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Factors Affecting Religious Beliefs at a Public Midwestern University

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FACTORS AFFECTING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

AT A PUBLIC MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors


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Factors Affecting Religious Beliefs at a Midwestern University

I. Introduction

Religion is a very controversial issue and its influences can be seen in many aspects of life. Among developed countries, the United States has one of the highest percentages of individuals who claim to be religious, and the primary U.S. religious identification is Christian (Pew Forum 2007). Studies indicate that religious affiliation, beliefs about God, and religiosity are often correlated with social and political attitudes and practices, including among young people (Carling 1969; Duriez & Soenens 2006; Sherkat 1998; Tuntiya 2005). Indeed, as multiple studies indicate, the college experience is a likely setting in which students might be exposed to new ideas, beliefs, and practices, and this may lead them to question or doubt their faith (Barker 1992; Conner 2007; Hoge 1976; Hunsberger, Pratt & Pancer 2002; Speers 2007; Uecker, Regnerus & Vaaler 2007). This provides a good reason to study the religiosity of traditional-age college students in the United States.

While the literature on the religious lives of college students is vast, very few studies attempt to synthesize the childhood experiences, university experiences, and personal belief trajectories of young adults (Clydesdale 2007). To help fill this gap, I conducted qualitative, in-depth interviews of students at a public Midwestern university to examine what factors affect students' religious affiliation, religious practices, and beliefs about God, and specifically what may lead to skepticism and doubt. My study

focused on students who were brought up by practicing Christian families.¹ Specifically, I interviewed participants from two different majors: business and sociology. I chose these two emphases because their curricular focus is very different, and I wanted to see if choice of major and/or type of coursework affected religiosity or religious doubt, as Sherkat (2007) and Kimball et al. (2006) discuss in their research.

There is general disagreement in the literature on religion regarding its consequences, and whether they are positive or negative. Theorists such as Freud and Marx argue that religion is detrimental to the individual and society, while some, such as Sorokin and Jung, have found beneficial effects of religion (Ferraro & Albercht-Jensen 1991). This thesis also explored my assumption that doubting and/or critically thinking about religion is useful in creating the global citizens the world may benefit from. Global citizens, in my estimation, are individuals who have respect for individual or cultural differences, regardless of nationality, race, gender, religion, or creed. In sum, this thesis attempts to uncover how college students make sense of their religious identity and to what degree they have doubts. It explores the impact of university coursework, specifically within one's major, on religiosity and religious doubt. It also argues that college majors that have coursework that encourages critical thinking and explores major life questions better prepares students to be global citizens.

¹ This is because studies indicate Christian is the dominant religion in the U.S. I include participants raised by families from any denominations identifying as Christian, such as Protestant, Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, etc. whose families did not overtly or regularly encourage their children to doubt their faith or explore other religions.

II. Literature Review

Many studies have been done about the religiosity of college students. However, not many attempt to determine what causes the development of doubts about a person's faith, or what personality characteristics or personal situations may be more likely to lead a person to question the things they were raised to believe. Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer (2002) assumed that few young adults think about religious issues in a critical manner because the majority of them maintain the same religious affiliation as their parents. I argue that there are more young adults who struggle with religion than research may indicate, but that the way mainstream society discourages questioning one's religious belief system might cause them to stifle or hide those thoughts.

When surveyed, about 79% of college students claimed to believe in God (Mayrl & Oeur 2009), as compared to 92% of adults in the U.S. who claimed some belief in God (Pew Forum 2007). Since only a fraction of the adult population have earned college degrees, this seems to support earlier studies that find that higher education greatly diminishes a person's religiosity (e.g., Astin 1977; Hoge 1976). However, more recent research questions the strength of this association (Clydesdale 2007; Dillon 1996; Hill 2009; Mayrl & Oeur 2009; Roberts, Koch & Johnson 2001; Sherkat 2007; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler 2007). Higher education may not be as "harmful" to religiosity as it was believed to be a few decades ago. For example, Clydesdale (2007) argued that students tend to tuck their religious identity and beliefs into a "lockbox" for the duration

of the college experience. Also, as Sherkat (2007) pointed out, demographics have changed: many more people are attending college than in the past, and the increase in African-American students, non-traditional aged students, and other minority populations all contribute to a general increase in those from religious backgrounds attending college.

However, church attendance and prayer did generally decrease in college (Bryant, Choi & Yasuno 2003), and certainty of belief in God tended to decrease as educational attainment increased, although there was little agreement as to the specific causes (Sherkat 2008). Astin (1998) argued that students' values have changed, with more focus on being financially well-off than developing philosophies on life. Others argued that belief in God was actually increasing among college students. Although external religious activity has waned, the recent increase in belief in God and maintaining spiritual belief systems may be due to the increasing number of churches and religious groups available to students and to the decreasing amount of hostility towards religion in today's universities (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler 2007).

A number of Christian organizations exist, and they are increasing at rapid rates. For example, Campus Crusade for Christ served approximately 55,000 students in the country, a threefold increase in student involvement in eight years (Moran, Lang, & Oliver 2007). The students who belonged to this organization, however, experienced a great deal of stereotyping and face challenges both on campus and in the classroom; they were often accused of being intolerant and/or arrogant. As one student

interviewed said, "I think some people think that Christians are dogmatic and condemning...I think a lot of it is just a lack of understanding," (Moran, Lang, & Oliver 2007: 9). The authors surveyed perceptions of a Christian group at a public Midwestern university and found that those students were not received well by the campus as a whole, either. Students interviewed reported feeling that there were very few authentic Christians on campus; that is, very few actually practiced what they claimed to believe. The Christian students involved in the organization also felt that their values conflicted with those of higher education because they perceived the campus culture to be materialistic and focused on achieving personal success. They stated that they felt Christianity was unacceptable and not celebrated as much as Eastern or New Age religions. They felt that their religion was devalued due to stereotypes they dislike, such as that Christians are closed-minded, superior, and anti-intellectual (Moran, Lang, & Oliver 2007). Despite this, the students said they were involved in the religious group because it was like family to them and it was a safe place for them to go to. They navigated the college world by being involved in campus ministry, and/or hiding their religious identity in certain situations.

The Lockbox

College students often make use of an *identity lockbox*, meaning they set aside their religious beliefs for the most part and do not display them externally (Clydesdale 2007). The decline in church attendance, prayer, and attending religious activities may

be because college students are completely consumed with other activities such as managing their money, maintaining and acquiring relationships, and earning degrees (Astin 1998). Being so busy may contribute to students storing what religious identity they have in an *identity lockbox* even before they enter college. By stowing that identity away, they are protecting their religious beliefs and, therefore, their future key into the cultural mainstream of America (Clydesdale 2007). In addition, students may perceive that questioning or doubting their religious beliefs might hurt their chances of attaining the ideal happiness that they were socialized to attain. This ideal happiness of American mainstream culture involves glorifying hard work and personal achievements, being patriotic, and believing in God and an afterlife (Clydesdale 2007). While this ideal definition of happiness is open to debate, acceptance by one's peers certainly seems desirable for life satisfaction. For example, Gillings and Joseph (1996) have shown that religiosity does increase a person's social desirability and that many people practice impression management in order to achieve acceptance. Therefore, students may also be reluctant to openly discuss their religious beliefs or doubts, or to explore other options. In sum, according to Clydesdale (2007), many students employ the "lockbox" during their college years and later return to more open expression of religiosity.

How Religion is Maintained

Most college students do not want to do anything that may harm their future or relationships, and so they see no benefit in going against the status quo and questioning

the religion in which they were raised (Clydesdale 2007). Doing so may cause them to be ostracized or affect their status in society especially if they openly identify as atheist or choose lifestyles that oppose their religious teachings. Conversely, one's affirmed religious identity and practices tend to increase one's social desirability, especially among close-knit community or family networks (Gillings and Joseph 1996). Some students have spent their entire life following a particular religion, resulting in a heightened emotional attachment to it. Also, they may not wish to convert in order to maintain the cultural capital (social assets based on cultural familiarity, conformity, or knowledge) they have built up (Stark & Finke 2000). There is also social capital (beneficial social network connections) associated with retaining the religion of one's family and friends; college students may not want to lose those relationships and that social capital.

Along with the personal investments many college students do not wish to give up, "strict" churches have certain characteristics that assist them in keeping people committed to their faith, such as an emphasis on conformity and moral absolutism (Iannaccone 1994). Such churches require followers to live a certain lifestyle and have a specific set of beliefs. Strict religions are typically smaller than the more liberal, lenient religions and therefore become stigmatized. Those who belong to these churches tend to only socialize with fellow members of that church, limiting their opportunities to be exposed to acts or beliefs that are deviant to them. When a person is surrounded by members of the same faith, it makes breaking the rules or questioning things much more difficult (Iannaccone 1994). In fact, stricter, more fundamentalist Christians often

view doubt as a major threat to their religion's existence and believe that those who entertain skeptical thoughts are being dangerous and destructive (Puffer et al. 2008). Although religious fundamentalism (especially conservative Protestantism) was associated with lower educational attainment (Fitzgerald & Glass 2008; Sherkat & Darnell 1999), those from "strict" churches who did enter college may have been more likely to hold on to their strong religious beliefs.

Raised to Believe

Students may also simply be predisposed towards a particular religion due to early socialization (Meyers 1996; Roberts, Koch & Johnson 2001). When a group of students was asked why they thought others believed in God, the two most common responses were because of comfort and being "raised to believe" (Shermer 1999). As Carling (1969) argued, most religious parents teach their children that their religion alone holds the truth; kids are made to feel as if they have a secret promise of eternal life, that they are special. He claimed that this might lead to ethnocentrism and prejudicial attitudes, which is borne out in the research to some extent, especially amongst fundamentalists (Froese, Bader & Smith 2008; Gorsuch & Aleshire 1974; Perkins 1983, 1992). Children are "too young to understand theology and too innocent to appreciate morality. They accept all that they are taught about the church in the same way that they accept what they are told about history or arithmetic" (Carling 1969: 92).

There are several theories that attempted to explain how religion was transmitted from one generation to the next and what the most significant factors were that affect religiosity. Cultural broadening theory, for example, argued that as young adults were exposed to more liberal ideas when they left home, their religiosity was more likely to decline (Myers 1996). Therefore, this theory argued that what a person experiences as an adult is much more important than what they experience as a child. Clydesdale (2007) and Speers (2007) have found that highly educated parents encourage their children to think for themselves and form their own opinions, which in turn makes their children less likely to simply accept a religion at face value. Another theory was secularization theory, which stated that as society becomes more modern, religion becomes less prevalent (Speers 2007). This theory has been debated recently, however, because religion is not going away. While sociologists originally claimed that there was a universal trend towards rationalism (appeals to reason and logic) occurring, secularization (process of society becoming non-religious) is now seen as the transformation of religion into being a more private matter. This has been seen in universities, for example with the identity lockbox utilized by some students (Speers 2007; Clydesdale 2007).

There were a few other ideas about how religion is transmitted. Myers (1996) argued that one's experiences in life are less significant than others claim, and that as people age, get married, and have children, they will typically increase their religious participation regardless of personal experience. In addition, some children whose

parents were not religious became involved in religion later on in their life. On the other hand, some children whose parents were extremely religious tended to shy away from their religion after they left home (Myers 1996).

While some research argued that education itself does not diminish religiosity as much today as it has in the past, the relocating that many college students do increases the probability of religious conversion or doubting (Loveland 2003). Moving to a new location creates opportunities to make new connections with people of different religions or worldviews. Also, college students tended to lapse in religious practice, which caused some to explore other religions or spiritual paths. The bottom line, however, is that those who were raised in a religious environment and/or have religious friends were more likely to be religious (Roberts, Koch & Johnson 2001).

In sum, changing student demographics, shifting priorities, religious socialization, and strict churches are all factors that help enable religiosity to remain relevant within the potentially corrosive college experience (Regnerus & Uecker 2007). However, college remains a setting where students ask life's big questions and this often leads to religious doubt and questioning (Connor 2007).

Pros & Cons of Religion

College is supposed to be a time when young adults can discover and challenge themselves, expanding on the knowledge they gained in high school. It is a time to critically reflect on their beliefs and how they want to live their adult lives (Speers 2007).

Those who do struggle with faith and religious questioning often feel alone (Clydesdale 2007). Questions such as “What do I value? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand death?” are often not addressed in typical college courses. Research has shown that many students yearn for the opportunity to think through these questions in a systematic way (Connor 2007).

Those students who reported having doubts about religion experience had these feelings for various reasons (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002). Many doubters felt that religion does not make people better or more moral and seems to only cause closed-mindedness and conflict. Others doubted the authenticity of religious scriptures. Others believed that the fear of death causes people to hold on to religious beliefs rather than doubting or questioning. Most of these doubts were mild, however. Those who were raised in a strict religious environment or in a close-knit family were less likely to have doubts. Fundamentalism and Catholicism were also associated with fewer doubts (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002).

Individuals who were socialized into a religious family but did not accept religious doctrine believe themselves to be less religious and less fundamentalist than their family or peers and were associated with higher levels of religious doubt. A lack of prominence of religion in the family home was also associated with higher levels of doubt (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002)., Certain personality characteristics that were related to having religious doubt included lower authoritarianism, increased social activism, greater openness to experience, and more complexity of thought about

religious issues (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002). Those who were more likely to doubt religion and less likely to attend church also scored higher in curiosity, optimism, originality, versatility, and insightfulness (Shermer 1999). I would argue that those are positive personality characteristics that are desirable in future world citizens and leaders. Being more optimistic and versatile makes one stronger; having an optimistic attitude allows one to keep going when life gets tough and being versatile allows one to adapt to many different situations in life. Also, being more insightful and curious causes one to seek out solutions to social issues that are neglected such as unequal distribution of wealth and healthcare.

There were some who argued that religion has positive benefits for college students, however. For example, Paek (2006) pointed out that people with intrinsic religious orientation had higher levels of self-motivation, life satisfaction, sense of control, and lower rates of delinquency. Ozorak (2003) found that students with higher religiosity tended to volunteer more in their communities. Several studies showed that religious people may have more academic success than the non-religious (Mooney 2005). These studies used religious participation as a measure of religiosity. Actively participating in religion reduced the rate of substance abuse and other activities that make succeeding in academics more difficult. Going to church promoted conformity, which could be seen as a good thing on the college campus because it goes hand in hand with attending class regularly. Religion also provided a social support system, helping students avoid the possible loneliness and depression they may face in college (Sherkat

& Ellison 1999). Religion provided a coping mechanism and contributed order to a frightening world full of uncertainty (Carone & Barone 2001). So, religion may provide a useful tool in navigating the college years of a young adult's life.

On the other hand, high levels of religiosity could limit critical thinking and shape how students made decisions about the world around them: Carone and Barone (2001) explained by saying, "Believers are likely to use heuristics (What does our creed say?) to form rapid judgments rather than engage in extended inquiry. A well-documented consequence of heuristic processing is the confirmatory bias, in which selective perceiving and remembering seem to validate beliefs, hypotheses, and schemas about the world even when they do not" (1990). This strategy gave believers more predictability and confidence that they were doing the right thing, and may have provided an efficient way of decision-making. However, it restricted the range of ideologies and perspectives available or made use of in the cognitive process (Carone & Barone 2001).

Other researchers did not believe that religion had significant effects on the wellbeing of college students one way or the other. For instance, Richards (1991) studied both religious and nonreligious individuals, and found that there was no difference in mental health and identity formation. A few small differences were noted, such as the tendency for the religious to feel guilty and the nonreligious to feel emotionally separated from their parents. Yet neither of these differences was significant enough to cause mental health disturbances, and may have been positive for those individuals. Thus, the literature was contradictory at times. However, there seems

to be agreement that the college experience affects students' beliefs and religiosity in significant ways.

Critically Thinking About Religion

A few studies have been done regarding how students deal with religious doubt. Most sought pro-religious sources only, but a few students searched for answers both anti- and pro-religion. In one longitudinal study, those who kept their options open and explored some anti-religious sources were more likely to still have doubts a few years later (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002). While some studies of religious doubters showed negative effects of doubting, such as increased stress, depression, and anxiety levels, other studies revealed positive associations with doubt (Puffer et al. 2008). These positive effects included high levels of self-esteem, responsible sexual behavior, low prejudice, racial openness, more adaptive coping styles, and a more positive attitude toward homosexuals. In a country in which a majority of the population claim a belief in God and are involved in religious practices, for a person to be skeptical of the existence of God requires boldness; also, to maintain this position in the face of scorn would require a bit of optimism (Shermer 1999; Duriez & Soenens 2005).

III. Research Questions to be Answered

I conducted this study because while searching the literature, I did not find much that explores the synthesis of a person's childhood socialization, college experience, and

personality characteristics in regard to their religious questioning and/or lack of questioning. In particular, I did not find any studies that systematically or empirically address the possible effects of different areas of study (majors) on the religious beliefs of students. I feel that it is important to investigate what causes a person to either accept what they have been told to believe or to critically examine their given belief system. I feel that a good way to make meaningful societal progress and address society's numerous inequalities is to take a look at one of its most self-evident institutions.

In order to more fully explore such factors, I asked the following research questions:

- What effects does the early religious socialization of a person have on their religious views and experiences in college?
- What factors or experiences in higher education do students identify as leading to religious doubt or questioning?
- Are students encouraged to think critically about their own religious/spiritual beliefs at the university level?
- Does a person's choice of major, area of study, or specific coursework have an impact on their degree of skepticism/religious doubt?

The first two questions were addressed in the previous literature I reviewed, but I felt it was necessary to include them in order to see if my findings were similar to previous researchers'. The final two questions are, however, the primary questions being asked in

this study. They are designed to help fill gaps in the literature that my study purposefully addresses.

IV. Methodology

In general, there is a lack of rich description of the religious experiences of college students in the literature. Not many studies are in-depth and few explain how these religious experiences are related to the environment of a university (Mayrl & Oeur 2009). For this reason, I completed in-depth, qualitative interviews with four students at a public university in the Midwest United States. I obtained life history narratives, spanning from the interviewee's childhood to college experience. Time constraints limited the number of students I was able to interview, but I feel that insight into the beliefs and doubts of the interviewees through in-depth discussion and qualitative analysis is valuable data. Although qualitative methods have their drawbacks, such as lack of generalizability and small sample size, they are useful to gain deeper understanding of others and to explore how people interpret the world around them and assign meaning to things in their lives. As Berg (2004:114) remarks, qualitative research can "demonstrate meanings and understandings about problems and phenomena that would otherwise be unidentified." Religion is a difficult topic to fully understand; therefore, qualitative methods can enhance and add nuance to quantitative findings.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, interviewees were identified using a “request for participation” email sent to students of different majors. Potential interviewees were told of the purpose of the study, as well as potential benefits and harms that could come from participating in it. I chose students from different majors to see if different curricula have effects on religiosity. Specifically, I interviewed two students with majors in the area of business and two from sociology, based on the assumption that coursework in social science majors is more likely to challenge students’ fundamental belief systems or worldviews. The interviewees chosen were Caucasian, raised in a Christian home, are of traditional college age, have been in college at least three years, and have declared either social science or business majors. Three were female, and one male. This use of non-random, convenience sampling was helpful because it resulted in data that helped answer my focused research questions (Berg 2004).

Prior to the actual interviews, I obtained informed consent from all participants. A semi-structured interview guide was used and the interviews were digitally recorded. I then transcribed the interviews and kept the recordings and transcriptions protected and confidential. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The pseudonyms I assigned for the sociology majors were Jessica and Amy, and the business majors were Sarah and Jack. The interviews took place in a quiet location chosen by the interviewee, such as their home or the library. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to guide the conversation to the major questions I wanted to address

without leading the respondent to a specific answer (Lofland 1971). I collected my data as in-depth interviews because I was doing a micro-level analysis and wanted rich, personal data (Neuman 1997). The in-depth interview method was useful for this research because the respondents were allowed to expand on questions I asked. I was also able to ask for feedback from the respondents' perspective, with the understanding that they view the world in varying ways (Berg 2004). By establishing rapport and asking probing questions, the goal was to obtain a sort of guided monologue from the interviewee that I could transcribe and use for analysis.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I used an inductive, grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Berg 2004). I then was able to perform the technique of data reduction, which involves identifying recurring themes and patterns in the data, thereby reducing it to be more concise and manageable for analysis, while still reflecting the interviewees' voices (Berg 2004). To accomplish this, I coded the data using sensitizing concepts from my literature review and research questions, and subsequently began organizing it into different themes so that I could analyze the interviewees' responses. I then verified my data by checking how I arrived at my conclusions to avoid a wishful thinking fallacy (Berg 2004). Verification also involved making evaluations about the data by consulting and making links to the existing literature. Data will be presented throughout my results section in order to demonstrate the various themes and patterns I found.

Data collection and analysis were done from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Symbolic interactionism is attributed to several social scientists, including Blumer, Cooley, Parks, and Mead (Berg 2004). This theory assumes that humans develop meaning and definitions for their lives based on interaction with others (Berg 2004). Interactionists use human interactions as their main source of data. Using this perspective, my goal as a researcher was to understand this process of attaching meaning to symbols and interactions done by my interviewees. By understanding these meanings, I was able to get a sense of how my interviewees produced the realities they live in, of which religiosity is a major component.

V. Results

The themes and patterns that emerged from my data that support existing literature were that those who prayed when they were young continue to do so, doubts were minor, familial closeness predicted continuity of one's religion, and my respondents used the 'identity lockbox'. Unique to my study were the themes that students created their own specific religion and that while both majors did not feel challenged by general education courses, sociology majors felt their major courses were significantly challenging and business students did not feel this way.

The students I interviewed were all fourth or fifth year students, and had been in their major at least three years. All but Amy attended this specific university for all of their education thus far. Amy attended a private college for the first year. Amy is a

sociology major who grew up in a small Iowa town. Her family was Christian Reformed, but they attended Lutheran churches because there were not any Christian Reformed churches in her town. Her family attended church regularly and she was involved in many religious activities. Amy is now actively seeking a different church. The second interviewee is Jessica, also a sociology major who grew up in a rather large Iowa town. Her family is Lutheran and they attended church every Sunday, and also volunteered regularly through the church. Jessica now considers herself spiritual rather than religious. Sarah, the third interviewee, is a business major who grew up in a very small Iowa town. Her family is Baptist, and she still identifies herself as Baptist. Her parents did not attend church regularly, however. Her grandfather is a pastor and much of her religious exposure came from extended family. The last interviewee, Jack, also a business major, grew up in a moderate-sized Iowa town. He attended Christian elementary school and was raised Christian. His family attends church every Sunday, and also reads the Bible together. They attended Methodist church when he was younger, and now attend Baptist services. Jack identifies as Christian.

There were several patterns that emerged from my data that support previous findings. In regards to childhood socialization, those who prayed with their family in the past continue to pray today. Any doubts experienced by my respondents were minor and this may be related to the previously identified emphasis on retaining social capital. Feeling close and communicating frequently with family also seemed to predict interviewees' continued practice of their family's religion. For example, three of the

four interviewees had a generally positive view towards organized religion. In addition, I found that all the students in my sample seemed to utilize the “identity lockbox,” by not questioning their religious beliefs or discussing them with others (Clydesdale 2007). However, church attendance decreased during college attendance for all of my respondents, which also supports Clydesdale’s (2007) and others’ findings that although students attend church less often while in college, they do tend to retain private religious beliefs and practices.

There were also several patterns in the data that are unique to my study. For example, a significant theme was that some interviewees created their own personal interpretation of their religion by integrating only certain aspects of their religion and molding it to fit their individual lives. Also, while all of the interviewees agreed that their general education courses did not push them to think critically, the business students did not report feeling particularly challenged in their major coursework, while sociology students reported many instances where critical thinking was encouraged in their major courses, and they expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their university experience.

Early Religious Socialization

Data from interviewees in my sample show that families and the ways students are socialized early in life can have a lasting impact on their religiosity. This is in concurrence with Meyers (1996), who argues that students can be simply predisposed

towards a religion due to their socialization. For example, interviewees who spent a great deal of time praying with their family when they were young also pray frequently as a student. Both Amy and Jack reported praying numerous times a day and even reading the Bible with their families, and both try to pray every night now as college students. Sarah specifically stated that her family, and not her friends, is who mainly influences her beliefs:

It's what I've always known and what I've always been taught. I don't question it because I was never taught to and I never cared to. I just believed it and that's what I believe and I just do.

Those who reported praying regularly did, however, admit to praying more often during times of difficulty. Those who prayed mentioned that doing so was a comfort to them. For instance, Amy and Sarah felt that it was "comforting" to confide in someone they cannot see and that religion gives people hope. As Carone and Barone (2001) said, religion can provide a coping mechanism and assist young adults in navigating through their lives. Sarah and Jack, both business majors, stated many times that they did not care to know more about their religion, question the authenticity of the Bible, and other related issues. They "just believe."

Loveland (2003) stated that the probability of a student doubting increases if they relocate. I found that it was not simply relocation (all my interviewees had done that), but the amount of contact with and level of closeness to their family that affected their willingness to question and doubt. I asked them how often they currently see or

Speak with their family, and it seems that the closer they were with their family, the less likely they were to stray from their religious upbringing. For example, Jessica only sees her family every couple of months, and she is the only respondent who does not define herself as religious anymore. The other interviewees see their families every few weeks, and some talk on the phone with them daily, and all three are still very religious.

However, lack of strict religious socialization was not directly correlated with a lack of strong faith among all my respondents, as was suggested by Hunsberger, Pratt, and Prancer (2002). Sarah, for instance, was not raised in a very strict family and rarely went to church while growing up, yet Sarah had a very strong faith. She reported having a few doubts when she was younger, due to a friend dying, but nothing serious enough to cause her to seriously question or leave her religion:

When I was in high school, I had a friend pass away when I was 16. It just doesn't make sense sometimes with that kind of stuff like when someone passes away or things like that. Like why would that happen? So those things made me think about it, but never enough to really question it.

Also, the social capital associated with retaining one's religion also came up in my study (Stark & Finke 2000). The students apparently did not want to lose or weaken either their relationships with family or the social status that comes with it. For instance, Jessica has not told her parents she is not religious anymore, and Amy has not told her parents that she is living with her boyfriend (which is against her religion).

There did not seem to be a direct relationship in my sample between church attendance as a child and as a student, however. Jessica attended church every week as a child, and also participated in youth groups, religious camps, and evening programs, yet is not religious anymore. Another example is Jack, who did all that Jessica did and attended a Catholic elementary school, remains faithful, yet does not attend church services.

Views on Organized Religion

Three of four interviewees in the sample had a relatively positive view of organized religion and felt it was necessary in society. The one exception was Jessica, who views Christianity as a mainstream cult that is restricting to the mind:

You learn about cults, and they're pretty much the same as Christianity except one's mainstream and one's not. I guess cults can be a little bit more extreme...but it's all based upon the same thing and I just see it as restricting people. It's like their own separate society...they have their own beliefs and pretty much "laws" that you're supposed to abide by or else you are kind of ostracized. I know my mom, she grew up Catholic, and she got divorced and she was kicked out of the church pretty much.

Jessica feels that religion was hypocritical because religious people preach being welcoming and accepting, and yet they often are not. She also chooses not to be a part of religion because she believes it is not rational and it often involves selfish thinking, such as the belief that only those of a particular religion will get into heaven. Despite these negative feelings, even Jessica cannot imagine a society without some form of religion because it “fills the void of unanswered questions.” She also mentioned that if, in the future, her children are interested in religion, she will let them explore it.

Amy feels that religion urges people to be generous and kind, yet acknowledges that many non-religious people are also kind and generous. She does not think that non-religious people or non-Christians will be punished for eternity. She contradicts herself in a way though:

I do think humans need religion to be moral. I also think religion means something different for each person. Some are in religion out of fear or to get into heaven... whatever religion is to them is fine with me. For me, religion is pleasing Him and myself and positively impacting the people around me.

Amy also thinks religion has a bad reputation because of those who put others down for what they believe in. Sarah stated that believing in something is healthy, and religion gives hope as well as explains the unexplainable. She does think it can get “a little over the top and crazy,” especially Catholicism. She enjoys being Baptist because she believes her religion is more understanding and accepting of others.

Jack thinks religion is necessary because it explains those things that science cannot. He thinks religion has a bad reputation at times because of selfish motives of certain individuals using it for the wrong reasons. As a whole, however, he believes religion offers a sense of community and is good. In sum, Jessica feels that religion is restricting but the other three have a positive view of organized religion. Amy feels it creates generosity and kindness, Sarah thinks it helps explain the unexplainable, and Jack also feels that it explains things that science cannot.

University Experiences & the Identity Lockbox

In my study, I found Clydesdale's (2007) "identity lockbox" theory to be supported. He argues that students tend to tuck their religious identity and beliefs into a "lockbox" for the duration of their college years. As he discusses in his article, the interviewees in this study also seemed to be preoccupied with acquiring and maintaining relationships, school, working, and socializing, and are therefore too busy to fully examine their religious and spiritual beliefs. Jessica, who is not religious herself, has had religious roommates but they never talked about religion much. Amy has a fairly strong faith, yet her boyfriend is not very religious. She admitted to distancing herself from God at times during college:

At times I felt lost and confused, I had really distanced myself from God because I was ashamed of what I was doing. It was an ongoing circle...if I did things He didn't approve of then I wasn't

happy, but if I did things He would be proud of then I was
happy...I can't quite explain it.

Sarah had a religious roommate during her freshman year that went to church every week, but they never talked about religion either. She said, "I have a friend that is in college and still chooses to go to church every week with her boyfriend. I thought it was different to be in college and still want to do that." Most of Jack's friends were not religious because he found his friends based on their desire to have fun in college, not their religiosity. He admitted if he had made being a good Christian a priority in school, he probably would have had different friends. The lockbox theory may have some weaknesses, however. In my sample, it seems that friends do not have much of an influence on religiosity because those who still believe in God had nonreligious friends, yet still believed and even tried to get their friends to believe at times. Sarah stated that she might go to church more often if she had someone to go with, so church attendance may be affected by the religiosity of friends.

Picking and Choosing Aspects of Religion

All the students in my sample reported decreased church attendance in college, which is in agreement with Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno's (2003) findings. In addition to this trend, in looking at the overall spiritual/religious lives of the students, I found that their beliefs and practices were not straightforward. The students in my sample were not simply Catholic, Baptist, or non-religious – rather, they expressed a complex blending of

religious and spiritual ideologies. They followed certain aspects of the religion they were raised to believe, incorporated others, and formed a unique belief system for themselves. The students did this in different ways, however. The sociology students did it by actively seeking new solutions to things that did not make sense or feel right to them. The business students simply chose to disregard some teachings of their religion and either made excuses for it or could not quite explain why they did it.

For instance, Jessica, a sociology major, defines herself as spiritual rather than religious. When asked to explain, she replied:

I think I am still trying to figure it out. I am just going off the basis that I don't know all the answers and obviously I think there is something beyond myself, I just don't know what it is.

She has gone to the local Unitarian Universalist society a few times because they are more diverse and accept everyone. She values that they acknowledge everyone's unique belief systems. Amy, the other sociology major, is actively seeking a church that feels right for her and will allow her to learn something:

I don't want church to be something I grudge getting up for in the morning... I want it to be worthwhile and have something for me to learn.

She does not attend church regularly now, but plans on attending as often as she can once she finds the right fit.

Sarah, a business major, just does not think going to church is necessary because “as long as you believe, you will get into heaven.” Jack, another business major, attended church less and less throughout college. He did not make going to church a priority because he wanted to focus on having fun and told himself that as long as he believes, his actions do not really matter:

I never made it a priority to go to church. I did occasionally but less and less the longer I was there. I was also free to do whatever I wanted, so I suppose I became a little more reckless. It’s not like I wanted to burst out of the oppression I was under, it was more like I always wanted to have fun and there were always opportunities...unlike when at home.

Both business majors retain some version of their beliefs, emphasize a forgiving God, but do not attend church services as often as they used to. Maybe they do not go to church because it does not do much for them, or perhaps their coursework does not provide them with the tools to explore other options. In any case, it seems from these particular respondents, that partying or having fun in college is a major influence keeping them from attending church.

In my sample, the students’ beliefs about the Bible were another instance in which they seemed to be picking and choosing their beliefs. For example, Amy believes the Bible literally, that the world is 6,000 years old, and that we all came from Adam and Eve. Yet she struggles with the fact that it has been translated so many times and said

she believes there is no way of knowing what the authentic Bible consisted of. Sarah does not understand who wrote the Bible and never reads it, but takes it literally because that is what she was taught. Jack believes that the Bible is divine and takes it literally as well. He said he does not know much about the origin of the world or other things the Bible addresses, and does not know if everything in the Bible is true. Jack did not feel that the truth of the Bible mattered, but only faith in Jesus:

I know that carbon dating dates the world much older than the Bible says...how, I have no idea. I think people can get really hung up on 'did God create the world in seven days, were dinosaurs on the ark, things like that'. There is a place for those arguments, but for me I'm just not informed enough to give an opinion. What I believe is most important is your faith in Jesus, that's what makes Christianity. Those are all aspects of it, but something that I think people get hung up on and miss the main point. I would hate for someone to disregard Christianity because of things like that because do they really matter?

On the other extreme, Jessica does not take the Bible literally at all and thinks people who do are "in denial" by ignoring all of the contradictory scientific information.

Interviewees expressed differing images of God; it was something they also personalized. For instance, Sarah's God is very actively involved in her life and her religion (Baptism) sees Him as controlling what you do and say. She said she has a hard

time accepting that, however, because there are so many people in the world. She believes that your actions do not matter because no matter what you do, God will get you through it. Others emphasized personal closeness as well as forgiveness as an important aspect of their image of God. For instance, Jack views God as loving and personal:

You can't doubt the awesome power of God, and I know terrible things happen that a loving God could stop, but I think it's so cool that he cares enough to give us a second chance.

Finally, Jessica sees God as her "buddy," someone involved in her daily life to look after her – more of a good friend than an omnipotent patriarch.

All of my religious respondents make lifestyle choices and/or hold beliefs that do not align with their religion. Sarah, for example, still drinks although strict Baptists, including her grandfather who is a retired pastor, do not believe in drinking alcohol. Jack states that premarital sex is a sin yet does it anyway because he believes God will forgive him if he is genuinely sorry. Amy lives with her boyfriend and has premarital sex, but does not think God frowns upon it because "He knows my situation better than anyone else, knows we will get married eventually, and I think I'd feel a heaviness upon my heart if I was doing the wrong thing."

With regards to controversial topics such as homosexuality, Amy thinks God is okay with it and that the beliefs against it were misinterpreted in the Bible. Sarah does not think homosexuality would prevent anyone from going to heaven and that it does

not make anyone less of a person. Jack, however, believes homosexuality is a sin just like murder and lying. This may be because he uses heuristics instead of critical thinking to arrive at his opinions, as Carone and Barone (2001) assert. Jessica, the nonreligious interviewee, is completely okay with homosexuality. In short, two out of the three religious interviewees think homosexuality is okay and one thinks it is a mortal sin; therefore the data from my study is mixed and does not fully support the finding from Puffer et al (2008) that those who support homosexuality experience significant religious doubt. For three out of the four interviewees, doubts experienced were minor for the most part. However, Jessica chose to completely leave religion, although it is unknown whether this has anything to do with her views on homosexuality.

In sum, interviewees expressed a mixture of beliefs about the Bible, homosexuality, their image of God, and their own behaviors in relation to their faith. For most, though, these sometimes contradictory ideas failed to cause them to significantly doubt their faith. Those who are still religious may stifle even small doubts they have because mainstream society discourages questioning one's religious belief system (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer 2002). Therefore, small doubts may be ignored and replaced with picking and choosing aspects of a religion that individuals can come to terms with.

Major Decision & University Coursework

The business majors in my sample did not feel challenged in either their general education or their major courses, and did not feel like much if any critical thinking was

required of them. The majority of their classes were strictly lecture and they reported that they did not feel stimulated during class. Jack said that more critical thinking would have been nice because it may have helped him figure out what he wants to do with his life, “which [he] feel[s] almost lost on.” As Connor (2007) noted, many students would like the opportunity to think through life’s big questions in a systematic way. However, when asked if they would like to learn more about, for example, other religions, the business students did not have much interest. Sarah did not have a desire to discuss religion with others because “This is what I think, and this is how I feel about it.” She was not willing to consider alternatives when it came to religion, which may be reinforced by the lack of critical thinking required in her major. Jack, another business major, also expressed a lack of critical thinking required in his coursework:

Had my classes focused more on critical thinking, maybe I could have more motivation to get a job with a positive effect on people’s lives, along with more knowledge in general.

The level of satisfaction with their major and their coursework seemed much higher among the sociology students I interviewed. The feeling that general education courses did not stimulate students much nor require much critical thinking was still prominent among the sociology students. However, their sociology courses involved much more discussion and critical thinking. Jessica felt that her major courses helped her grow intellectually and personally. She stated that her sociology courses were a contributing factor to her becoming less religious and more spiritual:

I think I used to be kind of closed-minded since I grew up Christian and now taking my sociology classes...it's definitely opened up my mind to other views and...yeah I'm definitely not Christian anymore.

She expresses that her thinking has changed and that she has become more open-minded and now needs solid reasons to believe something because of things she has learned in sociology courses. Also, Jessica specifically gave the example of business majors as needing to take these kind of courses to encourage others to think about things such as religion and their own spirituality. She said, "They aren't pushed to actually view something different from what they already believe."

Amy felt similarly, stating that sociology helped her find her own opinions on certain things in life. For example, she now believes she has no right to judge someone based on their beliefs, which is something she would not have said before her sociology classes. Although she did not abandon religious practice because of her sociology classes, she claims:

I'm all for forcing people to think critically...that's why I loved my sociology classes so much...because they forced you to think and analyze everything.

She has thought a great deal about her exact beliefs; all of her beliefs are her own and make sense to her. She can explain them in great detail, which I did not find among the business students in my sample. Amy believes that doubting and questioning is a good

thing because it forces you to look at what you believe and make an educated decision. She even thinks she could benefit from learning about other religions a bit more. Amy says she was drawn to sociology because it “thrives on people, communities, genders, and ethnicities being different.” She feels that sociology could help people become more educated about those who are different from them and if more people took critical thinking courses such as the ones she took, she feels hate crimes may be less frequent. Amy also stated that sociology gave her the desire to have a job that is impacting and important and also to volunteer more. Amy feels that sociology forces people to take the time to think about things they’ve never thought about or realized.

In fact, both sociology majors were so pleased with their coursework and the positive consequences it had for their lives, they expressed a desire for all students at their university to take sociology courses, or similar discussion-intensive courses. Thus, Amy and Jessica provide examples that lend support to the argument I make that critically thinking about one’s beliefs and assumptions can help create the global citizens the world could benefit from.

VI. Discussions and Implications

This study provided an in-depth look at the religious beliefs of four students at a public Midwestern university. It synthesized information from the students’ childhoods, university experiences, and personal belief trajectories to make sense of how they form their ideas about the world, their future, and one of society’s most pertinent

institutions—religion. This is something that is rare in the existing literature, and therefore this study adds to the body of existing knowledge.

As I anticipated based on existing literature, most of my interviewees still belong to the church in which they were raised, but have decreased their church attendance and activities since attending college. The level of strictness regarding religion when growing up did not seem to be directly related to the maintenance of a family's religion, however, in contradiction to Hunsberger, Pratt, and Prancer's (2002) argument. Also, relocation had some effect on diminishing religiosity as predicted, but it was more the level of familial closeness that affected a person's religiosity rather than moving away that had the most significant effect, according to the interviewees in this sample. The students in my sample seemed to view religion as a private matter for the most part, and followed the "lockbox" theory closely (Clydesdale 2007). A very prevalent pattern among my data was that of respondents forming their own personalized belief system and following only certain doctrines of one or more religions. This was not addressed thoroughly in the literature, and a study focused solely on this trend would be useful.

This study was limited because I was only able to obtain four interviews; time and money were also limited. If I were to do this project on a larger scale, I would like to interview many more students from several majors. I would also include a quantitative survey and combine the two methods to create more reliable, generalizable results. Ideally, I would make it a longitudinal study so that I could study the changes in religious views over time.

When I began this project, I anticipated that there would be differences between sociology and business majors, but I also thought that general education courses, especially in the liberal arts, would provide spaces for the participants to think more deeply about their belief systems. However, it was really only the sociology students in this sample who were affected in this way. I was correct that those who took discussion-based classes were more likely to question religion, but they did not necessarily doubt their religious beliefs as intensely as I had predicted. However, the sociology majors in my sample had both thought critically about their personal beliefs and incorporated the new information they learned to tweak their beliefs to better fit their lives. As Dan Barker (1992: 60) stated, "Christianity doesn't ask people to think. It asks them to accept. It requires a humbling of the mind and a submission of the self...Why are these ideas acceptable to so many people?" In my opinion, the sociology students in my sample were on the right track towards ridding society of mindless acceptance of ideas of any kind. I feel that if this study could be done on a larger scale, the importance of discussion-based and/or sociology courses should be emphasized.

That being said, I do not think that questioning or renouncing religion is for everyone, but I do think that more people need to take a closer look at the central ideas they consume their life with. Religion has been used to justify many evils in the world, such as racism, sexism, slavery, war, and oppression. Personally, I believe the world is better off without these things, and further, I do not believe that we need religion to create a just and orderly society, or in order to create a useful moral code. I agree with

Marx and Engels' (1957:23) argument that religion is an "opiate of the masses."

However, I believe it is important to examine the belief systems that have been handed down through the generations because if we do not, the injustices certain uses of religious doctrine has caused or helps to maintain may continue to exist. The students in my sample were not directly encouraged to think about their spirituality and/or religious beliefs. The sociology students were able to do so indirectly through skills learned in their classes. These are important skills to master. As Chalfant, Beckley, and Palmer (1987) assert, in order to create change and rid the world of its evils, we need to focus on this current life and quit thinking about the "next life" in which the poor will be blessed.

Assuming critical thinking skills are important to the future leaders of our nation, I argue that every university should strive to include a few courses that legitimately challenge their students to look at controversial life issues, such as religion. While those who took sociology courses in my study experienced this benefit, such courses do not have to be limited to sociology. Based on previous studies and my own findings, students would benefit from courses that help them figure out how they feel about important issues, where they fit in the world and where they want to go once they graduate. These courses should be required in both general education curricula and/or within each major. If such courses were implemented regularly, I argue that many more students would leave their university with a positive feeling about their education, as well as developing crucial skills such as critical thinking and the ability to interact with

diverse others. As today's employers will assert, these skills are increasingly necessary in our postmodern, globalized service economy.

VII. References

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