

RGC Ref. No.: UGC/FDS15/H08/14 <hr/> (please insert ref. above)
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**RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL  
COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUNDING SCHEMES FOR  
THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR**

**FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)**

**Completion Report**  
(for completed projects only)

<p><b><u>Submission Deadlines:</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Auditor's report with unspent balance, if any: within <b>six</b> months of the approved project completion date.</li> <li>2. Completion report: within <b>12</b> months of the approved project completion date.</li> </ol>
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**Part A: The Project and Investigator(s)**

**1. Project Title**

In face of life's problems, what does religion mean? Assessing rational choice theory with evidence from Catholic case studies

**2. Investigator(s) And Academic Department(s) / Unit(s) Involved**

Research Team	Name / Post	Unit / Department / Institution
Principal Investigator	HO Yuk-ying/ Assistant Professor	Department of Sociology/Hong Kong Shue Yan University
Co-Investigator(s)	LI Kit-man/ Associate Professor	Department of Sociology/Hong Kong Shue Yan University
Others	N. A.	N. A.

**3. Project Duration**

	Original	Revised	Date of RGC / Institution Approval (must be quoted)
Project Start Date	1 Jan 2015	N.A.	N.A.
Project Completion Date	31 Dec 2016	30 June 2017	27 Sept 2016
Duration (in month)	24 months	30 months	N. A.
Deadline for Submission of Completion Report	31 Dec 2017	30 June 2018	N. A.

## **Part B: The Final Report**

### **5. Project Objectives**

#### 5.1 Objectives as per original application

1. *to evaluate RCT (Rational Choice Theory) with reference to its three assumptions, that is, instrumental rationality, the cost-benefit mode of thinking and acting, and otherworldly rewards*
2. *to investigate what religion means to Catholics when they encounter life's problems*

#### 5.2 Revised objectives

Date of approval from the RGC: N. A.

Reasons for the change: N. A.

- 1.
- 2.
3. ....

#### 5.3 Realisation of the objectives (*Maximum 1 page; please state how and to what extent the project objectives have been achieved; give reasons for under-achievements and outline attempts to overcome problems, if any*)

The research project has progressed satisfactorily and its two objectives have been fully achieved.

This qualitative case study adopts in-depth interview as the main research method, supplemented by participant observation. We spent a total of 30 months collecting data on Catholics facing life's problems of different severity, which are divided into 2 main categories: general solvable life's problems (e.g. interpersonal conflicts, study problems, work stress, financial problems, etc.) and insolvable life's problems that refer to incurable illnesses (e.g. cancer, terminal illnesses, physical disabilities, etc.). Our research investigates the meaning of religion on two levels (Objective 2). The first level considers religion as a means or resources for people to solve their problems and the second level reveals its deeper meaning in terms of making possible human self-transformation in suffering. We pay special attention to the mode of thinking and acting revealed in Catholics' responses to life's misfortunes and examine the features of rational choice therein as well as changes that occur over a longer period of time (**Objectives 1 & 2**). Obviously, the two objectives of our research are intrinsically connected with each other. The process of data collection roughly involved 3 stages: Stage I: Jan - Dec 2015; Stage II: Jan - Dec 2016; Stage III: Jan - June 2017.

**In Stage I** (12 months), we interviewed 15 Catholics having general solvable life's problems and 27 Catholic patients, comprising totally 42 research subjects. For the former, we conducted one interview session with each of them. For the latter, i.e. Catholic patients who suffer from serious bodily pain and/or are facing irreversibly negative health conditions, we conducted on-going home visits and in-depth interviews, in order to examine the meaning of religious beliefs for Catholics in the context of severe suffering. We recorded the changes that occur in their thoughts, behaviors, and emotional states. Throughout the first 12-month period, the 5 key themes in this research ("religious

resources,” “otherworldly rewards,” “interpretive framework,” “redemptive suffering” and “self-transformation”) guided our data collection and initial data analysis. In short, Stage I fieldwork provided us data on how Catholics make use of religious resources to solve their problems and how they understand the idea of otherworldly rewards in the Catholic faith. For the last 2 key themes (i.e. “redemptive suffering” and “self-transformation”), it took a longer time for us to observe and detect Catholics’ deeper understanding of these concepts, and hence data collection on Catholic patients continued to the next stage.

In **Stage II** (12 months), we kept conducting ongoing home visits and in-depth interviews with the 27 Catholic patients. We also recruited 8 more Catholic research participants who have general solvable life’s problem and one interview session was conducted with each of them. Hence, the total number of research subjects in this project is 50. The previously-mentioned 5 key themes in our research still guided our data collection and data analysis. But obviously, data related to the last 2 key themes emerged in Stage II fieldwork especially with the seriously-ill Catholic patients. 8 out of the 27 Catholic patients either have a terminal illness or were diagnosed with end-stage cancer. We were able to collect data concerning how Catholic patients understand the meaning of the Catholic otherworldly doctrine of redemption, their struggles amidst severe pain, and changes in their thoughts and actions. In this period, 2 Catholic patients passed away.

The last 6-month period, i.e. **Stage III**, is an extension of this project requested by the PI (with Institutional Approval) for collecting data on a few of the remaining 6 Catholic patients who had entered the final stage of their illness but were very generous and willing to be interviewed at intervals even when they were in pain. The specific issue we addressed is whether and in what ways a cognizance of imminent death serves as a catalyst for Catholic’s deep understanding of redemptive suffering. Data collected in this stage supplemented findings on factors affecting Catholic’s understanding of the supernatural doctrine of redemptive suffering and a transformation of self-understanding.

Within the entire 30-month period of this project, 5 Catholic patients passed away. We collected data on totally 50 Catholics, among them 27 patients (2-8 interview sessions were conducted with each of them; each interview session lasted 1hr-2hrs). For the other 23 Catholics having general solvable life’s problems, one interview (lasted 1 – 2hrs) with each of them was enough. In this project, the interviews with Catholic patients obviously provided rich and in-depth data concerning the meaning of religion on different levels.

#### 5.4 Summary of objectives addressed to date

<b>Objectives</b> <i>(as per 5.1/5.2 above)</i>	<b>Addressed</b> <i>(please tick)</i>	<b>Percentage Achieved</b> <i>(please estimate)</i>
1. to evaluate RCT (Rational Choice Theory) with reference to its three assumptions, that is, instrumental rationality, the cost-benefit mode of thinking and acting, and otherworldly rewards	✓	100%
2. to investigate what religion means to Catholics when they encounter life’s problems	✓	100%

## 6. Research Outcome

### 6.1 Major findings and research outcome (*Maximum 1 page; please make reference to Part C where necessary*)

The research project has the following major theoretical findings and empirical findings:

**Theoretical findings:** \*As demonstrated in 3 conference presentations (**C9a, C9b, C9c**) and 1 academic essay (under preparation, **C8b**), we offer in-depth evaluations of R. Stark's *Rational Choice Theory (RCT)* for explaining religious behavior in general and Catholic religious behavior in particular.

- 1/ Stark's concept of the supernatural, which is closely linked with *otherworldly rewards*, has reduced religion to human investment, hence failing to aptly capture religious actions that orient to self-transcendence or moving beyond the natural human inclination to self-interest. RCT can explain actions in which religion serves a means or resources for problem solving, but it is not quite able to look into the deeper meaning of religion. In contrast, R. Orsi's discussion on the problem of the holy illustrates that the holy is supernatural and hence the experience of the holy can be self-transcending. Similarly, K. Pargament's *Religious Coping (RC)* gives proper attention to the sacred, sacred matters, and spiritual strivings that orient to self-transformation.
- 2/ Both Orsi's and Pargament's views throw light on the importance of (2.1) religious experience in connection with the supernatural and (2.2) human strivings for meaning and transcendence in studying religion. For the specific Catholic religious behavior in connection with the idea of redemptive suffering, the issue of how humans can understand (and accept) a supernatural doctrine helps bring into sharp focus the limitations of *instrumental rationality*. Theoretical reflection reveals that *cost-benefit mode of thinking and acting* tends to confine humans to self-centeredness and hence hinders humans from perceiving the virtues or moral concepts embodied in redemptive suffering.
- 3/ Methodologically speaking, we successfully demonstrate how the topic of the supernatural can be properly addressed in an empirical inquiry of religion, by introducing "redemptive suffering" into the study of Catholics' responses to life's problems.

**Empirical findings:** - What religion means to Catholics when they encounter life's problems (i.e. the meaning of religion on two levels mentioned earlier in 5.3)

- 1/ Both Catholics having general solvable life's problems and Catholic patients having incurable illnesses use religious resources for solving and/or alleviating their problems. A pragmatic view of religion and means-end reasoning serve as guides for actions in the problem-solving process.
- 2/ For Catholics having general solvable life's problems, religion generally becomes less important after their problems have been solved. This finding confirms the general characteristics of our modern, secular age.
- 3/ For Catholic patients having incurable illnesses, prolonged pain and suffering was found to have impacts on Catholics' attitudes towards life and self-understanding. The supernatural doctrine of redemptive suffering can play a role in facilitating human self-transformation.
- 4/ The crux of the above-said self-transformation lies in Catholic patients' ability to understand bodily pain and illnesses in a non-secular way. It was found that such an understanding cannot be acquired by instrumental reasoning pivoting on individual self-interest. Rather, it is by "stepping outside" of the self-focused mode of thinking that one can start perceiving the redemptive potential of being a virtuous patient in spiritual union with the image of the merciful Christ on the cross.
- 5/ To be or not to be a virtuous patient, it is a choice drastically different from RCT's "choice" and yet consciously and sensibly made by Catholics in their religious and everyday lives. It was found that the more effort that a Catholic patient makes to practice virtues, the better able s/he is to detach from human self-interests, to empathize with the supernatural (the suffering God) and ultimately accept and transcend pain.

\* Major empirical findings 3, 4, and 5 have special significance and are included in: 1 conference presentation – **C9a**; 1 academic essay (under review) – **C8a**; 1 book (under preparation) – **C8c**

## 6.2 Potential for further development of the research and the proposed course of action (Maximum half a page)

### 1/ Value involvement in social inquiry:

The research project demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and means-end rationality in studying religion. It is well understood that there is a close connection between religion and morality, but academic investigations in this respect are not yet well developed. Based on our research findings, it is suggested that the study of religious behavior on the micro-individual level may consider a line of research that looks into issues concerning virtuous practices. This line of research will help open up possibilities for including the moral framework of a given religion in designing a research. To take it further, on the meta-theoretical level, we look forward to reconnecting substantive moral or value components to social science researches, in which the mainstream ones have grown accustomed to establishing positivistic “value-free” social knowledge.

### 2/ Possible development in the practice domains:

By introducing “redemptive suffering” into the study of Catholics’ responses to life’s problems, we successfully demonstrate how it is possible for the idea of the supernatural to be included in the framework for empirical investigation. Scholars like Pargament who engage in clinical practice have been making specific academic contributions towards advancing a mode of intervention practice that takes into account the assumption of a supernatural dimension (see his book, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*, published in 2011). We do not ignore functional uses of religion for they serve as an important and the most basic dimension in dealing with real-life problems. We just suggest that the helping professions can be open to ideas and views derived from the supernatural dimension of a given religion in helping their clients to ultimately transcend life’s misfortunes (see also **12. Other Impact**).

## 7. Layman’s Summary

*(Describe in layman’s language the nature, significance and value of the research project, in no more than 200 words)*

This research project examines what religion means to people via a qualitative case study. We specifically investigate the ways in which Catholics rely on their religion when they encounter life’s problems. Totally, 50 Catholics were interviewed. Among them, 23 Catholics encounter general solvable life’s problems (e.g. financial problems, interpersonal conflicts, etc.). The other 27 Catholics are patients having incurable illnesses (e.g. physical disability, cancer, etc.) and they have to endure pain and suffering for the rest of their lives.

We investigate the meaning of religion on two levels: 1. religion as a means or resources for problem-solving; 2. a deeper meaning that makes human self-transformation in suffering possible. The significance of this research lies in the deeper meaning of religion which brings the Catholic concept of redemptive suffering into the study of Catholic behaviors. Two implications deserve attention. First, the analysis of how Catholics connect worldly misfortunes to the afterlife reveals the meaning of religion at the supernatural level. Second, the virtues embodied in redemptive suffering (e.g. patience, compassion, self-sacrifice) enable us to detail the human struggles for self-preservation as well as the strenuous dynamics of meaning-making amid suffering. The findings of this project are useful for pastoral care, and scholars and practitioners who are interested in the role of religion in social work, counselling and health care.

**Part C: Research Output****8. Peer-Reviewed Journal Publication(s) Arising Directly From This Research Project**

*(Please attach a copy of the publication and/or the letter of acceptance if not yet submitted in the previous progress report(s). All listed publications must acknowledge RGC's funding support by quoting the specific grant reference.)*

The Latest Status of Publications				Author(s) (denote the corresponding author with an asterisk*)	Title and Journal / Book (with the volume, pages and other necessary publishing details specified)	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the institutional repository (Yes or No)
Year of Publication	Year of Acceptance (For paper accepted but not yet published)	Under Review	Under Preparation (optional)						
		√		HO Yuk-ying (C8a)	“Illness, Suffering, and Redemption: How Can Catholic Patients Develop a Supernatural Perspective on Suffering?” 〈患病、受苦、救贖：天主教病人如何發展出對「苦」的超自然理解角度？〉， 《輔仁宗教研究》(台灣)	No	No	Yes	N.A.
			√	LI Kit-man (C8b)	“How Rational is Religious Faith? Questioning Rational Choice Theory”	No	No	Yes	N.A.
			√	HO Yuk-ying (C8c)	(Tentative title) <i>Illness, Suffering, and Transformation: Catholic Patient Case Studies</i> 《患病、受苦、轉化：天主教病人個案研究》 (approx.: 100,000)	No	No	Yes	N.A.

					words; both traditional and simplified Chinese editions)				
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**9. Recognized International Conference(s) In Which Paper(s) Related To This Research Project Was / Were Delivered**

*(Please attach a copy of each conference abstract)*

<b>Month / Year / Place</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Conference Name</b>	<b>Submitted to RGC</b> <i>(indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)</i>	<b>Attached to this Report</b> <i>(Yes or No)</i>	<b>Acknowledged the Support of RGC</b> <i>(Yes or No)</i>	<b>Accessible from the institutional repository</b> <i>(Yes or No)</i>
Dec/2015/ Hong Kong	Reflections on the Rational Choice Theory of Religion: What's the Problem with the Means-end Model of Rationality (delivered by Dr. HO Yuk-ying, PI) <b>(C9a)</b>	Hong Kong Sociological Association 17th Annual Conference: Sociological Imagination in a Pluralist World	Yes (2016)	Yes	Yes	N.A.
Dec/2015/ Hong Kong	The Problem of Reductionism in the Study of Religion Revisited (Delivered by Dr. Li Kit-man, Co-I) <b>(C9b)</b>	Hong Kong Sociological Association 17th Annual Conference: Sociological Imagination in a Pluralist World	Yes (2016)	Yes	Yes	N.A.
Dec/2017/ Hong Kong	Religion and the Search for Meaning in Face of Irresolvable Life Problems: A Catholic Viewpoint (Delivered by Dr. Li Kit-man, Co-I) <b>(C9c)</b>	The 19 <sup>th</sup> Hong Kong Sociological Association Annual Meeting: Social Transformations in Chinese Societies	No	Yes	Yes	N.A.

## 10. Whether Research Experience And New Knowledge Has Been Transferred / Has Contributed To Teaching And Learning

*(Please elaborate)*

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This research has enhanced Dr. Ho Yuk-ying (PI)'s teaching of Sociology of Religion (SOC 339), an elective in the BSocSoc (Hon) in Sociology program offered by the Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University.

Dr. Ho shared with students how it is possible to conduct a social research that takes into consideration the supernatural assumptions of religion. As revealed in this research project, Catholics' responses to illnesses and the Catholic supernatural doctrine of redemptive suffering together provide a substantive arena for investigating how the idea of the supernatural can be investigated empirically. More specifically, the theoretical and empirical findings have generated new knowledge and enhanced the teaching of the following topics in the sociology of religion: "the rational choice theory (RCT) of religion," "secularization," and "mysticism."

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Inspired by this research, Dr. Ho Yuk-ying (PI) introduced the idea of a transcendent worldview and Hong Kong people's religious practices into the design of a new General Education Course on "Hong Kong Chinese culture". This new course (GEA 105) is offered to undergraduate students at Hong Kong Shue Yan University from the academic year 2017-18 onwards.

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## 11. Student(s) Trained

*(Please attach a copy of the title page of the thesis)*

Name	Degree Registered for	Date of Registration	Date of Thesis Submission / Graduation
N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

## 12. Other Impact

*(e.g. award of patents or prizes, collaboration with other research institutions, technology transfer, teaching enhancement, etc.)*

- For teaching enhancement, please see **10.** above.
- In the course of this research study, three persons in the helping professions were involved in conducting in-depth interviews with Catholics, and they had discussions with the PI. Among the three persons, two were part-time social work supervisors working in a UGC-funded university. The other one is a seasoned counselor in private practice. All of them are interested in exploring the role of religion in social work and counselling. The discussions held in the course of the research study were fruitful dialogues and facilitated two-way transfer of knowledge/insights between academics and practitioners.



**13. Public Access Of Completion Report**

*(Please specify the information, if any, that cannot be provided for public access and give the reasons.)*

<b>Information that Cannot Be Provided for Public Access</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
N.A.	

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THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR**

**FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)**

**Completion Report - Attachment**

*(for completed projects only)*

**RGC Ref. No.:** UGC/FDS15/H08/14

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. HO Yuk-ying

**Project Title:** In face of life's problems, what does religion mean? Assessing rational choice theory with evidence from Catholic case studies

**Statistics on Research Outputs**

	Peer-reviewed Journal Publications	Conference Papers	Scholarly Books, Monographs and Chapters	Patents Awarded	Other Research Outputs (Please specify)
No. of outputs arising directly from this research project [or conference]	2 (1 under review & 1 under preparation)	3	1 (scholarly book, under preparation)	N.A.	N.A.