

## **Religion and Higher Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

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Religion is a hot button topic in higher education, as it is in many areas of the provision of public goods. Scholars and administrators are noticing that our students are more religious than previous generations of college students, though they don't have a clear sense of why. Some studies claim that religious students are better students—and there is some merit to this argument. Religion does provide students with healthy alternatives to other social engagements. Yet, studies of elite and residential college populations fail to take into account the larger picture; since religion, and especially fundamentalist Christianity, can have a negative effect on going to college. While some religious factors have a positive impact on college success, other religious commitments undermine educational attainment (Darnell & Sherkat 1997; Glass & Jacobs 2005; Lehrer 2004, 1999; Sherkat & Darnell 1999). Once in college, religious factors can also play a role in the trajectory of study, impacting the choice of major, courses taken, and successful completion. Importantly, religious factors also influence the context of contemporary higher education. Increasing rates of college attendance in the general population has also meant that more members of predominately fundamentalist Christian sects, who almost uniformly eschewed higher education in previous generations, are now living in the same dormitories with liberal Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and an increasingly diverse array of non-Christians.

It is important to briefly outline the contours of American religion, and define some sociological terms which may differ from their common usage. "Sect" is a term describing religious groups holding the belief that religious rewards (heaven, nirvana, etc.) will exclusively fall to adherents of the sectarian faith—everyone else will receive punishment from the gods, or at least no rewards. This orientation often creates tension with other religious groups and broader society (Stark and Finke 2000). In the United States, the majority of sectarian organizations are Christian, including groups like the Southern Baptists, Assembly of God, Nazarene, and Churches of Christ. Liberal and moderate Christian denominations (such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, United Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ) tend to be less exclusive in their beliefs about religious rewards and punishments. Of course, there are liberalizing movements within sectarian denominations, and sectarian movements within liberal denominations (Stark & Bainbridge 1987). Among General Social Survey (GSS, 2000-2004) respondents age 25 or under, 19% were raised in liberal or moderate Protestant denominations, while 25% were raised in sectarian groups. 31% of

college-aged persons were raised Catholic, 3% grew up in non-Christian faiths (1% were Jewish, the rest mostly Moslem, Hindu, and Buddhist), and 13% reported not being raised in a religious faith. Looking back at previous generations, reveals a profound shift in religious origins: 29% of GSS respondents born between 1940 and 1945 grew up in liberal or moderate Protestant groups, while 26% were reared in sectarian Protestant churches, and only 3% were raised without a religious affiliation.

Fundamentalism is a religious orientation of individuals or groups that values sources of meaning derived from the sacred texts of a religious tradition (Hood, Hill, & Williamson 2005). Religious fundamentalism is found in movements and among individuals from all types of religious traditions (Cole 2002; Hood, Hill, & Williamson 2005). Among Christians, an excellent measure of fundamentalism is belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. General Social Survey data show that among those who hold a sectarian affiliation, about 60% have fundamentalist orientations, while 30% of mainline affiliates and 21% of Catholics adhere to fundamentalist beliefs (Sherkat 2007). Religious fundamentalism is somewhat less prevalent among younger members of sectarian denominations, GSS data show that 50% of sectarian Protestants age 25 or under hold fundamentalist beliefs.

Most accounts of religious trends tend to ignore the basic demographic processes which often explain religious dynamics (Hout, Greeley, & Wilde 2001). Students are more involved in religion, and current college students are more committed to sectarian religious groups. Several things have happened. First, over the last five decades there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of the American population who attend college. Because sectarian groups and Catholics have higher rates of fertility, the average age of sect members is much lower than the average age of members of mainline religious groups (Roof and McKinney 1987; Sherkat 2007). As a consequence, the available pool of students is now more heavily comprised of sectarian affiliates and Catholics, and both of these groups have high levels of religious commitment when compared to mainline Protestants.

Second, the proportion of African Americans and women earning college degrees has increased dramatically—many universities currently have more women seeking degrees than men. This simple fact has a profound impact on the religiosity of college campuses, since African Americans and women are substantially more religious than men and Anglo Americans (Miller & Stark 2002; Sherkat 1998, 2007). Young men have the lowest levels of religious commitment of any demographic group, and they dominated college campuses until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. African Americans have also brought an expressive form of sectarian Christianity to college campuses, and the visibility of largely African American religious practices at sporting events has caused concern in many venues. The arrival of women and African Americans has infused religion into the core of everyday activities of campus life. When women were a small minority and African Americans were confined to segregated institutions, campus religion could only be sustained by using paid chaplains serving an ecumenical group of mostly liberal Protestants. Catholic colleges enforced religious participation by making it mandatory. Now, college religious institutions are more diverse, more sectarian in affiliation, more fundamentalist in orientation, and are more often led by students and outside ministries like the Campus Crusade for Christ.

Third, a large proportion of degrees are now earned by “non-traditional” students. Compared to previous generations, current students are older, more likely to be married, more likely to have children, and to work outside of school. Older students will be more settled into religious participation. People who are married and who have children are more likely to be active members of religious groups (Myers 1996; Stolzenberg et al 1995; Sherkat 1998). In my experiences in the classroom, I have found that older students tend to be more vocal about religious commitments and other political, economic, and even personal issues. The aging of the undergraduate population certainly makes religious issues more visible on campus.

Normal demographics explain much of the current trend toward religiosity among college students, and they may also explain a substantial portion of the positive relationship between religious participation and educational outcomes. Young women with academic promise tend to be diligent and studious, and women who have modest potential are unlikely to completely ignore their studies. Talented young men are often spotty in their scholarly performance, and less adept young men are prone to be delinquent with assignments, attendance, and other basic tasks essential for success in college. Some portion of the much ballyhooed connection between student religiosity and academic performance is likely caused by gender differences in both religion and academic success. The same holds true for older students. Older students are typically paying for their own education, and together with family responsibilities, this motivates non-traditional students to perform well.

### **The Good: Religion and Educational Success**

Several studies have shown that religious students do better on critical indicators of academic success (Mooney 2005). Typically, studies finding a positive impact of religious factors on school success measure “religiosity” with an indicator of religious participation. Religious participation cuts across denominational lines. Religious participation and personal religiosity can help lower rates of substance abuse, and limit activities that undermine college careers (Regnerus 2000). While we should applaud organizations which provide a positive influence on students, it is notable that other types of extra-curricular activities can have similar positive effects (Pascarella et al, 2004).

Students who participate in religious groups have made a choice about social commitments. Being active in religion precludes other types of social ties, particularly ones which might cut against the prescriptions and proscriptions of religious traditions. If a student is going to Mosque on Friday, she is unlikely to be found at the bar. Commitments to religious groups also preclude negative behaviors like going home for the weekend, or taking impromptu road trips. Connections to positive social groups promote conformity, and in the college setting, conformity means going to class and completing assignments. Alcohol and substance abuse are among the most important factors predicting negative educational outcomes. Most religious groups oppose alcohol use, or at least militate against drunkenness. Hence, students who choose to join religious groups are going to be less likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs (Regnerus 2000). Depression, loneliness, and anxiety are also strongly associated with poor college performance. Students who are depressed

often skip classes, return home, or begin abusing alcohol or drugs. Religious activities provide a basis for social support outside of the home, thus combating the loneliness and isolation which can lead to mental health problems (Sherkat & Ellison 1999).

Religious students can also be expected to devote time and energy to a variety of pro-social causes (Wilson & Janoski 1995). Indeed, religious students and their organizations have forged the backbone of social activism on a variety of causes; from civil rights for African Americans, to opposition to the war in Vietnam, to the anti-Apartheid movement, to homelessness, to opposition to support for varied brutal dictatorships (Zald 2000). Religious students frequently help connect colleges with the surrounding community, and provide volunteers and partnerships with groups like the Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouting groups, and Head Start programs. While today's students are often characterized as inactive and apathetic on social causes, this is not an accurate depiction. And, much of the volunteering and activism on college campuses is forged in religious organizations by religious students.

### **The Bad: Sectarian Religion, Biblical Fundamentalism, and Educational Attainment**

Studies of students enrolled in college, and especially ones which focus on students enrolled in religious or elite institutions, cannot fully convey the effects of religious factors on college success. Most studies of the effects of religion on college success focus on personal religiosity or on religious participation, and these indicators are likely to produce positive effects. In contrast, more sophisticated longitudinal research shows that sectarian religious affiliation and biblical fundamentalism—beliefs in the inerrant truth of religious sacred texts—have a substantial negative effect on educational attainment (Darnell & Sherkat 1997; Sherkat & Darnell 1999; Glass & Jacobs 2005). Sectarian affiliation and biblical fundamentalism have an especially negative impact on the educational attainment of women (Sherkat & Darnell 1999; Glass & Jacobs 2005). In sectarian and fundamentalist religious communities young women are expected to marry early, have many children, and be primarily responsible for childcare (Roof & McKinney 1987; Sherkat 2007). Even if young sectarian and fundamentalist people choose to attend college, sectarian and fundamentalist Christians are more likely to choose religious colleges, which have fewer options for majors, lower prestige, and are more costly. Finally, the narrowing of social networks and the restriction of information sources advocated in sectarian and fundamentalist religious groups is associated with smaller vocabularies (Sherkat 2006), which can undermine academic success.

Religious activists argue that sectarian and fundamentalist Christianity is at war with secular institutions, and particularly embattled with secular education. This perception has some merit, since higher educational attainment is predictive of defection from fundamentalist Christian beliefs and sectarian religious organizations (Sherkat 1998; Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Beginning in high school, sectarian Protestants and biblical fundamentalists have been shown to be less likely to take college preparatory coursework. Predictably, students who avoid taking courses like biology, chemistry, calculus, and British literature in high school are less likely to successfully complete college (Darnell and Sherkat 1997).

Early family formation and strong norms against female labor force participation also hinder conservative Christians' educational attainment. Studies consistently show that among sectarian Protestant fertility is higher, and ages of marriage are lower (cf. Lehrer 1995; Sherkat 2007). The burden of early marriage and fertility are also likely factors in low rates of educational attainment for conservative Christian men, since having a family often requires forsaking future rewards which could accrue from educational attainment for the immediate benefits of employment. Large family size, coupled with limited wealth (Keister 2003), will also hinder sectarian Christian parents' ability to help finance the educational pursuits of their children. This may help explain lower rates of college attendance and completion among conservative Christians (Darnell & Sherkat 1997; Lehrer 1999; Glass & Jacobs 2005), and likely results in higher levels of debt associated with college education when religious devotees do attend college. Notably, however, one recent study found no influence of sectarian affiliation on educational attainment for African American women (Glass & Jacobs 2005).

The choice of religious higher education almost always limits options for study. Only a handful of religious institutions truly qualify as research universities (i.e. Notre Dame, Brigham Young, Baylor; Georgetown), and most that do are Catholic. Conservative Christian schools are even more limited in their size and scope. Faculty members at small religious colleges tend to teach heavy loads of diverse courses, and sectarian colleges are only able to sustain a handful of majors and programs. Most of these programs are not suited to providing the type of training needed for preparation for graduate study. Engineering and hard science programs are especially difficult to sustain at small colleges. Further, religious schools are generally viewed as inferior in quality (Mixon, Lyon, & Beaty 2004), whether or not they truly are. Low prestige combines with limited options for majors to produce less valuable degrees and fewer options for advanced study or highly compensated employment.

### **The Ugly: Fundamentalism, Learning, and Tolerance on College Campuses**

The increasing proportion of religious conservatives on college campuses has brought problems in the classroom and in residential life, particularly in secular universities. Sectarian and fundamentalist Christians often come to college with little or no preparation for understanding or tolerating ideas which confront their beliefs, or interacting with people who do not share their opinions. The focus on religious explanations for all manner of phenomena in fundamentalist communities does not conform to the standards of secular education (Hood et al. 2005). The focus on religious sacred texts as the only source limits the cognitive complexity of thought (Hunsberger et al., 1994, 1996; Sherkat 2006), which may well lead to poor performance and exacerbate conflict with professors. Finally, young sectarian and fundamentalist Christians often have difficulty dealing with environments and situations where they are not monitored by parents and coreligionists, and this often leads to risky unplanned experimentation with sex and substance abuse.

Sectarian Christians spend most of their lives in a segregated religious community, isolated from people of different races, ethnicities, and religious traditions. White sectarian Christians often seek refuge in deep suburbs (Eiesland 2000), perhaps in part to avoid African Americans and other

minorities. When that is not possible, some parents send their children to private sectarian and fundamentalist Christian schools, or even withdraw their children from school to “homeschool.” Because of this isolation and aversion, conservative Christians tend to hold substantial prejudices against ethnic, religious, and especially sexual minorities (Edgell et al. 2005; Burdette et al. 2005; Emerson et al. 1999). In large state universities—where most sectarian and fundamentalist Christians attend college---these young devotees are often confronted with diversity for the first time in their lives. The likelihood of being assigned a dorm roommate who is black, Moslem, Jewish, Atheist, or gay/lesbian/bisexual is non-negligible, and the probability that a sectarian student lives in the same suite or floor with a minority student is very high. Indeed, because of their lower rates of secular college attendance, a burgeoning minority population, and because fundamentalists and sectarians comprise less than a third of the college-age population (Sherkat 2007), fundamentalist and sectarian students will invariably find that *they* are the minority. This can lead to confusion, isolation, and conflict. Religious activists exacerbate this alienation by amplifying the cultural distinctiveness of sectarian Christians, and suggesting that racism, sexism, and homophobia are less of a problem than discrimination against sectarian and fundamentalist Christians.

In many disciplines, the scripturally based orientations prevalent among conservative Christians may give them a considerable disadvantage in coursework because it lowers the complexity of thought (Hunsberger et al., 1994,1996). Young fundamentalists are convinced that they know the “Truth” and that perspectives which deviate from the scripted narratives of their tradition are not only false, but potentially heretical. Critical argumentation about issues in politics, history, ethics, or sociology is difficult for fundamentalist Christians, since they believe that biblical pronouncements are not only necessary explanations, but also sufficient. This orientation is particularly problematic in a context where 75% of college professors view the Bible as a book of fables (Ecklund & Scheitle 2005), compared to only 23% of the college educated public surveyed in the General Social Surveys. Social and cultural distance between professors and conservative Christian students is quite considerable, and this can lead to unpleasant exchanges, particularly when students honestly do not understand that their faith is not relevant for coursework.

Young adults freed from parental supervision can be expected to have sex, to experiment with sexuality, and to experiment with alcohol and substance abuse. While religious commitments can forestall the initiation of sexual activity, religious effects do not last forever, and research shows that sectarian Christians often engage in risky sexual behavior once they do begin their sexual careers (Bearman & Bruckner 2001). Similar findings hold for alcohol: while sectarian Protestants are more likely to abstain from alcohol; if they do drink, they are more likely to drink in excess (Moulton, Ellison, and Sherkat 2003).

## **Retrospect and Prospect**

Religious factors have always influenced the educational trajectories of Americans. With the expansion of higher education, we have seen unprecedented proportions of conservative Christians entering higher education. Their religious commitments will, perhaps, be helpful for navigating the stressors of college life. Religion provides a sense of meaning and purpose, and a group of

likeminded believers who can provide essential social support. But this is not a call for prescriptive religious measures. Most religious effects work in tandem with well known demographic correlates of school success. The proliferation of sectarian religious schools in the last few decades raises serious questions about the future trajectory of those students. Even more fragile and potentially volatile are the children who were “homeschooled” in fundamentalist Christian environments. We know very little about how such persons will fit in with a complex multicultural society, and what we do know lends to pessimism. Even more shrouded is the influence of other styles of religious commitment on educational attainment and institutions. As more and more students hail from non-Christian backgrounds, it remains to be seen whether Hindu, Islam, Buddhism, and other faiths help or hinder the educational progress of young members in the U.S.

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