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Book Talk: *Stuck: Why Clergy Are Alienated From Their Calling, Congregation, and Career …and What To Do About It* by Todd W. Ferguson and Josh Packard (2022, Fortress Press)

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The origins of *Stuck* were in a more extensive project conducted by Josh Packard. This project investigated religious "Dones," individuals who no longer affiliate with a Christian church but still hold orthodox Christian beliefs (Packard & Hope, 2015). While sifting through his data, Packard discovered that a subsample of his interviewees were clergy who, like many others, were done with their churches. Packard recruited Ferguson, a sociologist with a ministry background, to dive deeper into the lives of religious professionals who felt "stuck" in one of several ways. Some clergy felt stuck believing they had a divine call to serve people despite their dissatisfaction with their occupation. Other clergy felt stuck in a congregation that operated as a transactional business rather than a transformational ministry. Additionally, clergy reported feeling stuck in their positions due to their compensation and a lack of alternative professional options. To capture these accounts, the authors interviewed 42 religious professionals from the United States and Canada. Most of their interviewees were male (74%), from evangelical (55%) or mainline churches (43%), and educated (approximately 80% had a bachelor's or a Master of Divinity degree; pp. xvi-xvii). Despite their efforts, the authors could not recruit Catholic priests for this study; consequently, the findings are limited to Protestant clergy in North America.

The book is written in a style accessible to readers who do not have a social science background and includes questions after each chapter for pastors, churches, seminaries, and denominations to discuss or reflect upon. Nonetheless, the authors identify and apply rich sociological theories and concepts. Ferguson and Packard frame their project with three social structures that dominate North American society: social Darwinism, capitalism, and secularization (p. 11). Situating their findings in religious economies literature, the authors argue that churches operate as capitalist enterprises where numerical growth is rewarded. To achieve growth, churches must compete with one another by offering religious goods and services that are most in demand. The churches that meet adherents' demands will survive, while those that cannot die (hence, social Darwinism). As North American societies secularize, the pool of possible adherents decreases, accelerating the competition between churches. Ferguson and Packard argue that this acceleration places a tremendous amount of stress on ministry professionals as they strive for congregational growth. Pulling from Marx, the authors determine that these structures alienate clergy from their congregations as they must act inauthentically to meet market demands, setting aside their personal values and original callings to assuage the expectations placed on them by their congregants (p. 29). When religious professionals attempt to shift expectations away from capitalistic outcomes, they report facing bureaucratic roadblocks, producing feelings of powerlessness and aimlessness (p. 67). In response, some clergy leave their ministry positions to pursue their callings in other contexts (e.g., non-profit work), leave for secular careers, or stay in their positions despite their deep

dissatisfactions. Although some interviewees revealed a loss of faith due to their ministry experience, the authors stress that these accounts were the exception. Most clergy in the study hold orthodox Christian beliefs and are passionate about their call to serve people, despite feeling stuck. For this reason, the monograph offers a detailed explanation of how the structure of congregations in North America undermines the ministry profession (p. 117).

Ferguson and Packard's work dovetails into a decades-old conversation concerning the secularization of societies. The conventional argument put forth by Berger (1967) claims that advances in education and science will erode religious belief systems, causing religious individuals to leave their faith. Since then, the secularization thesis has been studied, refined, and highly debated. Some argue that the rapid rate of disaffiliation from institutionalized religion corroborates the secularization thesis (Burge, 2021). Yet, research has shown that religious belief systems, although changing and evolving, have not experienced the same rate of regression as participation (Burge, 2021). This pattern is repeated in *Stuck*; religious professionals leave their churches, not their beliefs, due to the machination of a capitalist economy. As such, Ferguson and Packard add to the secularization-by-disaffiliation literature. While this argument has a strong theoretical foundation, I wonder if other perspectives can better explain why individuals leave religious institutions but not their beliefs. Consequently, my question to the authors and the broader field is this: *Do social scientists give too much power to the market when explaining religious disaffiliation?* In the following paragraphs, I suggest one avenue that Ferguson and Packard could have taken to examine religious disaffiliation, and a direction for future research for social scientists who want to investigate this avenue further.

First, I think Ferguson and Packard could have taken an interactionist approach to their study. The basis for this approach is simple: religion is performative (Durkheim, 2001; Goffman, 1959). Through the socialization process, members of religious subcultures learn to use scripts, costumes, and props that symbolize their membership (Goffman, 1959). Special status is ascribed to clergy since they are trained to use scripts, costumes, and props to perform religious rituals per the members' expectations. As Ferguson and Packard illustrate, I can see how clergy are alienated from their calling due to congregational demands that make them feel inauthentic. However, I question whether this alienation is derived from a capitalist religious marketplace or a fading interest in maintaining religious performances ascribed to the role of clergy. In his study of Emerging Evangelicals, James Bielo (2011) cites the importance of living authentic spiritual lives for Christians disaffiliating from evangelicalism. Like Ferguson and Packard, Bielo begins his discussion by citing Lindholm's (2008) claim that authenticity is a derivative of alienation due to urban industrialism. But then Bielo pivots, relying on Parish (2009) as a backdrop for the rest of his work. According to Parish, modernity causes

individuals to live among symbols that are arbitrarily created and subject to rational and instrumental manipulation (2009). Consequently, modern individuals are left wondering what is "really real" (Parish, 2009, p. 143). Bielo demonstrates that Emerging Evangelicals critique evangelicalism by asking what is "really real" about faith, ministry, and churches. In this sense, Emerging Evangelicals view religious performances as arbitrary creations manipulated to legitimize membership in the evangelical subculture. As a response, Bielo reports that Emerging Evangelicals "deconvert" from evangelicalism to regain power and autonomy, thereby experiencing an authentic religious way of being. Although their research extends beyond evangelicalism, the same dynamic seems true of the clergy that Ferguson and Packard interviewed. As opposed to the effects of market dynamics, religious professionals may be alienated from their congregations because they are tired of the religious performances associated with their roles.

If this is the case, future research on religious disaffiliation should focus on performance instead of market dynamics. The literature on interaction ritual chains (IRC) can inform studies that pursue this line of thought. Grounded in the work of Randall Collins (2004), IRC theory suggests that individuals' interior lives are constructed through ritual performances. These performances symbolize group membership and provide individuals with emotional energy, serving as a vehicle for continued participation. When applied to religion, researchers have shown how IRC affects participation (Wollschleger, 2012) and religious experiences (Draper, 2019). I think IRC would be a welcome addition to the secularization-by-disaffiliation conversation because it potentially clarifies why some individuals leave organized religion while others continue their participation. As Ferguson and Packard report, some clergy stay in their ministry because the practical benefits (e.g., salary) outweigh the costs of a mid-career change. These are rational calculations based on market economics. However, by focusing on the satisfaction gained from symbolic performances, I wonder if IRC might offer a more fertile context for why some religious professionals left their ministries while others remained. Perhaps some clergy are stuck because they exist within interaction ritual chains too strong to break. *If this is the case, can IRCs present a new way of examining religious disaffiliation apart from market-based theories?*

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Author's Reply by Todd W. Ferguson

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The beauty of social science is that we can take one social phenomenon and analyze it through many perspectives. Human society is complex, and so we need to use multiple lenses to see what is occurring in our world. Because of this complexity, researchers often have blind spots, and so the gift of researching within a community of other scholars is that we gain so many more perspectives that our blind spots prevent us from seeing.

Such is the case with Mark Killian's review of our book *Stuck.* Killian offers the main question in response to our research: "Do we give too much power to the market when explaining religious disaffiliation?" I think this question is vitally important. Are people—including clergy—leaving religious institutions because of capitalistic market forces, or changes in culture, or deficiencies in ritual interactions? In essence, it is a question of Marx vs. Weber vs. Durkheim that we often pose to our undergraduate students in their sociological theory courses.

Killian critiques the centrality of the marketplace in our examination of pastors who no longer think that the local congregation is the place where ministry happens. He recommends a more interactionist approach. Pastors move out of their positions because they are tired of the performances tied to the clergy role. They feel the need to be more authentic, autonomous, and "real" in their lives. To continue with the theoretical framing of "performances," Killian brings in Collins' interaction ritual chains theory (IRC). I, too, have used this framework in my own research to explore how interaction rituals bolster religious worship (Ferguson, 2020), and it may be that the theory of IRC helps to explain why some clergy feel "stuck" in the ministry.

I think IRC is absolutely an appropriate approach to examine the nature of the clergy profession, and I am glad Killian brings it up. The ideas of interaction ritual chains and a competitive, capitalist marketplace between congregations are not mutually exclusive. They can shed light on each other and help expand our understanding of what is happening with these pastors. One way to think about "stuck" pastors is to understand that interaction ritual chains exist within a marketplace (Collins, 2004). In this marketplace, emotional energy is the currency, and people seek out experiences that lead to the greatest level of emotional energy. Clergy feel stuck in their roles because the emotional energy rewards within the interaction rituals have diminished. Worship no longer feels like a spiritual experience. In other words, these religious services lacked what Durkheim (1995) called "collective effervescence." Instead, their roles as worship leaders merely feel like a job that they were required to do. They feel drained, and so they look elsewhere for a meaningful way to live out their calling.

We saw this lack of energy in our research, particularly with Mainline Protestant clergy who were struggling with shrinking memberships. These Mainline Protestant pastors we spoke to felt drained because their focus was more on resource management (money, people, and buildings) and less on spiritual leadership. They were frustrated that their job meant trying to keep the doors of the church open while also keeping satisfied the few people who remained. The idea that pastors must keep people "satisfied" is a symptom of what we called "social Darwinism," or the idea that congregations must compete for limited resources or close down. The language of IRC, however, offers an additional insight into the competition because congregations are also competing for the emotional energy found within interaction rituals. Mainline Protestant congregations are struggling more than Evangelical congregations to generate this emotional energy, and so membership shrinks, and clergy feel stuck.

An IRC approach could even shed light on the pastors who felt like the business-world bureaucracy was encroaching into their spiritual leadership. Along with social Darwinism, we also used the framework of capitalism to help explain the plight of stuck pastors. The centrality of numerical growth, the constraints of bureaucracy, and the idealized model of for-profit businesses led the pastors we spoke with to be frustrated that so much of their job was "number crunching" and not spiritual leadership. A key concept in IRC is that participants have a "mutual focus" centered on sacred objects during successful rituals (Collins, 2004). Yet, if the congregation resembles a business more than a spiritual gathering, the mutual focus breaks down for the clergy because they are more attentive to budgets and marketing than to worship.

IRC allows us to examine the sacred objects created within interaction rituals as well. These objects operate within a marketplace, too, similar to the marketplace for emotional energy. Often, we think of sacred symbols in terms of religious or

nationalistic symbols, like a star of David, a cross, or a flag. Yet, the pastors we spoke to had to deal with the competing sacred objects that were sacralized through capitalism, such as financial stability and numerical growth. Furthermore, the sacred symbols created by capitalism possibly have a higher status than the religious sacred symbols. They compete with each other, and often the religious symbols lose.

Interaction ritual chain theory offers us a different perspective on our "stuck" pastors. Yet, even with the strengths of the IRC approach, I would still ask the follow-up question: Why are the interaction rituals for clergy leading to diminishing returns? Why do clergy feel like they have to perform in order to do their jobs? What has changed?

I think this is where the ever-present marketplace comes back into the story. The interaction rituals do not work as well because congregations are in competition with each other and with other institutions, beliefs, and cultures for peoples' attentions. This in itself is nothing new as Finke and Stark's (2005) *The Churching of America* and Smith's (1998) *American Evangelicalism* demonstrate. What is new within the marketplace is that there are fewer people in the pool of potential members, which makes the competition all that fiercer. Yes, IRC helps to explain an important dynamic. Leading worship in an empty church can be demoralizing because the rituals are weaker. The competition for emotional energy and sacred symbols is absolutely real. But the main reason for the diminishing returns of these rituals is there are fewer people in the religious marketplace. Some congregations do well in this competitive environment for potential members while other churches struggle and have to focus on budgets and buildings in order to survive.

As Finke and Stark (2005) demonstrate, "lower-quality" religious worship services can spur innovation among clergy to create more marketable experiences that have higher levels of emotional energy for participants. Our "stuck" pastors were spurred to develop new experiences, but these experiences were not within the congregation. Many felt like the congregational model was broken forever. Instead, they looked outside of traditional religious organizations to create models that they felt aligned more with their sense of calling. The goal for these new models was to create deeper connections and a richer sense of community. In the language of IRC and Durkheim, they wanted to build "solidarity." For instance, "Robert" was one of the pastors we spoke to. He left being a worship leader at a large megachurch to create a coffeehouse and bar whose profits helped local women leave sex work. His goal was for this café to serve as a social and business hub for the community by selling local craft beer from the nearby brewery and pastries from the neighborhood bakery. The result was that the community had a stronger sense of solidarity. Because of secularization, pastors are having to innovate outside the congregation in order to continue to follow their calling.

Ultimately, I am thankful for Killian's insight into how a view on performance and interaction rituals can help us think more fully about the social situation of religious leaders. Adding the interactionist perspective to this study creates a richer and needed layer of depth that our book lacks. Yet, I still believe that underneath all of the layers, the competitive marketplace remains.

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