

# The Role of Hierarchy in the Production of Salvation Goods

**Zachary J. Gochenour**

James Madison University

**John A. Robinson**

James Madison University

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## **Abstract**

We argue that in the production of certain types of goods, hierarchy may be beneficial or even necessary to maintain quality and consistency. To illustrate, we investigate how the hierarchical form of the Roman Catholic Church has provided religious “goods” for thousands of years and compares favorably to other modes of production. While the Church frequently clashed with the forces of “liberalism,” it has maintained that its hierarchical structure supports freedom of a different sort—freedom from external corruption. We believe the hierarchical structure has mostly succeeded in providing that freedom. Hierarchy is also intended to promote good reputation, addressing the uncertainty involved with salvation goods and freeing consumers to make symmetrically informed choices. We further argue that organizational hierarchies in modern corporations have goals that share similar features.

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## **I. Introduction**

Economists generally and justifiably sing the praises of decentralized markets for maximizing consumer welfare. Following Coase (1937), we find that within the market environment are firms that are pockets of central planning. They are typically organized with a rigid hierarchical structure and almost never use prices for internal decisions. The hierarchical, centralized nature of firms should give us pause if we believe that decentralized markets are not just efficient but robust and liberty enhancing in the long term. How should lovers of liberty think of private governance structures that rely on hierarchy?

In this paper, we discuss the advantages of hierarchy in the production of certain types of religious “goods.” As in the secular market, some goods are provided in a decentralized, horizontal way, and some by rigid hierarchical organizations. The mode of production depends on the attributes of the goods being produced. The religious arena is full of goods that either cannot be priced or whose value is greatly diminished when offered for sale. Religious firms must grapple with the trade-offs between modes of production.

One religious firm, the Roman Catholic Church, has long maintained a strict hierarchy internally, even in the face of challenges arising from within (Ekelund et al. 1996). It has always maintained that the hierarchy is key to preserving the production of the religious goods it produces. It has also maintained that by restricting the freedom of producers, and indeed the consumers, of its religious goods, it improves their welfare. We consider the role of hierarchy in the Church’s production of religious goods in this paper. Finally, we return to the question of whether freedom and hierarchy are compatible societal goals.

## **II. How the Production of Salvation Goods Is Different from the Production of Other Goods**

As economists have turned their attention to “religious goods” and “religious markets,” they have tended to treat churches as firms, engaged in the production and distribution of one or another good to religious consumers. While this approach has attracted some criticism, it has been remarkably fruitful, and it continues to motivate a good deal of the ongoing research on the sociology of religion. Iannaccone, Stark, Bainbridge, and others, working in the rational choice tradition, have identified and discussed a wide variety of goods that religious organizations produce. Furthermore, they have described how many of the functions of religious organizations parallel the activities of secular firms, while recognizing that religion offers an important area of social activity often characterized by “nonmarket” behavior (Iannaccone 1998). The common lists of religious goods includes both personal and social goods, ranging from concrete to abstract and from natural to transcendent.

While some of these goods have much in common with those economists are accustomed to discussing, others are unusual or perhaps unique, inasmuch as religious markets are in the business of supplying goods that relate to the afterlife. Stolz provides a useful typology for distinguishing between six kinds of religious goods.

Three are individual goods—consumer, membership, and personal—and three are social goods: communal, collective, and positional (Stolz 2006). Using standard economic concepts, Stolz distinguishes the goods based on their exclusivity, alienability, divisibility, and transferability. Consumer goods, including both objects and services, can be produced and traded just like any other commodity. Consumer goods include religious icons, prayer books, and other media. These are divisible, exclusive, and transferable, and most importantly, they have no inherent qualities that would make one mode of production and exchange more appropriate than another.

Membership goods, first analyzed at length by Iannaccone (1992), can be traded, but tend to exhibit some interesting characteristics that differentiate them from other commodities. For one, they are often exclusive, in that belonging to one group requires refraining from belonging to any others. Consumer goods and membership goods fit comfortably into standard models of market behavior, and for economists studying religious markets, that the firm in question is a church adds little in the way of analytic import. Religious membership and religious belonging are similarly amenable to traditional economic analysis. The demand to belong to a particular religious community will surely be higher as the benefits of belonging increase. However, Iannaccone describes some peculiarities of these markets, beginning with their link to the supernatural, which disrupts certain feedback mechanisms that allow markets for more conventional goods to operate as efficiently as they do (Iannaccone 1992).

#### *A. Salvation and Communal Goods*

Outside of consumer and membership goods, the sorts of goods religious institutions provide begin to be oriented toward nonprice production and nonmarket exchange. Among Stolz's list of goods, personal and communal are perhaps the least amenable to market processes. These goods generally cannot be purchased, exchanged, divided, or even produced in a traditional sense. Among these salvation goods are the development of religious human capital; physical, psychic, and social well-being; the attainment virtue; and religious experiences (Stolz 2006). Further, Stolz offers a definition of salvation goods based on Weber's 1922 *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*: "an end or a means to an end which is offered by a religion, embedded in a specific world-view and a system of life practices, and which may be aspired to or used by an individual or social group" (Stolz 2006, p.

19). These salvation goods can either be goals or the way those goals are achieved. The beatific vision—seeing God face to face—is a focal salvation good in the Christian religion. However, the sacraments or rituals provided in the context of the church, by which this exclusively afterworldly goal is achieved, are also salvation goods. Thus, these salvation goods consist of the identification of—and solution to—some perceived social ill as conceived of in a particular worldview. In part, these goods are resistant to market exchange because they tend not to be divisible or transferable. Religious human capital is context specific and tied not just to specific practices, but to certain belief systems. In addition, while membership with the group might be open to exchange on a market, salvation goods are separable from mere membership, which is neither necessary nor sufficient to obtain them.

Communal goods are similarly situated, and function in large part to coordinate the behavior of group members. These goods arise out of social interaction inside a social group, and the fruit of the interaction is the end as well as the means. As Stolz puts it, “communal goods are a goal in themselves; their performance is the produce” (Stolz 2006). Because only those involved in their production enjoy these goods, the problem to be solved in the case of communal goods is one of coordination rather than allocation. Specifically, it is a problem of coordination without prices.<sup>1</sup> And while we can still certainly think of religious consumers making rational trade-offs in choosing their level of participation with a religious community, the lack of explicit prices differentiates these goods from the markets for consumer goods. The proper functioning of these communal goods is also crucial for the quality of the personal religious goods, which rely on a shared worldview.

Stolz points to “compensators” and other salvation goods as the quintessential personal religious goods. Stark and Bainbridge first articulated the concept of compensators as “postulations of reward according to explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation” (Stark and Bainbridge 1979). These rewards tend to either be abstract or other-worldly, and promises of reward substitute for tangible goods. In the case of the beatific vision, the

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<sup>1</sup> Stolz differentiates communal from collective goods by arguing that in the case of collective goods, the cooperation between members is a means to an end, whereas communal goods have cooperation as a primary end itself. The final goods—positional goods—are competitive rather than cooperative, and only play a role in our research insofar as they are necessary for providing the other goods.

Catholic Church offers a wide array of advice, rituals, practices, and prayers which all serve as more concretely observable means to achieve that end. While the beatific vision is elusive in this life, the church provides a context in which its members find consolation derived from that expected good prior to its actual enjoyment. Furthermore, these are not the same as the rewards for leading a virtuous life—happiness, wealth, health, or the esteem of your community—also potentially obtainable through religious means, but which are more clearly verifiable. While religion is not the only source of compensators, religions are distinguished by their association with compensators, offering both questions and answers of ultimate meaning. These are questions which by their nature cannot be epistemologically settled, but which humans seem unable to stop asking.

### *B. Goods Outside Markets*

Salvation goods are “inherently risky” because “individuals cannot evaluate the goods” (Stolz 2006). Of course, markets can accommodate a great deal of uncertainty, but not without costs. In the market, firms producing hard-to-evaluate goods face a trade-off between long-run reputation and short-term gain (Richardson 2012). Thus, the demand for social structures that provide the context in which these questions can be asked and answered is inevitable. Religious organizations provide proposed answers to these questions, the ends they indicate, and the means by which those ends are to be pursued. Personal religious goods, prominent among which are “compensators,” salvation goods, and transcendent goods, are thus characterized by uncertainty, a resistance to exchange, and finally by a reliance on coordination. The goodness of these salvation goods depends on the coordination of views regarding both the ends to be pursued and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the means by which those ends are to be accomplished. Market exchange does a poor job of providing either the questions or meaningful feedback about proposed answers, and so we must look to other social technologies to fill in the gaps.

## **III. How Hierarchy Produces Salvation Goods Better Than Alternative Modes**

In the eight decades since Coase published his seminal article “The Nature of the Firm,” describing the emergence of the firm out of exchange relationships in an economy, economists have developed a

rich literature on how and when vertical organization can be the most efficient mode of production (Coase 1937). The traditional neoclassical assumption of exchange in the absence of transaction costs remains a useful methodological tool, but Coase, Williamson, Ostrom, and others have described the variety of reasons why the economy is populated by firms and other forms of nonmarket production and allocation. Coase's original paper and subsequent work in "The Problem of Social Cost" emphasized the role of transaction costs in market exchange in motivating the organization of economic activity within hierarchical modes of production, while Williamson emphasized the "wider variety and greater sensitivity of control instruments that are available for enforcing intrafirm . . . activities" (Williamson 1971). Others have discussed the potential importance of information, expectations, authority, ownership, and competitive advantage, among other reasons, to explain why firms are ubiquitous in a market economy (Alchian and Demsetz 1972; Madhok 2002; Malmgren 1961). Each of these attributes, separately or in conjunction with others, may play a role in determining why any particular good is produced, consumed, or traded in a nonmarket social structure. The same principles hold true in the religious market where "religious goods are not all produced the same way and . . . different situations underlie different religious goods" (Stolz 2006). We argue that the inherent uncertainty involved in questions about the ultimate ends of human existence, the impossibility of exchange or pricing, and the need to coordinate are among the most crucial reasons why certain types of religious goods might be best produced in a hierarchical and even bureaucratic structure.

Salvation goods are first characterized by an unusual amount of uncertainty with respect to both the proper ends to be pursued and the proper means of pursuing these ends. Additionally, these open-ended questions and ambiguous answers are prone to challenge, and the religious organizations must be able to successfully manage encounters with unforeseen contingencies. Both challenges make signaling credibility and protecting reputation among the primary concerns of the producers of salvation goods. Hierarchical structures allow for the cultivation and protection of reputation at a lower cost than markets do, and thus, the organizations can provide salvation goods more effectively (Holmstrom and Tirole 1989).

Furthermore, these goods are difficult to price because they are not always amenable to exchange. Developing religious human capital is context specific and not transferable. It relies on stable goals

and is thought in many cases to be compensated after death. Though there have been markets and attempts to price salvation goods, these attempts have tended to have an erosive effect on the producers. Because prices cannot provide information to either producers or consumers in these markets, they again rely on alternate sources of signals to validate the quality and reliability of the goods. While none of these characteristics completely rules out market provision of these or other religious goods, they open the door for alternative modes of production. In cases where stability is valued over innovation, hierarchy has marginal advantages over markets (Powell 2003). Religious institutions signal their credibility through stability, and the benefits of innovations have to be weighed against their corrosive effects on coordination.

The final characteristic of salvation goods is that they depend on coordination and cooperation among the community. The quality of communal goods is inextricably tied to the community's ability to maintain a shared worldview, and salvation goods must be embedded in these communities. Markets and prices are famously good at solving the problem of coordination among producers and consumers, especially when able to operate freely (Hayek 1945). However, in cases where the costs of using prices are prohibitively high, nonprice coordination is a second-best alternative. Schelling (1960) first explored the role of rules in coordinating behavior in cases where coordination itself is part of the good in question. Just as laws can help to design a system of rights and liabilities to aid in coordinating behavior in the absence of a market, a religious authority can provide focal rules in the form of rituals, moral commands, and religious texts. The rules may be suboptimal in particular cases, but this cost may pale in comparison to the loss of a shared worldview and the goods that arise from cooperation toward a set of shared ends, enabled by rules. Rational actors might well be willing to trade their autonomy for these goods.

#### **IV. Case Study: The Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest and most important institutions in Western civilization. Throughout its history, it has developed a strict hierarchy and maintained this hierarchy despite numerous challenges. The hierarchy is supported by a number of

rules—in fact an entire code of Canon Law—which coordinate the elements of the hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

### *A. Developing the Hierarchy*

The Catholic Church teaches that it is the continuation of early Christian communities established by Jesus and his apostles. By the third century AD, local Church leaders called bishops began meeting in regional synods to resolve issues related to Church teaching. The ability to use a hierarchical structure to settle matters of faith and morals for the Church is instrumental in its ability to consistently provide salvation goods.

After Emperor Theodosius I established Nicene Christianity as the state church of the Roman Empire in 380, the Church became more hierarchical and unified. Nicaea (AD 325) was the first of a series of Ecumenical Councils that defined the theology and practices of the Orthodox Christian religion. These councils served an important role in the performance of the Church's most important mission: the provision of salvation for its members and the world or, in economic terms, the production of salvation goods. The first seven councils, held from the fourth through the ninth centuries, were widely recognized by the major Eastern and Western branches of Christianity to be universal, but theological and political divisions plagued later attempts at consensus.

Ultimately, the most important division was over the hierarchy of the Church: Would it be served better by a supreme Pontiff, as maintained in the West, headquartered in Rome, or would it be better served by decentralized decision making? By the eleventh century, mutual excommunications ended any pretense of universal unity of theological thought among the Christian faithful leadership.

### *B. Roman Catholicism vs. the Eastern Orthodox Church*

The Catholic Church has maintained that for the successful provision of salvation goods, a sort of constitutional monarchical power structure is necessary. The Church changes its pastoral practices, which constitute the means by which salvation goods are obtained,

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<sup>2</sup> Hayek (1981) writes, “Even where the type of order chosen is that of organization and not a spontaneous order, the organizer must largely rely on rules rather than specific commands to the members of the organization. This is due to the fundamental problem which all complex order encounters: the organizer wants the individuals who are to cooperate to make use of knowledge which he himself does not possess.”

more rapidly than its dogmatic teachings, but the hierarchy has been careful when it does change to provide a plausible account for why the changes are in keeping with the more consistent salvation goods. For instance, the Church's more dogmatic position on freedom of association undergirds each of the multiple interpretations of the Church's position on the right of workers to unionize (Schmiesing 2013). The Church's approach guards its reputation with regard to its primary product, even while allowing it to change the nature of some of the other goods it provides. Catholic bishops in communion with the Pope have continued to hold Ecumenical Councils to decide matters of faith and morals. Many of these councils were specifically called to heal divisions or anathematize heresies. Depending on the perspective, this could either be seen as a freedom-reducing monopolization or a critical component of the production of salvation goods.

The Eastern Orthodox churches remained in communion with one another, but repeated attempts to convene another Ecumenical Council of Orthodox bishops have mostly failed.<sup>3</sup> Without an authority to resolve important disputes on faith and morals, the Orthodox churches face an insurmountable coordination problem in establishing new doctrine and answering new questions in a unified manner that seems value enhancing for salvation goods. Today, the Orthodox Church is heavily fractured. Regional churches essentially act autonomously.

### *C. The Protestant Reformation*

In the sixteenth century, the Church's commitment to hierarchy was majorly challenged by a group of loosely related reform efforts that became known as Protestantism. Some of the Protestant and Reformed sects embraced degrees of hierarchy and centralization, while some were extremely decentralized and egalitarian, essentially establishing themselves as completely autonomous religious communities. The Reformation would prove to be the most serious attack by members of the Christian faithful on the idea that the Church's hierarchy was necessary for the production of salvation goods. That the Reformation happened at all exposed some weaknesses of hierarchy in this regard. By limiting consumer choice to a considerable degree, even declaring a right of physical coercion

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<sup>3</sup> The Orthodox position is that since the Seventh Ecumenical Council, there has not been a Council or Synod with the same authority, although there have been many meetings and local councils of bishops.

over the baptized at Trent,<sup>4</sup> the Church's commitment to its hierarchical structure certainly played a role in the deepening divisions of Europe.

The proliferation of Protestant churches greatly fractured Christianity. While most Protestants accept many of the core tenets of Christianity established in at least the first four Ecumenical Councils, much of the shared sense of tradition, community, worship practice, and doctrine was lost. The ability of the Christian Church as a whole to communally produce salvation goods as previously defined was severely diminished.

The Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation is called the Counter-Reformation. It began with the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and lasted until the end of the Thirty Years' War (1648). Much of the Counter-Reformation includes defenses of the sacramental practices—a key part of the salvation goods provided by the Church—from Protestant attacks. Trent rejected compromise with Protestants, but several reforms were enacted to improve the administration of the Church. More education for parish priests, depoliticization of the Church and of appointments to the priesthood and bishopric, and a focus on regenerating the clergy were all major Counter-Reformation goals (Wright 2005).

#### *D. Modernity and Freedom*

The Catholic Church, now consisting of over 1.28 billion members, has maintained its leading position in the production of salvation goods to the present day. It is the largest and oldest religious institution in the world. In addition to its primary religious role, the Church is the world's largest nongovernmental supplier of education and health care (Agnew, 2010). How did the Church's hierarchical structure contribute to its current position in modernity?

Contemporaneously with the Reformation, Europe began an age of exploration and discovery that would fundamentally change the world. Many explorers specifically wanted to spread the Catholic faith

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<sup>4</sup> The council declared: "CANON XIV. If any one saith, that those who have been thus baptized when children, are, when they have grown up, to be asked whether they will ratify what their sponsors promised in their names when they were baptized; and that, in case they answer that they will not, they are to be left to their own will; and are not to be compelled meanwhile to a Christian life by any other penalty, save that they be excluded from the participation of the Eucharist, and of the other sacraments, until they repent; let him be anathema." This effectively affirmed that the Church had a right to use physical coercion, including the death penalty, to enforce religious uniformity.

to people from around the world, which was now possible in a way it had never been. Without the Church's unity of vision, such widespread conversion would never have been possible. Rather than constrict freedom of choice for people around the world, the Church's missions expanded the set of potential consumers of salvation goods.

The relationship between the Church and freedom in the modern era was clarified by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Among other theological and liturgical changes, the Council adopted a declaration on religious freedom called *Dignitatis Humanae*. This document shows the Church's support for the protection of religious liberty. Scholars are split on whether the document is fully consistent with premodern papal declarations on this issue (Pink 2012), but it is agreed that there was at least a *policy* change, if not doctrinal, about the relationship between the Church hierarchy and secular states. The Church decided it would not attempt to restrict religious freedom by using the coercive power of these states.

Finally, we note that freedom from corruption delivered by hierarchy requires that the top of the hierarchy is itself free from corruption. What we have described as a feature of hierarchy could be its undoing. To address this, the Catholic Church has limited papal infallibility to a small subset of matters, making it very difficult to change Church doctrine. Still, concern over this potential for abuse has been a rallying cry for schismatic movements within the Church and remains a sticking point for Eastern Orthodox not in communion with Rome.

## V. Freedom-Enhancing Hierarchy?

How freedom should be defined is an age-old question of political philosophy. The freedom granted by decentralized market production of goods is freedom of choice. Buyers choose products from a variety of sellers to suit their needs. But both producers and consumers relinquish this type of freedom frequently.

The Catholic Church has long disagreed with common conceptions of "freedom." Following Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* 1.83), the Church has taught that freedom is the manner in which human beings seek universal goodness. It is the freedom to practice virtue, not the freedom to make any choice as dictated by natural appetites.

Producers frequently choose to restrict their freedom by organizing in firms so that they can produce a higher quality good.

Consider a franchisee of a fast-food restaurant—why voluntarily chain yourself to restrictions in offerings, practices, and prices if it does not increase your business’s profitability? As long as people voluntarily enter into the arrangement, it is not meaningful to talk about corporate rules as freedom-restricting. Producers within the Catholic Church have decided that by voluntarily submitting to the authority of the Church’s hierarchy, they are able to produce the most important goods for mankind. It would be meaningless to talk about these goods being produced and sold in a marketplace, because the mode of production and consumption is part of the good itself. Participation in hierarchical firms is completely consistent with freedom more generally.

How should we define freedom for consumers other than maximizing their choice set? In distinguishing the relationship between freedom and certain forms of coercion, we inevitably come up against questions of human nature. At least in the Christian context, individuals find themselves constrained even in the absence of external forces, and they might choose to make use of worldly institutions to counteract this fact. As Chesterton (1908, p. 8) puts it, “Whether or not man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing.” Salvation and communal goods are both wrapped up in our desire to exercise our will against our appetites. Whether or not Chesterton was right to call original sin “the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved,” individuals and communities alike have a persistent appetite for institutions designed to limit certain modes of freedom.

When considering the relationship between hierarchies and freedom, we should not simply use maximizing freedom of license as our metric. Society is not best served simply by maximizing choices for consumers. Consumers will only have access to certain goods by voluntarily submitting themselves to decisions made, sometimes, by rigid hierarchies. Hierarchies of this sort enhance overall liberty even when they diminish direct liberty (Klein and Clark 2010). A society that relied more on private governance structures would probably be filled with rigid hierarchies, especially when the goods being produced benefited by this mode of production. Rather than see the mere existence of hierarchy as necessarily in conflict with a desire for liberty, perhaps we should recognize the essential elements of human nature that crave hierarchies and limitations. We may actually see a much higher demand for strict, choice-reducing institutions that can better provide certain types of goods, an outcome that would be

consistent with Iannaccone's conclusion that the most successful churches tend to be the strictest, as they are the most well equipped to handle free-rider problems associated with communal and collective goods. Counterintuitively perhaps, we might see this as freedom-enhancing and freedom-protecting rather than as freedom-restricting.

## VI. Conclusion

Decentralized, competitive markets have long been the gold standard for economists. The efficiency of these arrangements is certainly undeniable for the production of almost all the goods and services we enjoy. In certain circumstances, though, limiting one type of freedom for consumers and producers can enhance the quality and consistency of the product and reduce information costs for the consumers. While some customers might be unhappy with having certain freedoms restricted, others actively seek out governance structures that can help them commit to their desired modes of behavior.

In this paper, we have focused on the production of transcendent goods such as those provided by religious institutions, particularly focusing on the Roman Catholic Church. We should be clear about the value of hierarchy in some realms by appreciating decentralized markets in others. A world with more private governance could lead to more hierarchy as firms seek to provide types of goods that improve when choice is limited. Future research in this area should continue to analyze real-world instances of private governance limiting choices for consumers or producers and report on the effects.

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