



The Limits of Secularization through Education

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Abstract

Education-inspired decline of religious thought and practice among students has long been conceived as a mechanism of secularization. How education correlates with religious outcomes, and vice versa, have been of interest both in academia and in the public, primarily because of the rise of the so-called “New Atheist” movement that seeks dominion within the intellectual sphere, the rise of the number of individuals who do not identify with a religion, and the guiding secular ethos of Western nations. Modern social research has exposed important limitations and caveats to the secularization paradigm that call into question to what extent, or even if, religious decline occurs during post-secondary schooling. This article presents the inadequacies and unsubstantiated assumptions of the secularization hypothesis through discussion of key topics of contention, namely: (1) propensities of religious to enroll and excel in school; (2) demographic changes in educational trajectories of religious and non-religious; (3) decline of religious service attendance among post-secondary students; (4) the dissolution of religious plausibility structures; (5) the “liberalization” of student religious opinion; and (6) the nature and process of religious disaffiliation during schooling. Although the consensus of this review is that education is generally not atrophic to religious orientation, exceptions in favor of the secularization hypothesis will also be presented.

Keywords: education, religion, secularization, apostasy, college, university

Introduction

The hypothesis that education has a secularizing influence on student religiosity, or that religious adherents are generally averse to educational pursuits, is a vestige of the emergence of the social sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early social theorists such as Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Max Weber (1864-1920), and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) predicted the eventual decline of religion through the prevalence of education and the

triumph of the intellect (Schwadel). As Schwadel notes, “Since the beginning of modern social thought there has been an almost unquestioned belief that education and other aspects of modernity are detrimental to religion” (161). Consequently, Gerhard Lenski adds, the study of religion was “from its inception . . . committed to the positivist view that religion in the modern world is merely a survival from man’s primitive past, and doomed to disappear in an era of science and general enlightenment” (quoted in Iannaccone: 1468). The university, the institution responsible for generating and transmitting information, has been conceived as a vehicle of secularization (Feldman and Newcomb; Hadaway and Roof). Higher education has been variably characterized by social thinkers as “relatively free of religion” (Wilson: 9), a “breeding ground for apostasy” (Caplovitz and Sherrow: 109), and possessing a “pervasively secular ethos” (Carpenter: 265).

Support for the idea of education-inspired religious decline has lingered within the social sciences despite waning empirical support. “Most of the voluminous literature on religion and higher education,” Mayrl and Oeur explain, “has been normative or theoretical in character, filled with grand claims noticeably lacking in empirical justification. However, in recent years social scientists have begun to re-examine the role of religion in higher education, and their efforts have begun to yield data that have challenged some longstanding assumptions and raised important new questions” (260). The purpose of this article is to illustrate the inadequacies and unsubstantiated assumptions of the secularization hypothesis through discussion of topics of contention related to education-religion outcomes. These are, namely: (1) Effects of religiosity on school enrollment and academic performance; (2) changes in religion-education correlation trends among adherents and non-adherents in the twentieth century; (3) the commonly observed decline of rate of religious service attendance among young adults; (4) whether introduction of religious young adults into the diverse campus culture encourages religious decline and disaffiliation; (5) what students believe as compared to the general public, and whether these beliefs signify secularization of religious thought; and (6) whether religious disaffiliation in college is primarily caused by the educational experience. Although this article generally concludes that most forms of religious expression are not associated with aversions to education and that education does not lead to precipitous declines in religious expression, exceptions to this conclusion will also be illustrated.

It is notable that although modern social research has since offered many signposts of caution discouraging the promulgation of sweeping secularization narratives, these have been nonetheless endorsed through the popular writings of non-religious personalities. “Is there any evidence,” wrote Oxford biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins in his 2006 *New York Times* best-seller, *The God Delusion*, “that . . . atheists are likely to be drawn from among the better educated and more intelligent?” (129). In what has now become an oft-quoted passage of his book on blogs and other online venues, Dawkins describes a meta-analysis written by Paul Bell and published in 2002 in the non-academic *Mensa Magazine*. Dawkins summarizes Bell’s findings: “Of 43 studies carried out since 1927 on the relationship between religious belief and one’s intelligence and/or educational level, all but four found an inverse connection. That is, the higher one’s intelligence or education level, the less one is likely to be religious or hold ‘beliefs’ of any kind” (129). The relevance of this article is indebted not only to social scientists interested in the controversies of the secularization paradigm but also

as a disputation of at least some of the more extravagant claims offered as evidence of education-inspired religious decline.

There has been much debate among social scientists not only concerning the process of secularization, but also concerning a resolute definition of “secularization,” whether and how secularization occurs, or whether secularization as a social theory is coherent (cf. Chaves; Gorski and Altinordu; Stark 1999; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Casanova; Dobbelaere 1981; 1999; Hadden; Yamane; Shiner; Bruce 2002; 2011). It is therefore necessary to define secularization as the process of drift and divorce of an individual from religious affiliation, thought, and practice. This is commonly measured in the social sciences through survey questions determining religious identity or through proxy variables such as rate of church attendance. This review is hence focused on the effects of education on the religious orientation of the person, and vice versa. Discussion at the denominational scale will only occur if it assists in discussion of effects of education at the individual scale. Broader elements of the secularization paradigm, such as the influence of education on the dissolution of ecclesiastical authority within the public sphere or the public standing on religious roles and institutions, will not be discussed. When referring to adult education, college, university, post-secondary education, and higher education are used interchangeably for simplicity, and it is intended by these terms to encompass all academic schooling received after the completion of secondary studies such as high school. Western education is of singular focus because the vast majority of studies on religion-education outcomes are conducted with Western, and typically American, participants. Similarly to secularization, creating a resolute definition of religion is problematic. To avoid befuddling discussion for the sake of nuanced definitions, by religion I refer plainly to the sum of religious identity, thought, and practice, as commonly understood and exemplified in the West, predominantly through the three Abrahamic religions and, in particular, Christianity.

Propensities of Religious Adherents to Enroll and Excel in School

Topic Summary

Whether religious affiliates are less likely to pursue education or are less likely to excel in school is a complicated subject in the sociology of religion. On one hand, participation in congregational religious expression develops critical social skills that enables participants to function well in other public engagements, including the classroom. Religion also provides members with an identity, a sense of belonging, and positive values, all of which contribute beneficially to multiple measures of psycho-social well-being as well as educational performance. On the other hand, in countries such as the United States we have witnessed a conservative backlash against the so-called corrupting influence of secular education, including attacks against particular classroom subjects such as evolution. Some fundamentalist groups choose to insulate their children from secularizing influences through privatized religious colleges. Evaluating the influence of religion on educational trajectories hence requires a nuanced appreciation of both the positive and negative drivers of religious practice on educational outcomes.

Religiosity and Educational Outcomes among Children

Although this review is concerned with the educational trajectories of religious adults, review of religion-education trajectories among children has been included for completeness and because childhood trends inform adult patterns of behavior. Youth attending primary and secondary schooling are exemplified in social literature by potent positive correlations between religiosity and education. That is, as educational performance increases, children are more likely to have a religious orientation or to routinely attend religious services, and vice versa. This is true regardless of attendance at public schools (Regnerus 2000) or private schools (Neal), as well as regardless of ethnicity, e.g., African-Americans (Freeman; Brown and Gary; Jeynes 2002) and Latinos (Sikkink and Hernandez; Jeynes 2002). This is also true among the economically disadvantaged, of whom children from poor families present with particularly positive correlations between religious participation and academic outcomes, presumably due to a lack of other social resources within these communities (Regnerus 2008; Regnerus and Elder).

Religiosity is also positively correlated with specific behaviors fortuitous for academic success. A high rate of religious involvement among children is associated with more time spent studying, better student-teacher relationships, developing a positive study-work ethic, and achieving higher grades (McKune and Hoffmann; Muller and Ellison; Regnerus and Elder; Jeynes 2003). Religious practice among parents also contributes to academic performance among children as religious parents are more involved in the educational progress of their children (Wilcox; Muller and Ellison). Youth religiosity is also positively correlated with transition into post-secondary studies as these youth are more likely to complete high school and enroll in university (Erickson and Phillips). It has also been observed that youth mentored by community religious leaders are particularly likely to enroll in university (Erickson and Phillips). That high measures of religious thought and practice are associated with high measures of school performance is also supported by several meta-analyses (Jeynes 2002; 2012; 2013; Johnson, Tompkins and Webb).

Religiosity and Educational Outcomes among Adults

Research on adult education-religion relationships generally suggest positive effects of most forms of religious expression on academic outcomes. Mooney found that regular religious service attendance and self-reports of adherence to religious traditions were both positively correlated with increased number of hours studying, increased participation in extra-curricular activities, decreased time spent partying, greater satisfaction with their post-secondary experience, and greater grade point averages (GPAs). A survey conducted in 2005 of approximately one hundred thousand students at 236 colleges and universities across the United States revealed that the number of students who believe in God is similar to the percentage of the general U.S. population (UCLA). Student religious practice was found in this and other studies to be positively associated with greater satisfaction with their campus social life, greater satisfaction with their college experience, and higher GPAs (UCLA; Kuh and Gonyea). Studies of college students have also shown positive correlations between student spirituality as well as other measures of religiosity with academic performance (Walker and Dixon; Zern). Being a member of an ethnic minority and participating in an ethnic church is positively correlated with educational outcomes (Bankston). Positive

associations between religiosity and educational measures has also been observed using a variety of methodological approaches (Gruber; Sawkins, Seaman and Williams; Branas-Garza and Neuman; Brown and Taylor).

Other studies on education-religiosity outcomes among adults have not reached favorable conclusions. For example, Hungerman, analyzing the effects of compulsory schooling laws in Canada on religious participation, concluded that each additional year of schooling correlated with a four percent drop in the likelihood that an individual will self-identify as religious in later life. Surveys of women from 97 countries reveal negative associations between female educational attainment and adherence to major local religions (Norton and Tomal). Evidence also suggests that particular styles of religious expression may have various influences on educational outcomes. For example, among fundamentalist expressions of Christianity, and among Christians who profess inerrancy of religious sacred texts, adherents are associated with lower educational accomplishments (Sherkat 2007). As compared to national averages, conservative Protestants have below average educational attainment rates, Jews have above average rates, and Catholics and mainline Protestants are average (Lehrer; Darnell and Sherkat). Other religious traditions, such as Mormonism, are not associated with any aversion to education (Merrill, Lyon and Jensen). It has been curiously observed in one study that in Christian denominations with high average educational attainment among its members, average rate of church attendance is low, whereas in denominations with low average educational attainment, average attendance is high. However, within each denomination, individuals who are more educated are also more likely to participate in religious services often. This distinction suggests confounding influences at play on the effects of educational achievement on rates of church attendance (Sacerdote and Glaeser).

Generally, support for the idea of education-inspired secularization has waned in favor of nuanced appreciation of recent data and cautious support for a charitable opinion on the status of religious thought and expression on campus (Mayrl and Oeur). Parodying the sentiments of early social thinkers, some researchers now regard the university as “a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching” (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield: 295) and that “organized religion is alive and well” in higher education (Jachik: A30). Other researchers have opined that “religion is not the province of the poor and uninformed” and that “[most] rates of religious belief and religious activity . . . increase with education” (Iannaccone: 1470).

Positive Drivers of Educational Outcomes

Why would religiosity contribute to educational outcomes? One cause is the generation of social capital. Analogous to the idea of physical and human capital (tools and training that enhance productivity), Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995: 67). Social networks such as family bonds, friendships, work associates, religious communities, and political organizations, provide individuals with social resources such as information, assistance, and moral support. These resources allow members of social networks to overcome obstacles and achieve goals. In addition to support, members of a community are

indoctrinated with the values, norms, and standards of behavior imbued within the community. In most examples, prosociality and other socially positive tendencies are inculcated whilst undesirable and self-destructive behaviors are mitigated (Coleman). A plethora of studies have concluded that social capital accrues positive outcomes in measures such as mental and physical health, education, economic prosperity, and child welfare, and that social capital also attenuate negative outcomes in measures such as binge drinking, delinquency, and quitting school (Putnam 2000).

Religious participation is another source of social capital (McKune and Hoffmann; Muller and Ellison; Glanville, Sikkink and Hernadez; Sikkink and Hernandez). Religion, among other things, provides adherents with support networks, a means of transmitting positive attitudes, and a venue to bridge youth with older members of the community who may serve as mentors and role models (Taylor and Chatters; Gardner; Ellison and George). As Regnerus explains, “religion as traditionally practiced performs several social functions: it reinforces collectively-held values and beliefs, it provides social networks to individuals, it encourages caring, it has enduring faith in the possibility of individual transformation, it galvanizes and organizes moral indignation, and its practitioners are committed to the next generation. The list goes on . . .” (2008: 5). Religion has hence been characterized as “a major source of social cohesion” (McIntosh and Alston: 876). Additionally, religion “promotes traditional values, facilitates interaction, breeds self-confidence, and establishes social bonds that encourage academic competence, emotional health and intelligent decision-making” (Regnerus 2008: 10).

The influence of religion on academic outcomes in low-income neighborhoods is particularly positive and is a major determinant of academic success within these communities because religious social networks are often the only major source of social capital (Regnerus 2008; Regnerus and Elder). Participating in a religious community encourages normative behaviors and guides youth towards desirable social end-states, and for this reason, religious practice has been linked with higher measures of academic success as well as many other socially desirable behaviors (Smith 2003a; Glanville et al.; Bankston). Meta-analysis of 650 studies have concluded that religious thought and practice contribute beneficially to multiple behavioral and health-related outcomes concerning hypertension, mortality, depression, suicide, promiscuity, alcohol use, drug use, delinquency, well-being, sense of purpose, and self-esteem (Johnson et al.). This meta-analysis similarly-concluded, based on an additional 19 studies on religion-education correlations (some of these studies observed children), that educational outcomes are also positively correlated with religiosity (Johnson et al.).

Other explanations for positive religion-education trends have been suggested in literature reviews meriting mention (cf. Jeynes 2013). Religious work ethic, conceptualized by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is a source of motivation for success that may encourage Protestant (and perhaps Catholic) students to work harder and achieve better grades (Mentzer; Gerhards; Giorgi and Marsh; Mudrack). Religious involvement may deter individuals from destructive behaviors detrimental to academic performance. These may include decreased propensities for drug and alcohol abuse as well as delinquency (Johnson et al. 2002). Religiously committed youth are also less likely to become pregnant while they are teenagers (Beck, Cole, and Hammond; Jeynes 2003; Holman and Harding).

Smith (2003b) has suggested that religiosity contributes to positive psycho-social outcomes through at least nine concomitantly operating factors: (1) moral directives; (2) spiritual experiences; (3) role models; (4) community and leadership skills; (5) coping skills; (6) cultural capital; (7) social capital; (8) network closure; and (9) extra-community links. These factors likely work in synergy to promote high academic outcomes among religious students.

Negative Drivers of Educational Outcomes

The beneficial effects of accumulating social capital within religious groups could be counter-weighted by excessive social restriction within a close-knit group. Some religious conservatives have displayed aversions to external sources of knowledge and view familiar information with unduly trust (Hood, Hill and Williamson). As Welch and colleagues explain, “past research has often characterized some conservative and fundamentalist Protestant denominations as having surrounded members with resistant sub-cultural barriers that attempt to insulate them from the corrupting influences of the secular society” (2007: 26). Welch et al. (2004) suggest that distrust of others within conservative groups may arise because of excessive bonding social capital – inter-group linking – and inadequate bridging social capital – intra-group linking. This imbalance between bonding and bridging social capital suggests that “although bonding capital may help to integrate members within such [conservative religious] groups, it may also simultaneously serve to engender suspicion about non-members” (Welch, Sikkink, and Loveland: 27). So-called mainline religious groups, in contrast, have been observed to formulate both bonding capital between themselves as well as bridging capital within the public, e.g., in the form of civic engagement (Smidt; Wuthnow; Uslaner).

Tightly bound social networks with few bridging connections to external groups promote distrust and the construction of worldviews replete with others and outsiders (Simpson; Welch, Sikkink, and Loveland; Darnell and Sherkat). Such distrust has bred a culture of aversion to public education. As Darnell and Sherkat observe, “For many conservative Protestants, education serves to undermine both secular and divine authority by promoting ‘humanism’ and denigrating faith. Consequently, organized movements have sought to resacralize public education by controlling curricula and textbook selection, reinstating mandatory or officially-sanctioned voluntary prayer, or providing alternatives through home schooling or fundamentalist schools” (307-8). Antagonism to public education is frequently found in the writings and speeches of conservative Christian leaders, who encourage young members of the community to avoid public education and for parents to insulate their children from its corrupting influence (Darnell and Sherkat).

Particular religious opinions may also be antithetical to educational progress. For example, adherence to biblical literalism, the belief in the scriptural inerrancy of the Bible as written word-for-word inspired by God for literal interpretation, is strongly associated with lower educational accomplishments (Stroope). If one believes that the truth is found in sacred texts, one would be inclined to eschew public education because it teaches scientific or historical lies at odds with sacred teachings. As Darnell and Sherkat argue further:

These distinctive religious beliefs could influence which educational options adherents deem desirable or plausible. Individuals who believe that the Bible is the inerrant source of truth may be ambivalent about secular studies, if not

hostile toward them. Thus, fundamentalist students might not “make the grades,” they may curb their educational aspirations, and may choose secondary curricula that limit opportunities for higher education. When kin, peers, and other associates are beholden to these cultural convictions, these can produce social pressures militating against secondary or post-secondary educational pursuits. Fundamentalist parents and denominations may not encourage children to excel in secular studies, may discourage educational aspirations, and might direct children away from college preparatory curricula (309).

This interpretation is supported by surveys of young adults revealing that conservative Protestants and biblical literalists have precipitously lower educational ambitions and are less likely to have taken college-preparatory courses (Darnell and Sherkat). Literalist beliefs have also been found to be associated with less verbal ability, although high rates of religious participation attenuates the effect (Sherkat 2010).

Demographic Changes in Educational Trends over Time

Topic Summary

One subject of contention is the question of potential changes in trends in the educational accomplishments of religious and non-religious within past decades. Evidence suggests that religious adherents have made impressive gains in educational outcomes since the mid-twentieth century. Although the cause remains unknown, speculative answers point to Western cultural revolutions sparking the entrance of women and minorities in universities and high-skills work. This development could explain why early social investigations arrived at uncharitable conclusions on religion-education relationships in the past and presents a signpost of caution to those vying to use what is now evidently expired data to support a secularizing effect of education.

Progress in Educational Accomplishments among Religious Adherents since Mid-Twentieth Century

A review of data relative to educational trajectories of religious and non-religious over the previous century suggests that major changes have taken place in the demographics of the educated population. Social scientists Rebekah Massengill and Carol MacGregor, using U.S. General Social Survey data from 1972 to 2008, compared educational attainment trends from the mid-twentieth century onwards for two religious and two non-religious groups, namely: (1) Persistent affiliates – those who were raised in a religious household and remained religious throughout adulthood; (2) Persistent “nones” – those who were *not* raised in a religious household and do not possess a religious affiliation in adulthood; (3) Adult affiliates – those who were *not* raised in a religious household but became religious during adulthood; (4) Adult disaffiliates – those who were raised in a religious household but disaffiliated from religion during adulthood. A “none” is a shorthand reference to individuals who select “none” on surveys of religious affiliation. These groups were studied in three birth periods: (a) pre-1940; (b) between 1940 and 1960; and (c) post-1960.

In the pre-1940 birth group, 31.6 percent of adult disaffiliates and 23.4 percent of persistent “nones” had graduated from college, a rate considerably higher than the respective 11.1 percent and 14.2 percent of adult affiliates and persistent affiliates who acquired post-

secondary education (Table 1). But of those born between 1940 and 1960, the educational attainment rate of the two lagging religious groups *doubled* from their pre-1940 values! The average educational attainment of the non-religious groups rose modestly. Of those born after 1960, the educational attainment rates of adult affiliates and persistent affiliates further rose to 27.5 percent and 31.7 percent, respectively. During this time period, the percentage of persistent “nones” who had graduated from college *decreased* by eight percentage points to 23.4 percent, and adult disaffiliates *decreased* by five points to 33.7 percent. Remarkably, while both adult affiliates and persistent affiliates made steady educational gains throughout the mid-twentieth century, religious “nones” and adult disaffiliates lost most or all of their educational gains from the previous birth periods, resulting in negligible net change in educational outcomes since the pre-1940 birth range (Massengill and MacGregor).

Table 1: Percentage of Persistent “Nones,” Adult Disaffiliates, Persistent Affiliates, and Adult Affiliates Who have Earned a Bachelor’s Degree, by Birth Period

Group*	Pre-1940 (%)	1940-1960 (%)	Post-1960 (%)	Net Change
Persistent “nones”	23.4	31.6	23.4	+0.0
Adult disaffiliates	31.6	38.3	33.7	+2.1
Persistent affiliates	14.2	27.8	31.7	+17.5
Adult affiliates	11.1	21.8	27.5	+16.4

*Data adapted from Massengill and MacGregor.

Presently, persistent “nones” are the least educated of the four subgroups, and persistent affiliates are trailing adult disaffiliates by a mere two percent difference. That religious “nones” presently lag in educational outcomes is supported by other studies that demonstrate that individuals who identify as mainline Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish are more likely to complete a four-year college degree than individuals who were not raised within a religious tradition and do not presently identify with a religion (Massengill). Interestingly, it is also true that individuals who *did not* attend college presently display the greatest measures of religious decline, and are the most likely to disaffiliate from religion (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler).

Speculative Causes of the Demographic Shift

Why did religious groups make such impressive educational gains in recent decades? Although no definitive answer exists, there are several suggestions. This shift may have occurred because of reporting differences in how religious “nones” self-identify. As Massengill and MacGregor suggested, such religious “nones” would have been individuals, whom a generation ago, “would have been loosely attached to religious institutions due to social pressures or other demands of conventionality; today, being ‘nothing in particular’ may well signify the absence of a decision to engage with religious institutions” (199). If religious “nones,” a group associated with low education measures, habitually associated with religious groups decades ago, this would have contaminated the educational attainment data for affiliate groups, resulting in artificially low numbers for affiliate groups in earlier birth periods.

Economic pressures in recent decades have placed great impetus upon the working-age population for pursuing post-secondary education (Lazerson). In 1966, more than 80 percent of college students listed “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an educational goal. By 1996, the percentage dropped to 47 percent, whereas the prevalence of the goal of “being very well-off financially” nearly doubled (Astin). Anecdotally, then Harvard law professor Elizabeth Warren candidly remarked that although the majority of Americans once believed that one can obtain middle-class status with a high school diploma and a positive work ethic, in the present day, “twice as many people in America believe that the moon landings were faked (and filmed in California) than there are people who believe that you can make it into the middle class in America without a college diploma.” Regardless of religious affiliation, all adults need and seek financial security, and skills acquired through college improve job prospects. Economic pressure may have incentivized lagging affiliate groups to seek university education whereas such pressure was not significantly present in earlier decades.

It is also plausible that the rise of educational attainment rates among religious affiliates occurred due to the entrance of women and minorities into the high-skills job market and due to the reprieve of sexism and racism against women and minorities via the successes of the civil rights and women’s rights movements. It is well documented that Blacks (Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters; Taylor, Chatters, and Jackson; Levin, Taylor, and Chatters; Johnson, Matre, and Armbrecht) and women (Miller and Stark; Walter and Davie; Levin and Taylor; Francis and Wilcox) are more religious than Whites and men. Although the reason why this is so remains speculative, it is unlikely to be due to socioeconomic status as religious participation has been found to be either positively associated with or have no net correlate with income or other measures of economic success (Stark 1972; Mueller and Johnson; Nelsen and Nelsen; Alston and McIntosh; Schwadel, McCarthy, and Nelsen; Wilcox, Cherlin, Uecker, and Messel). The unprecedented enrollment of Black and female students into post-secondary institutions would have consequently increased the percentage of the educated population who self-identify as religious. Rises in educational attainment among affiliate groups in recent decades could also be caused by an equilibrating representation of women and minorities in higher education.

A Note on Over-Reliance on Expired Data

This demographic shift is important to acknowledge because contamination of data reviews of religion-education relationships with expired data may lead to erroneous conclusions. Case in point, the meta-analysis published by Johnson and colleagues (2002) that concluded that education was instead positively associated with religious measures among adults and children relied on studies only as old as 1983. A second meta-analysis concluding positive effects among Black and Hispanic children relied on 15 studies, of which all but one were published in 1985 or more recently (Jeynes 2002). In contrast, the amateur meta-analysis published by Bell in *Mensa Magazine*, popularized in Dawkins suggesting negative trends between religiosity and education, relied on data as old as 1927, a difference from the aforementioned studies of 56 and 58 years, respectively. This difference signifies the passing of approximately two generations. It is likely that the inconsistency arose because

the amateur meta-analysis conducted by Bell failed to account for inter-generational cohort effects such as those discovered by Massengill and Macgregor.

The Decline of Rate of Church Attendance

Topic Summary

It has been well documented that post-secondary students have lower rates of church attendance as compared to the general population. But does this signify genuine religious decline towards eventual secularization? Data suggests that although students do not attend church as often as before they entered post-secondary studies, they nonetheless retain a sense of attachment to their religious beliefs and very few report disaffiliation from religion. Evidence further suggests that rising educational accomplishments attenuates the rate of religious decline. Most concerning to the secularization paradigm, young adults *in general* show declines in church attendance at rates comparable to decline among students, suggesting that attendance decline is occurring for reasons other than the educational experience. Social theorists have speculated that the cause of decline, common to students and non-students, is related to the experience of emerging adulthood. Most adults report greater measures of religious participation in later life-course, suggesting that church decline among most students is temporary.

Student Decline in Rate of Church Attendance

Students display precipitous declines in rates of church attendance during post-secondary studies. For example, surveys show that 81 percent of incoming freshmen students frequently or occasionally attend religious services (HERI). By the end of their first year, only 57 percent of students report similarly (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno). Uecker and colleagues observed that approximately two-thirds of college students reduce their rate of attendance while attending college. A longitudinal study of over 3000 senior students at 118 colleges also observed that senior students report less church attendance than at the beginning of their freshman year (Saenz and Barrena).

As religious service attendance is one of the most common measures of commitment to religion, declines in service attendance could be interpreted as evidence of the secularizing effect of education. Two lines of evidence dispute this interpretation, presented below.

First Argument: Attendance Decline is also Observed among non-College Educated

It has been observed for some time that the majority of young adults *in general* report declines in religious service attendance, not only young adults in post-secondary studies (Hardie, Pearce, and Denton; Willits and Crider; Dillon; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens). Additionally, it appears that educational attainment may attenuate, not enhance, the rate of decline of religious measures. Data reported by Uecker and colleagues are enlightening. Measuring rate of decline in religious service attendance, rate of decline in importance of religion to the student, and rate of disaffiliation from religion, the authors instead found that young adults who *did not* attend higher education were found to be the *most likely* to report the greatest decline in religious measures. For example, among those who did not attend college, decline in measure of religious service attendance was estimated at 76.2 percent, a considerably higher rate than the 59.2 percent rate of decline among those earning a

bachelor’s degree (Table 2). Intermediate educational attainment, such as enrollment in two year-programs, or those who attended college but earned no degree, generally reported intermediate rates of decline for these religious measures. These results suggest that rather than encouraging religious decline, rising educational accomplishments may instead attenuate decline.

As Schwadel suggests, that education may instead slow the rate of religious decline is reasonable to observe because education “impart[s] vital civic skills that are essential prerequisites for many forms of organizational participation, including some forms of religious participation” (166). If religious decline occurs across the spectrum of young adults, and education attenuates decline, then one must logically conclude that religious decline among college students is occurring for reasons *other than* education.

Table 2: Percentage of Young Adults Who Experience Religious Decline, by Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment*	Decline in Religious Service Attendance (%)	Decline in Importance of Religion (%)	Disaffiliated from Religion (%)
Did not attend college	76.2	23.7	20.3
Attended college but earned no degree	71.5	16.3	14.6
Enrolled in two-year program	64.9	22.2	19.0
Enrolled in four-year program	64.2	18.2	13.6
Earned an associate’s degree	60.3	15.1	14.4
Earned at least a bachelor’s degree	59.2	15.0	15.0

*Data adapted from Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler.

But what of educated professionals? An example used to argue for a secularizing effect of education is the low religiosity of scientists (cf. Dawkins). It has been well documented that the majority of American scientists doubt or do not believe in the existence of God (Larson and Witham). Of a recent estimate, according to a 2009 Pew Research Center poll, while 95 percent of the American general public believe in God or a universal spirit or higher power, only 51 percent of scientists believe similarly (Pew). That scientists are less religious than the general public is so well recognized that some social researchers interested in studying atheists and other religious “nones” have used scientists as survey participants for ease and economy of research (cf. Ecklund, Park, and Veliz). If scientists, who have spent a great amount of time in university, first as a student and in some cases as an instructor, are disproportionately non-religious, does this not prove that education secularizes?

Research conducted by Ecklund and Scheitle on the religious trajectories of scientists suggests otherwise. Rather than observe a secularization effect, the authors instead observed that most religious individuals who enter scientific careers continue to remain religious throughout their schooling and research. And among non-religious scientists, the majority reported that these individuals were raised in homes where religion was not an important

part of daily life or were not brought up in a religion at all. Ecklund and Scheitle presented some of their findings through example:

Consider two sociologists who are male, in the 18 to 35 range, born in the United States, have no children, and are currently married. One was raised some form of Protestant and religion was “very important” while growing up. The other was raised as a religious “none” and religion was “not at all important” while growing up. The former has a predicted probability of 14 percent for saying that he does not believe in God. This compares to a 54 percent chance of the latter saying he does not believe (302).

It appears from the findings of Ecklund and Scheitle that religious disaffiliation during scientific training and subsequent career is not the principle cause for the under-representation of religious individuals among scientists. As the authors concluded, at least “part of the difference in religiosity between scientists and the general population is likely due simply to religious upbringing rather than scientific training or institutional pressures to be irreligious” (302) and that “the idea that scientists simply drop their religious identities upon professional training . . . is not strongly supported by these data” (303).

More scientists are non-religious likely because more non-religious individuals pursue careers in science. More scientists are non-religious because there may exist modes of bias that subtly discriminate against religious individuals who seek to enter and advance scientific careers, many forms of which have parallels already accepted by social researchers accounting for the under-representation of women among the ranks of scientists (Bertrand). It is notable that other lines of professional work are incongruent with the interpretation that education leading to professional careers precipitates religious decline. For example, American physicians, another group of educated professionals, self-identify as religious at a rate on par or greater than the American general public (Curlin et al.). It is similarly likely that many doctors identify as religious simply because many religious individuals choose to pursue medicine and not due to conversion experiences during training.

Second Argument: Incongruence between Church Decline and other Religious Measures

The second line of evidence conflicting with the interpretation that decline in religious service attendance during college signifies secularization is the seemingly incongruent data between religious thought and religious practice as reported by students. One would expect that decline or increase in rate of religious service attendance would rise and fall correspondingly with stated importance of religion. This is not the case. Although the majority of students who earned a bachelor’s degree reported declines in service attendance (59.2%), only a small minority reported declines in stated importance of religion (15.0%) and a likely overlapping number of students also reported complete disaffiliation from religion (15.0%) (Uecker et al.). This discrepancy between religious participation and other religious measures is present among all college students surveyed as well as among college dropouts and non-attendees (Table 2). This discrepancy has also been reported in other studies: Arnett and Jensen reported that although half of students stated that it was “not at all important” to attend religious services, only 18 percent of students stated that that religion was “not at all important” to them. Incongruence between measures of religious practice and attitudes towards religion becomes even more striking when observations of *increases* in positive

attitudes towards religion are considered. Lee observed that although a minority of college students (13.7%) reported that their religious convictions weakened during their college years, three times as many students (37.9%) reported that their personal convictions grew stronger during their college experience! These findings are supported by Lefkowitz, who observed a net decrease in religious service attendance during the college experience with a concomitant net increase in positive attitudes towards religion.

Why do most young adults reduce church attendance? And why would students on average report attendance declines with net positive changes in religious attitudes? Evidence suggests that rates of religious practice (e.g., church attendance) is not constant throughout the life-course but fluctuates with temporary positive and negative changes influenced by life events. These may include, among other events, marriage, child-rearing, divorce, departure from home, death of spouse, and decline of health (Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy and Waite; Sherkat 1998; Bahr).

Changes in religious practice are further influenced by underlying factors such as quality of religious upbringing and personality types (McCullough et al.). For example, it is well known that the experience of parenthood encourages religious participation among newfound parents (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill; Ploch and Hastings; Sandomirsky and Wilson; Wilson and Sandomirsky; Ingersoll-Dayton et al.; Roozen, McKinney, and Thompson). Most religions are “deeply entwined with values and attitudes that encourage marriage and parenthood” and “offer institutionalized moral support for love, intimacy, and childbearing in the context of religiously sanctioned marriage” (Stolzenberg et al.: 84). The church is where children develop a personal identity, acquire religious training, are taught positive values, meet friends, and experience the vibrancy and love of a supportive community of believers (Stolzenberg et al.; Bao et al.; Edgell). For newfound parents who drifted from the routine of church during their earlier years, the introduction of children provides a powerful impetus for parents to tap into this social resource by returning to active church life. Case in point, in a study of the religious trajectories of Presbyterians, the most significant reason why lapsed members became active again in the church in later life was “Had children, thought about family life and religious education” (27%), a number even greater than other causes including unmet spiritual needs (24%) and conversion experiences (8%) (Hoge et al.). It is hence important to recognize that rate of religious exercise does not precisely correspond with the salience of religion to an individual because rates of religious practice fluctuates throughout the life-course.

The experience of becoming an adult also influences church participation. Arnett and Jensen, Regnerus and Uecker, and Uecker et al. have argued that declines in religious service attendance among college students is not secularization but the consequence of their expanding social experience. The term “emerging adult” necessitates an introduction into our lexicon because of the expanding length of time between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood in modern society as compared to earlier generations. As Arnett and Jensen argue, because the average age at marriage and parenthood have steadily risen in recent decades, and both are often postponed for post-secondary education and for early career development, the “late teens and early 20s are no longer a period of intensive preparation for and entry into stable and enduring adult roles but are more typically a period of exploring various life possibilities while postponing role transitions into the middle and late 20s” (452).

Case in point, when college students are asked whether they think they have reached adulthood, only 27 percent of college students responded “yes,” 10 percent responded “no,” and the majority of students (63 percent) stated “in some respects yes, in some respects no” (Arnett).

During these formative years, such emerging adults are experiencing ever greater personal autonomy, defining personal identities and ideologies, meeting new people, experiencing new things: in summary, they are becoming familiarized with the freedoms and responsibilities of adult life without fully committing to adulthood. With romantic partners, paying rent, a part- or full-time job, upcoming exams, and the late-night orientation of college social life, the cumulative effect of all these newfound responsibilities and freedoms for young adults, according to social researchers, is that religious participation is subtly and passively “crowded out” (Uecker et al: 1686) and rendered “low on the list of most young adults’ priorities” (Regnerus and Uecker: 6). How young adults express their religious identity is oriented away from external commitments such as church participation and towards internal devotions such as religious thought, reflection, and meditation (Small and Bowman; Bryant et al.). Though communal religious participation suffers, students are developing an adult spirituality.

In contrast to the hypothesis presented by authors above, Clydesdale has instead argued that little such internal reflection occurs. Instead, in order to integrate within the cultural mainstream, students choose to put their religious identities into an “identity lockbox,” only to be opened in later years. Both interpretations are consistent with participation patterns over the life-course: Studies of patterns of church attendance over the last fifty years have found that 46 percent (!) of Americans stopped going to church for a period of two years or more within their lifetime. Of this 46 percent, four-fifths resumed active religious practice at a later time in life (Roozen). In summary, the decline of church attendance among most (but not all) emerging adults, including college students, is not a sign of secularization, but is a reversible by-product of the normative transition to adulthood (Arnett and Jensen).

The Erosion of Religious Plausibility Structures

Topic Summary

Although the university has been speculated to dissolve student religious orientations through the disenchantment of the world via scientific and historical learning, it has also been speculated that the removal of an emerging adult from family and religious community to a culturally and religiously heterogeneous environment would have the effect of weakening the so-called “plausibility structures” (Berger) undergirding the plausibility of their faith. Can students retain an individual religious identity in a pluralistic campus? Evidence suggests that the challenge of the modern campus may instead energize students through “siege mentality” to prepare themselves intellectually and emotionally for potential challenges, consequently allowing students to “hone and renew one’s faith” and become more intellectually and emotionally resolute in their convictions as a result. This need not happen alone: religious devotions are strongest when shared with other religious peers. Evangelical Christians in particular have been observed to form what Smith (1998) calls “subcultural identities” that allow Evangelical groups to persist not despite pluralism, but

because of it. It appears that the hypothesis that the erosion of religious plausibility structures will lead to loss of religious salience among students has been over-stated.

Erosion of Religious Plausibility Structures

The cultural and religious diversity of the university environment could be suggested to encourage secularization because the religious orientations of individuals are mutually supported by the shared beliefs of those around them and are conversely weakened if others believe differently. This argument could be formalized in the context of “plausibility structures” (Berger), the social and cultural frameworks by which beliefs are made plausible. Speaking on Christian plausibility, Berger writes that “the reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this will be real to *them*” (46). Plainly, beliefs are validated as “true” if other people also believe them. Removing religious emerging adults from their religious social structures at home and church and placing them within the religiously diverse university endangers the plausibility structures undergirding their beliefs. In theory, this would encourage the dissolution of their religious orientation. For this reason, private religious schools have been established in many Western countries, and some religious parents elect to send their children to these schools in order to keep their children within the faith and to insulate their children from secularizing influences.

Responses to Pluralism

Evidence suggests that student’s religious commitment may not be eroded within the religiously diverse campus environment as speculated by Berger. Hammon and Hunter, through their study of Evangelical college students at Evangelical and public campuses, have observed peculiar trends relating to student religious commitment. At such Evangelical Christian colleges there is a modest erosion of religious commitment over time. Contrary to expectation, among Christian students attending public institutions, religious commitment for the majority of these students increases during their educational experience! The authors referred to this phenomenon as “the challenge of the secular campus”: students who enter public universities know that their beliefs are likely to be challenged, and that they are expected to explain, defend, and evangelize those beliefs to others. Such a “siege mentality” thereby encourages religious students to prepare themselves mentally and intellectually for the challenge. As the authors recounted a lesson learned from an Evangelical leader: “As one young adult evangelical leader told us, the assaults on the faith of evangelical students at a secular campus force these students to “know their Bible” and “extract the rational basis for their beliefs.” In contrast with students on Evangelical campuses, most of whom (our informant says) are “naïve” Christians who were “sent” to those schools by parents or pastors, evangelicals on the secular campus “chose” to be challenged. “They elect to ‘go out on a limb’ and do so knowingly” (Hammon and Hunter: 231).

We must remind ourselves that students are not merely objects to be acted upon, but are agents of influence as well. They seek to “find their own” and to find their place in the cultural mosaic of the campus. Religious diversity provides students an opportunity to evangelize, to challenge, and be challenged. This process allows students to “hone and renew

one's own faith" (Hammon and Hunter: 232), to "sharpen the blade" of their beliefs, and consequently, become more intellectually prepared and emotionally resolute for the challenges awaiting them. Precisely due to the similarity of beliefs at religious colleges, most students at these institutions seldom experience these same challenges, and their beliefs atrophy.

That campus diversity may not disrupt student religious commitment, and perhaps reinforce it, is also supported by other studies. Lee, using longitudinal data from an American cohort of 1994 freshmen, found that "diversity-related experiences" were not correlated with weaker religious measures. Experiences including "had roommate of different ethnicity," attended "ethnic studies course," attended "women's studies course," and had "ethnic interaction," had no discernable effect on influencing the religious trajectories of students. One diversity variable, attended "cultural diversity workshop," was instead found to be positively associated with faith commitment (Lee). The interpretation of Hammon and Hunter is also supported by the observations of Hill who observed that students attending Catholic and mainline Protestant institutions reduce religious participation at a faster rate than students attending Evangelical institutions and non-religious public colleges, presumably because "the religious and ethnic pluralism that activates minority religious identity at nonreligious public institutions is also less likely to be present on Catholic and mainline Protestant college campuses" (2009: 515). Hill (2011) further argues that the general familiarity and acceptance of diversity in immigrant countries such as the United States may have had the effect of desensitizing students to diversity, mitigating the consequences of loss of religious plausibility structures to student religious identity. Such students appear simultaneously well adapted to perform well in school: Evangelical Christians in particular possess an above average educational attainment rate as compared to the general public, and are distinct from other Protestant groups such as Fundamentalists and Pentecostals who lag in educational outcomes (Beyerlein).

Students need not face the challenges of the campus alone. Much evidence supports the influence of religious peers for encouraging or continuing high rates of religious practice and for accepting traditional religious beliefs (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson; Gunnoe and Moore; Barry et al.). It is also true that religious adherents form social networks that serve to re-enforce collective religious identity (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). In the study of Evangelical Christians in the context of its survival within modern society, Christian Smith has argued that such evangelical groups form what he has termed "identities" that sustain a distinct collective identity by drawing boundaries between themselves and the wider public. This is not a strategy of isolation, for Evangelicals appear to be "quite engaged with the people, institutions, and the concerns of the pluralistic, modern world" (1998: 75). Tension with out-groups re-enforces the collective identity and the appeal of the subculture to its members. Hence, pluralism re-enforces the collective identity and permits these groups to thrive because of it. "In a pluralistic society," Smith concludes, "those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant out-groups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural" (1998: 118). Christian fundamentalists lag in education because they create well-defined insulating communities without bridging connections, whereas liberal Christians succeed at building liberal connections while losing

the centrality of their group identity. Evangelicals strike a balance, being “fully committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social, and political life of the nation” (Smith 1998: 10).

In summary, it appears that students are able to use the pluralism of the campus to bolster their own religious commitments, either in the form of siege mentality or collectively with friends through forming subcultural identities. These observations suggest that shedding plausibility structures may not have such the deleterious effect on student religious orientations as once envisioned. This is not to suggest that students do not experience changes with respect to what they come to believe, e.g., on matters concerning biblical interpretation or whether “Truth” can be found in other religions. This aspect of the influence of the educational experience, and the relevance of these changes to secularization, will be discussed in the following section.

Changes in Religious Ideas among Post-Secondary Students

Topic Summary

Are student religious beliefs changed by the educational experience? Evidence suggests that although most students do retain their core religious identity, they do experience a “liberalization” of religious beliefs, coming to endorse pluralistic views on other faiths and turning away from literalist interpretations of sacred texts. Although such changes could be interpreted as signifying “progressive” or “piecemeal” secularization, these can also be interpreted merely as “refinements” or “edits” to theologies that students come to adopt whilst retaining the core original narrative of their beliefs. The crux of the discussion is not to determine whether changes in student theological opinion occurs during schooling, but whether these changes, if they do occur, signify secularization. Two arguments will be presented suggesting they do not.

What do Students Believe?

Several illuminating trends have been observed suggesting a liberalization of student beliefs. For example, there is a negative correlation between educational attainment and belief in the absolute inerrancy of sacred texts. In the case of Christianity, Christian college students are more likely to switch to metaphorical or allegorical interpretations of particular biblical passages in lieu of the literal (Darnell and Sherkat; Sherkat and Darnell; Glass and Jacobs; McFarland, Wright, and Weakliem; Schwadel). Students also express relatively greater levels of uncertainty regarding the veracity of some religious truth-claims as compared to members of the general public (Sherkat 2008). For example, students are more likely to admit that their beliefs could be wrong and are less likely to claim inerrancy in their religious views. Hill (2011), on studying the impact of higher education on several measures of student religious beliefs, noted:

although college does not appear to substantially alter the religious beliefs of most emerging adults, findings do reveal a modest increase in skepticism toward super-empirical religious beliefs among college students and graduates compared to those who have never attended any form of post-secondary education . . . Apart from changes in super-empirical belief,

graduating from college modestly increases preferences for institutionalized religion while simultaneously reducing adherence to exclusivist religious belief (533).

Pascarella and Terenzini also observe that the religious beliefs of post-secondary students “became more individual and less doctrinaire, and tolerance for the religious views of others appeared to increase” (284).

Schwadel has shown that there is a potentially negative relationship between educational attainment and student affirmation that there is Truth in only one religion. That is, students are more likely to endorse the pluralistic view that Truth in at least some form may be found in religions other than their own. It is hypothesized that such inclusivism arises from the extensive and diverse social networks experienced by students within educational settings. Education is also negatively associated with the propensity of claiming that one must follow the teachings of their church or synagogue in order to be a good Christian or Jew. Education is positively associated with permissive attitudes for allowing atheists to make public speeches against religion, and is also associated with opposition to enforcing mandatory recitation of the Lord’s Prayer or mandatory reading of the Bible in public schools. This is arguably due to Western attitudes that strongly support protecting the right to freedom of speech and of the separation of church and state. Young adults in general, including students, regard personal experience and self-discovery as more important to their faith than adhering to specific churches or doctrinal customs (Roof; Arnett and Jensen). It is hypothesized that this attitude may have arisen through changes in parental strategies such that parents in earlier decades prioritized instilling obedience and respect in their children but presently instead prioritize instilling a sense of self-esteem and independence (Alwin).

Educational attainment is associated with both recalcitrant attitudes towards religious authorities as well as greater support for the right of those same authorities to take public stances and mobilize support for political or moral issues, e.g., on matters of promoting tolerance, opposing oppression, and defending civil liberties (Schwadel). Young adults, including students, emphasize developing their own religious philosophy rather than simply accepting an established religious doctrine (Arnett and Jensen). It is arguable that the salient culture of independence and free-thought in the United States may have the effect of encouraging adults in America to seek out their own religious ideas rather than merely assimilate the beliefs of their parents.

Not all researchers agree with the conclusion that students undergo a liberalization of beliefs. For instance, a longitudinal study based on the National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted by Mayrl and Uecker, found that students are no more likely than non-students to develop liberal religious beliefs, and in some measures such as opposition to conversion attempts, students leaned in the opposite direction. Although students were more likely to express doubts about religion than non-students (31% vs. 20%), non-students were more likely to report disbelief in a personal god than students (29% vs. 23%) (Mayrl and Uecker). Alternatively, Clydesdale has suggested that as a means of entering the cultural mainstream, students choose to put their religious identity within an “identity lockbox” such that little attention is paid to re-evaluating or molding their religious perspectives until later in life.

In summary, although evidence does suggest students undergo systematic changes in their theologies away from the norms of the general public, it is problematical whether these changes signifies progressive secularization of student religious opinion. Two arguments are presented suggesting they do not.

Argument One: Religious Fallout or Religious Refinement?

It has been observed, for example, that many college students abandon literalist interpretations of particular passages of sacred texts in favor of allegorical or metaphorical interpretations. Although this could signify that the centrality of sacred texts in informing religious opinion is weakening, it could also simply signify that students are adapting their literary approach to interpreting sacred texts based on the reading skills acquired through education. The didactic goal of education, particularly in the liberal arts, is to teach students the variety of literary themes employed by writers, encourage the use of historical or scientific material to inform interpretation of materials, interpret the intentions of the author, observe links and lapses in logical flow, and to approach material critically. It seems reasonable that education may erode literalist interpretations of sacred texts because literary education would encourage “reading passages in broader context, identifying literary genres, using background historical material, thinking about redactions, as well as other considerations” and that “all of these ways of understanding literature and historical documents may eschew a biblical literalism schema that approaches the Bible world-for-word without strong consideration of literary devices, historical sources, or scientific information” (Stroope: 1480). Eschewing literalist interpretations may not signify religious departure but the application of literary training.

Moreover, we must not forget that the broader products of education, such as critical thinking, logical reasoning, and scientifically and historically informed opinions, may be employed by students not to eschew entire religious worldviews but to refine or edit religious ideas in order to make their religion rationally coherent and consistent with scientific and historical knowledge. In this case, the educated would certainly be deviating away from the theological norms of the non-educated but for reasons other than religious departure. It is notable that, in the example of Christianity, if religious adherents display a mark of mild skepticism towards religious truth-claims, de-emphasize truth-exclusivity of their religious tradition, or question how Biblical passages ought to be interpreted, these traits would be congruent with the intellectual spirit of past Christian thinkers. For example, the Catholic theologian, Oxford professor, and logician, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), encouraged his students to examine theological statements and to “summon up all their zeal to establish the truth and in doing so to gain increased perspicacity. For the prime source of wisdom has been defined as continuous and penetrating inquiry” (quoted in Grant: 60-61). As Grant explained of Abelard’s intention:

Peter wanted students of theology to think for themselves and to arrive at their own answers to problems. Toward this end, he formulated a number of queries in his *Sic et Nom* [Yes and No], that allowed, and seemingly encouraged, alternative answers . . . For each proposition, Abelard marshaled arguments pro and con, taking them largely from the Church Fathers. The reader could see at a glance that the Fathers were in disagreement, often

contradicting one another. Abelard, however, provided no answers, and thus left each question unresolved . . . (60).

One may also be reminded of the teachings of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), as he cautioned his readers on the folly of taking firm stands on scripture:

In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture (Taylor: 41).

Augustine also cautioned his students on the folly of certainty, for eschewing worldly knowledge (often under the shroud of ignorance) for the sake of defending authority of text will only discredit both the believer and the text:

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as been certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn . . . Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion (Taylor: 42-43).

On the truth-inclusivism of various religious traditions, in 1453 the Catholic theologian and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) published *De Pace Fidei* (*The Peace of Faith*), styled as a dialogue between representatives from every world religion. The undergirding theme of this work was to illustrate not only the differences between the various religious traditions but also the similarities. Although Cardinal Nicholas concluded that the primacy of truth is found in the Christian faith, he does not exclude from recognition all that is virtuous and holy in other religious expressions.

It would be suspicious to label student theological changes as signposts of secularization when parallels can be found in the endorsements of some of the foundational theologians of

the Christian intellectual tradition. Although students are probably not intimately familiar with the teachings of Abelard or Augustine, students may be instructed through education to caution themselves in matters of religion in the same way that they would be taught to approach any subject. For example, students are likely to learn that the history of humanity is littered with false proclamations, morally repugnant attitudes, and misguided opinions. If students are more likely to state that their religious views could be wrong, is it because they have lost the grounding of their faiths or is it simply because they, like Augustine, have realized the folly of certainty? And if students eschew literalist interpretations of particular biblical passages, e.g., concerning Creation, is it because the significance of Creation has been lost upon them, or is it because they are using historical and scientific information to inform their religious opinions in order to become wiser adherents, lest they become, as Augustine cautioned, “reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture”? And if university students express that truth can be found in other religious traditions, is it because the salience of their faith has been obscured and relativized, or is it simply because, like Nicholas of Cusa, through the educational experience they have come to realize the commonalities within the global religious community? And if they question, as Abelard questioned, is it because they are losing the faith or because they are seeking it?

It is evident that at least some educated religious adherents have made efforts to refine their religious opinions in order to make them rationally and factually sound. For example, interviews with religious scientists have revealed that, rather than segregate religious outlooks from scientific perspectives, scientists seek to integrate these belief systems together in order to form a coherent and unified system for interpreting the world (Ecklund; Ecklund, Park, and Sorrell). Means of reconciling religious and scientific epistemologies through informed opinion has been frequently endorsed in the writings of some religious scientists (cf. Miller; Collins; Polkinghorne; Giberson and Collins; Lennox). Moreover, considering the spectrum of theological opinions held throughout the various denominations of Christianity, if a student experiences cognitive dissonance through education, it seems likely that students would reform their opinion in order to align with mainline opinion rather than disaffiliate entirely because mainline Christian denominations “commonly promote beliefs that are in accord with scientific knowledge and worldviews, [possess] diverse social networks, a pluralist perspective, and other attributes associated with increased education” (Schwadel: 165-66).

In summary, changes witnessed within college could be interpreted as refinements of existing religious thought rather than the disassembly of religious view. Whether students are merely refining their faith rather than losing it is a serious possibility that ought to be investigated further before sweeping conclusions be made concerning the significance of these changes to the course of secularization.

Argument Two: Has the Core Narrative been Lost?

Differences in opinion among a community of believers is the rule, not the exception. Deviations from a collective norm should not therefore be interpreted *prima facie* as a sign of secularization without other substantiation. Although many of the most prevalent religions are doctrinaire in substance, what members within a community of believers actually affirm in terms of specific religious ideas is extremely diverse. Case in point, although the numerous

Christian denominations differ on matters of theology and ideology, all of them are properly recognized as Christian groups. Contrary to what is popularly assumed, cross-cultural and ethnographic work has revealed that among members of both ancient societies as well as peoples of indigenous (pre-industrial and traditional) societies there was and is considerable heterogeneity in the types and degrees of belief, including what religious ideas people upheld or devalued, how important they considered these beliefs in the conduct of their day to day lives, or whether they even believed at all (Johnson 2012). The same is true of medieval European society: although stereotyped as uniformly religious, similar historical work has instead showed that medieval society was remarkably diverse on matters of religious practice and opinion, including the presence of individuals properly recognized as non-religious (Stark 1999). Given that heterogeneity is the norm, not the exception, one ought to recognize that *different* in religion is not equivalent to *departure* from religion. One must ascertain by other means whether students are truly losing the faith.

When do we know when students are falling away from the faith? Examining ideas mutually exclusive between religion and non-religion is a reliable litmus test of secularization. Christianity, to discuss the most prominent Western religion, is endowed with cosmogonical narratives, sacred histories, meanings of life, and ideas concerning human nature and humanity. These ideas include, for example, the idea that humans were created by God with intent, exist in a morally fallen state, are ultimately destined to be in communion with God, are infinitely valuable in the eyes of God, exist as a fraternal community of believers under God, commit transgressions against a divinely established moral order, and may seek reconciliation from God for these transgressions. These narratives, histories, meanings, and philosophies are clearly contrasted by many dichotomous ideas upheld by secular humanists, atheists, and some but not all non-religious: God is imaginary, and we were not created with intent or ultimate purpose. Humans do not exist in a morally depressed state. Morality, and the value we assign to life, have no other-worldly bearing, but is a behavior often explained in terms of evolutionary psychology or social contracts. Hence, “sin” is an illogical concept as there is no ultimate moral order, although moral transgressions do occur whenever humans have been unjustifiably harmed.

This exclusivity of worldviews is but a part of a larger panorama of debate in Western society comprised of opposing intellectual tribes of religious and non-religious philosophers, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers (cf. Lewis; Dawkins; Martin; Day; Steele; Myers; Barker; Eagleton; Sheiman). Such writings suggest that the conceptual divide between religious and non-religious worldviews is not porous or easily interchangeable, but is sharply divided with specific philosophical commitments, and one may only cross that divide with a deliberate, extensive, and sustained reshaping of one’s entire philosophical framework. Supporting such an interpretation are the accounts of religious apostates, who describe their exodus from religion not in terms of a sudden transformation based on a single idea, but as a gradual process (Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan and Edwards); in other language, as a “slow progression” (Smith 2011: 233) or a “process of discovery” (LeDrew: 433). Although the religious orientations of students are often shifted by worldly influences towards a liberalization of beliefs as documented above, this seldom leads to apostasy or complete abandonment of core religious principles (Reimer). This suggests that the process of

secularization requires far more than the mere minute refinements of theological thinking witnessed in most college students.

Given this polarization, one cannot help but view the theological differences between religious college students and the general public as insignificant to the course of secularization. I admit that no evidence is presented demonstrating that most students are not throwing away the undergirding narrative themes of religious sacred histories. But I would also contend that few would be bold enough to suggest, for example, that most students who discard a literalist interpretation of Creation are also discarding the undergirding cosmogonical theme that humanity was created with intent or that there is an ultimate purpose to being in this world.

Perhaps a more reasonable interpretation of the significance of changes in student religious ideas is offered by Pascarella and Terenzini, who suggest that student religious beliefs “may not so much increase or decrease as become re-examined, refined, and incorporated in subtle ways with other beliefs and philosophical dispositions” (534). And as Regnerus and Uecker have opined on this matter: “Graduating seniors may well be more politically moderate or liberal than incoming freshmen, and may tolerate a wider range of lifestyle choices than when they began. And students who do engage intellectually are more likely to accommodate “progressive” ideas into their belief systems rather than to deconstruct their entire worldview. Such is often the result of social interaction within a more heterogeneous university environment. But this is hardly a *secularizing* effect. Seldom are beliefs so radically altered that students walk away from college believing the Bible is merely a book of fables. Instead, new perspectives may “edit” their belief system, but seldom is the original narrative lost” (5). I contend, in summary, that proponents of the secularization hypothesis ought to also ask whether the “original narrative” has been lost, lest they make too sweeping a conclusion on the significance of the liberalization of student religious beliefs.

Causes of Religious Disaffiliation among Students

Topic Summary

This final point of contention examines the root causes of disaffiliation among emerging adults who leave religion during post-secondary schooling. Evidence suggests the presence of at least a minority of apostates who leave for so-called active reasons: deliberate and sustained moral or intellectual exploration that led these individuals to the conclusion that their religious worldviews were incoherent and abandoned them as untenable. However, evidence also suggests that the majority of apostates leave for so-called passive reasons such as apathy, boredom, moving away from family, et cetera. Those wishing to defend the secularization paradigm of higher education must reconcile the fact that most student disaffiliations occur for reasons outside of the classroom.

Why do Students Disaffiliate from Religion?

Why do some students disaffiliate from religion? And are these reasons pertinent to the spirit of enquiry, learning, and exploration characteristic of education? The secularization narrative suggests that among those students who disaffiliate, their apostasy was caused primarily through epistemological dissonance: Through their education they acquire

knowledge and experiences that lead these emerging adults to challenge their beliefs and eventually abandon them as untenable. Whether accidental or through a deliberate search for truth, these students make the conscious decision to learn and explore, eventually leading, however painful this transformation may be, to the abandonment of their religious worldviews. Is there merit in this narrative of apostasy?

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of studies available on the process of religious defection, limiting the scope of discussion available on this subject. Some evidence, however, does exist suggesting that at least some religious apostates do experience such a transformation consistent with this secularization narrative.

Active Disaffiliation

Interviews with ex-Christians are enlightening because it gives apostates their own voice to explain why they left religion. Analysis of unsolicited written online testimonies provided by ex-Christians reveals three common themes: (1) theological or intellectual concerns; (2) frustrations with God; and (3) frustrations with other Christians (Wright et al.). First, many ex-Christians object to the concept of Hell on both moral and intellectual grounds, asking why a loving God would send people to Hell, or why God would send a beloved family member to Hell. The problem of evil and suffering in this world was another prevalent concern. Lest these objections be interpreted as a way of easing emotional pain, the study authors caution that “narrative writers focused on issues of moral right and wrong rather than cost-benefits” and that “they write as ‘truth-seekers’ more than ‘benefit-optimizers,’ taking perhaps a more philosophical approach, rather than economic, to religion” (8). Other individuals focused on their personal dissatisfaction with God, lamenting unanswered prayers and confusion. Remarkably, the majority of ex-Christians (84%) cited frustration with other Christians, and particularly on matters of hypocrisy, as a motivating factor for leaving their religion. Such written testimonies reveal that disaffiliation, at least among these individuals, were motivated by intellectual and moral drivers. Such a transformation could be characterized as an “active” departure from religion: Intentional intellectual and moral reflection that eventually led them away from their religious views.

Passive Disaffiliation

However insightful these narratives, it must be cautioned that studies such as these select a unique subset of apostates, in this case, voluntary and unprompted writers of online deconversion testimonies who are sufficiently confident and intellectually resolute in their decision to leave religion and discuss their experiences in a public forum. Most non-religious are not so intellectually resolute, may not be as involved in moral or intellectual self-reflection, may not care to share their perspectives, or are afraid to speak in public forums. Although these unprompted online stories speak of at least a fraction of apostates that have made a conscious decision to leave religion, over-reliance on these testimonies to understand religious disaffiliation would disguise the fact that the majority of religious decline is in fact due to passive processes that do not involve significant conscious self-reflection and are not centralized around intellectual or moral exploration.

Hoge and colleagues, for example, observed through survey that the two greatest reasons why lapsed Presbyterians left the church were “left home, moved, away from family”

(32%) and “too busy, lack of interest, lazy” (31%). Only 13 percent of former Presbyterians stated that “doubted, questioned, lost faith” was the principle motivating factor, and only three percent stated that “church had too much hypocrisy” was the main motivating factor (Hoge et al.). Although this study examined the religious patterns of only one religious denomination, one cannot help but contrast this figure of three percent with the 84 percent of unprompted vocal ex-Christians studied by Wright and colleagues who observed that hypocrisy was a significant motivating cause of disaffiliation. Such disparate figures suggest there are significant social differences between such active disaffiliates and other religious fallouts, and that relying on testimonies of openly vocal apostates in order to characterize the nature and process of disaffiliation risks fallacy of hasty generalization. Among Mormon apostates, the reasons were again revealed through survey to be predominantly passive: Compatibility issues with lifestyle choices, competing interests that distracted them from participation, a lack of sense of belonging, leaving home or changing cities, problems with work schedule, et cetera (Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham). Moreover, most Mormon apostates claimed that they “were never truly ‘in’ the faith” and that only one in five stated they were ever a “fervent follower” (Bahr and Albrecht: 194). Bahr and Albrecht characterized this pattern of apostasy as “drift . . . a gradual, often inadvertent, disaffiliation” (194). Regnerus and Uecker, in their study of the causes of religious defection, further support this sentiment: “Half of all American teenagers who disaffiliate from their religion do so for passive reasons; they simply lost interest, stopped going to church, or were altogether incapable of articulating a reason . . . Religious decline is seldom a cognitive decision” (5).

Other passive causes of religious decline include family needs such as having the husband and wife attend the same church, unmet social needs such as the feeling of belonging and acceptance, and unmet spiritual needs such as wanting to rid themselves of guilt or bad habits (Bahr and Albrecht). Yet other plausible causes may include dissatisfaction with how the church or community is meeting their needs, boredom, apathy, disagreements with the evolving nature of the church (e.g., traditional Catholic parishioners objecting to the Second Vatican Council), disagreements and infighting with other church members, and many other reasons.

Although detailed discussion on the following is beyond the intended scope of this article, underlying psychological drivers may contribute to religious drift. Declines in religiosity often correlate with the rise of social behaviors contra-normative to most religious groups. These include, for instance, measures of binge drinking, pre-marital sex, drug use, and co-habitation in lieu of marriage (Uecker et al.). A causal source of disaffiliation in the context of contra-normative tendencies may be gleaned through the lens of cognitive dissonance resolution theory (Festinger) as well as problem behavior theory (Jessor and Jessor 1977). Several studies have found that religious salience may be influenced by adoption of behaviors that deviate from religious norms (cf. Desmond, Kikuchi, and Budd.; Ulmer, Desmond, and Jand.; Thornton et al.; Jessor and Jessor 1975). This again illustrates the power and prevalence of passive causes of disaffiliation.

In summary, although it is true that some students who leave religion do so through intellectual and moral exploration, of which religious departure could have been encouraged by the educational experience, available data instead show that the majority of disaffiliates

occur for passive reasons that have little to do with learning or moral and intellectual exploration. Proponents of the hypothesis that education secularizes must reconcile the fact that disaffiliation during college is most frequently attributable to causes outside of the classroom.

Summary

In addition to presenting recent findings on the individual effects of education on religious orientation, and vice versa, I have also sought to resolve several contentious topics in order to settle confusions, present limitations to the secularization hypothesis, and expose unsubstantiated assumptions. Evidence suggests that religion is positively correlated with educational measures among children and that religious children display greater measures of academic success and behaviors fortuitous for learning. Most forms of religious expression are also amiable to educational measures among adults, though conservative fundamentalist expressions as well as adherence to some theological opinions such as biblical inerrancy do have detrimental effects on educational accomplishments. Positive drivers include religion as a source of social capital, a source of motivation, a deterrent to destructive behaviors, and a source of meaning and identity. Negative drivers include tendencies of social isolation and distrust and preferential treatment of religious schemas regarding the truth-claims of sacred texts over scientific or historical knowledge.

Evidence also suggests that significant positive changes in the educational trajectories of religious groups have occurred within this past century, possibly due to an evolving political and economic climate. Although college students do display declines in church attendance, this is also true among non-college students, and hence, decline cannot be attributed to education. Although university presents students with diverse experiences threatening religious plausibility structures, evidence suggests that religious and cultural heterogeneity may paradoxically strengthen student religious commitment by fostering a siege mentality that encourages students to prepare themselves emotionally and intellectually for the challenges awaiting them. Religious students tend to find their own on campus in order to re-enforce collectively held religious identities. Evangelicals in particular are adept at forming subcultural identities that allow Evangelical Christians to thrive amidst religious pluralism.

Although students do display a liberalization of beliefs during college, leaning towards ideas of alternative interpretations of sacred texts or inclusivity of religious truth-claims, this development may not signify decline of religious salience but merely refinements in theological thinking spurred by the educational experience. Because heterogeneity in belief among groups of religious is the historical and social norm, difference should not be automatically interpreted as departure from religion. There is little to suggest that students have abandoned the original narrative that best defines the rift between religion and non-religion. Although a minority of apostates do identify intellectual or moral reflection as the means of their departure from religion, consistent with the expectation of the secularization hypothesis, the majority of disaffiliation events occur because of passive reasons such as work pre-occupations or moving away from home, suggesting that most students who leave religion occur for reasons unrelated to the educational experience.

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