The Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) held its eleventh annual conference at Chapman University in Orange, California on March 9-10, 2012. The program brought together world experts in economics, religion and culture from across the social sciences to debate new research findings.

The keynote colloquium featured a Q&A with four distinguished scholars from across the range of specialties within the field of economics and religion. They were Nobel Laureate Vernon Smith (experimental economics), Sriya Iyer (demography and developmental economics), Laurence Iannaccone (economics of religion), and Roger Finke (sociology of religion). Topics discussed included how each chose their field and who were among their early influences, the value of the economic approach to understanding religion and culture, the debate between science and religion, and what each feels are the most important unanswered questions in the economic and sociological study of religion.

Other sessions covered such topics as consequences of the Catholic Church abuse scandal, the impact of religion on economic development, and experimental studies of religions belief and behavior.

Dr. Mark Koyama (George Mason University) presented his work entitled “Taxes, Lawyers, and the Decline of Witchcraft in France”. His research used data on the distribution of witchcraft trials in France as a measure of legal capacity in order to support the hypothesis that the emerging modern state’s need for higher tax revenues led to better legal institutions. Data on witch trials can be used to look at the emergence of legal centralization; because witchcraft was difficult to prosecute when adhering to the letter of the law, trials and convictions were more likely to occur where the judiciary veered away from established law. The trials therefore become a measure of legal fragmentation. Dr. Koyama has created a unique data set that combines the witchcraft data with receipts from twenty-one French regions which can be used by other scholars. He uses the example of France (which was fiscally fragmented until the 18th century), making the study relevant for looking at how states today could develop fiscal or legal capacity.

Dr. Dan Hungerman (University of Notre Dame) presented a study on the impact of the Catholic Church sex-abuse scandal on Catholic and non-Catholic religiosity. His work, entitled “Substitution and Stigma: Evidence on Religious Competition from the Catholic Sex-Abuse Scandal”, investigates substitution between religious groups by looking at the impact of a large shock on one group and how it affects religious participation on other religious groups. Dr. Hungerman reported a 2-million member fall in Catholic populations and increase in non-Catholic participation and non-affiliation. Further observations suggest that people chose dissimilar alternatives; Baptist churches gains significantly compared to the Episcopal church which is more similar to the Catholic church. His work is relevant not only to the study of religion, but also research in economics that look at substitution between charitable activities.
Dr. Jared Rubin (Chapman University) presented his book manuscript entitled *God, Power and Printing: the Institutional roots of Economic Success and Stagnation in the Middle East and Europe until 1600*. His work investigates the question of the difference in economic growth between Europe and the Middle East, arguing that cultural theories are not sufficient. Dr. Rubin explores differences in religious and political institutions, looking at their long-run impact on economic development. He believes that good reasons for the divergence between Europe and the Middle East should also account for the earlier economic success and then stagnation of the Middle East. He employs economic theory to explain differences in economic growth, using the history of interest restrictions in Islam and Christianity, and the spread of printing in Europe and the Middle East as important examples. By looking at what worked in Europe and did not work in the Middle East, we better understand the roots of long run economic success.

Dr. Mahmoud El-Gamal (Rice University) presented findings on recent trials of field research in his paper “Bank-Insured RoSCA for Microfinance: Experimental Evidence in Poor Egyptian Villages”. He discussed studies in microfinance that estimate 2.7 billion adults in the developing world are unbanked and explained that the Muslim poor show high rates of rejection for traditional microloans, exclusion from banking products and services, and, more generally, rejecting loans on religious grounds. His research compares the rates of takeup and repayment using two models of interest-based sequential group microlending, the Grameen model and an alternative finance model built on the familiar rotating savings and credit association (RoSCA). Dr. El-Gamal’s study used experiments in the field using poor subjects in rural Egypt who are eligible for microloans and compares the takeup and repayment rates of randomly assigned subjects under the two models. His findings show that RoSCA performs better with regard to takeup and no worse with regard to repayment when compared to the Grameen model. The long term goal of this study is to look at the “viability and desirability of village-level credit unions to bridge the gap between the poor and the mainstream financial sector in majority Muslim countries”.

ASREC returns to Washington DC in 2013, holding its 12th annual conference at the Hyatt Regency in Crystal City on April 4-7.

For additional information on upcoming ASREC conferences please visit our website at [www.thearda.com/asrec/conference](http://www.thearda.com/asrec/conference)