Honors Thesis Proposal

For

Sacred Changes on Campus: The Effects of Higher Educational Experience on Religiosity and Spirituality, and Resolving Cognitive Dissonance

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, social scientific research has explored new trends in definitions of religiosity and spirituality. These studies indicate that spirituality and religiosity are being defined as separate, but overlapping concepts (Marler and Hadaway 2002; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). There is also a small, but growing trend to define oneself as spiritual, but not religious (Grossman 2010; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Spirituality and religiosity may also be affected by higher educational attainment and college experience, but the current literature provides mixed and contradictory results. Some studies suggest higher educational attainment has a negative effect on religious behavior (Brant, Yun and Yasuno 2003) and a liberalizing effect on student’s religiosity for a minority of students (Raimer 2010). While other studies claim that higher educational attainment is associated with a strengthening of beliefs (Lee 2002) or an increase in religious behavior, such as prayer (MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem 2010). Previous research also reports an increase in spiritual interest during students’ college years (Brant, Yun and Yasuno 2003; Hatley 2004).

As students leave their social, familial and religious networks and environment and immerse themselves into new networks, they enter a scholastic environment that focuses on academia that introduces them to diverse views. As well, they experience unique events in their college years that may have a negative or positive effect on their previous religious beliefs (Brant, Yun and Yasuno 2003). Cognitive dissonance theory states that when there is a discrepancy between two cognitions, individuals attempt to reduce the psychological tension (Dunford and Kunz 1973; Mahaffy 1996). One possible method of resolution is to change or add a new cognition (Dunford and Kunz 1973;
Mahaffy 1996). Another is to change one’s behavior that causes the dissonance (Mahaffy 1996).

Do students with religious beliefs that experience both the college lifestyle and the secular education acquire psychological discrepancy? Does this discrepancy result in cognitive dissonance for these students? As students seek to resolve this discrepancy, do their religious and spiritual identities become redefined as a way to alleviate these pressures? The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of college experience and higher educational attainment on students’ religious and spiritual identities. As newer trends in religious and spiritual identity are being played out in younger generations, college may have a role in these trends and this research seeks to explore the relationship between the two.

The findings of this research will extend our understandings of the effects that college education and experiences has on current trends in religious and spiritual beliefs and identity. The findings are important to the overall literature on educational attainment, students’ religious and spiritual identity and how students navigate between the two. This study helps fill in the gaps in current literature about the effects of higher education on religious and spiritual identity and the role redefinitions has in neutralizing any cognitive dissonance incurred during college experience.

**Literature Review**

Recent media attention has been brought to a trend in younger individuals identifying themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious.’ In a recent survey reported by both USA Today and CNN, 72% of Millennials identified themselves as ‘spiritual, but
not religious" (Blake 2010; Grossman 2010). The USA Today and CNN articles referred to data from a LifeWay Christian Resources Millennial Study in which 12,000 18-29 year olds were surveyed. According to the data, 65% "rarely or never pray with others", 65% "rarely or never attend worship services" and 67% don't "read the bible or sacred texts" (Lifeway Christian Research 2010). A recent pew poll, also mentioned in the USA Today article, reports similar findings that Millennials are less religiously affiliated than previous generations (Pew Research Center 2010). These recent findings are an example of trends where individuals are redefining religion and spirituality and defining themselves as spiritual, but not religious.

In an often cited study by Roof and reported by Marler and Hadaway, in 1989, 536 ‘baby boomer’s’ were interviewed from four states (Marler and Hadaway 2002; Roof 2000). Respondents were asked if they considered themselves religious and/or if they considered themselves spiritual. 86% of the respondents answered “yes” to considering themselves religious. 65% answered “yes” to considering themselves spiritual, but interestingly, 9 percent considered themselves “spiritual, but not religious” (Marler and Hadaway 2002). Roof called this unique group “highly active seekers” (Marler and Hadaway 2002; Roof 2000). Many more studies would explore this apparent schism between two concepts that were once interchangeable (Zinnbauer et al. 1997).

In a classic study from Zinnbauer et al. (1997), a total of 346 participants from 11 sample groups from selected churches. New Age groups, college campuses and mental health facilities were given questionnaires asking for their self-definitions of religiousness and spirituality as well as their self rated religiosity and spirituality. Zinnbauer and colleagues found that 19% of respondents identified themselves as
“spiritual, but not religious.” In addition, these respondents were more likely to engage in spiritual experiences with groups and less likely to believe in traditional Christian beliefs.

Marler and Haday (2002) compared their study with Roof’s 1989 study, Zinnbauer and colleagues 1997 study, a 1999 Gallup poll, a 2000 Spiritual health poll and Roof’s follow-up study in 2000. Results show findings that ‘baby busters,’ the generation born after the ‘baby boomer’ generation, are much less likely to identify as religious and spiritual and much more likely to say that they are neither religious nor spiritual than any of the other age groups. In addition, a significant finding is that the percentage of individuals that identify as “spiritual but not religious” increased steadily from the oldest age group to the youngest age group. Respondents from the oldest age cohort, born before 1927, indicated that 14.5% identified themselves as spiritual, but not religious whereas 22.6% of the ‘baby buster’ age cohort identified themselves as spiritual, but not religious. These studies show that there is a growing trend in younger individuals to identify themselves as spiritual but not religious.

This trend follows another underlying trend: changing definitions of religion and spirituality. Previously in research, spirituality and religion were interchangeable terms resulting in inconsistent definitions (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Newer research shows that these two terms are becoming concepts that are “distinct, but interdependent” (Marler and Hadaway 2004) or “separate, but not independent” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). For the lay person, religion is associated with “higher levels of authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, intrinsic religiousness, parental religious attendance, self-religiousness, and church attendance,” “belief in God or a higher power, and organizational or institutional beliefs
and practices such as church membership, church attendance, and commitment to the belief system of a church or organized religion” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). It is also a “strongly felt and followed belief system relating to a higher power,” and it is “associated with a sense of community” and “connected with others” (Schlehofer, Omoto and Adelman 2008). As spirituality is earning a distinction, it is bringing with it some of its previous religious elements (Hill et al. 2000). Spirituality is associated with “mystical experiences, New Age beliefs and practices” and “a belief in God or higher power, or having a relationship with God or a higher power” (Zinnbauer et al. 1997).

While these concepts have on certain levels diverged, they share many commonalities, many more than differences (Schlehofer, Omoto and Adelman 2008). Both religion and spirituality incorporate the search for the sacred (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Schlehofer, Omoto and Adelman 2008; Hill et al. 2000). In a conceptual framework proposed by Hill et al. (2000), the criterion given for spirituality was “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from the search for the sacred.” The criterion for religion includes the criterion for spirituality, but also includes either the search for the non-sacred to facilitate the search for the sacred and/or the means and methods of the search for the sacred.

The long held assumption that higher education has a negative effect on religious beliefs was shaken about a decade ago. A study by Lee (2002) unexpectedly found evidence that contradicted some of these assumptions. Lee found that while students experienced a change in their beliefs, more experienced a strengthening of their beliefs (about a third), instead of a weakening (13.7%). Religious activities were found to
decrease, but there was an increase of religious conviction. Following studies resulted in mixed results.

Brant, Yun and Yasuno surveyed 3,680 first year students from 50 universities and colleges around the nation with two longitudinal surveys in the fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001. Results indicated that while students do not become more religiously active, they are interested in integrating spirituality into their lives. Highly religious students were usually very spiritual and very spiritual students were usually religious, but to a lesser degree. Of the students that claimed no religious preference, 12% classified themselves as highly spiritual. College students were also less likely to partake in religious activities as much as they did in high school and their spiritual identity declined significantly over their first year. Conversely, students had an increase in integrating spirituality into their lives.

Rainer (2010) finds that higher education has a liberalizing effect on a significant minority of Americans. Seven hundred church attending Protestants from three different denominations (Episcopal, United Methodist, and Assemblies of God) were surveyed. Exposure to secular theories was found to have either a positive or negative effect on their “theological liberalism,” depending on the level of network closure. In line with the network closure argument, different religious traditions have different levels of network closure and thus are able to act as a buffer to any secularizing effects of higher education (MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem 2010). Network closure is the connectedness of an individual to a network that disseminates information and gives them a “means to develop trust and accountability” (MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem 2010). MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem (2010) found that religious denominations with
weaker network closure (such as mainline Protestants and the non-affiliated) and a higher educational attainment corresponded in a lessening of religious beliefs, such as seeing the Bible as a set of fables, instead of the word of God.

Not all researchers are in agreement. In the same study by MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem (2010), religious denominations with a greater network closure, such as evangelical Protestants and Black Protestants, and a higher educational attainment saw an increase in church attendance and prayer. Why such a difference between denominations? One possibility the authors suggest is that highly educated individuals in closed networks would be highly valued for their resources and status and so their behaviors would be more rewarded, thus acting as a buffer to the effects of secular beliefs. Hartley’s (2004) review of literature spanning fifteen years also provides contradicting conclusions; particularly that attending college does not impact the student’s religious practices. Compiling the research reveals that studies repeatedly contradict other studies on a multitude of dimensions. The effect of higher educational attainment on religiosity is still unclear and needs further research that better measure for both spirituality and religiosity (Maryl and Oeur 2009).

Uecker, Regenerus and Vaaler (2007) find that normative deviance was a possible explanation for some religious decline and that cognitive dissonance could occur if individuals were aware of the religious teachings. Cognitive dissonance theory states that when there is a discrepancy between two cognitions, individuals attempt to reduce the psychological tension (Dunford and Kunz 1973; Mahaffy 1996). This may occur when one’s actions conflict with some cognitive schema. While there is not much literature that explores the cognitive dissonance of students when their religious or
spiritual identity is in conflict with their college education and experiences, there is similar literature on how cognitive dissonance is resolved when their religious beliefs and homosexuality conflict and result in psychological tension.

Mahaffy (1996) looked at how lesbians resolved cognitive dissonance when the teachings of their religious beliefs conflicted with their sexuality. Those that were most likely to struggle with their religious beliefs and their sexual orientations were evangelical before they came out as a lesbian. For lesbians with internal conflict between their religious belief and their sexuality, they were more likely to alter their cognitions unless they became Christian during adulthood. If they became Christian during their adulthood, they were more likely to live with the tension. The later the respondent suspected her homosexuality, the more likely that she would change her beliefs or leave the church. One method to live with the tension was to realize that religion and spirituality were separate entities.

Methods

This study examines the effects of higher education on student’s levels of religiosity and spirituality, their religious and spiritual identity, and how students navigate in their identity in their new environment. The study has two aims. One aim of the study is to explore any correlations between higher educational attainment and college experience and defining one’s beliefs as spiritual, but not religious. The other aim is to explore whether any changes in their religious and spiritual identity is a result of cognitive dissonance. The second aim then uses cognitive dissonance theory as a theoretical framework.
Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: College education and experience will have an effect on students’ religiosity and/or spirituality for a small proportion of students.

Hypothesis 2: A small proportion of students will identify themselves as more spiritual than religious.

Hypothesis 3: Respondents that adjusted their religious and/or spiritual identity during college did so in part due to tension between their college education and experience and their religious beliefs.

Measurements

I plan on using online surveys for this research. Students will be referred to the online survey, either through their professors or by other students. A total of 500 surveys will be collected for analysis. The sample will consist of students in their third year of college or higher. First and second year student will not be directly measured for two reasons. First, students in their first or second year may not have as much time to adjust to either their surroundings or any religious beliefs that may have altered. Second, students may not have recognized any changes that may have occurred in their religious belief or spiritual identity. Seeking only third and fourth year students and higher will help reduce any confounding results from first or second year students. Instead, 1st and 2nd year student responses will be used as a control group. Respondents will be clumped into three groups: underclassmen (1st – 2nd year students), upperclassmen (3rd and 4th year students) and graduates (5th year and beyond students).
Demographics. The measure on race is modeled from the U.S. Census 2010 race question, with the exception that the Asian category is not broken down any further. The measure for the student’s year of college is broken down into undergraduate or graduate. The age question is a fill-in because students are predominantly only a few years apart and so this would allow for more accurate responses from student. The measurement for students’ sex will have the options male or female.

Dependent variables. Religious preference measures were drawn from the GSS questions on religious preference. GSS is a national survey conducted every two or three years in the United States and it contains measures for religiosity and educational attainment. Respondents are asked their religious preference, with the options of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None or other. There is a follow-up question for those that respond with Protestant as their religious preference, which asks if there denomination is Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal Church, Non-denominational or other. Self-rated measures for religiousness and spirituality are separated into two questions to better measure students’ levels of both religiosity and spirituality. Respondents will be asked how religious they consider themselves to be and how spiritual they consider themselves to be. A 4-point Likert scale will be used ranging from ‘very spiritual’ to ‘not spiritual at all.’ Measures for religious behavior include religious attendance, prayer/meditation and reading religious texts. These measures are broken down into Likert type scale options. The question asking respondents’ frequency of religious readings uses a 6-point Likert scale ranging from ‘a few times a day’ to ‘never.’ The question asking respondents’ frequency of religious attendance uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘a few times a week’ to ‘never.’ The question asking respondents’
frequency of prayer or meditation uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'a few times a day' to 'never.' Changes in these religious behaviors since college began are measured as either as increase, decrease or no change. A measure for respondents' level of connection to their religious community is included in a 4-point type Likert scale ranging from 'very connected' to 'not connected at all.' Closed network argument states that closed networks act to buffer any secularizing or corrosive effects of educational attainment (MacFarland, Wright and Weakliem 2010). Combining the measurement for connectedness in their religious community and respondents religious preference can then tap their involvement in a closed network. To measure for cognitive dissonance, two measurements on respondents tension between their religious/spiritual beliefs and educational attainment are included, as well as measurements on their adjustments to their religious beliefs due to educational attainment. The questions ask whether the respondents have experienced any tension between their religious or spiritual beliefs and their college experience or course materials, measured through yes/no responses. The cognitive dissonance measures on tension and adjustment in addition to the measures of current religiosity and spirituality, the measures of change in religious behaviors and the measures on precollege religiosity and spirituality can then infer whether resolving cognitive dissonance played a role in changes in religious and/or spirituality identity.

*Independent variables.* Four measures of campus involvement were included. Respondents are asked if they are involved in a student organization or club, and if they are involved in a fraternity or sorority. Both student organizations or clubs and Greek organization were measured dichotomously as either a yes/no involvement. Follow-up questions to students' involvement in student organizations or clubs and Greek
organizations ask if the organizations are religiously affiliated. Respondents are asked how frequently they attend college parties and how frequently they volunteer in their community. A follow-up question for students’ involvement in community volunteering asks if the volunteer organization is religiously affiliated. Frequency of both college partying and community volunteering through the school were measured in a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from daily (college parties) or ‘a few times a week’ (volunteering) to ‘never’ (both).

Control variables. Control variables were included to account for any intervening influences of high levels of sexual activity, drug use or alcohol use. Respondents are asked how frequently they use illicit drugs and how frequently they drink heavily. Measures of drug use and alcohol use were included in a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from ‘daily’ to ‘never.’ The question for respondents’ sexual activity asks how many sexual partners they have had outside of a committed monogamous relationship. Sexual activity outside of a committed monogamous relationship is measured by the number of partners within a 12-month period. The question was left open ended. Cohabitation has also shown to have a negative effect on religiosity (Uecker, Regenerus and Vaaler 2007), so a measurement for the respondents living arrangement was included. The respondent was asked what their housing situation is, with response options of ‘living with family’, ‘living on-campus,’ ‘live in an off-campus affiliated apartment, not with partner’, ‘live in a non-affiliated apartment/house, not with a partner’, and ‘cohabit with a partner.’
References


LifeWay Christian Research. 2010. “American Millennials are Spiritually Diverse” Available at
http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=LifeWay-Research-finds-American-millennials-are-spiritually-diverse


