
How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice?

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While Americans remain among the most religious in the industrialized world, it is widely observed that many of them exhibit cycles of religiosity, the most evident of which occurs in early adulthood. The young adult years of many Americans are marked by a clear decline in outward religious expression, which is widely thought to hit bottom during—and perhaps because of—the college experience. Data from 30 years of the General Social Survey pinpoints age 22 as the point in the life course when average levels of weekly or more frequent church attendance are at their lowest (17 percent). The climb back into regular or semi-regular religious practice—if it occurs at all, and it usually does—is often stimulated by marriage and childbearing (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). This barely needs retelling, as if a farewell to organized religion during the college years is simply part of the cultural script so many possess. But not *all* Americans check their religion at the dorm door. While much is made of religious decline, emerging adulthood is also a time in the life course when Americans are most open to religious change and growth. It is a phase commonly associated with religious conversion and thus targeted for considerable proselytizing by evangelical religious organizations. Waxing or waning, adolescence and early adulthood are certainly the most religiously unstable phases of the life course.

Waning religiosity is typically the presumed phenomenon, however, and various reasons have been offered for why very many young Americans tend to experience a dip in religiousness during the college years. The common suspects are the secularizing tendencies of higher education and the cognitive dissonance (or guilt) caused by deviation from (religious) norms taught by parents. First, it has been popularly held that the university classroom expands students' horizons, breaks down the "believability" of religious faith, and for such reasons constitutes "a breeding ground for apostasy" (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977:109). Additionally, many believe greater personal freedom affords emerging adults the opportunity to stop activities (like going to church) that they find uninteresting or devalued among peers, and to start doing things they are curious about and motivated (by peers) to do—things like drinking, drug use, and sex—that place them at odds with their religious tradition's teachings. As a result, higher education and its freedoms are thought to

promote more secularized perspectives on the world—or at least ones at odds with a particular religious socialization, which in turn may lead some young adults to stop believing in the religion of their youth.

This essay focuses primarily on the first of these two explanations, higher education. Sociologist James Hunter, author of a pair of books on the culture wars motif, argued in 1983 that it is a “well-established fact that education, even Christian education, secularizes” (132). But does it? The questions that motivate this essay are these: How does college students’ religiosity compare to the general population of young Americans? Should religious decline among college students be attributed to the educational process itself?

The skeptical reader may ask why we even bother to question such a “well-established fact.” The answer, at least in part, is that social institutions—such as universities—change over time, and larger cultural shifts also affect how people approach religion. Yet almost everything we know about the relationship between religion and education is based on data from the 1960’s and 1970’s, the height of the sexual and countercultural revolutions on campus. Thus we believe a fresh look at the matter is merited. We draw upon several sources of information in this essay, including what recent studies have concluded, what older studies noted decades ago, and our own data analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a massive survey project which first spoke with teenagers in the early 1990’s and continues to track respondents (now young adults) into their mid-20’s.

So what can be said about the religiosity of today’s young adults? As we might expect, recent data from the Add Health study reveals that nearly 70 percent of all young adults who attended church at least once a month during high school subsequently curtailed their church attendance. Contrary to our own and others’ expectations, however, young adults who *never enrolled* in college are presently the *least* religious young Americans. The assumption that the religious involvement of young people diminishes when they attend college is of course true: 64 percent of those currently enrolled in a traditional four-year institution have curbed their attendance habits. Yet, 76 percent of those who *never enrolled* in college report a decline in religious service attendance.

Attendance habits are the hardest hit during early adulthood. But some forms of religiosity, like how important religion is in one’s life, witness far smaller declines. More than one in four young adults who avoid college reported lower “religious salience” than when interviewed as adolescents, compared with just 19 percent of young adults pursuing a traditional college education. And then there is religious disaffiliation—when youth no longer identify with any religious affiliation at all. Whereas 20 percent of those that did not pursue college renounced any and all religious affiliation, only 13 percent of four-year college students had done the same.

Thus, the assumption that a college education is the *reason* for such a decline gathers little support. The results remain the same even when we employ multiple regression models to account for other factors that might explain the college-religion relationship (such as age, marriage, drinking habits, and sexual behavior, to name a few). Simply put: Higher education is *not* the enemy of religiosity. Instead, young people who avoid college altogether display a more precipitous

drop in their religious participation. So if a college education is not the secularizing force we often presume it to be, what is going on?

First, there are a variety of reasons for religious change during the young adult years, ones that have little or nothing to do with higher education. For example, we know that young people who get married comparatively early tend to *be* and to *stay* religious, regardless of their schooling decisions (and many of them do complete college, either just prior to marrying, shortly after, or sometime before childbearing). In fact, getting married appears to prevent the standard script—the emergence of temporary religious disinterest—from happening in the first place, not because there is something mysteriously religious about marriage (though that may be true) but because religious young people are more likely to marry early. In other words, religiosity encourages marriage, not vice versa. This is not to say that there is nothing particularly interesting going on with religion and the college experience, but rather that most of the foundation for the observed religious decline has *already occurred*; the patterns that eventually predict emerging religious disinterest were in place well before those first days of college.

Similarly, Americans that enter cohabiting relationships often subsequently diminish religious involvement. Not only does cohabitation imply unmarried sex, it implies an intentional union that remains sanctioned by most Catholics, evangelicals, and conservative mainline Protestants and Jews. But cohabitation itself doesn't secularize; rather, it reflects secularization. Religiously problematic behaviors—such as drug use, excessive drinking, and nonmarital sexual behavior—are also positively associated with diminished religiosity during early adulthood. They are lifestyle patterns that are not easily maintained alongside a vibrant religious faith and practice.

But back to higher education, our key concern; why don't we see evidence of education-inspired secularization? Anecdotally, such a phenomenon is well-known to many academic professionals. They have *seen* students stop believing. We would argue, however, that this too is often the result not of education, but again of processes set in motion long before young people ever set foot on a college campus: Those students who “lose their faith” in college or drop out of organized religion after high school are primarily those already at considerable risk of doing so *for other reasons* that predate these actions. To suggest the die is cast before the dorm room is occupied may be too strong a claim, but not by much. As Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005) note in *Soul Searching*, parents tend to “get what they are” when it comes to their teenagers' religious sense. If parents do not actively affirm and transmit the oral and written traditions of a religion, their failure to “teach the language” results in youth who cannot speak the language and are at elevated risk of shedding the religious value system altogether. Indeed, scholars often forget that religion is primarily taught, not caught or transmitted by osmosis. Once these teenagers leave the structures (especially families) that have patterned their religious lives, religiosity is simply left behind as well.

The majority of college students, however, do not exhibit a noticeable decline in the importance of faith in their lives. The religious belief systems of most students go largely untouched for the duration of their education. Religious faith lies dormant in students' lives, waiting to be awakened at some point after college, but it is rarely seen as something that could either influence or be

influenced by the educational process. This is true for several reasons. First, some students have elected not to engage in the intellectual life around them. They are there to pursue an “applicable” degree, among other, more mundane pursuits. This is hardly limited to religious university students, though. Second, some “miss the forest for the trees,” wishing instead to stick to what will be on the exam. Here again, there is nothing uniquely religious about this pathway. Such students are numerous, and as a result students’ own religious faith (or lack of it) faces little challenge. Indeed, many university curricula are constructed to reward this type of intellectual disengagement. The modern university seems increasingly interested in certifying students, boosting their technical skill set, and offering, as one example, money-generating “crash course” weekend curriculums, all of which are quite distinct from previous emphases on the liberal arts and communication skills. One byproduct of this is that grappling with the deeper realities of religion, faith, the nature of knowledge, and human meaning seldom occurs. Courses on computer programming or electrical engineering are religiously neutral. What is not contested, then, cannot be lost. Third, while higher education opens up new worlds for students who apply themselves, it can but doesn’t often create skepticism about old (religious) worlds, or at least not among most American young people, in part because there is not a great deal of *perceived competition* between higher education and faith, and because very many young Americans are so under-socialized in their religious faith (before college begins) that they would have difficulty recognizing faith-challenging material when it appears. And even if they did perceive a challenge, many young people do not consider religion something worth arguing over.

As a result, while their church attendance may take a hit simply because of the late-night orientation of college life, or because of collective norms about appearing “too religious,” very many young people nevertheless retain a static level of private religiosity during their college years. Recall that for four out of five college students, religion’s importance does not diminish at all. Faith simply remains in the background of students’ lives as a part of who they are, but not a part they talk about much with their peers or professors (and for many, this never changes across the life course). In structured class debates about some of the “big questions” of life—such as the sources of happiness, the nature of love, and the meaning of sex—we have witnessed such “closet Christians” become animated (albeit briefly) seemingly out of nowhere when we began to talk about elemental ideas close to the heart of religion. Such experiences reinforce the data that the number of college students who altogether drop religious faith due to cognitive inconsistencies that their professors point out is very small. Far more commonly, faith goes underground not for the purpose of feeding and sustaining it through the college years but simply because it feels non-normative to either admit religious faith, much less make any sort of big deal about it. As Smith and Denton (2005) note in their study of teenagers, so with young adults: to appear over-religious can be the social kiss of death.

On the other hand are devoutly religious college students. They arrive on campus *expecting* challenges and hostility to their religious perspectives. When they don’t get it, they’re pleasantly surprised; when they do, it merely meets their expectations and fits within their expected narrative about college life. Campus religious organizations anticipate such intellectual challenge, and often provide a forum for like-minded students. In fact, college campuses are less hostile to organized religious expression and its retention than are other contexts encountered by emerging adults,

such as the workplace. The arrival of postmodern, post-positivist thought on university campuses has served to legitimize religiosity, even in intellectual circles. Together with heightened emphasis on religious tolerance, antireligious hostility on campus may even be at a decades-long low.

We are not claiming that higher education does not *liberalize* students—that very well may be true. 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.

Despite appearances, we are *not* suggesting that college-educated young adults in America never lose their religion. Some do. But they are a small minority, and they are losing their religion at significantly lower rates than other young adults, especially those who never went to college in the first place, meaning any negative religious effects attributed to higher education are far more likely the result of the university environment and its freedoms than the process of learning per se. Religious decline is more of a passive than an active process. Smith and Denton (2005) note this already during adolescence: about 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. These passive rationales for religious decline, we hold, are similarly prominent in early adulthood, which brings with it a host of responsibilities and opportunities that simply crowd out religious participation and diminish its importance. Religious decline is seldom a cognitive decision. Religious commitments are simply low on the list of most young adults’ priorities.

In conclusion, the college experience—more than the education itself—seems corrosive to religious faith only among those who were at an elevated risk of such corrosion when they arrived on campus. This spells good news and bad news for all parties here. First, it suggests that antagonistic professors are having little effect on the religious faith of most students. Faith challenges and belief systems hanging in the balance are not the norm (though they do of course occur). Second, it suggests that Christian “revivals” during college rarely connect those that entirely lack a religious sense. Instead, evangelistic efforts tend to connect best with the dormant faith and inactive-but-intact belief systems of previously religious youth. Accounts of completely new conversions—from either one religion to another or from no religion at all to a committed faith—are uncommon. They happen, but they are rare. Each, however, is far less frequent than the “revival” of dormant faith, which in turn is much less common than the *temporary* religious exit that the early twenties often witness.

A longer and more technical version of this article is forthcoming:

Uecker, Jeremy E., Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Vaaler. Forthcoming. “Losing My Religion:

The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood.” *Social Forces*.

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