religious niches. Three dimensions were used here for both types of niches. Future research could incorporate other dimensions, such as racial, ethnic, or geographic variables, into the calculation of niches. Similarly, other niche variables could be added to future models, such as measures of the resources within different niches and the niche engagement by religious organizations. There are also opportunities to reframe current discussions within the religion literature, such as the effects of strictness, within a larger organizational literature. These steps will not only refine the discussion and analysis of religious organizations, but also contribute to a larger literature in organizational ecology research.

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