



Preserving religious identity through education: Economic analysis and evidence from the US

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Abstract

This paper models the decision of religious parents to send their children to private religious schools as reflecting their desire to shield their children from external influences and thus preserve their religious identity. It follows that when the share of the minority in the local population grows—and outside influences become less threatening—the demand for separate religious schooling among the members of the religious group decreases. This pattern implies concavity in the relationship between enrollment in private and religious schooling and the share of the religious group in the population. We present empirical evidence from United States county data on Catholic and private school enrollment that strongly supports our theory. The paper contributes to a better understanding of the demand for religious education.

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1. Introduction

Religious and ethnic minority groups try to preserve their religious values and their group identity through different channels, such as marrying within the group, wearing traditional clothing and congregating in segregated communities. This paper considers the role of private religious education in this light. Recognizing that the vast majority of private school (K–12) pupils in the United States attend religious schools, and that a large majority of these children attend

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schools affiliated with their own denominations, we contend that many religious households send their children to these schools in an effort to preserve the religious identity of their children.¹ As such, we extend previous studies of school choice that ignore the religious motive in private education and model the demand for private schooling as motivated only by differences in desired school quality.²

We address this issue directly by extending existing models of school choice to a model that explicitly incorporates the specific role of education in preserving religious identity. Our model recognizes two types of households: religious and non-religious, and three types of schools: public, private-secular and private-religious.³ In the model, religious parents send their children to private religious schools to shelter them from outside influences and preserve their religious identity.⁴ Consequently, when the share of the religious group in the local population is larger, outside influences are less threatening, and so their need for private religious education decreases. Thus, the share of the religious group in the population has two opposite effects on the demand for religious schooling. On the one hand, holding constant the proportion of parents from the religious group who send their children to religious schooling, there is a positive linear relationship between the demand for religious schooling and the share of the religious group in the general population. On the other, as the share of the religious group in the population grows, a smaller share of parents from the religious group chooses religious schooling. This pattern implies a concave relationship between enrollment in private and religious schooling and the share of the religious group in the population.⁵

Many studies on education attest to the importance of a religious or a cultural motive in school choice. Tyack [63], describing the organizational revolution that took place in American schooling in the nineteenth century, notes that “[o]ften at stake in the pluralistic politics of urban education were issues that were more cultural than economic. Many citizens who sought to influence school policies were not interested in jobs or contracts or favorable tax assessments but rather in an imposition of their values on others or in freedom to affirm their subculture in their own school” (p. 104). Tyack goes on to describe the struggle between the Protestant majority and Catholic and Jewish immigrant groups on the place of religion in public schools; and the efforts that Germans exercised in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other places, to promote bilingualism in local public schools. Similarly, Paley [48] describes the tradeoff that African-Americans

¹ In 1993–1994, 84.54% of pupils enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools in the United States attended religious schools (Digest of Education Statistics [72, Table 62]). In Catholic schools, which account for the majority of religious school enrollment, children from Catholic families accounted for 86.6 percent of enrollment in 2002–2003, down from 97.3 percent in 1970 (National Catholic Educational Association [46, Exhibit 23]). This suggests that many households send their children to private schools primarily for the religious content of these schools rather than for their scholastic achievement.

² See Rangazas [52], Epple and Romano [13], Glomm and Ravikumar [19], among others. Religious content and scholastic achievement are not contradictory goals. Evidence has shown that scholastic achievement in religious schools is greater than in public schools (Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore [11], Sander and Krautmann [54], Evans and Schwab [14], Sander [55–57], Neal [47], Jepsen [35]).

³ Different school and household types are also introduced in Cohen-Zada and Justman [10] and in Ferreyra [15] but neither specifies the micro-foundations of a preference for religious schooling. The present paper also builds on Bisin and Vardier [2] which presents an economic model and empirical evidence showing that compared to cultural majorities, minority groups exercise greater efforts to prevent their children from marrying out.

⁴ Nechyba [45] points out that the desire of parents to preserve their religious identity implies that religious differentiation is another reason for mobilizing the private sector.

⁵ The present paper, which emphasizes religious differentiation, ignores the detrimental impact of cultural differences on productivity (Lazear [40]) and its implications for education policy (Gradstein and Justman [20–22]).

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