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Sacred Values May Keep Some People From Becoming Entrepreneurs

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A study of more than 14,000 people across 11 countries finds that people guided by sacred values are less likely to become self-employed, especially in cultures that strongly enforce tradition and conformity.

Modern entrepreneurship culture celebrates the dominant narrative of the entrepreneur as self-promoting, independent, aggressively ambitious, and singularly focused on pursuing economic opportunity and market success. Over time, this image of entrepreneurship has become so normalized that it is often treated as universal. However, many individuals approach entrepreneurial action through very different and, at times, opposing value-based lenses.

The initial decision to enter entrepreneurship serves as an outward reflection of a deeply held value system or set of personal beliefs. To determine whether entrepreneurship is a clear reflection of a specific set of underlying beliefs, we have to look closely at the choices being made and the underlying motivations behind them. Some people are guided primarily by an orientation toward secular values—emphasizing self-direction, personal advancement, and individual achievement. Others are guided more strongly by an orientation toward sacred values—rooted in religion, moral obligation, and a sense of duty to others. These personal value systems shape how individuals understand success, wealth creation, and the kinds of economic actions they see as legitimate or worthwhile to pursue.

We researched whether these differences between sacred and secular value orientations influence entrepreneurial action (as reflected in self-employment). Using data from more than 14,000 individuals across 11 countries, we found that individuals with sacred values were generally less likely to engage in self-employment than individuals with more secular value orientations. This relationship became even stronger in societies where social norms and traditional expectations are more strongly enforced.

These findings raise an important question: Are some highly capable individuals choosing not to pursue entrepreneurship because they perceive it as incompatible with their deeply held values? If so, entrepreneurship may be overlooking individuals whose sacred value orientations are often associated with qualities linked to entrepreneurial success—including discipline, trustworthiness, and strong community commitments—simply because prevailing entrepreneurial narratives do not align with how they understand meaningful work and economic contribution.

Our Assumptions

We expected individuals with stronger sacred value orientations to be less likely to engage in entrepreneurship. Mainstream entrepreneurship narratives often portray the entrepreneur as a heroic figure driven by personal ambition, growth, and market success. These assumptions align closely with secular value systems centered on individual agency and self-directed achievement.

Sacred value orientations frequently emphasize different qualities. Many religious traditions place greater importance on humility, discipleship, moral

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obligation, and the common good. As a result, we expected that individuals guided by sacred values may be less attracted to entrepreneurship when it is commonly portrayed as emphasizing personal advancement and individual achievement.

Rather than viewing entrepreneurial action primarily as an opportunity for personal success, individuals with stronger sacred value orientations may evaluate career choices through the lens of service, responsibility, and purpose. Consequently, they may be less likely to pursue entrepreneurship when it appears inconsistent with these commitments.

What We Studied

We analyzed global survey data from more than 14,000 individuals across 11 countries. The surveys included questions related to religion, moral beliefs, attitudes toward authority and tradition, and work-related behavior. We then examined whether individuals were self-employed.

Importantly, we were not simply measuring religious affiliation. We focused more broadly on sacred versus secular value orientations. Sacred values reflect stronger commitments to moral principles, tradition, and transcendent belief systems. Secular values reflect greater emphasis on personal autonomy, flexibility, and individual choice. This distinction allowed us to examine whether underlying value systems—not simply religious membership—influence individuals' willingness to pursue entrepreneurship.

We also examined cultural context. Some societies place stronger pressure on individuals to conform to accepted norms and discourage deviation from traditional expectations. In these environments, social expectations tend to shape career choices more strongly than in societies that are more accepting of individual experimentation and nontraditional paths. We expected these cultural pressures to matter because individuals with strong sacred value orientations may be especially attentive to social norms and community expectations when making career decisions. As a result, we thought that any tendency to avoid entrepreneurship should become even stronger in societies where conformity and tradition are more heavily emphasized.

What We Found

The findings were striking. Individuals with stronger sacred value orientations were generally less likely to engage in self-employment and were therefore more likely to work for others rather than become business owners themselves. This relationship became even stronger in societies where social norms and traditional expectations were more strongly enforced. In other words, individuals with strong sacred value orientations were especially unlikely to become business owners in cultures that place a high value on conformity, tradition, and adherence to established social expectations.

At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive. Religion is often associated with discipline, strong communities, trust, and long-term orientation—characteristics commonly linked to successful entrepreneurship.

Our findings suggest that sacred value systems shape not only personal beliefs, but also how individuals evaluate entrepreneurial action itself. For some individuals, entrepreneurship may be perceived as less compatible with their values, particularly when dominant narratives emphasize personal ambition and individual achievement over service, stewardship, and responsibility to others.

Takeaways

Our findings point to a broader issue in how entrepreneurship is understood. Entrepreneurship is often presented through a highly secular lens that treats economic action primarily as an expression of individual choice. Yet across societies, many individuals continue to interpret economic life through sacred value systems that shape how they understand responsibility and the purpose of work itself.

We therefore encourage entrepreneurship scholars, educators, and practitioners to broaden how entrepreneurship is defined and taught. Religion does not simply influence whether individuals persevere amid challenges. Sacred and secular value systems shape what kinds of entrepreneurial paths people view as worthwhile, legitimate, and morally appropriate. As a result, some individuals may fail to see entrepreneurship as a viable option—not because they lack entrepreneurial potential, but because prevailing entrepreneurial narratives do not resonate with their values.

This distinction is important because efforts to expand entrepreneurship often focus primarily on funding, training, and market access. Our findings suggest that entrepreneurial participation is also shaped by deeper

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systems of meaning that influence how entrepreneurial action itself is interpreted. This raises important questions for business schools, entrepreneurship programs, incubators, and regional support organizations. Do entrepreneurship programs unintentionally emphasize individual ambition, growth, and financial success at the expense of other motivations such as service, stewardship, community development, and moral purpose? If so, expanding how entrepreneurship is presented to students, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders may help a broader range of individuals recognize entrepreneurship as consistent with their values and aspirations.

Importantly, our findings suggest that some individuals may opt out of entrepreneurship because the dominant image of the entrepreneur does not reflect the values they seek to express through their work. These findings suggest that people with different value systems may be attracted to different forms of entrepreneurship and may pursue entrepreneurial action for different reasons. Recognizing this diversity creates opportunities to develop more inclusive approaches to entrepreneurship education, training, and support.

Acknowledging these differences does not weaken entrepreneurship. Instead, it broadens the field beyond narrowly individualistic models of success and creates space for multiple pathways into entrepreneurship. In doing so, it may encourage more individuals—including those guided by sacred values—to view entrepreneurship as a meaningful and legitimate way to create value for others, serve their communities, and pursue purposeful work.

Explore the Research

Moral boundaries: how sacred values and cultural tightness influence entrepreneurial action (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/401619537_Moral_boundaries_how_sacred_values_and_cultural_tightness_influence_entrepreneurial_action) . *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, February 2026

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