

THE PRACTICE OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND DIGNITY

EDITED BY
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AND CLEMENS SEDMAK**

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556
www.undpress.nd.edu

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Published in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 0000000000

ISBN-13: 978-0-268-00000-0 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-0-268-00000-0 (WebPDF)

ISBN: 978-0-268-00000-0 (Epub)

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Hope and Human Dignity

Exploring Religious Belief, Hope, and Transition Out of Poverty in Oaxaca, Mexico

*Bruce Wydick, Robert A. Dowd,
and Travis J. Lybbert*

Hope has a fundamental and integral relationship with human dignity. Simply put, people who are aware of their own human dignity are hopeful because they believe they are capable of shaping their future for the good by doing good. Its opposite, hopelessness, is incompatible with human flourishing, not only because hopelessness is in itself an undesirable state but also because hopelessness discourages progress toward a better state though its power to quash aspirations and demotivate positive human action. Individuals may live in material poverty, but poverty is both magnified and perpetuated when accompanied by hopelessness. Hope, in contrast, gives birth to aspiration, and aspiration to a sense of purposefulness that can enable human flourishing.

In this chapter we address this relationship between hope and human dignity. Specifically, how are a person's capacity to aspire and her sense of agency related to human dignity and human flourishing? Moreover, how does the nature of spiritual and religious belief influence hopefulness? We address these questions by exploring and unpacking the basic components of hope: the capacity to aspire, the conceptualization of personal agency and responsibility, and the ability to conceptualize pathways to a better state. Using the framework of the economic model developed in Lybbert and Wydick (2018), we then apply this conceptualization of hope to a field experiment we carried out among 601 women who were part of a faith-based microfinance lending program in Oaxaca, Mexico.¹ We argue that hope is fundamental to human flourishing and dignity and that a better understanding of hope as a motivational and inspirational force of the soul can inform both our understanding of poverty and the design of effective programs to alleviate poverty.

In his classic work on the psychology of hope, Rick Snyder decomposes hope into *goals*, *agency*, and *pathways*.² His characterization of hope gives us a framework for thinking about the relationship between hope and human dignity and, in turn, how spiritual belief may influence both of these. While Snyder's work is of a secular nature, it is possible to find evidence of a relationship between human flourishing and Snyder's components of hope in the earliest biblical writings of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. Different Christian traditions, however, have emphasized different facets of scripture and offered diverse interpretations of scriptural references to hope. As a result, Christian understandings of the nature of hope, its manifestation in religious practice, and its influence on individual behavior vary widely within and across Christian denominations and faith communities.

In this chapter we compare and contrast the theological roots of hope within the context of Snyder's hope framework.³ We also share results from a field experiment built on Snyder's framework, which interface strongly with themes of religious belief and human dignity. We designed and implemented this experiment with a microfinance lender in order to test whether a spiritually based intervention designed to elevate levels of hope is able to (1) increase hopefulness as measured by psychological indicators and (2) generate significant effects on key economic variables such as microenterprise expansion and business income. In this study

of indigenous women in Oaxaca, which we describe in detail later, we have found that baseline values of hope, optimism, and agency display strong religious correlations. However, our results also demonstrate that it is possible to bridge these differences through a hope intervention. We use these results to explore the relationship between religious belief, hope, and human flourishing and dignity. We find that if a spiritually based intervention nurtures greater hope and hope is integral to human flourishing and human dignity, then we may be able through such an intervention to conceptualize a relationship between human dignity and spiritual beliefs as mediated by hope.

HOPE, AGENCY, AND HUMAN DIGNITY

We define hope along the lines of Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino, as the belief that the future may be different than the present in desirable ways.⁴ Hope can be passive, as when people wait for an external force to produce a desirable state for them, or it can be active, as when people take it upon themselves to do what is necessary to realize a desirable state. In this section we explore the theme of hope in Judeo-Christian theology, but we begin with the understanding of hope by the ancient Greeks. This progression from the Greek to the Judeo-Christian conceptualization of hope is particularly noteworthy because of the stark contrast between the two. Indeed, in the vast span of human history, our collective understanding of hope as part of the human experience has never been so radically altered as it was in the transition from Greek mythology and philosophy to Judeo-Christian theology and practice.

Greek mythology largely framed human existence as driven inexorably by fate. The Greek understanding of hope is expressed in the story of Pandora's box. In this story, which provides an explanation for the presence of evil and trial in the world, Zeus seeks to torment mankind by giving Pandora, the first human on earth, a box filled with all the evils of this world. Although he forbids her from opening the box, he knows that curiosity will ultimately prompt her to open the box. When she does, all of the evils in the box escape and begin tormenting the world—all the evils, that is, except hope, which remains trapped inside. To the modern reader, the logical interpretation of this final outcome is that

hope remains to help mankind confront and conquer evil and trial. Yet this interpretation imposes too much of our contemporary worldview on the ancient myth. The only interpretation consistent with the Greek philosophy is that if fate controls our destiny, hope is worse than foolish; it is the ultimate and most enduring evil because any sense of human agency is fundamentally illusory.⁵ Thus, in the juxtaposition of hope and fate, hope was seen as a human weakness, even a vice. Indeed, it would be inconceivable in ancient Greece to view hope as many view it today, as fundamentally good, even virtuous.

This radical shift in our view of hope in the Western world traces back to the emergence and growth of Judeo-Christianity, which articulates a worldview in which human agency plays a central role in tandem with the guidance, will, and grace of God. Nonetheless, this shift toward understanding hope as inherently good left considerable space for differences in emphasis and application. Thus, not everyone influenced by a Judeo-Christian worldview applies hope in the same manner. Some Christians apply hope by emphasizing the importance of waiting: waiting for God to do something or waiting for a miracle or some direct divine intervention in their lives to deliver them from an undesirable state. Some have associated this “passive hope with some Christian denominations and communities, where hope can lie in manifestations of the supernatural in the form of a patient faith that perseveres in praying and waiting for deliverance or healing. Other Christians may apply hope in ways that require their personal action in cooperation with the divine as a means of deliverance from some undesirable state. We refer to this as “active hope.” Active hope can be manifest in variants of Pentecostalism in the form of the “prosperity gospel,”⁶ but it is also embedded in the liberation theology of developing-world Catholicism.⁷ People who exude this kind of hope envision their personal lives or their communities to be more fulfilling, secure, just, and peaceful in the future and devote themselves to cooperating with God and others in order to realize this vision. In this worldview, hope quickly becomes a source of inspiration, motivation, and even salvation. Moreover, manifestations of active hope may move beyond a self-absorption with personal gain to a more general sense of both personal and communal health and well-being. A positive conceptualization of hope and related future-oriented traits is apparent throughout the Hebrew scriptures. This strand of the Judeo-Christian

tradition sees goals, aspirations, and planning as virtues that can enable human flourishing, though human plans should be inspired and influenced by the will of God (see, e.g., Proverbs 16:3 and 16:9). Both the Old and New Testaments speak directly of the importance of hope. The book of Proverbs, for example, admonishes us that “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”⁸ Proverbs contains other counsel, regarding the importance of planning and purposefulness,⁹ which is balanced with the value of submitting individual plans to the greater will of God and to wise human counsel.

Other strands of scripture relate the importance of hope. Psalm 9:18 states, “For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.” Jeremiah 29:11 reads, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” In Luke 1:37, Jesus tells his disciples, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” And in 1 Corinthians 13:13, the Apostle Paul lists hope among the paragon of virtues with faith and love.

In sharp contrast to the Greek vision, this particular Judeo-Christian worldview conceptualizes human agency as fundamental to this set of virtues, which is central to human flourishing and dignity. Early in Genesis, God speaks to humankind, saying: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”¹⁰ Such declarations of human agency run freely through both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, often paired with accountability for the natural consequences of choices within this agency. In other instances, human agency is seen as subject to divine accountability.¹¹

The ability to think outside of historical patterns, to question established norms, and to conceptualize different paths to achieve an objective is arguably less overt in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and tradition, but it is implicit in many of the admonitions of scripture, in which creativity, skill, and individual giftedness are consistently praised.¹² One of many examples in the Hebrew scriptures is seen in Nehemiah’s organization of the Jewish people during the rebuilding of the wall after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile, particularly in Nehemiah’s ingenuity in overcoming obstacles and opposition.¹³ There is also a sense in the New Testament, in particular, that one component of human and

even spiritual flourishing involves the choice of creative, even divinely inspired, pathways in the context of human agency. The Apostle Paul emphasizes in Ephesians, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works”¹⁴ and tells us to “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”¹⁵ We also see examples of creativity and innovation in Jesus’s own admonition against putting new wine into *new* wine-skins¹⁶—which reflects his support for the free, creative, and productive use of resources¹⁷—and in the creative pathways forged by Paul in bringing the Christian gospel to the Roman world as led by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

In the faith of biblical Christianity, hope originates from multiple sources, including hope for an eternal heaven, described as “hope of eternal life, which God . . . promised before the ages began,”¹⁹ and hope for God living within the believer: “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”²⁰ To the extent that the latter forms a vital component of hope for the believer, human agency is not a contradiction of the sovereign will of God, but rather the will of God is summoned to act within human beings in the context of their human agency. As such it breeds a capacity to aspire, a belief and even acceptance of one’s “locus of control” as divinely appointed.²¹ In the context of human agency, the divine will allows for creativity, thinking “outside the box,” new pathways around obstacles, and inspiration and direction from the Spirit when we are making choices and taking action. The submission, then, of individual aspirations, agency, and pathways to divine wisdom, guidance, and influence, indeed the submission of one’s own recognized agency to *divine* agency, is a vital component of a biblical view of human flourishing. The recognition of all human beings and their human agency—their capacity for moral choices and creativity, their capacity to be smaller imitators of the Divine, and their capacity for the indwelling of his Spirit—is an affirmation of human dignity.

AGENCY AND HOPE IN PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

The best-known (and more recent) elucidation of Christian perspectives on human agency is Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*

Capitalism, which argue that the personal conservatism, thrift, and work ethic characteristic of Calvinist northern Europe fostered the emergence of modern capitalism and the region's relative economic prosperity.²² Implicit in Weber's work is the observation that a sense of human agency, at least at a crucial point in the history of the European Industrial Revolution, was generally greater among Protestants than among Catholics, whom he viewed as distinctly proactive and passive, respectively, in their relationship to divine will. The Protestant ethic viewed human choices as principal sources of human flourishing based on scriptural evidence: "Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labor."²³ "Whoever watches the wind will not plant—whoever looks at the clouds will not reap."²⁴ "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."²⁵ "I can do all things through him who gives me strength."²⁶ A more submissive posture toward the divine can also be supported with scripture, but the dominant Protestant interpretation of the scriptural canon as a whole has tended to emphasize the centrality of human agency.²⁷ This emphasis on agency comes with an equal emphasis on the principles of love of God and neighbor and on submission to the divine will.

It is important to recognize that Weber's explanation for the rise of modern capitalism and the contrast he draws between the attitudes and behaviors encouraged by Protestantism versus those encouraged by Catholicism are not without their critics. Some have argued that the roots of modern capitalism pre-date the Reformation by pointing to an emphasis on agency in northern Italian city-states during the fifteenth century.²⁸ The emphasis on agency in these heavily Catholic settings occurred either despite Catholicism or, to some extent, because of the way Catholicism was applied at the time. Our point here is simply to recognize that both Protestantism and Catholicism may be applied in ways that encourage or discourage "active hope" and the human agency that flows from such hope.

As we have noted, the Christian scriptures include many passages that may be used to encourage human initiative and hope for a better life in this world (and not just in the next). However, there are also passages that seem to discourage human initiative and encourage people to focus exclusively on a better life in "the world to come" (i.e., heaven). In this sense, Christianity is multivocal, and Christian leaders, as well

as members of the churches they lead, have a choice as to which of these voices in their scriptures and traditions they choose to emphasize.²⁹ They may choose to give greater weight to those voices in scripture and tradition, which encourage attitudes and behaviors that call upon human agency to improve the well-being of their families and communities, or they may emphasize those voices that encourage more passive approaches, which deemphasize human agency and more strongly emphasize the sovereignty of God over human events.

Although there are many exceptions, there is evidence to suggest that, at various points in time and in many parts of the world, Protestant leaders and members of their communities have given greater weight than Catholic leaders and members of their communities to those voices in Christian scripture and tradition that emphasize human choice and initiative. Indeed, since Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic*, other studies have found Protestant Christianity in many contexts to place greater emphasis on human choices and agency than does Catholic Christianity.³⁰ Protestantism has been thought to place more emphasis on human freedom within the religious hierarchy, privileging the unmediated authority of scripture over the authority of church leaders. The structure of Protestant churches is more conducive to human agency, as church organization tends to be more horizontally than vertically organized. Because Protestant churches are typically less hierarchical than the Catholic Church, they provide more leadership opportunities for their ordinary members, including women.³¹ Along with an emphasis on the importance of individual choices, the leadership opportunities that many Protestant churches afford their members may give Protestants the chance to build the self-confidence and social skills that serve them well in economic activities and civic affairs outside of church.³² Yet, without dismissing the basic theological and organizational differences between Catholicism and Protestantism and the findings of previous studies, it is important to recognize the diversity within Protestantism and Catholicism, particularly at the local level, and to refrain from making overly sweeping generalizations about the effects of Protestantism and Catholicism on human agency.

The relationship between religious faith and human agency is complex. We certainly recognize that Catholicism does not always and everywhere discourage human agency and Protestantism does not always and

everywhere encourage such agency. The relative passivity of evangelicals in Latin American revolutionary movements in the face of Catholics who were motivated to action by different strains of liberation theology provides merely one counterexample. Indeed, there is evidence of variation across time and place in how Catholicism as well as Protestantism may be applied to social, economic, and political life.³³ Since there is evidence of variation across time and place in how both Catholicism and Protestantism are applied to social, economic, and political life, there is reason to think that there is something about time and place that explains why Protestantism or Catholicism is lived out in ways that are more or less encouraging of human agency.

In liberation theology, hope is manifest in the mediation of human beings to usher in the reign of God on earth.³⁴ In this view of hope, human agency is critical to fulfilling the will of God for the poor. As Gutierrez (1993) expresses,

We may say that there is an *act of hope* and an *act of hoping* and that both must be made concrete in the act of service to the poor in order to provide access to an understanding of the Reign [of Christ]. The object of hope is the object of the hope of the poor in this world—an end to their misfortunes, an opportunity for life, a just configuration of this world that oppresses them. The signs that the poor hope for are those that already offer them a little life and enable them to hope that life is possible. . . . Hope always has the structure of victorious action against what opposes it.³⁵

Thus, in liberation theology we see a strain of thought that runs counter to strains of Catholicism, which are more accepting of status-quo political structures and that, while possessing implications for collective action that contradict the political views held by most mainstream Protestants, contains a similar emphasis on human agency.

HOPE AND POVERTY IN ECONOMIC LIFE

For the vast majority of people throughout human history, poverty—often crushing, desperate poverty by modern Western standards—has

defined daily life. Given the trivial rates of improvement in material conditions that prevailed until the past few centuries,³⁶ this was as true for the average citizen of the city-states of ancient Greece as it was for the disciples of Jesus or commoners of the Middle Ages. In the sweeping history of the mythology and theology of hope we provided above, the reality of grinding poverty amidst concentrations of relative wealth and power among the elite must have fundamentally shaped conceptualizations of hope and human dignity. In this section we briefly explore modern perspectives on hope and poverty through a World Bank project that sought to understand poverty through the eyes of the poor.

In the 1990s, inspired by the work of Amartya Sen, the World Bank undertook an ambitious project to document how the poor themselves view poverty. This *Voices of the Poor* project provides a nuanced and qualitative complement to the standard objective and quantitative measures and definitions of poverty that development economists typically use. This research effort mined all of the dictated text collected in this project for references to the word “hope” and its derivatives. By analyzing all of the terms the poor used in conjunction with these references to hope, it is possible to gain some insight into how the poor today think about and experience hope and its counterweight, hopelessness.

Figure 7.1 depicts the content of hopeful statements made by the poor as a word cloud in which the size of the word is proportional to the number of references to hope linked to it. While there are several patterns that could be plumbed in these statements, there is one dominant pattern we wish to highlight: the common targets or sources of hopefulness of these desperately poor individuals from around the world are remarkably similar to the targets and sources of those who are comfortable or even wealthy. Moreover, this cloud makes clear how multidimensional the experience of hope is for the poor. When viewed from a position of relative material comfort, it is easy to let the material plight of the poor blind us to the social, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of life and the relationships that bring meaning and purpose—not only to the poor, but to also to the rest of us. This seems to be corroborated by a recent survey of World Bank researchers, which concluded that “development professionals assume that poor individuals are less autonomous, less responsible, less hopeful, and less knowledgeable than they in fact are.”³⁷ When we focus our attention on the material needs of the

intervention we hoped to tap into the deeply meaningful and yet, in many ways, less tangible forms of hope in order to encourage entrepreneurship among these women as they managed various microenterprises. We found significant differences in our baseline measures of hope between Catholic and Protestant women, but the intervention was, at least in the short term, able to narrow these differences.

A Description of the Project

In May 2015 we launched a randomized controlled trial among 601 indigenous women who procured microfinance loans with Fuentes Libres, a Protestant evangelical faith-based microfinance institution based in Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico, and, while known for a rich culture of art, cuisine, and architecture, it is also beset by numerous social and political problems. Fuentes Libres carries out microlending among its borrowers through a network of more than fifty community banks. The women we worked with both saved and borrowed at the banks, and there was joint liability for loans at the community bank level: if a woman failed to repay a loan, other members of the bank were liable for the loan via their deposits with the community bank. Loans from Fuentes Libres are typically in the range of US\$200 to US\$1,000, and the loans are used to augment investment in microenterprises. The kinds of enterprises women operate with the banks' help vary, but common activities include selling food on the streets or in small eateries, producing or retailing children's and women's clothing, and operating small convenience stores. Fuentes engages in other interventions as well, working with abused women and providing other kinds of spiritual formation and counseling; it uses a holistic approach to economic development that is oriented around the idea of human dignity and human flourishing.

Our randomization was carried out in the two main centers of Fuentes' program activity, Oaxaca City and Salina Cruz.³⁹ Fifty-two community banks were included in the study, and the banks were put into matched pairs based on the size of the group, the age of the group, the ages of the women in the group, the group's business activities, and the women's having a common loan officer. Each bank in a matched pair was then assigned to the letter A or B, and a coin was flipped to

determine which twenty-six banks, the As or the Bs, would be selected into the treatment or the control group, where the coin flip determined that the B banks' customers were selected for treatment. The A banks' customers would receive treatment twelve months after the beginning of the intervention.

The intervention consisted of a "hope treatment" based on Snyder's three components of hope: goals, agency, and pathways.⁴⁰ First, a film crew from California State University at Sacramento produced a documentary featuring four of the most successful women in the Fuentes microlending program. In the thirty-five-minute film women told their stories of being lifted out of poverty, in part through the help of the community bank loans. Women using the community banks who were selected for the treatment group viewed the documentary at the time of the baseline survey and found the film to be inspirational and uplifting.

After the film, each woman was given a three-by-eight-inch refrigerator magnet showing the three components of hope (*aspiraciones, habilidades, y avenidas*) along with three corresponding Bible verses related to aspirations, agency, and pathways.⁴¹ Below these verses were spaces for the women to write their goals for community bank saving and sales for their enterprises as well as a long-term goals such as a major business expansion or sending a child to high school or a university.

During the five weeks after the screening of the documentary and the completion of the baseline survey, the women in the treatment group were engaged with a Bible-based curriculum centered around the three components of hope: in the first week, the importance of having goals and aspirations; in the second, the recognition of their gifts and abilities (agency); and in the third, training in conceptualizing new avenues for their businesses, or thinking "outside of the box." The fourth week involved performed case-study exercises, and a preliminary one-month follow-up survey was taken in the fifth week after the baseline survey and documentary screening. Taken as a whole, the intervention was designed to provide a biblical basis for fostering aspirations, agency, and the ability to conceptualize pathways out of poverty and to appeal to both Catholic and evangelical women customers of the community banks.

We expected that the Catholic and evangelical women might respond in subtly different ways to the treatment. Historically, Oaxaca is predominantly Catholic, but over the centuries the Catholicism of the

area has blended with traditional indigenous beliefs; however, the area's evangelical Protestant churches are newer and tend to manifest a more vibrant and modern manifestation of the Christian faith. Because the intervention was carried out by a nonprofit organization rooted more strongly in the Protestant evangelical tradition, we thought it likely that the Bible-based curriculum might appear to be more novel to the Catholic women than to the evangelical Protestant women.

Results

In a work we published last year, we present results from the five-week follow-up survey that show the impact of the hope intervention.⁴² We estimate its impacts using an ANCOVA (analysis of covariance) estimator that controls for the baseline values of the impact variable as well as other characteristics of the women in the study. We have two major sets of results, one on psychological impacts related to the components of hope, and the second on microenterprise variables that include reported savings as well as sales and profits of the women's enterprises.

As we reported in the study reported last year, we find that the intervention increased aspirations by 24.4 percent among women in the treatment group based on an index of questions created to capture differences in the capacity of women to aspire.⁴³ Point estimates also increased in happiness, optimism, agency, pathways, and future orientation, although, unlike the increase found in aspirations, these estimations were not significant at the 95 percent level of confidence. We created indexes of seven measures of hope, including all of the above and of the basic three components of hope, and they were all statistically significant at the 90 percent and 95 percent levels, but this was largely driven by the substantial increase in aspirations.

The impact of the hope intervention on business performance shows some interesting effects. While we found no impact on employees at five weeks, plans for new employees, or hours spent in the enterprise, we did find that sales increased by 17.7 percent in the treatment group, and profits increased by 19.1 percent; however, both of these point estimates had confidence intervals that contained zero at the 90 percent level. A business performance index shows point estimates of a positive effect of about 0.1 standard deviations, but this is statistically insignificant.

What is perhaps most interesting about our results, however, was the difference in baseline levels of our psychological variables between Catholic (74 percent) and Protestant evangelical (26 percent) women in the sample and the impact of the intervention on these differences. Protestant evangelical women at baseline showed levels of optimism that were 0.29 standard deviations higher than those of the Catholic women ($p < 0.01$). Their levels of aspiration was far higher than those of the Catholic women, a difference of 0.21 standard deviations ($p < 0.05$). They evangelical women were also reported to be happier (based on a happiness index) by 0.16 standard deviations ($p < 0.10$) and had a greater sense of agency by 0.14 standard deviations (though this was not statistically significant). A three-variable hope index shows a baseline difference in favor of the Protestant evangelical women of about 0.15 standard deviations, and our seven-variable hope index shows a difference of about 0.17 standard deviations. In other respects, the two groups of women were similar in risk aversion, future orientation, and business variables.

The most stunning result of our experiment, nevertheless, was that the impact of the intervention was exceptionally strong for the Catholic women and had essentially zero impact on the Protestant evangelical women. The differences in impact on psychological variables can be seen in figure 7.2. Note that point estimates for the impact of the hope intervention on Protestant evangelical women are very close to zero, and confidence intervals at every level contain zero. However, the impact estimates for Catholic women are far more positive: impacts of about 0.30 standard deviations in the area of aspirations, 0.12 standard deviations in agency, 0.23 standard deviations in future orientation, 0.17 standard deviations in optimism, 0.21 standard deviations on our Hope3 index, and 0.27 standard deviation on our Hope7 index.

Figure 7.3 shows that our hope intervention had virtually zero impact on business variables among the Protestant evangelical women; a business performance index was even slightly negative. In contrast, the figure shows a 0.28 percent increase in sales and a 0.26 percent increase in profits for Catholic women. On other variables such as savings and employees (but not hours devoted to business) the effects were positive but insignificant.

The increasingly influential field of behavioral economics—a blend of economics and psychology—will shape policies and programs aimed

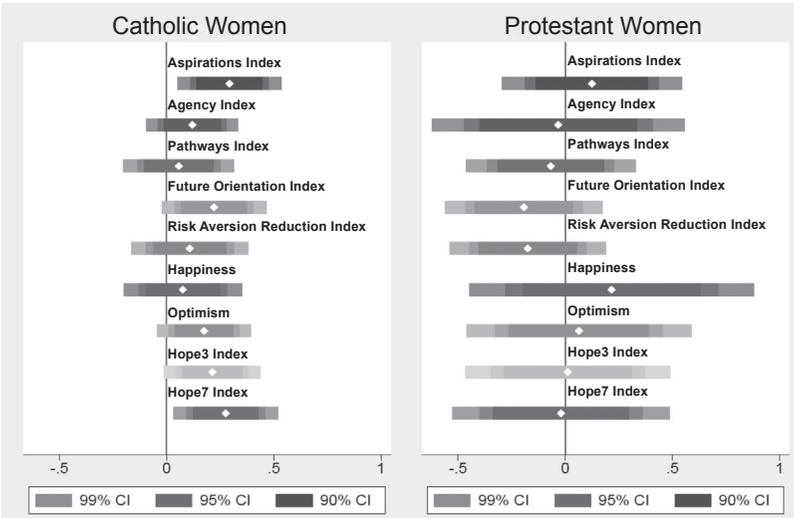


FIGURE 7.2. Estimated Effects of the Hope Intervention on the Catholic and Protestant Women in Our Study in Terms of Psychological Measures after One Month in the Microfinance Groups

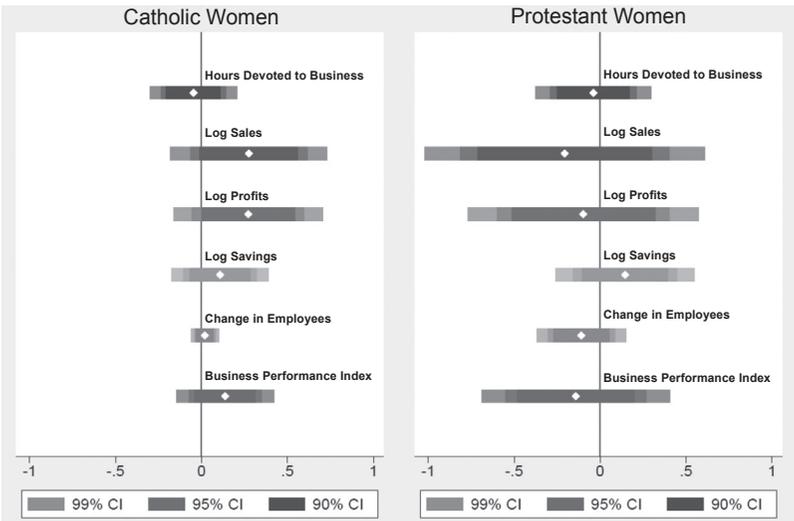


FIGURE 7.3. Estimated Effects of the Hope Intervention on Microenterprise Performance Measures after One Month for Catholic and Protestant Women in the Microfinance Groups

at alleviating poverty in both developed and developing countries for decades to come. This field has begun to generate insights into how people form aspirations and how these aspirations affect their livelihoods and well-being. Building on “hope theory” in psychology, we took the triad of aspirations, pathways, and agency as the conceptual basis of hope and explore the relationships among religious belief, hope, and poverty. We found that baseline differences between Catholic and Protestant indigenous women in Oaxaca largely reflect differences in hope and agency that are consistent with the patterns described by Weber and others. We also find that a Bible-based curriculum structured around developing aspirations, agency, and pathways out of poverty significantly reduced these differences.

Our study raised important questions about the nature of spiritual beliefs, how these beliefs affect one’s conceptualization of hope, and how this conceptualization of hope influences human flourishing and human dignity. At first glance, the lower levels of aspirational hope found among Catholic women relative to Protestant women at our study’s baseline would seem to indicate that Catholicism causes lower levels of hope than does evangelical Protestantism. But, this may be a misleading interpretation. Can we be sure that the Protestant women did not choose to become Protestants because they were more hopeful or wanted to exhibit greater agency in the first place? In other words, there may be a self-selection phenomenon at work that prevents us from concluding that Protestantism is more hope-inducing than Catholicism.

While further study is necessary, the findings we present in this chapter also suggest that hopefulness and human agency can be induced through the use of religious messages, especially among people for whom such messages are new. The religious messages we designed to induce hope were likely familiar to many Protestant women but less so to the Catholic women in the study. This novelty of the hope intervention may partly explain the relatively large impact such messages had on hopefulness among these women. Although meant to appeal to both Catholic and Protestant women, the intervention was viewed by many as “Protestant” in nature and was implemented by Protestant evangelicals working for evangelical faith-based organizations. Thus, what we appear to see, at least in the very short term, is a group of Catholic women who were strongly impacted by a Protestant-leaning intervention that emphasized human agency.

Christian orthodoxy teaches the virtue of an aspirational hope that encourages human agency with a fidelity to the principles of love for God and neighbor, as well as the virtue of a wishful hope that places faith in the beneficent agency of God. While different traditions have emphasized the former or the latter to varying degrees, particularly in different contexts, nearly all denominational leaders are likely to advocate for some degree of balance between the two. A better understanding of this balance will be of benefit to faith-based development practitioners who favor a holistic approach to poverty intervention that emphasizes not only the release of material constraints but the addressing of internal and spiritual concerns both as ends unto themselves and as means to poverty reduction.

Scripture states that “without a vision, the people perish.”⁴⁴ The capacity to aspire, the ability to conceptualize pathways to a better state, a healthy conception of human agency, and the navigation of these pathways are fundamentally related to human flourishing and human dignity. The narrative from our research is that developing hope and its components represents a fundamental process in the cultivation of human dignity and human flourishing and that this is possible through spiritually based interventions that can accompany other kinds of “tangible” interventions, such as those related to women’s empowerment and microfinance. Future research and practice can more deeply explore this relationship in a wide array of poverty interventions.

NOTES

1. Travis J. Lybbert and Bruce Wydick, “Poverty, Aspirations, and the Economics of Hope,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 66, no. 4 (2018): 709–53.

2. Rick C. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (Simon and Schuster, 1994).

3. Ibid.

4. Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964; rpt. 1993), and Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

5. Jürgen Moltmann, "Hoping and Planning: Future Anticipated through Hope and Planned Future," *Cross Currents* (1968): 307–18. For other important interdisciplinary work on hope, see J. R. Averill, G. Catlin, and K. K. Chon, *Rules of Hope* (New York: Springer, 1990); Ernst Bloch, "The Principle of Hope," *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 1320; L. A. Curry et al., "Role of Hope in Academic and Sport Achievement," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 6 (1997): 1257; Jaklin Elliot, "What Have We Done with Hope? A Brief History," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. J. Elliot (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2005), 3–45; Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi, "Hope: The Power of Wish and Possibility," *Theory and Possibility* (2010): 251–76; A. D. Ong, L. M. Edwards, and C. S. Bergeman, "Hope as a Source of Resilience in Later Adulthood," *Personality and Individual Differences* 41, no. 7 (2006): 1263–73; C. R. Snyder, "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind," *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2002): 249–75; C. R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); and C. R. Snyder et al., "The Will and the Ways: Development and Validation of an Individual-Differences Measure of Hope," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60, no. 4. (1991): 570.

6. Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

7. Sobrino, *Where Is God?*

8. Prov. 28:19 (Authorized King James Version, the only translation of the Bible used in this work).

9. Prov. 15:22 and 16:23.

10. Gen. 1:28.

11. For example, Gen. 3:17–19; 1 Sam. 15:11; Matt. 12:36–37; and Rom. 14:12.

12. E.g., Exod. 35:35; Col. 3:23; and Rom. 12:6.

13. Neh. 6:1–7:3.

14. Eph. 2:10.

15. Phil. 2:12.

16. Matt. 9:17.

17. Matt. 25:14–30.

18. Acts 20–28.

19. Titus 1:2.

20. Rom. 5:5.

21. Arthur Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977).

22. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1904).

23. Prov. 12:24.

24. Eccles. 11:4.

25. 1 Tim. 1:7.

26. Phil. 4:13.

27. The distinction in human agency in Spanish is sometimes described as the difference between “Si Dios quiere” (If God wills it) versus “Sí, Dios quiere” (Yes, God wills it). Where the former implies a submission to and acceptance of the (unknown) will of God (who is perceived to control all events), the latter implies human agency in carrying out what is perceived to be the will of God.

28. Hartmuth Lehmann and Guenther Roth, *Weber's Protestant Ethic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

29. Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the Twin Tolerations,” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (2000): 37–57.

30. Robert Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 106 (2012): 244–74; Jorg Spekunch, “Religion and Work: Micro-Evidence from Germany,” *SOEP Paper Series* (Berlin: 2010), and Robert Woodberry, “Pentecostalism and Economic Development,” in *Markets, Morals, and Religion*, ed. J. B. Imber (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2008).

31. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

32. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Scholzman, and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

33. Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion in World Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011); Robert Dowd, *Christianity, Islam, and Liberal Democracy: Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Robert Dowd and Ani Sarkissian, “The Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal and Civic Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online first, March 24, 2018).

34. See Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

35. Gustavo Gutierrez, “Option for the Poor,” in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis*.

36. Angus Madison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective* (Paris: Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

37. World Bank, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2015), 188.

38. The English translation of what Tolstoy wrote is this: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” See Leo Tolstoy and David Magarshack, *Anna Karenina* (New York: New American Library, 1961).

39. For an expanded description of the research design, see Travis J. Lybbert and Bruce Wydick, “Hope as Aspirations, Agency and Pathways: Poverty Dynamics and Microfinance in Oaxaca, Mexico,” in *The Economics of Poverty Traps*, ed. Christopher B. Barrett, Michael Carter, and Jean-Paul Chavas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) and *NBER Working Paper W22661* (2016).

40. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope*.

41. Ps. 37:4; Phil. 4:13; and Prov. 3:6.

42. Lybbert and Wydick, “Hope as Aspirations.”

43. Ibid.

44. Prov. 29:18.