

A thoughtful reading guide adapted for high-school students, college students, and educators alike

STUDY GUIDE

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Agency is the force of one's free will guided by moral discernment.



Dear Educator,

I am thrilled that you have chosen to engage with my book, *Agency: The Four Point Plan (F.R.E.E.) for All Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power*, and share it with your students. As an educator and lifelong student myself, I know that teaching is not just an act of service for others. At its best, it is also an act of learning, self-challenge, and growth.

Before I introduce *Agency* in brief and send you off on your journey of guided study, allow me to wish you the utmost success in both reaching your students and peers and reflecting on and grappling with my book. There will surely be some parts of *Agency* with which you already agree and others that will draw your critiques. But I am confident in this: You and your students will benefit from your good-faith engagement with the book.

Now, a bit about *Agency*. I wrote it because I found the conversation around education and opportunity, particularly for minorities and kids from low-income families, sorely lacking. On one side are the many Americans who believe that failure to achieve social and economic mobility is an individual's fault. That's not right. On the other, many prominent voices in our society insist that "the system" is keeping certain kids down. That's not right either.

There is another way to analyze our shortcomings and provide warranted optimism to Americans of all creeds and colors. It's the way that insists that despite any disadvantages they may have, all our kids can succeed and flourish if they make the right choices. In *Agency*, you'll see why I believe that ambition guided by moral direction is the most important thing we can instill in our nation's children. You'll also see how we can put this into practice by teaching young Americans about the four elements shown again and again in the social-science literature to be most important to flourishing: family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship, or as I like to call it, FREE.

As the founder of public charter schools that have served thousands of students and will boost many thousands more, I have tried to put these values front and center in everything we do. I believe that is the most important thing we can do to help young people unleash their potential and live secure and fulfilling lives. But instilling in our children a sense of agency, with an appreciation for the gravity of their choices, is easier said than done. Putting it into action requires tireless, dedicated, passionate educators—like you. As you will see throughout the book, I have experienced and appreciated the power of great role models, and as an administrator and educational entrepreneur, I stake my reputation on teachers' dedication to the cause every single day.

I hope your close reading of *Agency* will instill in you and your students newfound enthusiasm for their potential to grow and achieve. With an appreciation for the importance of family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship, I hope your students will be inspired to take control of their lives, become captains of their fate, and start working toward their highest aspirations.

Enjoy and engage,

lan Rowe

Study Guide

Agency: Introduction

EDUCATOR	Notes
1. In the introduction to <i>Agency</i> , Rowe discusses Lin-Manuel Miranda's megahit Broadway musical <i>Hamilton</i> and the title character, Alexander Hamilton, a young immigrant from the Caribbean who vows that he won't "throw[] away [his] shot" in America.	
Do your students feel like they have a shot?	
If so, what characteristics do they think they need to not throw it away?	
And if not, why not?	
2. Rowe writes that his hope is	
"to help young people learn the ways in which they can bridge the game between what 'is' in their life and what they want it 'to be'" (10).	
Before diving into Agency, it is worth asking:	
What kinds of aspirations do you and your students have?	
How long is the bridge between "is" and "to be," and how do your students currently envision crossing that bridge?	

What Is Agency and Why Is It So Crucial to Human Flourishing?

1. Rowe tells the story of the time he stood up to his parents when they wanted him to switch schools. He concludes,	Notes
"An amazing thing happened: my parents relented and said I could stay at I.S. 231. I think of this now as my coming-of-agency moment" (17).	
What virtues did young Rowe show in that moment, and why do you think they suddenly bubbled up?	
Drawing on the thought of Martin Luther King, Martin Seligman, and Albert Bandura, Rowe writes that	
"agency is the force of free will when it is governed by morally discerned choices" (20) and "is individually practiced, yet socially empowered" (19).	
How do you see these aspects of agency relating to each other?	
EDUCATOR	
3. In what ways does your classroom empower students' free will while guiding them toward moral choices?	
What concerns do you have about this empowering and guiding?	

Two Competing Visions of What Impedes the American Dream and the Effort to Build Agency

1. Rowe argues that the "blame-the-system" narrative "does not stand up to scrutiny" (28). Do you agree?	Notes
How do you think "blame-the-system" advocates would respond to Rowe's evidence of what happens to racial wealth gaps when other factors are taken into account?	
How might Rowe respond to them?	
2. How does Rowe's view of agency differ from a blame-the-victim mindset?	
What might each view be presuming about our natures as individual	
human beings and as participants in a society?	

The Third Way: Revitalizing Mediating Institutions to Strengthen Civil Society

	Notes
One key reason Rowe thinks "mediating structures" are so important is that they	
"facilitate in-person, human connections that are moderated by agreed-on standards of conduct" (38).	
Why do you think he chose to highlight these characteristics of families, churches, and other communal organizations?	
EDUCATOR	
One of Rowe's success stories involved students pushing themselves to try difficult math problems. He concludes that	
"these persistent kids saw a direct connection between their individual effort and their individual accomplishment" (45).	
How do your students observe the connection between their effort and their accomplishments?	
How might we structure our classrooms so that students better confront the relationship between input and output?	

How Believing You Live in a Good, If Not Great, Country Helps Build Agency

1. Rowe writes that	Notes
"building agency in the next generation will depend partly on teaching our young people to appreciate and embrace America's founding principles rather than teaching them to denigrate and reject those ideas," though they have been "often violated in practice" (49).	
EDUCATOR	
Do you and your students have your own ideas about what America's true "founding principles" are?	
Consider writing down a few that come to mind and then asking why you might choose to emphasize some over others.	
2. A major theme of the chapter is the "duality" of a country	
"in which enslaved people with a certain skin color at one time were once considered only three-fifths of a human being" (53)	
but where some descendants of those enslaved people achieved greatness. How have you and your students experienced that duality?	
Make a list of the ways you have inherited the struggles of people who came before you and the ways you have inherited the benefits of progress from past generations.	

3. Without denying that certain people face challenges others do not, Rowe concludes that

"we need to teach [young people] that they can make a difference in what is to come" (55).

What are some ways we can put into practice this aspiration to focus on a hopeful future rather than a lamentable past?

How the Hard Bigotry of "Antiracist" Expectations and the Pursuit of "Equity" Erode Agency for All

. How would you characterize Rowe's criticisms of the "equality versus equity" meme? Do you agree with these criticisms?	Notes
DUCATOR	
2. Rowe argues that	
"antiracism hurts kids of all races, but especially its intended beneficiaries" (63).	
If you or your school have implemented antiracist programming, what characteristics or behaviors were you hoping to bring out in your students?	
characteristics of behaviors were you hoping to bring out in your students:	
What are some ways we could encourage the good behaviors antiracism	aims for without sacrificing excellence
What are some ways we could encourage the good behaviors antiracism	aims for without sacrificing excellence
What are some ways we could encourage the good behaviors antiracisn	aims for without sacrificing excellence
What are some ways we could encourage the good behaviors antiracism	aims for without sacrificing excellence
	even if intended to help minorities and out the educational environment your
DUCATOR One of Rowe's major themes is the way that group stereotypes and prejudice, underprivileged kids, violate every human being's dignity. Thinking critically about the control of t	even if intended to help minorities and out the educational environment your
DUCATOR One of Rowe's major themes is the way that group stereotypes and prejudice, underprivileged kids, violate every human being's dignity. Thinking critically about the control of t	even if intended to help minorities and out the educational environment your negative—might your students pick u

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PART I EXERCISES

1. One parent in Evanston, Illinois, a school district that has embraced antiracist education, reports that her so despairing about "systems put in place that prevent black people from accomplishing anything" (66).		
	If you were looking to instill a sense of agency in that child, how would you respond?	
2.	. Rowe is critical of KIPP's decision to change its slogan from "Work Hard. Be Nice."	
	If you were marketing a school that cared about advancing agency, what would its slogan be?	

- 3. Match the expression [blame the system, blame the victim, or agency] to the worldview.
 - a. Black people may face disadvantages white people do not, but they, too, can succeed by remaining ambitious and making good choices.

Answer: Agency. This expression combines a sense of being "captain of one's own life" with moral direction.

b. Black people can't get ahead because America is racist to the core.

Answer: Blame the system. This expression points to a problem with the country as an explanation for why black people struggle. It blames systemic racism and overlooks the role of individual choices.

c. Black people can't get ahead because they don't work hard enough.

Answer: Blame the victim. This expression points to a problem with a group of people as an explanation for their own struggles. It does not account for social factors beyond an individual's control that may hinder social mobility.

- 4. True or False
 - a. Instilling a sense of agency means denying that minority kids face unique challenges in America.

Answer: False. Instilling agency is not a process blind to the unique challenges children face. Rather, it allows children to see that, even despite their circumstances, they have sovereignty over their personal choices that can contribute to their own uplift.

- b. Equity is just a more thoughtful way of providing the traditional American aspiration of equality.
 - Answer: False. Equity is a distinct concept that looks for equality of result between individuals and groups. The traditional American ideal of equality does not require equality of outcome and does not consider inequality of outcome to be evidence of inequality generally.
- c. Agency combines the sense that one's choices are real and matter with the framework for making good choices. Answer: True. This is the "free will plus moral direction" formula rephrased. Agency means that you have the power to choose and that you are capable of choosing wisely.

Who's Your Daddy? The Moment I Realized Schools Were Not Enough to Build Agency

EDUCATOR	Notes
1. The parable of the floating babies at the beginning of the chapter is amusing but makes a serious point about identifying and fixing problems at their origins.	
What problems have you seen in your classroom that you think might be "downstream" of larger social or cultural problems?	
What steps can you as an educator take to "walk upstream"? And in what ways are you limited in doing so?	
2. From the "Who's Your Daddy?" truck to the phenomenon of TV shows about teen pregnancies, there is clearly a cultural fascination with single motherhood. Yet single motherhood correlates with subpar outcomes for children.	
What do we find so compelling about single and teen moms?	
What might a culture fascinated by married-parent homes emphasize in its TV shows?	

Robbing Our Young People of Agency: Silence or Denial About the Importance of Family Structure

1. President Barack Obama spoke of the importance of black fatherhood, but his critics accused him of "perpetuating a racist myth about fatherhood" (96), in Rowe's paraphrase.	Notes
Why do you think President Obama took so much heat for emphasizing the importance of fatherhood to black Americans' success?	
2. Rowe's colleague writes that not discussing	
"systemic and institutional barriers that have played a major role in eroding the black family results in an incomplete narrative of what has led us to this point" (101).	
In your opinion, what would a "complete narrative" of the struggles and successes of black families look like?	

How America Has Changed Young Hearts and Minds in the Past: Teen Pregnancy

1. The national campaign to end teenage pregnancy was successful, at least in part, because of the diverse public figures it enlisted to spread its message in the late 1990s.	Notes
What kinds of public figures would a similar campaign need to be influential in the 2020s?	
EDUCATOR	
2. Rowe discusses the brouhaha around the fictional character Murphy Brown and her single motherhood.	
Whom do your students look to in popular culture for cues as to how to live well?	

Dan Quayle Was Right, but His Strategy Was Wrong

1. D	avid Frum is cited for concluding that we can no longer	Notes
	"moralistically reprimand the choices a growing population of young adults are making today" and must therefore "emphasize[] the life chances of children" to strengthen family stability (137).	
D	o you agree?	
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	o we continue to moralistically reprimand young people in other ealms? If so, why is this different?	
		- -
_		· -
-		
	What do you think accounts for the close correlation between a child prowing up in a single-parent home and the increased risk of adverse	
C	hildhood experiences?	
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The Success Sequence: The Empowering Alternative and the Other Building Blocks of Agency

1. One of the criticisms of the education and marriage elements of the success sequence is that full-time work does the "heavy lifting" (142) in keeping people out of poverty.	Notes
Can you think of ways that education and marriage help people find and maintain full-time work?	
What kinds of benefits might marriage especially have in promoting work and earnings?	
2. Imagine you are confronted with the argument that delaying parenthood until marriage is a "white middle class" value (143). How might you respond?	
How can you know whether a value belongs to a certain race or socioeconomic class?	
EDUCATOR	
3. Do you have reservations about teaching the success sequence to your students? You are not alone. A majority of Americans, but not all, support teaching the success sequence in schools (147). Try to identify the sources of your hesitation. Once you have listed them, think of some of the benefits and risks of teaching the sequence versus not teaching it.	
Even if doing so is not a perfect solution and comes with trade-offs, is presenting students with this information worth it?	

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Foundation of Family

EDUCATOR	Notes
Nicholas Zill is a research psychologist who emphasizes	
"how much burden has been placed on our public schools by the revolutionary increases in divorce, cohabitation, and unmarried childbearing" (150).	
Which burdens has your training as an educator prepared you to shoulder, and what have you not been trained for?	
Do you encounter challenges from your students that parents would be better equipped to handle?	
2. Rowe laments that	
"in their 2020 annual letter, neither Melinda nor Bill Gates makes a single mention of the word 'family'" (152).	
Were there figures in your life—role models, public figures, teachers,	
anyone—who stressed the centrality of family to your success?	
Were they successful in getting the message across?	

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PART II EXERCISES

	You are writing a brief speech for the president of the United States, to be delivered at a Boys & Girls Club in Washington, DC, on changing our culture to encourage social and economic mobility among low-income and minority children. List a few points you want to be sure to make central to your public information campaign. Think also about how you want to frame the relative importance of structural or systemic barriers and the power of young people's choices.
	Points
2	Imagine you are an administrator in a school that aims primarily to instill a sense of agency in its students. After a class-room lesson on the importance of marriage and two-parent homes, a fourth-grade student who you know is being raised by a single parent comes to you on the verge of tears because he does not want to feel inferior or incapable of making something great of his life. What do you tell him to restore his sense of agency and self-worth?

- 3. Circle the statements that, if spoken by a teacher, parent, or other authority figure to a child, could effectively advance the child's sense of agency.
 - a. "Your decisions matter. Your choices, big and small, matter."

 Answer: This does advance agency by expressing a significant prong of agency generally. It expresses in simple terms that people are captains of their life without saying that one's choices are *guarantees* of any one outcome or that circumstances do not matter.
 - b. "You can achieve anything you want in life, so don't let anyone else tell you what you should or should not do."

Answer: This is a tricky one. Though it does advance a sense of will, it fails the moral direction prong that separates agency from pure ambition. Agency requires guidance, which does include listening to people who tell you that some choices are better than others.

- c."Life is hard. It is full of struggle and pain. Some people can get through it, but others simply do not."

 Answer. If you circled this one, you might be picking up on the fact that the statement is almost certainly true, as advocates of agency will admit. But it is incomplete. It leaves the possibility of transcending struggle and pain to chance, or an unspoken and innate ability to "get through it." Without elaboration about what a child can do to transcend his or her circumstances, it sounds as though doing so is a matter of pure luck, or external forces, so this is not an agency-advancing statement.
- d. "Getting married before you have children will be crucial to achieving your goals in life."

 Answer: This is a perfect example of the moral guidance that directs a child's will toward achieving his or her goals. Though it is not a comprehensive expression of agency, it advances a central component—marriage—specifically and implies that a young person's choices matter generally.

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PART II EXERCISES

e. "Focusing on fatherhood as important to making it in life is racist."

Answer: This is the opposite of building agency. Instead of encouraging a young person to make responsible decisions—and see in family formation an opportunity to take a step toward "making it"—this blames "the system" for imposing racialized behaviors as a condition of success.

f. "It's OK to aspire to be a professional athlete, but don't be fooled into thinking your favorite athlete is a good model for your success. He does have lots of money, fame, and children out of wedlock, but that is not a recipe for success for most people."

Answer: This statement may seem like a dream crusher, but it is an important point nonetheless. Most children will suffer a significant disadvantage being born to unmarried parents. Breaking that cycle will require young people knowing that it is not equally good to have children within and outside of marriage. That is part of the moral direction that is central to agency.

g. "It's not fair that in this country you have to follow certain behaviors to stay out of poverty. You should be able to live your life how you want."

Answer: This is not an agency-advancing statement because it suggests that the system is what needs to change for life to be "fair." Rather than encouraging young people to make the good choices embodied in the success sequence, it encourages them to direct their energy toward fixing an "unfairness" they cannot change.

The FREE Framework to Build Agency

EDUCATOR	Notes
1. Rowe describes his parents' courtship and travels as an "adventure" (158).	
What can your students gain by thinking of their lives—and especially their trials and tribulations—as an adventure?	
How can you help them see that challenges and obstacles are opportunities for not just growth but adventure?	
2. Try to capture your initial impression of Rowe's FREE framework, laid out in brief Would you add any other building blocks of agency?	on pages 160–62.
Would you add any other building blocks of agency?	on pages 160–62.
Would you add any other building blocks of agency? Are you suspicious of any of these four? If so, why?	e points to two elements of
Would you add any other building blocks of agency? Are you suspicious of any of these four? If so, why? 3. One building block that might cause you some suspicion is religion (161). Rower	e points to two elements of ability to shape social norms.
Would you add any other building blocks of agency? Are you suspicious of any of these four? If so, why? 3. One building block that might cause you some suspicion is religion (161). Rower religion that make it crucial to agency: religion's unique moral authority and its	e points to two elements of ability to shape social norms. s moral code cannot? that space is our power to choose

Family

1. Think about the three versions of the Game of Life described on pages 165–67.	Notes
What does each one teach its players to consider important?	
What does each version assume about the importance of choice,	
obligation, and the purposes of our freedom in America?	
EDUCATOR	
2. Creating or renewing social norms concerning individuals' choices—such as	
when to marry and have children—is a major challenge.	
How do you cultivate social norms in your classroom?	
What, if anything, can that teach us about renewing social norms	
beyond the classroom?	
3. Rowe's recommendations to renew the centrality of the American family are	
largely focused on measuring outcomes and reforming government policies.	
What kinds of policies are there in the institutions you are involved in—	
whether educational, communal, or recreational—that might encourage	
or discourage marriage and family formation?	

Religion

1. George Washington is quoted in this chapter's epigraph:	Notes
"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports" (175).	
Why would he consider religion and morality so important to	
"political prosperity"?	
	-
What are the "dispositions and habits" that you see missing in our your people today?	ng ————————————————————————————————————
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How do you try to instill them?	
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2. Imagine you have told a young person that there are many	
"social-emotional benefits associated with religion" (178).	
But the young person tells you that she just can't believe in the things a	
religion would need her to believe.	
How can you respond to help promote her agency?	
	-
	-
	-
3. Rowe is skeptical of "religious substitutes" (178–79).	
Why? Do you agree with his analysis?	
	-
	-

Education

EDUCATOR	Notes
1. Rowe's parents considered negative stereotypes about "acting black" versus "acting white" to be "debilitating" (186).	
Have you observed these negative stereotypes in your classroom?	
Do you think the path chosen by schools like KIPP of "fully acknowledging the ways in which the [KIPP] school and organizational culture perpetuated white supremacy and anti-Blackness" (70) reinforces these stereotypes?	
2. The "Distance to 100" approach (193–98) emphasizes excellence for all students rather than focusing on gaps between different groups of students.	
What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?	
EDUCATOR	
3. Natalie Wexler suggests that we may be teaching our kids to read wrong:	
"What if the best way to boost reading comprehension," she asks, "is not to drill kids on discrete skills but to teach them, as early as possible history, science, and other content that could build the knowledge	
and vocabulary they need to understand both written texts and the world around them?" (197)	
Perhaps you have encountered this content-based theory of education before.	
What do you make of it? Based on your experience, could teaching civics as a means of improving literacy work?	

Entrepreneurship

1. An entrepreneur is, according to Rowe,	Notes
"one who takes ownership of all facets of their life to create financial, social, and other forms of wealth" (206).	
What perspective does thinking like an entrepreneur in the "business" of life add? What are the habits of an entrepreneur in business that benefit students in all their endeavors?	
2. One of the key elements of the entrepreneurial mindset, shown in the story of Alma (and expressed in many entrepreneurs' writings) is optimism "that a better future await[s]" (208).	
What are some small ways to instill that sense of optimism—an eye on the future, the hope that it will be better than the present, and concrete steps to get closer—that do not involve the traditional currencies of money or stocks?	
 Social entrepreneurs are individuals who "create new ways to stimulate opportunity for young people" (209). What would it mean for teachers and administrators to see themselves as 	
social entrepreneurs? Is it realistic?	
EDUCATOR	
4. Frederick Douglass wrote that	
"independence must be developed from within" (212).	
This presents a challenge: We must help young people develop independence from within themselves.	
How do you encourage independence in your classroom?	
Where might there be untapped opportunities throughout the school day for children to develop independence?	

A New Age of Agency

1. Rowe warns that the equity ideology leads to the dystopia of "Harrison Bergeron" (213–14).	Notes
What makes agency (and the inequality that might result) superior to the equitable distribution of everything in Kurt Vonnegut's	
imagined future?	
EDUCATOR	
2. Why do you think Rowe looks so favorably upon Archbishop Lyke Catholic	
Elementary's mantra, "We can do hard things"? (217)	
Do your students believe they can do hard things? If not, why not?	
3. On page 219, Rowe adds his FREE pane to the cartoon about equality	
and equity.	
What is fundamentally different about his view?	
What assumptions did the older cartoons make that Rowe does not?	

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Part III Exercises

- 1. Circle the statements that accurately express or advance the FREE framework for empowering young people to fulfill their potential.
 - a. Young people are responsible for cultivating personal agency on their own.

Answer: If you circled this, you might be making the common mistake of thinking that because young people will ultimately be responsible for making good choices, they are similarly responsible for developing the knowledge and habits that will allow them to do so. However, it is mediating institutions such as the family, church, and school that cultivate personal agency. Agency is individually practiced but socially empowered, and the FREE framework aims to advance that social empowerment.

b. The "family" prong of FREE means you need to be born into a two-parent family to succeed.

Answer: This is not quite right. Children not born into two-parent families can succeed despite the odds, and the "F" in FREE is less concerned with the family you inherited than the one you will build. What is really important is that all children know that the family they will form in the future should be one with two present, married parents if they want to give their own future children the best chance to succeed.

c. Religion is important principally because it speaks with moral authority and can shape social norms like little else.

Answer: This accurately represents the role of religion in FREE. Religion has the power to guide behavior in ways that turn ambition into agency. It does so with moral authority that cannot be replicated by immanent (not transcendent) authorities, even the government.

d. The "education" prong of FREE means rejecting "equity" goals that encourage equality of outcomes at the expense of excellence.

Answer: Yes, the first "E" of FREE requires young people to engage in self-discipline and hard work that will lead to educational excellence, including obtaining knowledge, skills, and virtues that not everyone may obtain in equal measure. It also involves advocating for policies that provide more and better opportunities for all.

e. An entrepreneurial mindset means teaching students that it is ideal for them to start businesses.

Answer: This is not quite right, though teaching the mindset it takes to start a business is much closer. Entrepreneurship does not mean teaching students that their life is best spent pursuing a career in business. It does mean encouraging students to approach their lives as people who own their own futures. If you are having trouble distinguishing the concepts, consider revisiting the chapter on entrepreneurship.

f. Government policy does not matter in the FREE approach to agency because the FREE approach is all about individuals making choices.

Answer: If you circled this, we did not read this section the same way. The FREE approach involves plenty of policy advocacy, including school choice for all and family-friendly policies that incentivize work without penalizing marriage. To socially empower good choices, government policy must encourage—or at least not discourage—the kinds of behaviors that are central to agency.

 $g.\ In\ fulfilling\ the\ religion\ part\ of\ the\ FREE\ framework,\ any\ set\ of\ beliefs\ based\ in\ faith\ and\ spirituality\ will\ do.$

Answer: This is not quite right. As Rowe writes, "a new form of identity politics has risen to fill [the] spiritual vacuum" (179) left by traditional religion: antiracism. But such beliefs do not encourage agency and thus do not help black communities. What does seem to keep people out of poverty is attending traditional religious services, likely because of their communal elements and strong moral instruction that directs individuals to act righteously.