Journal of Business Ethics
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-026-06287-8

ORIGINAL PAPER

Divine Limitation or Enabler? Understanding How Religion Influences the Relationship Between Ethics and Creativity

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Received: 4 April 2024 / Accepted: 2 March 2026

Keywords Ceativity · Ethics · Religion · Religious entrepreneeurship · Constraints · Entrepreneurship

Ethics is a critical and pervasive consideration in organizational contexts, influencing a range of decisions from entrepreneurial action to resource acquisition (e.g., Vallaster et al., 2019). Recently, scholars have focused on understanding the relationship between ethics and creativity (Shen et al., 2019; Kundro, 2023; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). Creativity is defined as the generation of novel and appropriate ideas (Amabile, 1983). It is a primary process by which entrepreneurs, organizations and their employees create and deliver value to their various stakeholders, and represents a major source of an organization's success, entrepreneurial opportunities, and longevity (George & Zhou, 2001; Liu, et al., 2020). Despite its importance, two different perspectives have emerged on the relationship between ethics and creativity.

On the one hand, ethics may limit creativity because "doing the right thing" may interfere with "rule-breaking" or challenging the norms to create something novel (e.g., Dollinger, 2007; Shen et al., 2019). This is referred to as the *hinder* hypothesis (Shen et al., 2019). Individuals may become preoccupied, drained, or distracted by ethical considerations, thereby hindering their creativity (Yuan, et al., 2018). On the other hand, ethics may promote creativity. This is referred to as the *facilitate* hypothesis (Shen et al., 2019). Individuals may become more cognitively flexible, benefit from morally positive emotion, and/or engage in moral imagination (e.g., Malti and Krettenauer, 2013; Shen et al., 2019; Kundro, 2023).

These two perspectives have been fueled by limited consistency in terms of theoretical frameworks, definitions, and mechanisms. As a result, scholars have encouraged a deeper investigation into potential factors affecting the relationship between ethics and creativity (Shen et al., 2019; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). One potentially important but overlooked factor that may help shed light on this relationship is religion (Dejardin et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b).[1] This is because religion is often considered a mechanism that influences ethics and creativity (Dejardin et al., 2024). From an ethical perspective, religion is important because it may inform ethical attitudes, knowledge, and frameworks for making decisions between right and wrong (Parboteeah et al., 2008). From a creativity perspective, religion is important because it has been associated with both positive and negative creative processes (Liu et al., 2018). Despite this potential promise of religion, it remains unresolved *how* religion might influence the ethics and creativity relationship. Therefore, our exploratory research question asks: *How does religion influence the relationship between ethics and creativity?*

Andrea C. Sottini and Brett R. Smith contributed equally to this manuscript. We would like to thank Tina Dacin and three anonymous reviewers for their feedback and guidance on this manuscript. We would also like to thank Chris Sutter and Cory Driver for comments on previous versions of the manuscript. We thank the Center for L.I.F.E. (Leading the Integration of Faith & Entrepreneurship) at Miami University for support to make the study possible. We thank the monks and nuns for sharing their experiences with us.

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[1] We recognize the longstanding debate about whether (or not) religion is required for ethics. Instead, we focus on the notion religion can serve as a mechanism for ethics in certain situations and highlight its relevance in the relationship between ethics and creativity.

To increase theoretical focus, we turn to the emerging theory of intimate co-creation (Rouse, 2020). Intimate co-creation acknowledges that creativity is a social and collaborative process and it shifts the focus from the individual to the collective, at a crucial and often overlooked level of analysis: the dyad. Specifically, it focuses on how and why intimate dyadic relationships under certain circumstances can offer trust and support that lead to the development of creative ideas (Rouse, 2020). This is important because research on ethics and creativity has shown significantly larger effects at the dyadic level, compared to either the individual or organizational levels (Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). Intimate co-creation, which was developed to explain interactions between two people, also allows us to integrate religion to examine close relationships between individuals and a deity to bring increased theoretical specification to understanding ethics and creativity.

To elaborate theory on these relationships, we conducted an inductive, exploratory study of creativity in the business enterprises of Catholic monasteries in Italy. Specifically, we negotiated sensitive access to obtain 49 interviews with monks and nuns across 25 different monasteries operating businesses. Our findings suggest an ethical process of *relational moralization* occurs between individuals and God and does so through three stages: relational development, relational identity and relational obedience, resulting in a form of relationally bounded creativity.

Our study makes three contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to business ethics by elaborating theory on the construct of *relational moralization* as a process between individuals and God, rather than two individuals, where ethical considerations are integrated into the relationship. In so doing, we find relational moralization leads to a more nuanced view of the ethics-creativity relationship where ethics acts as a double-edged sword that both *limits the domain of creativity* and *enables innovation within this domain*, resulting in a form of *relationally bounded creativity* based on relational obedience to God. Second, we further contribute to the literature on business ethics by highlighting the potential positive aspects of obedience. While prior research largely focuses on obedience as destructive or 'evil' (Pina e Cunha et al., 2010), we find obedience can also be potentially constructive, especially when the source of authority is an altruistic God (Dyck, 2014), who can be known, and with whom relational obligations develop. Finally, we contribute back to the literature on intimate co-creation. While theory identifies the role of a shared interpersonal boundary of the dyad, we elaborate theory empirically by moving from a shared boundary to a *relational identity* and *schemas* (servant and co-creator) in intimate co-creation.

Theoretical Background

Ethics and Creativity

Ethics is an essential and ubiquitous element of organizational processes. Ethics are generally considered beneficial to the functioning of organizations because "they help employees avoid unethical behavior, reducing the frequency and severity of organizational scandals" (Kundro, 2023: 1183). While ethics has been examined across organizational processes, scholars have more recently turned their attention to the role of ethics in creativity (Shen et al., 2019; Kundro, 2023; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). Despite the frequent benefits of ethics in organizational processes, scholars have advanced two different perspectives on how it connects with creativity.

First, some scholars suggest ethics may exert a negative influence on creativity. This is referred to as the *hinder* hypothesis (Shen et al., 2019). Consistent with this perspective, research suggests the development of novel ideas requires rule-bending or rule-breaking which stands against the ethical adherence to accepted or moral norms (e.g., Runco, 2009). As such, ethics will have a dampening effect on creativity. Going a step further, scholars find dishonesty may contribute to creativity (Baucus et al., 2008). Finally, research suggests employees may experience more stress or exhaustion from behaving in a moral way, thereby hindering the attention needed for creativity (Yuan, et al., 2018).

On the other hand, some scholars find ethics may promote or encourage creativity. This is referred to as the *facilitate* hypothesis. From this view, research suggests individuals may not have to break ethical rules to be creative (Shen et al., 2019). Instead, scholars argue the constraints imposed by ethics may contribute to effective creativity rather than blue-sky thinking by narrowing the search space area (Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). Ethics may also facilitate creativity through cognitive flexibility (Kundro, 2023) and moral imagination (Werhane, 1999). This may be especially true when values are aligned with the organization. As individuals confront opportunities to introduce ethical considerations into a creative process, they may be focused on growth and achievement to uphold these moral considerations (Kundro, 2023). Creativity may also be enhanced through morally necessary positive emotion or aesthetic feelings (e.g., Malti and Krettenauer, 2013). While theoretical and empirical research suggests a positive correlation between ethics and creativity, there is relatively limited understanding about the mechanism(s) influencing this relationship (Shen et al., 2019; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023).

Religion in Organizational Studies: A Mechanism-Based Approach

The theological turn in management and entrepreneurship research highlights religion as a major (and neglected) cultural force and seeks to provide novel answers to questions in organizational studies and entrepreneurship (Dyck, 2014; Smith et al., 2021). Religion is defined as a "systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, a community of faith, and a worldview of the sacred and what ultimately matters" (Schmidt et al., 1999, p. 10) and "the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors, that arise from the search for the sacred" (Hill et al., 2000, p.66). The theological turn begins to take seriously the role of religion in management and entrepreneurship and provides a framework for understanding how the integration of religion may change organizational processes. Emerging scholarship on the theological turn in management and entrepreneurship has explored a wide range of topics, including resource acquisition, decision making, entrepreneurial action and persistence (e.g., Smith, et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2024; Pidduck et al., 2024). Therefore, we believe it may be useful for understanding the relationship between ethics and creativity in both directions. In terms of ethics, religion may inform ethical attitudes, knowledge, and frameworks for making decisions between right and wrong (e.g., Parboteeah et al., 2008). In terms of creativity, religion has been associated with both positive and negative creative processes, such as the development of schemas to organize information (Bierly III et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2018).

To clarify its relevance, scholars have encouraged a mechanism-based approach for the study of religion in creative and entrepreneurial contexts (Dejardin et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2021). This is because a deeper understanding of a religious mechanism may serve as a mid-range theory, potentially bridging different theoretical approaches and allowing for the explanation of positive or negative factors (Dejardin et al., 2024), as is needed in the complex and multifaceted relationship between ethics and creativity. Therefore, while the inclusion of religion in the understanding of ethics and creativity may be worthwhile, more precise theoretical specification is essential (Barbosa & Smith, 2024).

Intimate Co-creation

One promising avenue to improve theoretical specification is the emerging theory of intimate co-creation, defined as "a process in which two people pass ideas back and forth throughout idea generation, elaboration, and evaluation (the phases of the creative process), with the goal of developing novel and useful ideas and products" (Rouse, 2020, p. 124). Intimate co-creation focuses on *how* individuals move ideas between themselves through intimate interactions and shared interpersonal boundary (Rouse, 2020). Intimate co-creation identifies a major oversight in the literature on creativity: the role of the dyad. This is important because practice reveals countless examples, such as Sergey Brin and Larry Page at Google, where "the pair is the primary creative unit" (Shenk, 2014: xxii) and research acknowledges significantly larger effects at the dyadic level than at the individual or organizational levels (Damadzic et al., 2022; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023).

Based on the theory of intimate co-creation, two individuals engage in creative interactions that may lead to the development of a shared interpersonal boundary, or sense of 'we' (Rouse, 2020). In turn, this shared interpersonal boundary provides a safe space where individuals participate in the vulnerable challenges and activities of creativity, including the appreciation of differences to increase creative divergence, the balancing of creative tensions to increase generative energy, and the leveraging of schemas to increase the quantity of ideas (Rouse, 2020). Within this shared interpersonal boundary, individuals may experience shared ownership, interpersonal flow, and validation (Rouse, 2020).

The centrality of a dyadic relationship has parallels in religion. In the study of religion, there is a focus on developing a close and personal relationship with God that leads to bi-directional communication (Luhrmann, 2012). Extant literature focuses on the ability to communicate with a deity or God, ranging from subjective experiences (James, 1902) to spiritual exercises, where the exercises are considered a means to initiate and nurture communication with God, as modeled by Ignatius Loyola (Fleming, 2008). This is seen most clearly in the case in Christian prayer, which is considered as "a continuing conversation with God" (Keller, 2014: 48), where "God is actually speaking to you!" (Packer, 1973: 36). In the study of communication and religion, extant research compares interpersonal communication and communication with a deity and finds these processes are similar in their dyadic nature, intention to communicate, and bi-directional communication processes, "such as speaking and listening" (Baesler, 1997: 10). Recognizing the importance of a relational approach in religion, we believe intimate co-creation is uniquely positioned to allow us to specify, build, and elaborate theory about how religion influences the ethics-creativity relationship.

Methods

To examine our research question, we conducted a qualitative, inductive study that is particularly well-suited for exploratory research focused on answering 'how' and 'why' research questions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We investigated the creativity of monks and nuns employed while operating business enterprises, which ranged from

making and selling products ranging from soap to beer, as an appropriate sample to investigate our phenomenon at the intersection of ethics and creativity. While accessing these religious orders is quite challenging, we were able to engage prior relationships and partner contacts to conduct 49 interviews with monks and nuns across 25 monasteries in Italy in four rounds of data collection (Table 1). We limited our focus to Italy to reduce cross-country differences in creativity (Assouad & Parboteeah, 2018). A list of the monasteries, interviewees, businesses activities conducted, locations and other details can be found in the Appendix 1.

Research Setting

We focused on Catholic monks and nuns in Italy because it is purposeful sampling—both empirically and theoretically—to address our research question. First, Catholic monks and nuns have been engaged in creativity in their business enterprises for many centuries. As a result, this sample allowed us to empirically examine the intersection of religion, ethics and creativity within longstanding business enterprises. Starting with St. Benedict's rule (540), many Catholic monasteries began running business enterprises to support their monasteries in Europe (Beales, 2003). Since their origin, Catholic monks and nuns had the dual mission of being financially sustainable and integrating their faith into their daily work.

Second, monastic life offers an ideal setting for understanding the theory of intimate co-creation. This is because monastic life focuses on the dyadic interactions and relationship development (between nuns/monks and God), which are essential to intimate co-creation. Anchored in centuries of religious traditions dating back to St. Benedict, the Catholic monks and nuns discern a 'call' to join the monastic life with a deep faith in God. As part of their daily routines and life purpose, monks and nuns practice religious contemplation as a means to establish and cultivate a relationship with God. The importance of the contemplation is documented in St. Benedict's rule (540), chapter XX: "We know by faith that God is present everywhere and that 'the eyes of the Lord look in every place' and we must believe it with absolute certainty and without the slightest hesitation." As a result, the sampling of Catholic monks and nuns represent a form of *theoretical* sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) because it focuses on examining the development of dyadic relationships between monks/nuns and God in the context of the creative process in their entrepreneurial ventures.

Finally, given the ubiquity of religion in their daily lives and across the business process, the research setting of the Catholic monks and nuns is an extreme case that offers unique insights to generate and elaborate theory on religion, ethics and creativity. In seminal research of religious monks and nuns, Baumol (1996, p. 906) highlights the historical "entrepreneurial propensities" of the Catholic monks as the "spearhead of technological advance". Examples of their entrepreneurial and creative success include the champagne by Dom Pérignon, water mills, and beer, among many others that have scaled businesses and influence of the monasteries for centuries (Berman, 1986). Nowadays, monasteries are recognized for their creativity both for achieving profitability despite developing commodity products with limited resources but also for their innovative capacities both in technologies, products, and art (Turak, 2009). For some illustrative examples of creativity from our sample, one monastery introduced important innovations related to restoration of damaged historical books through the use of magnets. Another monastery invented the first model of a tripod-tracking solar panel system able to be used in adverse weather conditions, like strong wind. A third monastery created software to detect vineyard origins based on statistics which resulted in a cheaper and more reliable system than the previous one based on plant DNA. The above examples illustrate the appropriateness of our sample to study the theological turn in organizational studies and entrepreneurship by focusing on creative activities within religious organizations (Smith et al., 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Tracey, 2012).

Data Collection

We built our data collection on three data sources of primary and secondary data as documented in Table 1. First, the data sources included semi-structured interviews conducted by two members of the research team. We completed interviews with 49 Catholic monks and nuns across 25 monasteries in Italy. Second, we analyzed eight books and manuscripts written or suggested by the monks and nuns interviewed, including the book of the St. Benedict's rules. We used secondary data to explore the contents mentioned in the interviews in greater depth while also gaining a general overview of monastery's organizations and history. Third, we visited sixteen monasteries that allowed us to collect several observations. Despite monasteries traditionally being closed to the public due to rules of cloister, we were able to gain special access to observe their daily routines which include prayer, work, and rest. These three sources of data allowed us to triangulate the findings and cross-check the content of semi-structured interviews with real-time direct observations and published books (Jick, 1979; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The selection of the monasteries was based on the following criteria. First, we checked for their activities and the number of members, when available, to ensure they ran businesses. Even though monasteries have the rule of economic independence, some monasteries rely primarily on donations due to a large number of elderly monks and nuns. Second, we carefully selected monasteries running businesses in different industries—from the restoration of ancient clothes and

Table 1 Main data sources and use

Data source	Type of data	Use in the analysis (e.g., gathering and triangulation)
Semi-structured interviews Sum-up: 575 pages, *verbatim* 49.1 h, *recorded*	**Country**: Italy **Participants**: entrepreneurial monks, nuns, and abbesses **Rounds of data collection** **First round (July 2019—September 2020)** Total number of interviews: 10; Participants: 13 Total pages of interviews: 136; total hours: 10.5 **Second round (May—June 2021)** Total number of interviews: 9; Participants: 13 Total pages of interviews: 98; total hours: 10.2 **Third round (January—September 2024)** Total number of interviews: 31; Participants: 41 Total pages of interviews: 341; total hours: 27.1	Gathering data regarding how and why entrepreneurial monks and nuns pursue entrepreneurial activities. We found religious understanding influence entrepreneurial decisions Expanding the sample to investigate monks and nuns build a relationship with God and how it informs their identity Understanding more in-depth how the relationship with God influences creativity
Archival data	**Public documentation:** St. Benedict (534). The cellar of the monastery, Regula monachorum **Essays shared by monasteries** Il messaggio di Benedetto per una Europa multiculturale—armonie composte (pg. 1–3) Introduction to "Monasticism and economy: rediscovering an approach to work and poverty: acts of the fourth international symposium" (pg. 1–2) Una lettura della Regola di san Benedetto: Alla luce dei concetti elaborati da Hannah Arendt per caratterizzare le attività umane (pg. 1–12) La Regola di San Benedetto applicata all'impresa (pg. 1–2) La Regola di San Benedetto: Una proposta di umanità (pg.1–12) La perenne attualità della Regola Benedettina (pg. 39–53) La regola Benedettina: uno strumento sempre attuale per una gestione efficace delle organizzazioni (pg. 1–20)	Triangulation interview data and archival data to dissipate limitations of monks' rhetoric. Verifying the consistency between primary data and St. Benedict's Rules. Obtaining more granular understanding on religious values that influence the frame of means
Direct observations	We had 21 visits in 16 monasteries; total hours of observations: 104 During the visits, we met informants in their daily routines, such as praying, working, and leisure activities	Triangulating interview data and observations to verify consistency and obtain further insights; gaining in-person examples of daily routines, collaboration between monks at work, and production sites (e.g., jams workshop)

books to the production of jams and liquors—to assess generalizability across a spectrum of their business activities.

The focus of the data collection evolved across three rounds between October 2019 and September 2024. Initially, we completed informational interviews with multiple monks and nuns in several monasteries to investigate how and why they pursue entrepreneurial activities. Based on initial evidence, we realized the influence of religion and their relationship with God in the way monks and nuns approach business activities. Initial concepts that emerged from the interviews guided us toward theory connecting religion and creativity, narrowing our research focus, and further developing the interview protocol accordingly, consistent with an inductive approach (Murphy et al., 2017). During the first round, we also conducted repeated interviews with monks and nuns in two different monasteries to strengthen our knowledge in preparation for our next round of data collections. In the second round, combining exploratory interviews with an examination of archival data and observations in the field we identified several relationships between religion and creativity. Moreover, we further explored the relationship between monks and God and its influence on their identities. For instance, seeking spiritual growth in the work environment was mentioned in many interviews and consistent with our observations and secondary sources. In a third round, we continued to expand our data collection by diving deeper into such relationships while returning to academic literature for a theoretical understanding of our evidence. Finally, we conducted additional interviews to confirm evidence on how monks and nuns understood their relationship with God, and how it influences their creativity in the entrepreneurial endeavor. We concluded our data collection when we reached *theoretical saturation*, which occurs when no substantial new insights emerge from the data to better describe or explain the categories of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 2015).

The semi-structured interviews were collected by two authors who also made several observations in 21 visits to 16 monasteries. This granted us unique access to data allowing us to observe their daily routines, spaces within monasteries (e.g., church, gardens, refectories, workshops, stores etc.) and surrounding environments—often in rural areas or even islands, isolated from main cities. The data analysis was conducted separately by two authors, who then compared their analysis while the third author cross-checked the process to avoid biases and ensure consistency with the data, as described in detail in the next section (Larsson, 1993).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three steps following rigorous analytical procedures: developing first-order categories, axial coding, and building a grounded model (Gioia et al., 2013). We carefully conducted a multi-stage process that allowed us to go back and forth between data and the emerging theoretical arguments (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In doing so, we connected empirical observations to existing theoretical concepts, which resulted in a grounded theoretical model (McMullen & Dimov, 2013).

Consistent with grounded theorizing, we analysed the transcribed interview and developed preliminary codes by following an "open-coding" process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which consisted in a fine-grained reading and re-reading of the transcriptions. The purpose of this phase of analysis is to reach meaning condensation from the large amount of data collected. From this analysis we identified different concepts. The identification of these codes was discussed among all the authors to ensure consistency. Similar codes were gradually collapsed into our first-order categories (Gioia et al., 2013), being faithful to reflect our informants' "concepts-in-use" (Gephart, 2004). Through this process we identified twelve first-order concepts. As suggested by this methodology, in the second step we grouped conceptually overlapping first-order categories into second-order themes. The purpose of this phase is to identify the first-order concepts that are related to one another and group them in theoretical categories allowing the coding process to evolve into second-order concepts. Accordingly, such themes were informed by existing theories, and therefore, required us to go back and forth between data and theory several times (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, first orders codes that suggested monks "avoiding self-affirmation" and framed "working to serve others" were grouped into a second-order theme of "servant schema". This enabled us to link our emerging concepts with prior theory. A theory-driven explanation of our phenomenon brought us to identify five second-order themes. Supporting data for each first-order theme are provided in Table 2 to ensure transparency.

Third, we developed these second-order themes into three aggregate dimensions based on their connected theoretical domains. The aggregated dimensions provided theoretical elaborations (e.g., relational identity with God) and theoretical generation (e.g., relationally bounded creativity). Here, our team of researchers worked closely, comparing the emerging coding structures. The result of the analysis produced a data structure of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregated dimensions, as reported in Fig. 1.

Finally, elaborating on second-order themes and aggregated dimensions, we constructed a conceptual model that connect such dimensions in order to explain the influence of religion on the relationship between ethics and on creativity as shown in Fig. 2 and explained in the discussion section.

Table 2 Supporting evidence

Second-orders codes	Supportive evidence
Aggregated dimension: relational development with god	
Integrating faith & work	*Working as a way to relate with God* *"Ora et labora* means live the prayer, so the relationship with the Lord in all aspects of the relationship exists within work." (Monk#3) "I believe the greatest thing is that in work there is possibility of meeting the presence of God. It is a very powerful factor of human and spiritual evolution." (Nun#20) "When our Lord asked to a crowd of people "Who is the labor here? Who desire the life and live days of joy?" Saint Benedict defined that person [the labor] as the person who will be happy. For us, work is a journey of faith, a way to relate with God." (Nun#1) *Working to give form to faith* "Work allows faith to become incarnate and ensure it is not disembodied. It involves my relationship with the creation and Creator. This does not mean that I pray while working, but it means that when you work…you give form to the spiritual dimension." (Monk#17) "It is when you enter work that you can truly understand it. You have absorbed it at that point faith becomes natural, like a tailor-made suit. Living work to the full allows me to also live faith to the full." (Monk#12) "In the work you live for Christ. The work is where you do your personal journey of faith." (Nun#45) *Working as a spiritual technique* "Work is an essential tool for balance your monastic life. The work helps to maintain the balance between inner experience and outer development, because the asceticism of work allows the progress achieved internally to pass into nature." (Nun#42) "Work is important not only for an economic perspective, but also as a spiritual technique. There is an apophthegm of the Desert Fathers that says there was an old man who lived far away in the desert and therefore was not able to sell the product of his work. He made baskets. At the end of the year, he burned everything and started again. This says it all very well. Work not as an economic need but as a means to balance the spiritual dimension." (Monk#2) "We constantly seek equilibrium between work and pray because work is to reach a unification of self, and so of these two overcome constant tensions." (Nun#43)
Aggregated dimension: relational identity with god	
Servant schema	*Avoiding self-affirmation* "Making the monastery machine work remains primary. One of the dangers of the spiritual life is the identification of an activity with your own person: 'I am the accountant.' Work should be experienced with humility. So, the opposite of acting to emerge (…) to being envied by others. No, hubris! There is not prestige to be conquered." (Monk#8) "There are risks of putting oneself a step above, feeling the owner of the activities. This is why if you are a manager in our sector, we make sure you are a collaborator in another. So, you remember to serve others and you avoid the risks to cannot impose yourself, it is a service I make myself available." (Monk#6) "St. Benedict was rather cautious precisely of the artisans of the monastery, that is, on those who came to the monastery with already skills … if there is a need, they can also be employed in the art in which they are experts, but if they feel owner of the monastery's outcomes because of their skills it is better to take that job away and make them do something else." (Monk#3) *Working to serve others* "You do a job that you have not chosen for yourself … I don't go to the Abbess and I tell her 'I want to do that thing … send me there …' Above all, it becomes beautiful when you live it as a service, so I'm not looking for my profit, I'm trying to build a reality on the basis of work and therefore today it is important to make the cream. It means it is a service to all." (Nun#1) "Cleaning, for example, is something that weighs heavily on me… in the sense that I don't like it… but I have to do it… you feel these divisions. So, the attempt is to put them back together, why am I cleaning up? Which service? What reasons? It is for the community." (Monk#18) "Listening with attention to the specific abilities and charisms of your members… and this is mutual between brothers. Therefore, if I learned from those who preceded me a certain type of work, it enriches me. By treasuring the experience of the other, gathering their greater competence, recognizing their existence … this can give rise to intuition, discernment, and understanding. So, the members here are at the service of the community." (Monk#35)

Table 2 (continued)

Second-orders codes	Supportive evidence
Co-creator schema	*Collaborating in God's creation* "Work in this sense is truly a way in which man collaborates with God. Benedict XVI said when speaking about the work of monks… that ultimately God works, he gets his hands dirty; therefore, our work is a responsible participation in God's work, it is a collaboration." (Nun#1) "You worked with your hands, and you participated in the work of creation, because then the work … in the social doctrine of the church has this meaning here, the active participation that the Lord asks precisely of his work." (Monk#18) "In the work you live this personal journey of faith, you adhere and live Christ through what He asked you. And what He asks to serve the Church and within the service you make Christ present in the world. This community itself is a place where you contribute to make God present. It so that you contribute to the Creation through this faith in God." (Nun#46)
	Creating with each other "Work interfaces with dimensions of faith. I see faith as a mission. More profoundly, work is a fundamental way of relating from the point of view of the quality of the relationship with others… Working together allows us to get to know each other in a much deeper way." (Nun#15) "We make decisions together, as a community. We discuss it together so that even the aspect of collaboration makes one feel like an active part, we could say. I think that the esteem is linked precisely to the fact of being an active part of, now let's talk about the work discourse but in fact of the whole life of the community, we every decision is taken as a community. So already as our legislation there is the fact that it is a chapter vote, but apart from the matter of law, it is also just an approach." (Monk#7) "Working with one another, which is an evangelical criterion, leads us to bear that fruit of human maturity, too, which allows for better work. So being able to collaborate means establishing a team that has the same purpose and that is supportive. Feeling useful for others makes you part of the community in which you live, otherwise there are slices of exclusion, instead everyone should come together and bring his or her own creative contribution." (Nun#26)
Aggregated dimension: relationally bounded creativity	
Relational obedience as limiting constraint: Operating within guardrails	*Accepting God's restrictions* "Obedience is a sort of bet because you throw yourself into something that you don't know how to do it. And, sometimes it is a job that I say, 'I am not suited to it or I don't like it. I would like to do another job,' But, you still have to do it. I remember when they asked me to work in agriculture. I was very shocked, and I had a lot of difficulty because I didn't have experience or the specific skills." (Monk#31) "Obedience is to God first of all and if I obey God, I also obey His words and then if I meditate on the word of God also comes to understand certain things. He helps me to discern and understand better what He did for us and wants from us with all we have here." (Monk#30) "Everything is fine when you are called to do what you like or what allows you to put into practice the talents you have. But the work that is entrusted does not always correspond with one's expectations: I have often felt completely inadequate or unprepared for carrying out the task that had been assigned." (Nun#42)
	Trusting in God's intentions "It is like a virtuous cycle: God offered us a path of life that exists only in the relation with the given reality [by God] and through obedience you grow your faith which leads you to entrust more in God. This gives you trust in viewing the reality positively because you know that there is another dimension beside the one you can tangibly see and touch." (Nun#47) "If I trust in a God who is the Creator and who has entrusted me with the responsibility for Creation, I cannot seek the face of God in a disembodied way if not by incarnating it within what my life is called to live." (Monk#17) "When you obey, you say a 'Yes', but you trust in it because the Lord is there with you. You believe to receive a grace that helps you to accomplish that 'Yes', to do your tasks regardless of how difficult it is. When I was nominated as responsible of the nursery, I was very worried. It was a great challenge to pass through it, but the Lord taught me that I am not alone. And so, your fears disappear." (Nun#48)
Relational obedience as enabling constraint: Providential innovation	*Perceiving abundance of resource endowment* "It's not that a prior selection made on the basis of professional qualifications, there is room for everyone because everyone has a value. Who can be competent for works that are more intellectual, who instead can do more practical job, you have to understand how to get the best out of it from them." (Monk#37) "We recognize what we have as sacred gifts that the Lord has given us." (Monk#31) "Everyone has his gifts and exercises them in the monastery. The Abbot recognizes there (the talents) and makes each monk realize them with his abilities (…) Because as St. Benedict says, the Abbot must recognize and in a certain sense value all the abilities that every monk has." (Monk#4)

Table 2 (continued)

Second-orders codes	Supportive evidence
	Embracing restriction with freedom "Obedience liberates in the sense of freeing you from what constrains you…the false needs that keep us bound as prisoners… so it is a discipline that tries to free you to make you understand what is for your good." (Monk#37) "Through obedience one develops their potential. It can be challenging otherwise to accept to put energy in something that does not look suitable for you. A monk was asked to work with the bees, he did not like the idea, the environment, but then became very successful and won several prizes." (Monk#35) "Obedience leads to a freedom from oneself. It opens us up to creativity." (Nun#20) *Assembling resources with faith* "The providence is trusting that God takes care of each of us. He doesn't abandon his children. Work is a way to support us to give to do our part, to commit ourselves to moving forward… but here we are not self-sufficient. We are not enough on our own we need God's providence and we also experience this providence." (Monk#31) "Providence is the Lord's gaze, His hand that watches over everything, and in the community, it is tangible because one feels that many times humanly certain things cannot be explained except for this intervention of the Lord. Every time a sister arrives it is like a piece of a puzzle that we say was missing because it brings with it its history and abilities." (Nun#38) "Different businesses were opened at different times taking into account the capabilities and possibilities of the people who became part of the community. For example, a publishing house was born from the work of some brothers and sisters who did editorial work or wrote, translated, took care of things for other publishing houses. The ceramic workshop was born from the sensitivity, the ability and desire of some brothers as well as the icons and the carpentry workshop." (Monk#37)

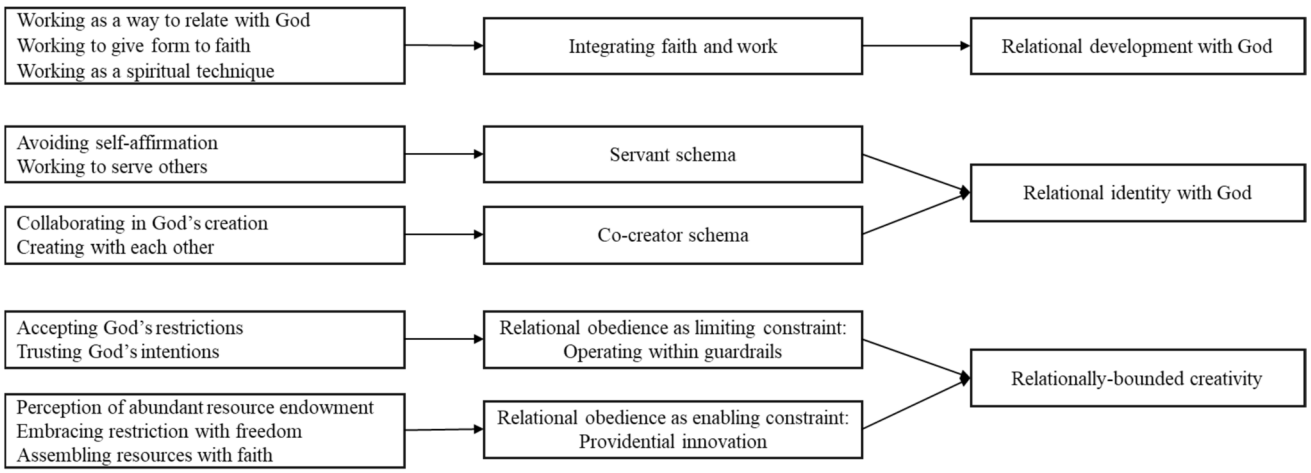

Fig. 1 Data structure of moralization of relationally bounded creativity

Findings

Our data analysis highlights how religious beliefs and practices by monks and nuns led to a process of *relational moralization* where ethical considerations based on the relationship between individuals and God influenced the process of creativity. The centrality of the relationship seemed to evolve through three stages: relational development, relational identity, and relational obedience, resulting in a form of *relationally bounded creativity*. Throughout the process, the importance of the dyadic relationship and corresponding ethical considerations remained at the forefront. As we iterated back and forth between the data and theory, we found the creative process was both limited *and* enabled by this relational moralization. We find relational moralization leads to a more nuanced view where ethics acts as a double-edged sword that both *limits the domain of creativity* and *enables innovation within this domain* through relationally bounded creativity based on obedience to God. We now discuss each of these stages.

Relational Development with God

As a starting point, we found monks and nuns integrated faith and work as a means to build a relationship with God. While research focuses on building relationships between

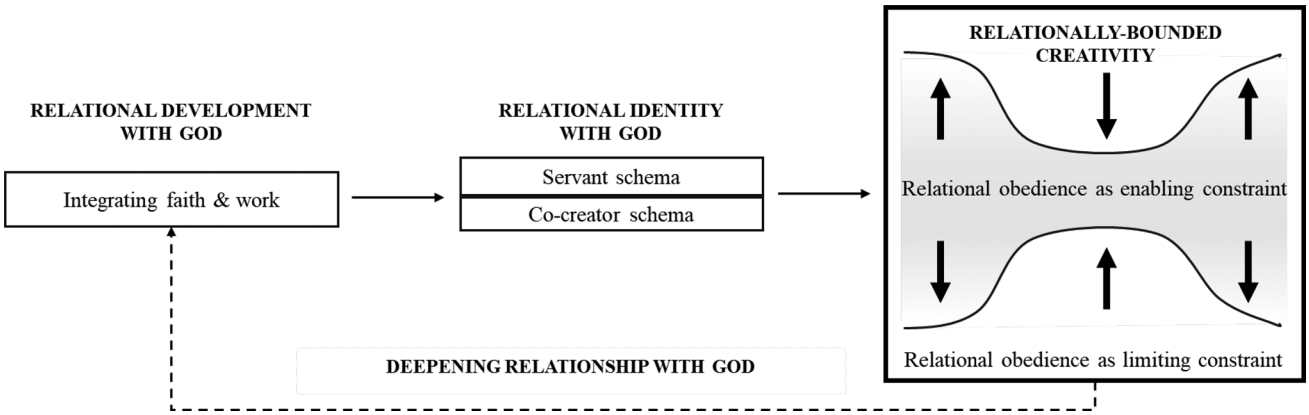

Fig. 2 A conceptual model of moralization of relationally bounded creativity

people, such as colleagues or partners (Rouse, 2020), we found individuals building a relationship with God in the context of work. Our data documented that this relationship is built not only by prayer but also by work itself. In this way, work influenced their faith by providing real-life experiences to better understand their knowledge of God gained through spiritual practices, such as prayer and Bible reading. In this way, relational development served as a first step in relational moralization.

Integration of Faith and Work

Both primary and secondary data documented that one of the most important pillars of the Benedictine monasteries is summarized in the expression 'ora et labora'—'pray and work.' It refers to the monastic way of life integrating work and prayer, outlined in St. Benedict's rule (540). In chapter XLVIII, the Rule explains the role of work in the spiritual life highlighting how monks and nuns "must live off the work of their own hands" to generate revenue to support the monastery. As our participants commented, these two elements are connected by the conjunction 'et,' suggests an integrated rather than segmented way of living. Our data documented three features that express the integration of faith and work.

First, we found monks and nuns experience *working as a way to relate with God.* Similar to the act of praying, work is a place of contemplation, representing a means to establish a relationship with the divine. As nun Beatrice explained, "The work becomes the battle field where you experience the relationship with God. You talk to God, you establish a dialogue with God" (Nun#46). Accordingly, work allowed the monks and nuns to not only be "working 'for' God, [but also] 'in the presence' of God: then work becomes an instrument of discerning and knowing God" (Nun#42). In so doing, monks and nuns could experience their faith within the work which becomes, "a place where you exercise the prayer, where you do your spiritual journey, thus, prayer becomes a sort of 'making'" (Monk#8).

Second, we found *work gives form to faith* by contributing to the understanding of God through a participation in real-world activities. As nun Elisabeth commented, "Work is to give concreteness to faith. I act, enter and operate in the history. Faith becomes incarnate through practical work which itself is humanizing" (Nun#5). Monk Lorenzo provided another vivid example from his experience:

> *"St. Benedict said he learned more working in the bushes then reading books, because in the work you experience your spiritual journey, your faith. Even I experience that when I was making cheese. I had to touch it to understand its density. This allowed me to move out of me, to focus on things which are not myself. Within this work, you experience a concrete growth of yourself and your faith"* (Monk#2)

Finally, monks and nuns framed *work as a spiritual technique* to provide a balance for spiritual and personal growth. Introduced in St. Benedict's Rule, the relative emphasis on work was a turning point in the monastic experience which largely focused on issues of prayer and spiritual practices. This aspect of the Rule shaped monastic life highlighting the importance of balance between different aspects of life. For example, Michele, the principal (abbot) of a monastery which produced sacred icons and clay artifacts, shared:

> *"The rule helps give the right proportion to all the activities, such as that of prayer and work. So, you pray but not too much, you also work. We must integrate them by balancing them. So, the manual, intellectual, and emotional dimensions are all dimensions that live in us and the goal is to keep them in balance"* (Monk#17)

Thus, work addresses an "anthropological need for a human balance; it is to feed the spiritual and humans needs

as such" (Monk#18). The principal (abbess) Valeria, leading a monastery specialized in restoring ancient books, highlighted the role of work as a means to balance spiritual life sharing her experience during the pandemic when "our clients stopped the orders. Our concern was to continue our work, not to have an income but to keep a balance in our life" (Nun#15).

To conclude, the integration of faith and work are seen as connecting two activities that lead to the building of a relationship with God. The principal (abbot) Claudio of a monastery explained:

> *"The monk has this double dimension that comes out of the Rule. A vertical transcendent part, which is the prayer, that binds him to the Creator. A horizontal one, the work, that allows him not to detach himself from history, that never makes him free from society completely. Thus, work keeps him tied to reality and social commitment, but with a capable gaze of thanks to this more transcendent vertical axis that gives him a vision*." (Monk#37)

Relational Identity with God

Our data provided evidence that through work and prayer, a relationship with God led to the creation of a relational identity with the deity for the monks and nuns. A relational identity with God refers to "a role-relationship between an individual and God" (Smith et al., 2024, p. 10), where individuals gain meaning for their identity and their role in the relationship. In our data, we found two schemas or cognitive frameworks informed the development of a relational identity and contributed moral considerations into their work: a servant schema and a co-creator schema. In this way, the religious understandings of the schemas influenced not only how monks and nuns understood their roles but also how these roles were not focused entirely upon themselves, but—rather—held in conjunction with another. We now briefly explain the two schemas that influenced a relational identity with God.

Servant Schema

The relational identity with God was explained by the monks and nuns through the role of a servant. It manifested itself in two inter-related ways: *avoiding self-affirmation* and *working to serve others*. Related to avoiding self-affirmation, the monks and nuns began to moralize this aspect of work by overcoming pride. They wanted to detach themselves from the identity threats of success and connect themselves to the identity with God. For example, Angelo who heads jam production explained, "An important part of our education is detachment. Detach yourself from something that becomes your definition and your fiefdom…Chapter 57 in the Rule says the artisans who have a dowry are in danger. It is pride because of personal affirmation instead of…working for the common good" (Monk#7). The monks and nuns went to great lengths to avoid self-affirmation, even if it was at the expense of productivity. For example, monk Andrea, who was a financial manager, shared:

> "*Saint Benedict said that if one thinks he is the savior of the community and that you can't go on without him, you need to immediately take him out of that job and put him in another one. No one should be considered indispensable…so, this is the first of all to avoid—personal affirmation. Here, every activity is shared, from the cook to the washer precisely to avoid that one becomes his own fiefdom*" (Monk#16).

The servant schema was also focused on *working to serve others*. This focus was important to keep the monks and nuns connected to the identity of God by following the example of Jesus. For example, the nun Angela who works in the tailoring of the monastery claimed:

> "*I give myself to others because in reality it is my concrete way in which I can serve. Jesus asks of us, 'Serve another as I served you.' In most cases, we are working for each other and within the community—those who cook for all, who wash for all, and who serve the sick—all reflect this pattern*" (Nun#26).

Connecting these ideas of avoiding self-affirmation and working to serve others, the servant schema also recognized the collective efforts of all in the outcomes. The principal (abbot) Marco of a monastery shared:

> "*All of the works serve the community. So, even if I do a more individual job, there is always a community behind me. Therefore, when we write a book, it is written in the name of the monastery, not the author. Even an individual work like a book becomes a fruit of the community*" (Monk#28).

Co-creator Schema

A second schema that informed and led to a relational identity with God was a co-creator schema. The role of co-creator acknowledged that monks and nuns were not working on their own but actually working in partnership with God and with each other. The monks and nuns suggested a primary reason for partnering with God was to participate in *collaborating in God's creation*. As partners with God in creation, monks and nuns began to moralize their work through an increased sense of purpose because of its religious significance. The nun Angela explained:

"Our work is part of a greater design, we are called to collaborate in the creation ... Because the creation is not completed, it is constantly becoming, then our collaboration enters there. So, whatever I do, I collaborate in a creative work with God. Whether I do manual or conceptual work, the story is the same: I am not just moving bricks, I am building the cathedral of God" (Nun#26).

The relational identity also informed and developed by its ongoing nature. For example, the principal (abbot) Luigi explained:

"*We collaborate in creation with our work. It is a continuous creation that never stops. I lived in a monastery where there were one hundred people and somebody was always working—a nurse tending to the sick, others making cheese. Therefore, it is a creation-continua which gives us a sense of vitality and participation in the co-creation with God" (Monk#32).*

Beyond partnering with God, the monks and nuns were also *creating with each other*. This co-creation with each other was viewed as an expression of their faith and a continuation of the development of their relationship with God. The principal (abbess) Elisabeth explained, "It is for us as Benedictine monks and nuns that the work be done together…because in some ways, this is a sacrament of the presence of God. There is a monastic expression that has been translated: Monks and nuns who have God as the absolute goal of life have deeply understood that the relationship with the others holds a fundamental place in the search for God" (Nun#5). Co-creating with others also brought a sense of solidarity to the monks and nuns in their faith and in their mission. The nun Grace shared:

"It is clear that the faith discourse is grafted into collaboration because it is not collaboration between business partners but between people who live the same faith and belong to the same Lord. So, we collaborate not for the purpose of productivity but because we are sisters in the same life and collaboration reflects the idea of growing together in our faith that goes beyond any economic criterion" (Nun#1).

Overall, a relational identity with God, based on servant and co-creator schemas, increased moralization of their work and served as an important antecedent to relational obedience to God.

Relationally Bounded Creativity

Building on a relationship and relational identity with God, we found the monks and nuns engaged in moralization of their work through a unique process of creativity in their business enterprises. This moralization occurred through relational obedience to God. They did not engage in unbridled creativity without consideration of limitations. Instead, their creative process was one of *bounded creativity*, which parallels the notion of bounded rationality (Simon, 1969) and acknowledges creative cognition in both recognizing limits of the design space and creatively operating within those limits (Brown & Cagan, 1996). While one school of thought in creativity examines "outside the box" thinking, bounded creativity focuses on "inside the box thinking" (Hoegl et al., 2008). For monks and nuns, bounded creativity was based on a relational obedience to God. Therefore, we refer to this form of creativity as *relationally bounded creativity*. Specifically, the monks and nuns undertook business activities where the boundaries of the creative domain were *limited* by relational obedience to God's guardrails AND where the creativity within that domain was *enabled* by relational obedience through providential innovation. In this way, a relationship with God informed the intimate co-creation process between the monks/nuns and God where they felt safe to trust where God placed restrictions and empowered to carry out new experiments within those restrictions.

Relational Obedience as Limiting Constraint: Operating Within Guardrails

Based on religious considerations, the monks and nuns sought to obey God in their business activities, thereby constraining the range of opportunities. This often meant they had to *accept God's restrictions* by giving up their own ideas and will in favor of where God called them. This obedience is explained in the Rule of St. Benedict, "Leaving immediately all that is theirs, and forsaking their own will, with their hands disengaged and leaving unfinished what they were about, with their ready step of obedience, follow by their deeds the voice of God who commands" (Rule, Chapter 57). In this view, the principal (abbot) Luigi explained, "We live in a regime of obedience, so that the monk must be willing not to control his own life, the monk should give his own life to God" (Monk#32). Accepting God's restrictions regularly challenged some monks and nuns. Yet, religious obedience infused their choices with moral overtones and provided an important boundary for creativity within which monks and nuns operate. Using the analogy of a vase, Monk Marco shared:

"Obedience educates your choices. It does not force you. Obedience helps to give shape to freedom, not to an unbridled freedom. Freedom for freedom's sake is wrong. It's like water that doesn't have a basin. It is useless, if it is dispersed. Instead, obedience keeps the water like a vase. So, it can be used to bathe, to drink, for many things" (Monk#28).

For instance, when we met with principal (abbot) Caludio, he shared how the monks and nuns felt called by God to build the monastery in an isolated area. Despite its limited accessibility by a mountainous road and unfavorable agricultural conditions, the monastery was built there. He shared, "When we arrived, there was just a forest, nothing else. We slowly tried to clear the woods, and we had to think of a business activity to undertake. We could not do ceramics or anything else, because of the road. So, we started to prepare some land to cultivate. Since the soil was acidic and the land is not flat, we could not grow very many things." (Monk#6). In this way, their obedience to build in this location restricted their potential creative business opportunities, similar to the aforementioned basin.

Based on relational obedience, the monks and nuns also *trusted God's intentions*, believing that God's divine plans had a purpose or meaning, even if it limited their opportunities. In this view, "Obedience is not [seen as] an execution of tasks, it is a 'yes' to which one entrusts yourself to God" (Nun#46). One nun described her trust in God's intentions as "the hope that one has inside that accompanies us and allows us to cross the tiring bottlenecks…looking at reality and knowing that there is a meaning, a fulfillment that we do not yet see" (Nun#20). This understanding of obedience required monks and nuns to see beyond their own concerns about limitations and trust in God. Nun Lucrecia shared, "We have always experienced trust beyond any of our own fears… how will it all end? We do everything not as if it depended on us, but knowing that everything depends on God" (Nun#38). Despite this trust, relational obedience limited the search space for possible solutions. For example, when considering tourism alternatives, Monk Alessandro explained, "I indulge in what seems to be His direction, to follow God's ways and operate accordingly…Chiara Lubich says, 'Stay within the radius of your adventure'" (Monk#29).

Relational Obedience as Enabling Constraint: Providential Innovation

While obedience to God established the boundaries of the creative domain, it also acted as a source of inspiration where God contributed to their creativity through providential innovation. This resulted in the expression of creativity "inside the box" of God's obedience. First, based on religious obedience, monks and nuns found inspiration for creative innovation by *perceiving an abundant resource endowment* within the restricted focus given by God that may have appeared as limited. St. Benedict's Rule states that monks and nuns must "regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected" (Chapter, XXXI). In this way, monks and nuns saw great possibilities in the resources they had. This is because, "Each person is valued, as St. Benedict says: 'It could also be the youngest, the latest arrival who has the right idea'" (Monk#6). During our visits, we often observed older monks and nuns contributing to the business operations, participating in activities that suited their age and abilities in order "to give a place for them to feel useful… for instance, we have a sister of ninety years old who paints icons" (#26). The principal (abbess) Christine of a monastery producing sacred icons explained, "What is God's responsibility? God's role surely is to give the basic endowment…that of delivering this enormous potential into our hands" (Nun#20).

These beliefs encouraged monks and nuns to see beyond resource limitations to innovative combinations with the resources. The principal (abbess) told us, "We have these gifts, how do we put them into circulation? Providence allows us to imagine how to find new ways to do things through faith…Providence is precisely this ability to believe that life opens up possibilities" (Nun#20). For instance, a monastery working in editing and restoring ancient books leveraged nuns' knowledge to overcome the lack of financial resources to bridge technological gaps and create a new innovation:

> *"an evaporation chamber in which the ancient and burnt parchments were revitalized with certain vapors put into play. (…) We studied and found how to soften it and how progressively restore them by using magnets. We invented this through the expertise of the typography that gave us a way to flatten without ruining the parchment and make it readable again" (Nun#5).*

Obedience also acted as an enabling factor allowing monks and nuns to *embrace restrictions with freedom*. Surprisingly, our data documented how restrictions coming from obedience encouraged monks and nuns to experiment with new activities, relieving them from potential false prejudices and biases about their own capacities and passions by relying instead on God's providence to provide starting points for innovation. One nun explained: "The obedience at the service of others and to God make you free… free from what? Freedom from your constrains, worries, weakness; and this opens you" (Nun#46). Another commented: "Obedience is what liberates, right? Letting ourselves modeling and educating, obeying means freeing oneself from the tyranny of one's ego, passions and desires which make us unable to read or interpret the greater project that is there for us" (Nun#38). In this regard, the principal (abbot) Luigi shared:

> *"I gave my life to God in order to get to know myself better and avoid getting too used to an image of myself. This enabled us to see if it is truly the gift we supposed to have. Otherwise, the risk is we remain at some job*

roles that we suppose are good for us and this does not allow us to expand our knowledge and abilities" (Monk#32).

This often stimulated the capacity of monks and nuns to discover new and sometimes hidden talents and meanings of their own life. Monk Marco shared, "I was asked to work in the book restoration workshop. I didn't have a particularly developed artistic dimension, any expertise. In letting myself be stimulated in this activity I learnt new talents and passion" (Monk#16). Embracing freedom allowed monks and nuns to pursue creative ideas they might have otherwise ignored or discarded. During one of our visits, a tangible example was offered about the notorious restoration workshop of ancient clothes placed on a small island. The current head of the workshop described its foundation:

"When the Bishop told the head of the monastery to open a restoration workshop on the island, she could have said, 'No, because I have here six young nuns and maybe they cause me a lot of disasters since none of them went to restoration school.' But even if it looks the craziest thing in the world, if you trust in the Lord's help, then the Lord helps you, gives you the strength and gives you the serenity" (Nun#39).

Building on this, monks and nuns were able to experiment with new ideas or creative combinations of resources. Accordingly, monks and nuns often *assembled resources with faith* that God will support their business opportunities. For instance, Father Carlo explained how a monastery began to use waste from the jam workshop to make fruit liqueurs. He shared:

"We saw that making the jams from the small apples was more a cost than a profit: you must clean and peel them; it was troubling. And we said, we have to find a way to enhance their value more, so the idea was to ferment them to make cider and then make the distillate. It is an inventiveness in transformation processes. In the end, a waste became a resource" (Monk#6).

In another interview, we documented that providential innovation encouraged a monastery to diversify production of beers with bitters, as shared by the head of the production during our visit to the plant: "At some point after two or three years, we came out with this question: 'But couldn't we do something else besides beer?' Combining the natural resources we have here with a little bit of our knowledge about bitters, we conducted an experiment, tasted some, until we made an amaro that people liked" (Monk#3).

Overall, the monks and nuns engaged in relationally bounded creativity, where obedience to God acted as a constraint imposing a guardrail on the creative domain and as an enabler within the creative domain based on providential innovation. These two functions of relational obedience did not happen in isolation. Instead, they *interacted* with each other dynamically across the creative process, often leading to unexpected creativity. For example, Monk Michele explained how he had to obey God's imposed limitations, as ordered by the Abess, even though he was very gifted at his role. He shared:

"When the abess told me to leave the reception role of welcoming guests in our retreat house, he did so, because I was too attached to it. It was a huge constraint because I loved to interact with our guests. Sometimes saying 'yes' doesn't come naturally to me or forces me into something uncomfortable."

Despite this limiting function, Monk Michele continued to innovate inside the box of these restrictions. He began to look for starting points of creativity within these limitations. He said:

"Yet, it is precisely the 'yes' that breaks me from the chains that bound me, that makes me a free person. The obedience that forces you to always confront yourself, this becomes a great help in freeing you from your immediate perception that sometimes deceives. So, what did I do? I started writing letters which eventually became a popular book that was printed in four editions" (Monk#17).

Taken together, this example illustrates the interaction of the limiting and enabling functions of relational obedience. It shows how this interaction imposed by obedience both restricted the creative domain and enabled creativity within the remaining search space to discover a creative way to pursue another entrepreneurial activity.

Discussion

Although extant research has been fruitful, it has also yielded equivocal results and two different perspectives on the relationship between ethics and creativity due at least partly to theoretical under-specification (Shen et al., 2019; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023; Barbosa & Smith, 2024). We therefore began by building on the theory of intimate co-creation to examine the role of the religious dyadic relationship between individuals and God in creativity. To organize the concepts and relationships in our data, we developed a conceptual model of relationally bounded creativity which summarizes and generalizes our primary findings, as shown in Fig. 2.

Toward a Model of Moralization of Relationally Bounded Creativity

The figure illustrates that creativity is influenced by the dyadic relationship that both limits and enables creativity.

As developed in our findings, the dyadic relationship is essential to intimate co-creation and often results in the moralization of creative work. When the relationship continues to develop through increasingly intimate interactions in a shared boundary (Rouse, 2020), schemas or cognitive frameworks unfold that contribute to the development of a relational identity. In time, a member of the dyad may define themself at least partly via the role-relationship. This is because the increased and positive intimate interactions will lead to personalization and attraction within the dyad and, therefore, a more salient role-based identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In our data, the monks and nuns began to define themselves at least partly through a relational identity with God, defined as "a role relationship between an individual and God, where individuals understand themselves at least partly in a parent–child relationship (as a child of God), working from a received (rather than achieved) identity that is enduring (rather than contingent on performance)" (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b: 10).

This development of a relational identity within the dyad suggests the relationship may become more embedded in common meanings, motivations, and goals (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). As a result, a relational identity between God and the individuals leads to continued moralization and relational obedience within the dyadic relationship. This may be particularly true when power differences exist within the dyad (Rouse, 2020). Based on our data, relational obedience functions to both limit and enable creativity. Relational obedience as a constraint defines the creative domain, thereby providing both limitations to the search space for solutions (Damadzic et al., 2022). As an enabler, relational obedience stimulates freedom to push new boundaries and frontiers within the creative domain (Winchester & Medeiros, 2023). Taken together, we view creativity as a complex process that is both *constrained* and *enabled* by the intimate dyadic relationship. We refer to this as *relationally* bounded creativity because it is the obedience within the dyadic relationship that sets the creative constraints.

Finally, we see how these interactions also create a potential feedback loop that influences the continued development of the dyadic relationship and therefore future creative interactions. We find initial evidence of this feedback loop as a means of deepening the relationship.[2] For example, one monk explained, "I have certainly deepened my faith…through the work. It's not that what I thought of God was wrong, but you know him better. God is certainly the fundamental reference in life, but I got to know increasingly more affective, interpersonal, emotional dimensions" (Monk#16). This illustrates not only how relationships influence co-creation but also how co-creation affects the continued development of the dyadic relationship (Rouse, 2020). We now discuss the theoretical implications of our study for business ethics and intimate co-creation.

Theoretical Implications for Business Ethics and Creativity

Our first contribution is to the business ethics literature on the relationship between ethics and creativity. While extant research finds competing perspectives on how ethics may hinder or facilitate creativity (e.g., Shen et al., 2019), our study finds a more nuanced perspective where ethics introduces constraints that both *limit* and *enable* creativity in relationally bounded creativity. In the process, we identify a religiously informed mechanism of relational moralization, where ethical considerations based on the relationship between individuals and God, result in a form of relationally bounded creativity. In so doing, we elaborate theory of relational moralization and the role of ethical constraints in creativity.

First, we augment the literature on business ethics through the notion of *relational moralization*. While the literature recognizes a relational turn to ethics, the relationship is generally considered between two humans (Kellenberger, 2005). Extending this idea, we elaborate the literature to include a relationship between an individual and God. We show how relational moralization between an individual and God occurs through three stages: relational development, relational identity and relational obedience. In this way, our study extends research on relationship and ethics to include a personal relationship with God. Our work aligns with research that takes seriously how a relationship with God and relational identity may influence entrepreneurial and creative processes (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b) and adds to this work by showing how relational obedience may inform ethical decisions. Building on the theory of intimate co-creation, our study responds to the call for greater theoretical specification of the mechanisms influencing the ethics-creativity relationship, the dyadic level of analysis, and the role of religion (Barbosa & Smith, 2024; Winchester & Medeiros, 2023).

Second, we elaborate on the literature on the ethics-creativity relationship by highlighting an important but often limiting role of constraints (Tromp, 2023). While ethical constraints are often considered limiting for creativity (Shen et al., 2019), we illustrate how relational obedience leads to two different *functions* of constraints, as both *limiting* and *enabling*. The limiting constraint serves the function of setting guardrails the search space of solutions (Tromp

[2] Our data provided initial evidence of a feedback loop from creativity to the relationship with God. Consistent with research that shows initial but not complete evidence (Younger and Fisher, 2020), we include the data in the discussion section rather than the findings. We represent this idea as a dotted arrow in our conceptual model in Fig. 2.

& Sternberg, 2022). This limiting function aligns with the traditional view of constraints in creativity and the *hindering* hypothesis of the role of ethics (Shen et al., 2019). By comparison, the enabling function provides starting points within the search space to encourage out of the box thinking within the guardrails (Tromp, 2023). Here, we move beyond the view of constraints as any factor that "limits creativity" (Acar et al., 2019: 98) by adding the generative view of constraints. This is consistent with meta-analytic research that finds a positive and significant relationship between constraints and creativity (Damadzic et al., 2022) and with the *facilitate* hypothesis where ethics enables creativity (Shen et al., 2019; Kundro, 2023). In addition, we align with and build on research that has theorized about different functions of constraints (e.g., Cummiskey and Baer, 2018; Tromp & Sternberg, 2022) and augment this work by showing how both functions may occur within the same creative process.

Finally, we offer a path to reconcile the two views on ethics and creativity that assumes a main-effect of constraints on creativity with an 'interaction' perspective of two types of constraints on creativity. Scholars suggest an inverted U-shaped effect of constraints on creativity to explain equivocal results (e.g., Acar et al., 2019). However, integrating both limiting and enabling ethical constraints in the same process, our study challenges this curvilinear static relationship by identifying a more dynamic, interactive relationship. In this way, we align with recent theorizing about an interaction paradigm of constraints and creativity (Tromp & Sternberg, 2022) and offer one of the first empirical studies demonstrating this interaction between two constraints. In so doing, we provide a more complete theoretical and empirical picture of the role of ethics in creativity (Winchester & Medeiros, 2023) and begin to reconcile competing views of ethics as limiting or enabling, with a view that acknowledges the interaction of both forces. In our case, both constraints of relational boundedness were paradoxically based on same the mechanism: obedience to God, to which we now turn.

Theoretical Implications for Business Ethics and Obedience

Our second contribution is to the literature on business ethics, obedience, and religion. Emanating substantially from the seminal work and popular interpretations of Stanley Milgram, research in social science has largely focused on the dark sides or *destructive* aspects of obedience to authority (e.g., Milgram, 1974). While subsequent research provides new insights into these experiments (Haslam et al., 2014), this trend continues in the literature on business ethics where research has focused on the "evil" of obedience to authority, ranging from Milgram to terrorist groups and extending across geographies around the world (e.g., Snell, 1999; Pina e Cunha et al., 2010). The construct of obedience to authority has been rightly criticized for its focus on control and the range of negative outcomes it may cause, even acting in the name of religion (e.g., Pina e Cunha et al., 2010). Endemic to this line of research is the "brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of a malevolent authority" (Milgram, 1974: 157). While not discounting this destructive possibility, our study complements the destructive view with a *constructive* view of obedience to authority based on the direction of an altruistic God.

The theological turn in organizational studies (Dyck, 2014) and entrepreneurship (Smith et al., 2021) is based on the utility of "developing social theory on the assumption that there is an altruistic god, even if one believes that such a god does not exist" (Dyck, 2014: 27). This is because it is difficult to theorize about concepts such as altruism in the absence of a benevolent and loving God, where the self-interested and instrumental economic and management paradigm dominates (Dyck, 2014; Smith et al., 2021). In our study, we build on the theological turn by examining how monks and nuns obey the authority of an altruistic God in the creative process of developing businesses to support their monasteries. In so doing, our study shifts attention *from a malevolent* to *an altruistic authority*.

Our study aligns with research that acknowledges the existence of a positive view of obedience to authority (Passini & Morselli, 2009), especially when it is based on the authority of an altruistic God (Dyck, 2014; Smith et al., 2021). In contrast to traditional views of obedience to authority, our findings suggest that obedience to an altruistic God is rooted in an *internalized moral framework* that prioritizes ethical integrity and altruism by means of moral self-governance. This is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which argues that internalization of external values leads to behaviors that are consistent with one's personal ideals and social cognitive frameworks (Fiske, 1991). Our findings align with research that suggests when obedience is internalized from an altruistic source, it fosters constructive outcomes rather than mere compliance (Passini & Morselli, 2009). This form of obedience not only shapes a relational identity, via the development of servant and co-creator schemas, but also integrates faith with daily work practices, transforming obedience into an active engagement with ethical dilemmas. Such intrinsic motivation enables individuals to operate within clearly defined ethical guardrails, promoting creativity where innovative ideas are pursued by aligning with moral principles.

In this vein, our study highlights the role of reflective safeguards, such as ongoing prayer, meditation, and communal discernment, which inform continuous feedback loops that help prevent obedience from devolving into unthinking submission. Unlike obedience to human authority, often extrinsically driven by sanctions or fear, obedience to a benevolent deity relies on intrinsic adherence, fostering an

environment where creative processes are both *limited* and *enhanced* constructively. This dynamic interplay between constraints underscores how moral reflection not only stimulates creativity but also ensures that ethical business practices remain central.

While we understand there is a long history of immoral atrocities in the name of religion, our study suggests it may be important to move beyond the *legitimacy* of the authority and their demands (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989) to the *morality* of the authority and their demands to more fully understand the interaction between religion, ethics, and obedience. Our study implies when obedience to authority is directed by the morality of an altruistic God, the demands of the authority are likely to result in more constructive, inclusive, and generative processes and outcomes.

Theoretical Implications for Intimate Co-Creation and Relational Identity

Our third contribution is to the literature on intimate co-creation. While we leverage the theory for greater theoretical and empirical specification, we also contribute back to the theory of intimate co-creation (Rouse, 2020). As one of the first empirical studies on intimate co-creation, our study moves from a theoretical to an empirical understanding of the theory. In so doing, we examine the processes through which creativity occurs in a dyadic relationship. Consistent with theorizing, our study recognizes the importance of a shared interpersonal boundary, including the shift from "me" to "we" (Rouse, 2020). Although the theory implies a collective (social) identity or "we-ness," our study suggests the development of a different form of identity: a *relational* identity. A relational identity is defined as the "portion of the role-based identity that is more or less directly relevant to one's role relationship" and is differentiated from a social identity in terms of personalization and interpersonal attraction, among other aspects (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007: 12). This is important because personalization and attraction become critical theoretical mechanisms whereby the work of co-creation fosters relationship-building, rather than the other way around. In our study, we see initial evidence of how the creative process leads to a feedback loop where the experiences in the creative process contribute to a deepening of the relationship. This is consistent with the literature on theology where communication, activity, and relationship become intertwined. For example, Willard (2012: 39) suggests, "Prayer is an honest exchange between people who are doing things together. God and I work together, and I need to invoke his power in that activity. Joint activity is a key to understanding how the conversation flows." Packer (1973: 36) adds, "God is actually opening his heart to you, making friends with you, and enlisting you as a colleague… a *covenant* partner."

This also advances research on intimate co-creation by explaining how and why co-creation happens between an individual and a deity, or God. Some artists, entrepreneurs, and even scholars credit a divine inspiration for their creative work (e.g., Coleman, 1998; Smith et al., 2019). In our study, we show this can happen through a relationship and relational identity between an individual and God. We extend recent research on a relational identity with God (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b) by complementing prior motivations and meanings of a parent–child relationship, a received identity and a more permanent identity with *schemas* of co-creator and servant. These cognitive frameworks help individuals organize new information about potential relationships between religion and entrepreneurial tasks such as creativity (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Pidduck et al., 2020).

The identification of the servant and co-creator schemas extend research on intimate co-creation by offering specific types of schemas that inform co-creation (Rouse, 2020) and may lead to better functioning within entrepreneurial teams (Blatt, 2009). The development of schemas in creativity builds on the theological turn in management and entrepreneurship that takes God to be an important stakeholder in organizational processes (Dyck, 2014; Schwartz, 2006; Smith et al., 2021). While a servant schema is prominent in the literatures on religion and leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), a co-creator schema augments the literature on religion-as-schema (Paloutzian & Smith, 1995) by calling attention to the collaborative role an individual plays with God. Consistent with other religious schemas (McIntosh, 1995), a co-creator schema also opens the door for increased mental health and well-being of entrepreneurs and creatives who must often cope with loneliness (Cardon & Arwine, 2024, 2022) and identity threats to achieve innovative breakthroughs (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Limitations

While our study makes a number of important contributions, it is also limited in a few ways. First, as a qualitative inductive study of an extreme setting, our study may not generalize to all settings where religion may not be as salient to the central actors. Given the prevalence and centrality of religion to many actors around the world, we believe our theorizing opens up new pathways to the role of religion in entrepreneurship. While we generate theory from an extreme setting of religious organizing, we believe the overall model of relationally bounded creativity based on obedience to God will generalize to other less extreme entrepreneurial settings due to the prevalence and centrality of religion (Smith et al., 2021). We also encourage future research to examine the boundary conditions that specify when religious organizing may (not) be so influential in the organizational process.

Second, our study was conducted with Catholic monks and nuns across monasteries in Italy. We acknowledge that our findings may not be representative across Christianity, across geographies, and across religions. We see our study as an important step to increase the theological turn in management and entrepreneurship research and strongly encourage studies that begin to take further steps comparing and contrasting the influence of religion across geographies and religions.

Third, while our study is based on extant literature that identifies bi-directional communication between an individual and a deity, we acknowledge one of the differences between interpersonal communication and communication with a deity is difficulty in empirical verifiability of the specific communication processes (Baesler, 1997). Given our focus on understanding the sensemaking perspective of the monks and nuns themselves, this risk is relatively mitigated in the context of our study.

Fourth, our study examined a specific entrepreneurial process—creativity—and may not apply across different forms of organizational and entrepreneurial dynamics. We believe this is an important step that opens the door for research that examines many other forms of organizational and entrepreneurial processes. Emerging work has focused on the role of religion in resource acquisition (Anglin et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024) and impact investor decision making (Smith et al., 2022). We suggest this is simply scratching the surface of entrepreneurial processes (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Future Research

While we focused on the dyadic process of intimate co-creation, there are many future paths for emanating from our study. Future research may move beyond the dyad to focus on how and why ethics influences group or collective creativity. Studies could also move beyond a focus on creativity to see how ethics, religion, and dyadic intimacy affect other organizational and entrepreneurial processes such as resource acquisition (e.g., Smith et al., 2019). Finally, future research could examine the directionality of the relationship between ethics and creativity. Our study examines how ethics influences creativity. Yet, the direction of the relationship may be reversed to understand if and how the creative process may influence the ethical beliefs of the creative actors. Our hope is that future studies on ethics and creativity—as well as other organizational processes—will move beyond coarse aggregate variables and under-specified theorizing to build a more robust foundation for the study of ethics and creativity (Winchester & Medeiros, 2023).

Future research on business ethics may provide insights into the conditions when obedience is destructive or constructive as well as when and how individuals may resort to disobedience under conditions of moral intensity (e.g., Jones, 1991; Smith et al., 2016). Research may examine contexts where both destructive and constructive forms of obedience occur and how they may interact with one other. Acknowledging the dark side, future research may help advance knowledge of how a deity may shape obedience of followers toward destructive ends or how destructive means may be developed more easily because followers of a religion may be more prone to quick and deep trust. Finally, the role of obedience may be examined across a range of different religions and geographies to examine macro-level influences on both destructive and constructive obedience.

Our study also opens up paths for future research on intimate co-creation. We find a positive development of a relationship and a relational identity in the process of co-creation. Future research may examine the relational and creative outcomes when there is difficulty in the relationship or why and when difficulty may lead to relational rupture (Olekalns et al., 2020). Research may also examine how the different outcomes of creative processes may lead to relational identity threats as well as what conditions lead to relational identity opportunities or inter-identity opportunities (Bataille & Vough, 2022). Finally, research may continue to explore additional scripts, schemas, and content that further inform the construct and nomological network of a relational identity with God (Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b) and how and when different forms of relational identification develop (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

Conclusion

Our study relies on an inductive, qualitative design to understand the relationship between ethics and creativity. Building on the theory of intimate co-creation, our study examines the dyadic relationship of individuals and God in the creative process. Rather than ethics simply hindering or facilitating creativity, our study develops a more nuanced understanding where ethics acts as a double-edge sword that both limits and enables creativity through a form of bounded creativity based on relational obedience to God. We find this obedience to be constructive for creativity. Our study takes an important step in reconciling competing views on the relationship between ethics and creativity and the role of obedience through more precise theoretical and empirical specification. We hope this approach encourages the use of more rigorous theoretical and empirical specification when examining the study of ethics and creativity.

Appendix 1

Data Collection: Monastery Interviews 2019–2024

#Int	Nun/monk	Position	Businesses	Places	Monastery code
1	Nuns (3)	Financial manager, Head of cream, Head of oil production	Beauty care (creams, oils)	Tuscany	A
2	Monk	Head of jams production	Honey, jams, sauces, herbs	Lombardy	B
3	Monk	Head of beer production	Beers, liquers, honey	Lombardy	C
4	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Honey, infusions,	Lombardy	D
5	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Restoration ancient books	Lombardy	E
6	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
7	Monk	Head of jam production	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
8	Monk	Financial manager	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
9	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Sacred icons	Lombardy	G
10	Nuns (2)	Principle (abbess), Worker	Sacred icons	Lombardy	H
11	Monk	Worker	Beers, liquers, honey	Lombardy	C
12	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
13	Monk	Worker	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
14	Monk	Head of jam production	Jams, honey, liqueurs	Piedmont	F
15	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Restoration ancient books	Lombardy	E
16	Monk	Financial manager	Sacred icons, clay artifacts	Lombardy	I
17	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Sacred icons, clay artifacts	Lombardy	I
18	Monk	Worker	Sacred icons, clay artifacts	Lombardy	I
19	Monk	Head of clay artifacts production	Sacred icons, clay artifacts	Lombardy	I
20	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Sacred icons, honey, jams	Lombardy	J
21	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Tailoring	Lombardy	K
22	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Restoration ancient clothes	Lombardy	L
23	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Restoration ancient clothes	Piedmont	M
24	Nun	Worker	Tailoring	Piedmont	N
25	Nun	Worker	Tailoring	Piedmont	O
26	Nun	Worker	Tailoring, clay artifacts	Piedmont	P
27	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Tourism and cheese	Piedmont	Q
28	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Sacred icons, Tourism	Lombardy	R
29	Monk	Worker	Sacred icons, Tourism	Lombardy	R
30	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Tourism, liquors	Marche	S
31	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Tourism, agriculture	Puglia	T
32	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Tourism and cheese	Piedmont	Q
33	Monks (2)	Principle (abbot), Worker	Wine, tourism, museum	Campania	U
34	Nun	Worker	Tourism, agriculture, liquors	Piedmont	V
35	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Tourism, agriculture, liquors	Piedmont	V
36	Monk	Worker	Agriculture, liquors	Emilia-Romagna	W
37	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Agriculture, liquors	Emilia-Romagna	W
38	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Repairing ancient clothes, sacred icon	Piedmont	X
39	Nun	Head of repairing clothes production	Repairing ancient clothes, sacred icons	Piedmont	X
40	Nun	Head of icon production	Repairing ancient clothes, sacred icon	Piedmont	X
41	Monk	Worker	Agriculture, liquors	Emilia-Romagna	W
42	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Tailoring, clay artifacts	Piedmont	P
43	Nun	Worker	Tailoring, clay artifacts	Piedmont	P

#Int	Nun/monk	Position	Businesses	Places	Monastery code
44	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Agriculture	Piedmont	Y
45	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Tailoring	Moncalieri	O
46	Nun	Worker	Beauty care (creams, oils)	Tuscany	A
47	Nun	Principle (abbess)	Beauty care (creams, oils)	Tuscany	A
48	Nun	Worker	Beauty care (creams, oils)	Tuscany	A
49	Monk	Principle (abbot)	Sacred icons, clay artifacts	Lombardy	I
	49% women; 51% man				Monastery: 25

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest between the author team and any entity related to this research.

Ethical Approval The research did include interviews with humans. All proper research protocols were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals involved in the study.

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