

Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research

DAMON MAYRL
FREEDEN OEUR
*Department of Sociology
University of California at Berkeley*

In light of increased scholarly and public discussion about the proper position of religion in higher education, we take stock of existing social scientific studies to illuminate what we know—and what we don't know—about religion and higher education. We argue that research shows that college students are more religiously engaged than has traditionally been thought, but that this interest appears to be more broad than deep; that the college experience does not lead to apostasy in most students, though its effect on students' religious engagements is still unclear; and that religion has a beneficial effect on some student outcomes, but not on others. We conclude by proposing three new directions for research that offer the potential to expand our understanding of the interaction of religion and higher education.

Recent years have seen renewed interest in the role of religion in colleges and universities. Stories in newspapers and magazines, echoing the views of many faculty and administrators, assert that among students there is “probably more active religious life now than there has been in 100 years” and that students are increasingly interested in religion (Finder 2007). Across the academy, too, religion is a hot topic. Scholars in student affairs argue that college curricula should be designed to encourage “holistic student development,” and that education that does not attend to the spiritual development of students is incomplete (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward 2006; Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm 2005; Parks 2000). And, perhaps most dramatically, a bevy of historians, philosophers, and educators has begun to question the secular ethos of many campuses, articulate the outlines of a new, “postsecular” campus (Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2008; Sommerville 2006), and consider how to encourage religious conversations among students (Edwards 2006; Nash 2001).

Despite this increased public and scholarly interest, social scientific scholarship into the religious lives of students and the role of religion on college and university campuses has been limited. Most of the voluminous literature on religion and higher education 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 reexamine 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. Ethnographic studies of college campuses and student groups, and national data sets such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and those produced by the Higher Education Research Institute have yielded fascinating, and sometimes surprising, results. Yet few attempts have been made to synthesize these findings in light of the raging debates about the proper position of religion in higher education.¹

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Correspondence should be addressed to Damon Mayrl, Department of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley, CA 94720. E-mail: mayrl@berkeley.edu

¹ The Social Science Research Council's “Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates” Forum (available online at <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/>) is an important exception to this statement. While the guide available on the forum

In this article, we take stock of these studies to illuminate what we know—and what we don't know—about religion and higher education. Our review of contemporary scholarship identifies three major lines of research: (1) What do college students believe, and how do they practice their faith? (2) How does the college experience affect students' religious beliefs and practices? and (3) How do students' religious commitments affect their college experience? In each, we assess the extent to which social scientists have provided compelling answers to these questions, and provide suggestions for improving these lines of research where they have failed to do so. We argue that research shows that college students are more religiously engaged than has traditionally been thought, but that this interest appears to be more broad than deep; that the college experience does not lead to apostasy in most students, though its effect on students' religious engagements is still unclear; and that religion has a beneficial effect on some student outcomes, but not on others. We conclude by taking stock of some of the overarching shortcomings in the study of religion and higher education, and propose three new directions for research that offer the potential to expand our understanding of the interaction between religious engagements and the college setting.

UNDERGRADUATE RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS: A PORTRAIT

We begin by reviewing studies that have examined what college students believe and how they practice their faith. These studies have largely used well-designed, large-scale surveys to assess student belief, religious affiliation, and religious practices. Overall, this research shows that while the majority of students appear to be religiously engaged, this engagement is limited in important ways.

Review

A strong majority of college students affiliate with a religious denomination. The Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) (2004) landmark survey of 112,000 freshmen at 236 colleges and universities found that 83 percent of students affiliated with a denomination. Meanwhile, a somewhat lower 66 percent of college students surveyed for a Harvard University Institute of Politics' (HUIP) (2008) telephone poll identified with a denomination. This lower percentage might be accounted for by the smaller sample size (1,222 students) of the HUIP poll, or because the HUIP study looked at college students of all levels, unlike the HERI study that sampled only entering freshmen. Despite an apparent increase in the degree of religious pluralism on college campuses, most students continue to hail from Christian denominations. The HERI study (2004) found that only 9 percent of students identified with a non-Christian religion, while 18 percent of college students in the HUIP study (2008) claimed a non-Christian religious preference.² Thirty-one percent of Christian students, meanwhile, consider themselves to be "born-again" Christians (HUIP 2008).

Studies regularly find that belief in God is high among students. Seventy-nine percent of students surveyed by HERI claim to believe in God (HERI 2004), a finding that smaller surveys examining only one or two institutions appear to confirm (Hollinger and Smith 2002; Lee, Matzken, and Arthur 2006). Belief in God varies considerably by race: 95 percent of

covers some of the same ground as this article, our review is designed to be more comprehensive and attuned to debates within the sociology of religion, more squarely focused on research findings rather than on philosophical issues, and more critical in its analysis of existing work.

² The differences between these two polls may reflect the fact that the HERI instrument gave students a wider selection of denominations from which to choose, leading to a considerably lower (3 percent vs. 13 percent) figure for those students selecting "other religion" in the HERI study. HUIP found that 18 percent of students identified with Muslim, Jewish, or "other religion," while HERI found that 9 percent identified as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Orthodox, or "other religion."

African-American freshmen believe in God, compared to 84 percent of Latinos, 78 percent of whites, and 65 percent of Asian Americans (Bartlett 2005). But while a majority may believe in God, only about two in five students say religion is “very important” in their everyday lives (HERI 2004; HUIP 2008), and only about one in five students claims to discuss religion “frequently” (Hurtado et al. 2007; Saenz and Barrera 2007).

Studies of religious participation paint a more mixed picture. While surveys of incoming freshmen show that 81 percent frequently or occasionally attend religious services (HERI 2004), studies that look at college students later in their career invariably show declines in attendance rates. Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) found, in a national longitudinal sample, that 64 percent of students enrolled in two- and four-year colleges reported attending services less frequently than they had as adolescents. Indeed, the pattern that emerges is that while a majority of students continue to attend services at least occasionally, only about a quarter attend frequently. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) found, in a survey of 3,680 students from 50 colleges, that 27 percent claimed to attend worship “frequently” at the end of their freshman year, while an additional 30 percent claimed to attend religious services only “occasionally.” Hurtado and colleagues (2007) similarly found that 23 percent of rising sophomores reported attending services frequently, with another 33 percent doing so occasionally. Rates of prayer also reflect this bifurcated pattern; 69 percent of freshmen report that they pray at least occasionally, but only 28 percent claim to do so daily (HERI 2004). As with belief in God, worship attendance varies by race, with blacks and Asian Americans more likely to attend services frequently than Hispanics or whites (Mooney 2005).

In recent years, evangelical parachurch organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ have drawn the attention of some scholars, who have published a number of excellent ethnographic studies exploring such organizations’ internal cultures and the factors that motivate students to participate in them (e.g., Bryant 2004, 2005; Hall 2006; R. Kim 2006; S. Kim 2000; Perry and Armstrong 2007). However, while such organizations undeniably are highly visible on many campuses, and while the organizations themselves trumpet increasing membership (Schmalzbauer 2007), the number of students participating in them reflects the above pattern of relatively low rates of sustained institutional participation. A 2001 survey found that 30 percent of students claimed to have participated in *any* student religious organization (including not just parachurch groups but also traditional denominational campus ministries) at least occasionally during their freshman year, but that only 14 percent claimed to have done so “frequently” (Bryant 2004).

Some more recent surveys have begun to try to study not only student religiosity, but “spirituality” as well. For example, in their 2004 report, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, researchers at the Higher Education Research Institute argue that college students demonstrate a high degree of spiritual investment and involvement. The study reports that 83 percent of students “believe in the sacredness of life,” 80 percent indicate an interest in spirituality, and 47 percent say that it is essential or very important that they seek opportunities to grow spiritually. Some scholars, however, have warned of the limitations of these surveys. Bender (2007), for example, suggests that large-scale quantitative surveys of spirituality are limited by their use of broad categories, which can disguise important variation in religious practices and in the meaning students ascribe to “spirituality” (cf. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno 2003:740). Although the HERI report has raised a number of important new questions about student spirituality, further research is needed to determine what, exactly, this apparent interest in spirituality actually indicates.³

³ Ironically, the answer to these questions may lie in the HERI surveys themselves. While HERI’s (2004, 2006) published reports have tended to highlight the broad, undifferentiated categories of “spirituality” and “sacredness,” other questions in their survey instrument (see http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/reports/2004_CSBV_Survey_Instrument.pdf) delve into a wide array of specific beliefs and practices that could go a long way toward empirically determining just how disparate the content and meaning of “spirituality” actually is.

Evaluation

In sum, traditional religious indicators suggest that the majority of college students are religiously engaged and interested in spirituality, though this engagement and interest is somewhat uneven. Although most students affiliate with a religious tradition and believe in God, fewer students attend religious services and pray regularly. In many respects, interest in religion and spirituality among college students appears broad, but not necessarily deep. The more time and investment religion requires of them, the less likely students are to engage; hence, students are more likely to believe in God and to pray occasionally than they are to attend services or participate in campus religious organizations. Recent attempts to explore student spirituality by moving beyond traditional indicators have been hampered by fuzzy measures that in many respects raise more questions than answers. Although there are tantalizing findings suggesting that interest in spirituality among students is quite high, few studies have explored whether this *interest* also indicates *investment* (Clydesdale 2007), or even what this spiritual interest *looks like* in practice.

Whether the figures shown here represent “a lot” or “a little” religion among college students largely depends on the frame of reference. Perhaps influenced by associations between religion and anti-intellectualism (e.g., Hofstadter 1963), higher education has often been thought to be a “zone relatively free of religion” (Wilson 2000:9), possessed of a “pervasively secular ethos” (Carpenter 1998:265). Viewed from this perspective, the number of students who continue to profess belief in God and to worship, pray, and participate in religious organizations seems rather high, even alarming (e.g., Taylor 2006). On the other hand, the percentage of students who participate in religious activities is, on most measures, somewhat lower than that found either in the general population (Bader, Mencken, and Froese 2007) or among adolescents (Smith and Denton 2005). Viewed from this perspective, the question to be asked is not why so many students are religiously engaged, but why engagement is lower among college students. We look at some studies that have addressed this question in the next section.

What is clear from these findings is that the popular emerging narrative that college campuses are religiously “vibrant” must be qualified. Based on relatively unsystematic observations, a number of scholars have pointed to the proliferation of student religious clubs and organizations and high student interest in religious studies courses and concluded that the university is “a breeding ground for vital religious practice and teaching” (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001:13). While student surveys showing high levels of self-reported belief and interest in religion and spirituality lend support to these claims, evidence showing that sustained investment in religion occurs only among a much smaller number of students should caution us against making this characterization too broadly. At the same time, the old assumption that religion and higher education are necessarily at odds must be discarded as well.

Finally, there is little evidence to support the claim, widespread in the popular media (e.g., Finder 2007; Swidey 2003; Taylor 2006), that students today are experiencing a surge in religious fervor. A few historical studies of collegiate religion exist (e.g., Goldsen et al. 1960; Hoge 1974; Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977; Hoge, Hoge, and Wittenberg 1987), but they have methodological limitations that make them poor comparisons with today’s large-scale surveys of multiple universities. They also cannot provide a convincing answer to the question of whether students today are more interested and invested in religion than students 50 years ago, or whether today’s colleges simply admit more students from groups that tend to be more outwardly religious, such as blacks, women, Catholics, and evangelicals (Schmalzbauer 2003; Sherkat 2007). Existing historical work, in short, provides very limited grounds on which to say whether students might be more religious today.

THE EFFECT OF COLLEGE ON STUDENT RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS

Researchers have long been interested in how college attendance affects the religious beliefs and practices of students. Yet while this is one of the most longstanding areas of inquiry, it is also one of the most currently active, and a flurry of recent research has led to the reevaluation of some cherished assumptions. In general, research in this area reveals that attending college does not, as was previously thought, inevitably lead to apostasy; in fact, recent work suggests that college may actually have the effect of preserving belief among some students. However, research has not provided a compelling answer to the question of how the college experience affects the *content* of religious beliefs.

Review

Until very recently, it was generally held that attending college tended to undermine religious faith. Studies from the 1970s and 1980s describe college as “a breeding ground for apostasy” (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977:109) and declare it to be “a well-established fact that education, even Christian education, secularizes” (Hunter 1983:132). The expanded horizons and exposure to new ideas that college provides were thought to lead students to question and ultimately abandon their traditional religious beliefs (e.g., Feldman and Newcomb 1969; Hadaway and Roof 1988). However, more recent work has called this assumption into serious question (for reviews, see Hartley 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Studies demonstrate that rates of religious practice decline precipitously in college. A longitudinal study of over 30,000 seniors at 118 colleges found that students discussed religion less often, attended services less frequently, and considered themselves less religious relative to their peers than they did at the beginning of their freshman year (Saenz and Barrera 2007). Alyssa Bryant and colleagues (2003:732), using data from two surveys featuring a sample of 3,680 students from 50 colleges and universities, similarly found that students “were less likely to attend religious services, discuss religion, and pray or meditate at the end of the first year of college relative to when they entered.” Attendance at religious services appears to be particularly hard-hit: Uecker and colleagues (2007:1683) report that nearly two-thirds of students attending a four-year institution scale back on their church attendance, although they caution that this decline may be more attributable to “the late-night orientation of college life; organized religion’s emphasis on other age groups . . . and collective norms about appearing ‘too religious’” than to the effect of college *per se*.

While evidence strongly suggests that religious practice declines during the college years, there is far less consensus about the effect of college on student belief. Although there is agreement that college is not as much of a “faith-killer” as was previously thought, two competing schools of thought have emerged about what happens to religious belief in college. One school holds that most students’ religious beliefs are largely unaffected by the college experience. A recent HERI survey of over 38,000 rising sophomores revealed that 56 percent reported “no change” in their religious beliefs and convictions since the beginning of college (Hurtado et al. 2007); a survey of students at New York University likewise found that over half reported no change in their religious beliefs and convictions (Lee et al. 2006).⁴ Tim Clydesdale’s (2007) study of 125 teens before and after freshman year found that the majority of college students place their religious identities—along with their political, gender, race, and civic identities—in an “identity lockbox” before entering college, essentially leaving them unexamined and unquestioned during

⁴ Several of these studies, while confirming that there is little change in belief for the majority of students, suggest that to the extent that change occurs, students appear just as, if not more, likely to grow *stronger* in their faith during college (Lee 2002b; Hurtado et al. 2007).

their freshman year. Most college students, he claims, are semi-religious and view religion like vegetables—as something that is “good for you” but that can be reserved for use later in life.

Perhaps the most intriguing work along these lines is a recent article by Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007). The authors argue, using longitudinal data from the Add Health data set, that attending a four-year college actually appears to *reduce* rates of religious decline. Their analysis shows that those individuals who opt out of college are more likely to experience declines in three types of religiosity—religious practice, self-reported importance of religion, and affiliation with religion—than those who ever attended college. Their work suggests that college may in fact serve as a spiritual prophylactic for many students, possibly because college campuses, with their many religious organizations and commitment to religious tolerance, are “often less hostile to organized religious expression and its retention than are other contexts encountered by emerging adults, such as their workplaces” (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007:1684).

By contrast, a second school of thought argues that, while students are likely to retain their overall orientation to religion, the content of their beliefs is transformed. Studies from before 1990 indicated that “religious beliefs became more individual and less doctrinaire, and tolerance for the religious views of others appeared to increase” (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005:284). None of the more recent studies has directly challenged this observation, while several others—largely qualitative studies—provide some confirming evidence. Cherry and colleagues (2001), in their ethnographic survey of four college campuses, found that students tended to identify as “spiritual” rather than “religious,” and to engage in a form of seeking that went far beyond familiar institutional forms of religion. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) found a decrease in students’ religious practices but an increase in how interested they were in integrating spirituality into their lives. And drawing on interviews with four Catholic students, Lee (2002a) found that academic and social encounters on college campuses caused students to reevaluate their beliefs, but not to abandon their faith. These studies provide great depth and nuance, but typically lack the breadth of the large-scale surveys. As a consequence it is unclear exactly what proportion of students experiences these transformations.

Evaluation

College’s effects on student religiosity are mixed. Studies repeatedly show that students become less religious on traditional indicators of religious practice over the course of their collegiate careers, though the extent to which this is an effect of college *per se* is unclear. Research does not show such a clear-cut effect when it comes to student belief, however. It is now increasingly clear that college attendance does not inevitably create apostasy among most students. However, exactly what happens to college students’ beliefs remains unclear. The terms of the debate have shifted: the question is now less about whether students’ religious commitments are maintained or abandoned, and more about whether they are ignored or reconstituted during the college years.

While these two schools of thought are contradictory, they are not necessarily irreconcilable. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the divergent conclusions drawn by these two schools of thought may be the result of different sampling. Perhaps those students whose beliefs are transformed make up a distinct subset of the overall collegiate population, and the mostly qualitative studies that have found change have focused inordinately on those predisposed to transformation. Or, alternatively, perhaps large-scale surveys with questions couched at a more general level fail to pick up on these more subtle differences in belief over time. Detailed, multimethod approaches that explore the content of student beliefs across the course of college can adjudicate among these hypotheses.

Finally, studies of the effect of college on student religiosity are hampered by their failure to incorporate strong comparative designs that allow researchers to isolate the specific impact of

college attendance. Amazingly, studies of this sort are virtually nonexistent. Most studies look exclusively at a collegiate population, with no outside comparisons. However, as Uecker and colleagues (2007) note, there are compelling demographic explanations that provide an alternative explanation for declining religious participation. Their study comparing college students and noncollege students is exemplary because it isolates the independent impact of college attendance on student belief. Future studies would do well to take it as a template, taking care to compare college students with those who do not attend college as a check against demographic counterexplanations.

RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

A final line of research investigates how students' religious commitments affect various academic and personal outcomes. In general, this line of research has focused on three main areas: academic achievement; personal growth, maturation, and emotional well-being; and social activities such as alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, and partying. Religion appears to be positively associated with student satisfaction and a variety of prosocial behaviors. At the same time, religion's effect on academic performance and emotional well-being appears to be mixed or minimal. Many extant studies have methodological drawbacks that make it difficult to draw strong conclusions about the effect of religion on student outcomes.

Review

Although studies of high school students regularly show a positive relationship between religiosity and academic success (Regnerus 2000; Smith and Denton 2005), it is not clear that this effect continues into college. Many of the studies showing a positive effect must be qualified. The strongest of these, Margarita Mooney's (2005) analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, a study of over 4,000 undergraduates at 28 selective colleges and universities, found that students who regularly attended religious services during their senior year of high school had higher GPAs in college than those who attended less than once a week, even after controlling for income, gender, race, and high school achievement. However, her data set unfortunately does not include a measure for religious attendance *during college*, weakening her otherwise robust finding. Other studies showing a relationship between religious belief and participation and higher GPA rely on small samples with limited cross-generalizability and few, if any, controls for external influences (Walker and Dixon 2002; Zern 1989). Moreover, even where findings show a correlation between achievement and religiosity, it is often difficult to determine the direction of that relationship. For example, based on data from a nationwide sample of college freshmen, Alyssa Bryant (2007:11) found only a minimal correlation between religion and academic success, and concluded that the "religious group participants succeed academically in the first year of college because they arrive at college exhibiting promising academic records."

Other studies paint an even less salutary picture. To begin, several studies have suggested that fundamentalist beliefs (such as belief in biblical inerrancy) can hinder academic attainment. For example, the children of fundamentalist parents are less likely to take college preparatory classes in high school, and the impact is much stronger for daughters than for sons (Sherkat and Darnell 1999).⁵ Consequently, longitudinal studies show that fundamentalists attain less education than their nonfundamentalist peers (Darnell and Sherkat 1997). Other studies suggest that too much religion can be a bad thing. Alyssa Bryant (2004) found that some of the evangelical students

⁵ Glass and Jacobs (2005) similarly find that childhood religious conservatism has a strong negative impact on later educational attainment for both black and white non-Hispanic women.

she interviewed devoted so much time to their religious commitments that their studying time suffered. A similar dynamic may be behind a study showing that religious participation decreased the likelihood of reenrolling as a sophomore (Sax et al. 2002). In short, it is not currently possible to assert that students as a whole do better academically when they are more religiously involved.

A second area of research looks at the effect of religiosity on students' emotional well-being. Here, the findings are decidedly mixed. One survey of over 3,600 freshmen observed a negative correlation between emotional well-being and participation in student religious groups, and found that "the only reason participating in religious groups does not boast a stronger negative correlation with emotional well-being is because these students tend to develop friendship networks that are ultimately beneficial for them" (Bryant 2007:12). By contrast, a study of 14,521 college students using the National College Alcohol Study data set found that those who reported being at least somewhat religious experienced fewer symptoms of depression than those who declared themselves not religious, but it did not control for any outside factors (Phillips and Henderson 2006). Small, single-campus surveys likewise paint a mixed picture. On the one hand, students who found meaning in religion coped better with stressors than those who did not (Pollard and Bates 2004), while religiosity promoted well-being among black students, but not white students (Blaine and Crocker 1995). On the other hand, students who were more involved in spirituality reported higher levels of personal distress (Schafer 1997) and tended to have higher levels of stress and anger and were less likely to try to control their anger (Winterowd et al. 2005). Reflecting on these discrepant findings, Bryant (2007) argues that it is possible that religious communities attract emotionally distressed students, and that these communities challenge them to think deeply and to have critical discussions about their place in the world. Students may, thus, experience low levels of emotional well-being while at the same time finding emotional support in religious groups. Her hypothesis receives some support from qualitative studies, which have shown that participation in religious communities provides an important source of support during times of stress and distress (Bryant 2004; Constantine et al. 2006).

A more consistent finding is that spiritual engagement appears to enhance students' satisfaction with their college experiences, both in and out of class. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which surveyed almost 150,000 students at 461 colleges, Kuh and Gonyea (2006:44) found that students who participated in "spiritually enhancing practices" such as worship, meditation, and prayer were "somewhat more satisfied with college and view the out-of-class environment more positively." Similarly, Mooney (2005) found that students who described themselves as more religiously observant and those who attended religious services more frequently in high school reported being significantly more satisfied with college.

Finally, scholars have also been interested in the relationship between religiosity and perceived risky behaviors such as partying, sexual behavior, alcohol and drug use. Generally speaking, large-scale surveys have found that higher rates of religiosity correlate with lower rates of participation in risky behaviors. Astin (1993) found that religiosity was a strong negative predictor of the "hedonistic" student (i.e., one who drinks, smokes, favors the legalization of marijuana, and parties frequently). Mooney (2005) similarly found that religious students spent less time partying than nonreligious students, while Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007:1677) found that three forms of religious decline—religious practice, religious salience, and disaffiliation from religion—correlated with "religiously suspect behaviors, most notably premarital sex and smoking marijuana" among college-aged students. Studies making use of smaller and less cross-generalizable samples tell a similar story. Bell, Wechsler, and Johnston (1997) found that students for whom religion was "not very important" were three times more likely to use marijuana than those for whom religion was "very important," while Perkins (1994) found a strong inverse relationship between drinking and drug use and religiosity, especially among women. However, Nagel and Sgoutas-Emch (2007) found that although students who attended church at least once a week drank less alcohol than those who attended less frequently, they did not smoke

less or use drugs less often. While religiosity appears to have a negative effect on risky behaviors, a handful of studies have found a positive relationship between various religious attributes and prosocial behaviors such as ethical decision making (Kennedy and Lawton 1998; Perrin 2000), knowledge and tolerance of other races and cultures after the first year of college (Bryant 2007), participation in extracurricular activities (Kuh and Gonyea 2006), and propensity to volunteer (Ozorak 2003).

Evaluation

Making sense of the studies conducted in this area is a difficult proposition. While there are many studies of student outcomes, few are convincing. The clearest and most consistent findings are that religious students appear to be more satisfied with their college experience, while being less likely to engage in drinking, drugs, and partying. Religiosity also associates positively with a loose nebula of prosocial outcomes. On the other hand, research does not convincingly show that religious students do better academically or have greater emotional well-being—in fact, some of the better studies seem to indicate that religiousness and emotional well-being may in fact be *negatively* correlated. In sum, religion's effect on student outcomes is probably best described as mildly but inconsistently positive.

Methodologically speaking, this is the weakest area of research of the three. In fact, it seems likely that methodological weakness is a major contributing factor to the intriguingly mixed findings in this area. To the extent that religion has been shown to correlate with positive outcomes, it has largely failed to demonstrate that religiosity causes those positive outcomes. Many psychological studies use small and nonsystematic samples and measure religiosity in scalar measures that obscure the potential mechanisms through which religion might have influence. Larger-scale studies, whether qualitative or quantitative, often do not provide controls for participation in nonreligious activities, leaving open the possibility that positive outcomes are the result of social support in general, rather than specifically the contribution of religion *per se*. In particular, too few studies pay attention to peer effects, even though these are potentially quite influential (Cornwall 1989; Ozorak 1989). For example, Bryant (2007) found that having a strong friendship network actually diminishes some of the negative effects of religious participation on emotional well-being. As a consequence of these oversights, the independent contribution of religion to the college experience remains obscure.

Methodological improvements will help to resolve many of these inconsistent findings, but this area is also in need of more synthetic research. The various studies in this field are considerably disjointed and rarely refer to one another. We have few explanations for why religion might exert a beneficial effect on some outcomes but not others. Relatedly, we do not have much sense of whether religion influences outcomes through particular pathways. A whole host of different independent variables—belief in God, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer, participation in religious organizations, self-reported religiosity—have been used to measure student religiosity, yet their relative effects have not been tested against one another. Future studies should explore student outcomes as a whole, and attempt to explain why religion matters more for some outcomes than others, and through which channels.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this final section, we take a step back in order to identify some larger shortcomings of work on religion and higher education, and suggest new research that might be undertaken to address them. We argue that the field of studies of religion and higher education as a whole needs to develop better measures of spirituality and religiosity, put studies of adolescents and college

students into dialogue, and pay greater attention to the institutional contexts of students' religious commitments.

Developing Better Measures of Spirituality and Religiosity

One goal of future research should be to paint a more nuanced picture of the many facets of student religiosity and spirituality, and to explore what practical effects those different facets may have on students' collegiate experiences. Currently, most surveys of college students tend to use traditional indicators of religiosity such as belief in God and worship attendance. While these measures tell us much about the broad contours of religious and spiritual life on campus, they also risk obscuring a richer portrait of students' religious engagements and how they interact with the college environment. Spirituality and religion are terms with porous boundaries and myriad potential meanings (Bender 2007), understood differently across different religious and cultural groups (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Consequently, surveys that study students' self-reported "religiousness" or "spirituality" in an undifferentiated fashion risk obscuring potential mechanisms through which religion might exert an influence. Developing more specific measures of belief and practice that would allow small but consequential differences among students to be more clearly observed is a key challenge for scholars working in this field.

We do not propose here to develop a definitive list of relevant measures, but we do offer some possibilities. Rather than simply asking whether students believe in God, for example, scholars could ask as well about how students conceive of God (as a judge, as an impersonal force or "energy," as someone actively involved in the workings of individuals' lives, as a distant creator) and how or whether one "knows" or communicates with the divine (through prayer, through works, through meditation, etc.). Rather than simply asking whether students attend religious services or pray, they might also ask in what types of settings they worship (parachurch groups, traditional churches, small study groups) or when they pray (in class, while volunteering, during exam periods, during times of stress, before going to bed, etc.). Rather than simply asking for a denominational affiliation, scholars could additionally ask a number of questions about specific beliefs (in biblical literalism, prophecy and revelation, speaking in tongues, the truth of other religions, the rapture, the prerequisites for salvation, the importance of evangelism, the nature of heaven and hell, the purpose of life on earth, etc.). In the end, good interview-based studies will be essential to determine which specific questions to ask of students. But the payoff in attending to such nuanced measures would undoubtedly be the identification of a more complex and interesting pattern of beliefs and practices among college students.

Using more nuanced survey instruments will undoubtedly provide new and important insights into the two major lines of research identified in the review above, *viz.* what happens to students' beliefs in college, and how religion works to influence student outcomes. As discussed above, a major unresolved issue pertains to whether beliefs remain unchanged or become transformed. Longitudinal studies using fine-grained measures of students' beliefs are a logical means of assessing this question. Students' beliefs are known to become transformed in a more tolerant direction on other issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005), for instance; investigating to what extent this trend applies to religion through the use of measures of belief sensitive to religious tolerance (as opposed to simple measures of belief in God, for example) would be a logical direction for further inquiry. And, as discussed above, although studies of student religion and college outcomes have used a wide array of independent variables to measure "religiosity," few have attempted to compare the effects of different measures. More deliberate survey design, using more complicated measures of religiosity and spirituality, and testing multiple independent variables against one another, has the potential to improve our understanding of the mechanisms whereby religion affects student outcomes.

Connecting Studies of Adolescents and College Students

Recently, there has been a renaissance in studies of religion among adolescents (e.g., Regnerus 2007; Smith and Denton 2005), which have shown that, by and large, adolescents lead lives in which religion plays an important and frequently positive role. These studies offer a natural and interesting comparison to existing studies of college students, which, as we have shown, tend to paint a more complex picture regarding beliefs, practices, and influences. One important new direction for research, therefore, is to put these two literatures in dialogue, identify points of convergence and divergence, and explain whether, why, and how religion functions differently in the lives of teenagers as opposed to college students.

Several points of contrast immediately suggest themselves. First is the question of whether students' orientation to religion and spirituality undergoes a change as the result of the college experience. As discussed above, one school of thought holds that students' beliefs are transformed by the college experience, generating students more likely to identify as "spiritual but not religious" or more likely to see themselves as active agents piecing together spiritual meaning (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Lee 2002a). These observations clash with existing studies of high school students, who typically appear highly conventional in their religious beliefs, and exhibit no tendency toward spiritual "seeking" or "questing." In their nationwide survey of the religious lives of teenagers, Smith and Denton (2005) found that most teenagers aged 13–17 adopt their parents' religion and very few claim to be spiritual seekers. Only a very small percentage of adolescents appear to undergo dramatic increases or decreases in religiosity (Regnerus and Uecker 2006). Nor do most teenagers appear to be deeply engaged with their faith; religion tends to function for them as a taken-for-granted backdrop to life, rather than as a central aspect of their experience, and they tend to have a difficult time articulating "what they believe, what it means, and what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives" (Smith and Denton 2005:262). Given that college freshmen can also have difficulty articulating their religious beliefs in a meaningful fashion (Clydesdale 2007), future studies should attempt to explain what impact (if any) college has on creating "spiritual seekers," as well as to identify any identifiable pathways (such as, for example, decreased attendance at traditional religious services) by which college students might transform from conventionally religious to "spiritual but not religious."

Second, studies of adolescents show that more religiously engaged teens do better on a wide range of outcomes, in many respects parallel to those described above, such that "the consistency across outcomes is truly striking" (Smith and Denton 2005:232). Relative to this, the far less consistent pattern of outcomes for college students is similarly striking. Particularly perplexing, should it stand up to further study, is the apparent disappearance of a clear positive impact of religion on academic performance. Future research should try to understand whether this inconsistency is simply the artifact of study design, or whether it reflects deep and significant differences in how religion "works" in the lives of teens and college students.

Theoretically, it is not clear why religion's robust effect on outcomes should weaken among college students. A starting point for theorizing these differences is the work of Christian Smith (2003). Smith proposes nine factors that are thought to drive how religion exerts positive effects on adolescent spirituality: moral directives, spiritual experiences, role models, community and leadership skills, coping skills, cultural capital, social capital, network closure, and extracommunity links. It is possible that some of these factors might be attenuated in certain instances by the college setting. We draw attention to four in particular: cultural capital, role models, social capital, and network closure. The beneficial effects of the cultural capital accrued in religious organizations might be less strong in a collegiate environment where a higher percentage of the student body is equipped with a higher degree of cultural capital. It might also be that different types of cultural capital (such as scientific research skills) not readily available in religious organizations assume greater importance in the collegiate setting. Similarly, the transplanting of students from their teenage congregation to the college setting likely will have disruptive and transformative

effects upon the role models available to students, the type of social capital generated, and the extent to which network closure is relevant. Many collegiate religious organizations are more age-stratified than typical congregations (Cawthon and Jones 2004), for example, reducing the hypothesized beneficial effects of intergenerational interaction and increasing the likelihood that role models will be derived from peer-group members. And lesser network closure (along with distance from home) might reduce the salutary monitoring and supervisory effects of the religious congregation.

Beyond these effects, future research should also consider how additional factors germane to the college experience provide different pathways through which religiosity affects college students. For example, parents have a dominant influence on adolescent religiosity (Smith and Denton 2005), yet peer groups are thought to exert a dominant influence on college students (Feldman and Newcomb 1969). Studies might also look at whether the religious beliefs and organizations of college students differ qualitatively from those of adolescents. Well-designed, discerning measures of religion and spirituality would be essential here as well to elucidate the means whereby religion might function differently in the college setting.

Situating College Students in Their Institutional Context

Most social scientific studies of religion and higher education have the unfortunate tendency of decontextualizing the students that they study. Many studies—especially quantitative surveys—appear to assume that all colleges are the same and that their effects are uniform on students. Equally problematic, the idea that students' religious beliefs and practices might act back upon the institutions in which they live and study appears never occurred to many researchers, so rare are the studies that look at this dynamic. While we believe, as discussed above, that it is important to isolate the independent effect of higher education on student beliefs and practices, we also believe that scholars must pay more attention to how specific institutional contexts interact with the religious engagements of undergraduate students.

One of the major drawbacks of studies of religion and higher education is a failure to distinguish among different types of colleges. "Colleges and universities" are often treated as an undifferentiated category, even though there are considerable reasons to believe they should not be. Qualitative studies have shown considerable variation in the religious "climate" of public, private, and religiously affiliated campuses (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Freitas 2008). Surveys of faculty have shown that professors at more elite institutions are far more irreligious than their colleagues at community colleges (Gross and Simmons 2007). And conservative Christian colleges often craft their organization and curriculum specifically to help students retain their faith (Wolfe 2006). All of these observations suggest that treating "colleges" as an undifferentiated category is problematic. A few pioneering comparative studies seem to confirm this: relative to their peers at nonsectarian public and private colleges, students attending colleges with a religious affiliation tend to be more religiously engaged (Gonyea and Kuh 2006) but also to struggle more with their spirituality (Bryant and Astin 2008).

There is much basic work to be done on understanding how the role and position of religion varies on different types of campuses. Public and private universities; large and small schools; elite research universities, teaching colleges, and community colleges; and urban and rural campuses are differences that immediately suggest themselves as axes of comparison. Basic, baseline comparative studies are needed here, since we know little of how the religious composition and organization of religious life varies on these different types of campuses, let alone how these campus cultures might influence students' religious commitments. Do denominational colleges improve students' ability to retain their beliefs? Do students at elite universities "lose their religion" to a greater extent than those in community colleges? Diversifying our approach to "colleges" holds the potential to answer these and other important questions.

A second means of bringing the collegiate context back in is to look at how students' religious engagements have in turn transformed their learning environments. The growth of religious diversity on college campuses poses particularly urgent questions and potential new lines of inquiry for scholars. New research should focus on how the needs and understandings of non-Christian groups challenge the norms of colleges and universities. For example, we know that religiously based conflicts occur on college campuses around the country (Jaschik 2006; Lewin 2007), yet we have no idea how widespread these are, how they are resolved, or what effects such conflicts have on interfaith relations. We also know that many universities have made or been asked to make administrative changes to accommodate the increased number of religious groups on campus (e.g., Mubarak 2007; Nasir and al-Amin 2006), but we know little of how these have been resolved. How have conflicts between religious observances and examination schedules, for instance, been accommodated? Have these accommodations varied by institutional type, and to what effect? Systematic studies of such conflicts and accommodations would help identify the scope and frequency of such interactions, and in-depth case studies would provide valuable insight into the dynamics of the religiously pluralistic campus.

CONCLUSION

Religion plays a larger role on colleges and universities than it is often given credit for. Students have extensive religious and spiritual commitments, though for many students they may not be a priority during college. Religious practice declines during the college years, yet religious beliefs appear to be maintained—though exactly what happens to them is a source of considerable debate. Religion appears to exert a positive influence on students' lives in some respects, though it does not convincingly appear to improve students' academic performance or emotional well-being. While there has been increased scholarly interest in religion on campus in recent years, the amount of high-quality research remains low relative to the scope and urgency of the debates. Improved methods can help clarify ambiguities in existing research traditions, while new research into the demographic and institutional contexts of student religious engagements would greatly enhance our understanding of the role of religion in the academy.

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