2018

Religious Identity Formation: Constraints Imposed on Religious Institutions and Implications for the Meaning of Religious Affiliation

Marc von der Ruhr
St. Norbert College

Paul Ngo
St. Norbert College

Joseph Daniels
Marquette University, joseph.daniels@marquette.edu

Religious Identity Formation: Constraints Imposed on Religious Institutions and Implications for the Meaning of Religious Affiliation

Marc von der Ruhr

St. Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

Paul Ngo

St. Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

Joseph Daniels

Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Abstract

Religiosity in the United States remains a strong social force. The United States persistently demonstrates higher religious participation than Europe. Some recent trends documented by the Pew Research Center in its 2008 and 2015 publications on the U.S. religious landscape, however, cite evidence that different religious groups are experiencing very different trends in participation. These trends show a recent and significant decline among many moderate Protestant denominations but a modest increase in participation at fundamentalist churches. The Pew Research Center similarly documents significant inconsistencies between what a religious hierarchy teaches versus what individuals personally choose to believe. For example, and perhaps most strikingly, one-half of Christians believe that non-Christian religions can lead to salvation. This finding presents a significant challenge to a religious hierarchy: will members of the church actually embrace and live what the church teaches? Another implication is to argue that an "us" versus "them" perspective with respect to religion is counterproductive and can lead to increased tension between faith traditions and the members of those faith traditions. This paper appeals to an interdisciplinary approach in order to help better understand the factors that explain these trends. This paper suggests that religious identity is personal and a consequence of a myriad of potentially interactive factors that leave traditional measures and definitions of religious identity poorly suited to the study of religious behavior.

The United States is a predominantly Christian nation, though it has great religious diversity. What does it mean to be Christian, even if we leave denominational affiliation aside? Ask a number of Christians, and the key factors that they associate with "being Christian" are likely to differ. In fact, Froese and Bader (2010) clearly show that self-identification via religious affiliation can mean very different things to Christians across all denominations. The Pew Research Center (2015) similarly documents significant inconsistencies between what a religious hierarchy teaches versus what individuals personally choose to believe. For example, and perhaps most strikingly, one-half of Christians believe that non-Christian religions can lead to salvation.

This paper suggests that an interdisciplinary approach can help explain such contradictions between a religious group's teachings and the personally held beliefs and self-identification of its individual members. We suggest that religious identity is personal and a consequence of a myriad of potentially interactive factors that leave traditional measures and definitions of religious identity poorly suited to the study of religious behavior. Among the implications of this outcome are: 1) religious hierarchies face significant challenges in ensuring that members of their religion actually hold a common set of beliefs regarding the religion's teachings, and 2) what members of a religion know about each other's beliefs or about the beliefs of members of another religion based on religious affiliation may be very misguided.

QUESTIONING THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Recent research suggests that traditional measures of religious identity may not offer much information about a person's religious beliefs, religious identity, or how they view other individuals' religious identity. For sociologist Andrew Greeley, God serves as a foundation of our worldview (Froese and Bader, 2010: 8). Consequently, what kind of God we believe in is very important. We would likely tend to think that the hierarchy and teachings of a particular religion or denomination would dictate the understanding of God within that religion or denomination. Recent research, however, calls this assumption into question.

Froese and Bader (2010) argue that far more than many other personal characteristics, including one's religious identity as indicated by the church of membership, one's responses to two questions do an excellent job of explaining many of our worldviews. These two questions are:

1. To what extent does God interact with the world?
2. To what extent does God judge the world?

The responses to these two questions lead to four categories of how a person views a God. They are (percent of survey responses are given following each category):

The Authoritative God: both engaged and judgmental, 31 percent

The Benevolent God: engaged but not judgmental, 24 percent

The Critical God: disengaged but judgmental, 16 percent

The Distant God: disengaged and non-judgmental, 24 percent

Froese and Bader (2010: 51) note,

> But within several religious traditions, there are high levels of disagreement about God. Consequently, saying someone is a Roman Catholic tells you virtually nothing about his image of God. The same is true of Americans in mainline Protestant denominations; their beliefs are spread equally across all God types.

They comment that one's God reflects something essential about oneself. This idea brings into question whether we form an image of God based on what we are taught (a top down logic) versus a more personal (bottom up logic) approach. Consequently, when we draw a conclusion about what someone believes or is motivated to do based on his or her religious affiliation, we take the very real risk that we arrive at an incorrect conclusion.

These results, in turn, open the door to considering research on the stages of faith development. We know that children combine fragments of stories and images given by their culture, so our initial introduction can have a lasting impact on us. Once an image has been introduced, it takes on a life of its own as many factors influence the view of a God we have and impose on others. We will later delve into Justin Barrett's work in cognitive science to understand this process better. Further, we will see the role of confirmation bias as we see how beliefs about ourselves and others deepen in our worldview. Froese and Bader conclude that the traditional method of classifying people by religious affiliation tells us little of what they actually believe. Similarly, assuming we know much about another person's belief about God based on their religious affiliation may likely be very wrong.

An interesting consequence in light of this finding is that there is a decreased need to adhere to the doctrines and dogma of a religion. So, it seems that to believe that someone's identification as belonging to a particular religion tells us about their personal beliefs on any range of topics because we know what the religion's teachings are may well be incorrect.

The authors go on to comment that we also choose churches in order to be with people like us. As a result, we choose to belong to churches based on the personal

characteristics of others who attend services of that church, yet the personal characteristics may not reflect the public nature of the teachings of that church.

This outcome is strongly related to work by Iannaccone and Makowsky and (2007) on the "accidental atheist." They point out that we have high labor mobility in the United States and have for some time had persistent religious identity across various regions in the United States, which seems odd if one maintains their religious identity after moving. For example, the Pacific Northwest has traditionally remained largely non-religious, and the South has traditionally remained strongly Baptist despite the fact that people move across the nation. The implication has been that they change their religious affiliation to accommodate that of their region/their neighbors. And while data have generally reflected this conclusion for quite some time, the most recent Pew research (2015) on the U.S. religious landscape offers reasons to revisit this thinking, as some of those entrenched religious affiliations are currently changing.

We believe that the nature of practiced religion is changing in the United States such that a segment of the population, generally associated with fundamentalist religions, reflects a traditional approach to practicing religion in which adherents follow the top down teaching of the church and look to their religion for absolute guidance regarding how to live a virtuous life. Another segment of the population views religion as a way to bring people together and looks for moral guidance from sources beyond the church. For these people, choosing a personalized religion or engaging in religious switching is likely much more of an option than for the previous group. These observations are consistent with Iannaccone's (1994) explanation that strict churches are strong while churches in the theological middle-ground (for example, moderate Protestant) will be weak. The logic behind this conclusion is that people will only attend a "strict" church (requiring significant sacrifice or stigma) if they are fully committed; thus, the church will be strong. Those that are not fully committed may associate with a more moderate church but not be fully devoted to it. Hence, the church stands to weaken from quasi-commitment.

The work by Froese and Bader suggests that people are inclined to think of a God in their own way (bottom up) rather than as a hierarchy dictates (top down). The Pew Foundation regularly conducts surveys of the U.S. religious landscape. Results of the 2014 survey (Pew Research Center 2015, which revisits the same survey conducted in 2007 [Pew Research Center 2008]) show a remarkable change in the U.S. religious marketplace. These results are not unique to the Pew study, as evidenced by Kosmin and Keysar's (2006) work. Taken together, these trends clearly indicate a significant challenge a religious hierarchy will face as it attempts to create a universal identity across its adherents.

Highlights of the changes between 2007 and 2014 include the following. The percent of the population self-identifying as Christian has fallen by 7.8 percent.

Mainline Protestantism has declined the most. Historically Black faith traditions have remained relatively stable, with a modest increase. There has been a modest rise in evangelical Protestantism, and Catholicism has declined, despite a Hispanic influx.

The percent identifying as "Unaffiliated" has risen by 6.7 percent (the largest portion of this increase is to the category of "Nothing in particular," which rose by 3.7 percent; the other two categories are atheist or agnostic), and the mean age of this category has fallen from thirty-eight to thirty-six in the course of the seven years. Last, non-Christian faiths grew by 1.2 percent.

These results consequently prompt us to consider research on religious switching. If we consider all Protestants as a single group, the percent of American adults that have switched religious affiliation is 34 percent. If we treat Protestant denominations as distinct, this switching rises to 42 percent.

Other highlights include that the percentage of college graduates who identify as Christian has fallen from 73 percent to 64 percent. We also see declines in religious behavior in many categories: belief in God fell from 92 percent to 89 percent, praying daily fell from 58 percent to 55 percent, regarding religion as very important fell from 56 percent to 53 percent, and attending services at least monthly fell from 54 percent to 50 percent.

Other measures of spirituality rose, however, such as self-defined spiritual peace and well-being, from 52 percent to 59 percent, and a sense of wonder about the universe from 39 percent to 46 percent. Further, among all Christians, the acceptance of homosexuality has risen from 44 percent to 54 percent. We also see that a greater percentage of the respondents agree that churches and religious institutions do more to bring people together (89 percent) than protect and strengthen morality in society (75 percent). This finding is likely to shock religious hierarchies. Is church becoming less about morality and more about social support? Of course, these functions are not mutually exclusive, but if the reason why people attend church changes so drastically in favor of one over another, the nature of the role of religion today is different than a generation ago (our discussion of identity will comment on these trends, as well).

Borrowing from economics, we speculate that religious intermarriage will be rare in an effort to maintain religious capital. The data show that religious intermarriage is on the rise. Of those Americans who got married since 2010, 39 percent are in mixed-religion marriages. For those married before 1960, this proportion was only 19 percent.

Thoughts about the afterlife are also a major theme in religious behavior. Among Christians, two-thirds believe many religions can lead to salvation. Further, 50 percent say non-Christian religions can lead to salvation (68 percent of Catholics and 65 percent of mainline Protestants).

Religion also competes with other forces when people look for guidance on questions of right and wrong (see Table 1).

Table 1: Guidance on Questions of Right and Wrong

	Percentage of Total	Percentage of People Who Affiliate Religiously
Religion	33	41
Philosophy	11	9
Common Sense	45	41
Science	9	7

If we borrow from Haidt's (2012) discussion of moral psychology and the role of tribalism, it is not hard to see how, for many religions, people of the same religion (or tribe) have preferred status over people identifying with a different religion (or tribe). As Putnam and Campbell (2010) point out, however, we all know of our "Aunt Sally" or our "Friend Al" who belongs to a different religion, but we know them so well and as such good people that we must afford them preferred status as well. Thus, people draw from many sources their opinions of right and wrong, or good and bad.

With this explanation in mind, do we live in a world of privatized religion? In other words, do we take aspects of the teaching of a church, but end up selectively following its doctrine so as to afford ourselves the identity we want for ourselves and for our church? Also, do we engage in similar selectivity of facts when we create images of others, for those we like and those we do not? In the end, are we logically consistent in how we apply standards across people and across faith traditions?

Christoforou and Davis (2014) consider social capital, social identity, trust, and conflict in a very helpful manner when it comes to exploring religious identity. They begin by borrowing from Putnam and his work on bridging and bonding social capital. Simply put, bridging social capital refers to generating, say, trust between people of different groups. Bonding social capital deepens trust between people in the same group. So, depending on the type of social capital you and your group emphasize, trust and cooperation may work very differently between people of the same group or of different groups.

If we view an individual identifying with others, then that person's own identity is a function of others' identities. As a result, we can roughly correspond Putnam's social capital framework to social identity in the following manner. Borrowing from social psychology, identity can be achieved as relational identity and categorical identity. As the words suggest, relational identity is established through personal contact between people. Categorical identity is based on how a characteristic or set of characteristics define a group. And this categorization is the

key for this paper. If we believe that we can understand what people personally believe or act upon simply based on the category of religion to which they belong, combined with the data previous discussed, we may very well be wrong. In fact, not only may we be wrong, our beliefs could easily discourage us from interacting with someone of a different religious affiliation.

On the other hand, if we establish increasing amounts of our social identity via the relational approach, we are more likely to understand correctly what the other person believes and how he or she will act. We will see this relational approach studied in depth in the work of theologian Mara Brecht later in this paper as she studies a women's interreligious discussion group in Philadelphia. Christoforou and Davis (2014) note that when there is a perceived conflict, for example a tension between what we expect to see in another person based on category and what is actually seen, the person experiencing the cognitive dissonance may reorder the weight they place on various attributes (for example the religion to which the other person belongs) in order to minimize the dissonance. This reordering clearly relates back to "Aunt Sally" and "my friend Al".

We can also consider the "elephant and rider" (system 1 and system 2) idea. Borrowing from either Haidt (2012) or Kahneman (2011), our brains have two systems: System 1 (intuition, or the elephant) and System 2 (forced reasoning, or the rider of the elephant). Research indicates that we rely heavily on System 1 and on System 2 for less than we would like to think. Our moral judgments come from the elephant, and we backfill logic to support them. Thus, we are inclined to come to a quick judgment and then later rationalize a logic to support it. Further, research has documented a negativity bias in that we respond more strongly to bad things than good things. So, if we feel threatened by others, we will react more strongly in opposition to them than to the benefit perceived in others. Research in this area also shows that we tend to view our background as yielding deep insights, while others' backgrounds yields deep bias. If we extend this beyond the individual to groups, we get to a comment from Haidt's (2006: 71) book regarding the threat of naïve realism in which a person may say, "My group is right because we see things as they are. Those who disagree are obviously biased because of their religion…." The combined threat of high self-esteem and moral idealism makes it easier to act out more strongly against "others." If we are conscious of these tendencies, however, we can deliberately counter them.

Taken together, we are convinced of our own moral superiority and can be overwhelmingly critical, making us feel powerful. Our "inner lawyer" is skilled at finding reasons to support our gut feelings. We overestimate our own virtue and that of those close to us. And again, how we define those close to us, either relationally or categorically, is vital to reducing interreligious conflict and increasing interreligious cooperation. Consider this situation in light of a pluralistic society. We can argue that we need to transition from "kin altruism" to reciprocal

altruism where we consciously re-frame our identity to emphasize relational identity and minimize the role of categorical identity. We can also reference Haidt's (2016) TED Talk, in which he mentions that it is easier to convince members of Scandinavian societies to offer a generous welfare state due to the relatively homogenous nature of their society; the wedge between relational and social identity is minimal due to the homogeneity. If we transfer that kind of analysis to the United States, the diverse nature of the United States will make achieving such a welfare state harder. Then, if we refocus analysis on the diversity of religion in the United States, it is not difficult to see subsets of religions that will take an "us versus them" perspective towards other religions.

Daniels and von der Ruhr (2010) also validate this discussion of trust in their study of the relationship between religious affiliation, religiosity, and the trust of others. The basic idea is as follows: religion impacts attitudes, which in turn affect economic outcomes. Social capital can, and often does, afford good results. It can, however, increase stratification across groups. Their key findings suggest that Black Protestants, fundamentalist Protestants, and Catholics trust others less than those with no religious affiliation. This lack of trust is via affiliation with little religiosity effect. Liberal Protestants trust others more than those with no affiliation, and the religiosity effect enhances this trust. For moderate Protestants, the impact is not affiliation but rather religiosity. A time trend is negative and a significant reinforcing Putnam's thesis of lower social capital in recent history in the United States. These results offer interesting empirical evidence that can be interpreted to offer some support for our earlier comment on the changing nature of religion in the United States. For some of the fundamentalist churches, there may be a stronger emphasis on a set of views that correspond to what the religious hierarchy teaches. Thus, the members who are attracted to the church will likely stay with the church and adopt the church's teachings. For the other individuals that choose to affiliate, most likely loosely, we expect to see less of an emphasis on following church teaching and a great emphasis on the social aspect of belonging. This emphasis will also then lead to the trends in trusting others seen in the paper's analysis.

Consequently, we see that religion can impact trust or contribute to an "us versus them" mentality that can reinforce or counter other factors that create trust or distrust. At this point, it is fair to say that religious membership in a church and what that may reveal about how a person views his or her own identity in that church, other members' identities, or the implication for the identity of people belonging to another church serves as a noisy signal, at best.

We next consider research that focuses on people who loosely or nominally belong to a church. Voas and Day (2010) examine secular Christians. Rather than classifying people as Christian or non-Christian, they allow for a "fuzzy" middle ground, citing that roughly half of the people of Europe are neither self-consciously nonreligious nor regular churchgoers. They state that many Americans fit into the

same category. They note that objective measures of religious affiliation are becoming less important than self-identification. In fact, they argue that if one makes the case that religious people must accept specific matters of faith and know church doctrine, then only a subset of self-identifying Christians are truly Christian.

Their paper sets up a three-dimensional measure of religious participation (identify, believe, attend) that results in eight possible classifications of being Christian. These range from religious Christians, to nominal (fuzzy) Christians, to non-religious. As they discuss the worldview of secular Christians, they come to the conclusion that self-identifying as Christian may have little or nothing to do with religion.

If this conclusion is the case for Christianity in general, the conclusion is likely to be even more dramatic when it comes to various denominations under the umbrella of Christianity. Voas and Day (2010: 12) comment, "A characteristic tends to disappear from our self-descriptions as it loses social significance." This observation may be critical to considering the future of religion on the American landscape. Hand in hand with that note is what membership in a religion really broadcasts about a person and her/his personal beliefs and policy preferences. If it is the case that more and more people are personalizing their religious beliefs in a manner inconsistent with the teachings of the faith tradition to which they belong, does the association with a particular faith tradition truly reveal much of what a person actually believes?

A natural question to ask is whether the data reflects a new version of a secularization hypothesis. Religion is not going away, but it is reasonable to question whether it is being reshaped among much of the population into something different from that which religious hierarchies or those who belong to stricter religions would expect. As we outlined earlier, a subset of the churches that tend to be more fundamentalist maintain a more traditional form of top-down religious practice. The middle of the road churches are less strict and consequently see lesser attendance but increasingly reflect what larger numbers of Americans see church as providing to society, namely a social setting that they perceive requires less commitment than going to church required in the past.

This observation, and the data from Pew (2008, 2015), reflect Iannaccone's (1994) work on why strict churches are strong. Iannaccone theorizes that attending church is in some ways like belonging to a club. For economists, this comparison means that the satisfaction you derive from being in the club is not only a function of your effort to contribute but also of other people's efforts to contribute. For example, if you are in a book club and no one else reads the book, the group discussion is not very worthwhile. But if everyone has read the book, the discussion will likely be excellent. Thus, the model predicts that strict churches, which require significant sacrifice or stigma, will not attract free riders and consequently be strong churches. Ones that are not strict will attract free riders and as a result be less

successful. It seems the data reflect this model in the traditional sense of church. If we interpret the Pew (2008, 2015) data, however, to suggest that people are spiritual, but not in a traditional sense, these less strict churches likely have more people who philosophically agree with the "looser" standards but also do not support the churches as much with financial assistance and formal attendance at services.

DOES THIS ANALYSIS CALL FOR A NEW APPROACH TO DISCUSSIONS OF RELIGION?

Froese and Bader (2010: 43) tell the story of Mori. She is an immigrant from Japan married to a Christian in Texas, and she goes to church every Sunday. She does not believe in God, however. They also tell the story of Herbert, who talks to God regularly but does not belong to a church. If there are many versions of Mori and Herbert, we can ask whether our surveys designed to gauge religiosity in the United States really provide a realistic reflection of modern-day religiosity.

In this section, we extend the argument established previously to consider not just how individuals adjust their own or others' identities but how churches themselves change as the environment in which they exist and compete with other religions changes. We can return to Christoforou and Davis's (2014) paper on social identity both to look back to previous work on identity and to look ahead to new results found in the research. If we first look back, a seminal paper is work done by Akerloff and Kranton (2010).

The authors discuss West Point's R-day, at which cadets surrender their old selves in stages. The authors note that in standard economic models, preferences are fixed and utility depends on pecuniary variables. But we can consider how identity affects our utility. Akerloff and Kranton also note how organizations do better placing workers into jobs with which they identify. Identity functions as a supplement to monetary compensation; firms are better off hiring people who believe in the mission of the institution.

To elaborate on the idea of identity, consider the role of norms. Utility comes from a sense of tastes (preferences) but also the norms of society or how we are expected to behave. This model can be extended also to consider particular situations in which we find ourselves. We can also think about such contexts as belonging to a given social category, having an identity or self-image. In this way, utility functions can change because appropriate norms can change across space and time. Identity can then affect how we view ourselves as well as how we view others. Akerloff and Kranton's model is set up such that a person's utility depends, in part, on how well that person's behavior matches an expected norm of a social category.

The model can also be used to induce in-group attachment and out-group animosity, which again can be related to Christoforou and Davis's (2014) work considering relational versus categorical social identities. We can also note the role this identity plays in incentivizing a religion to inculcate a sense of belonging or identity early in a person's life so that there is a reason not to engage in religious switching later in life.

Davis (2007) extends Akerloff and Kranton's identity model beyond just a personal self-image to allow for a social image of oneself. In turn, this extension allows for multiple social identities in various dimensions of our complex lives. Extending Akerloff and Kranton in this manner to incorporate multiple identities also allows for a tension to develop between personal identity and social identity. In particular, this framework can be used to explain evidence from the literature in psychology suggesting that when we experience conflict with others, we tend to re-order the rankings of our different social identities to reduce that conflict. Christoforou and Davis (2014) address this reordering as discussed earlier in terms of relational and categorical social identities.

Another example consistent with this re-ordering, and perhaps quite startling to the reader, is evidence found in Putnam and Campbell's (2010) work about the U.S. religious landscape. The authors consider the joint nature of religious and political identities people have and note that Americans are likely to resolve tension between politics and religion by changing their religion rather than their politics. Interestingly, Smith (2015) notes similar outcomes in his study of culture and religion in the United States. These observations represent a rather significant re-ordering of personal identities.

The evidence seems to indicate that how we view and practice religion is based on many factors beyond what the hierarchy of a church asserts, teaches, or assumes its members will believe and project for the church. We next consider research that carefully examines how churches may feel enormous pressure to change as society advances.

In this subsection we note that while many believe that a church sets out doctrine and beliefs that do not change, they may actually change in response to a changing environment. So, if churches change, and people personalize religion, what does religious identity actually reveal about what a person thinks?

An excellent case study to exemplify the nature of change in a church comes from Iannaccone and Miles (1990) in which they examine how the Mormon Church responded to social change as women's roles changed. This paper extends the themes of Iannaccone's work we examined earlier. It focuses on how a church may respond to social change which, in turn, may compromise its authority. In this paper, Iannaccone and Miles consider the issue of accommodating more modern roles of women in larger society by the Mormon Church. While doing so brought

younger women to the church, it also alienated some of the older members as the church's credibility was compromised.

The paper begins by establishing a cost/benefit model of a church responding to social change. What is at stake? There is a tradeoff between alienating "old school" members in order to attract new members in a dynamic social environment. A successful church must strike a balance between accommodation and resistance to social change. The "inevitable dilemma" is that the church must respond to wishes of its members, lest it lose support, but it must also make distinctive demands, lest it lose credibility.

The analytical approach of the paper is to consider someone's conduct and how that affects their religious identity/behavior and their secular identity/behavior. Some compromise to allow a conduct that produces both religious and secular behavior that will attract many people. The church struggles to figure out how to deal with significant social change, which affects how a person's conduct impacts religious and secular behavior. The significant social changes that the authors study include the role of women in the workforce and more effective forms of contraception, which served to increase the gap between religious and secular behavior. These changes made following the Mormon Church's teaching much more costly for members of the Mormon Church. In terms of the model, they widened the gap, pushing people to the extremes. In other words, they forced members of the church to embrace either their religious identity or their secular identity, and the cost of the alternative rose.

The authors found that the church ultimately accepted many changes, but the initial response by members of the church was negative. Over time, however, accommodating some social change found support in terms of the rates of growth. Despite some conflicting comments from authority figures, one quote was particularly interesting. One authority summed up the challenge by suggesting that a church embrace "Flexibility in practice while maintaining purity of doctrine" (Iannaccone and Miles, 1990: 1245). Thus, the Church worked to accommodate changes without appearing to abandon its ideals. Pope Francis has found himself in a similar position engaging in stealth-like reforms which will attract Catholics who fell away from the Church but simultaneously offending those who believe Church teaching is infallible and should not be adjusted as secular standards change.

Though we just examined one specific example of a church changing, it is not a novel idea to think of religion changing as it faces a changing world and environment. As we proceed, we seek to see how the practice of religion in general has evolved and to understand religious behavior in an evolutionary context. For the reader interested in more details, Nicholas Wade's (2009) book *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures* offers a more detailed account of much of the remainder of this section's coverage.

The threat of existential dread seems to offer a logical starting point for the evolution of religion. If we go back to a far more primitive time, we can see that the world was filled with more potential threats from unknown sources. The result was the worship of various gods that governed different aspects of life, ranging from the threat of weather to the bounty of harvests to the doling out of punishment for misdeeds.

This relationship between a society and its god(s) is bound to change as the environment changes. As the anthropologist Malinowski notes, a society no longer needs the god that had previously protected them from a particular threat when increased knowledge allows us to understand, manage, and significantly reduce that threat (Witham, 2010: 66). For example, as our understanding of agriculture grew, we no longer needed to pray to a god that managed our crops. Our application of knowledge performed that task.

A key role for an all-seeing god is that of monitoring behavior. We also know that we do better under a culture of cooperation. While this improvement is understood, not every member of a group contributes as much as is expected. Further, it is impossible to monitor other people's behavior all the time. Assigning the role of the ultimate punisher to another entity, in this case a god, offers a practical solution. Further, groups that successfully cooperate will do better than those that do not. Consequently, the process of natural selection will tend to see the advancement of groups that engage in some type of religious behavior.

Scientific advances are not the only reason for changes in religion. Other aspects of our environment will also impact the nature of religion. Wade (2009: 101) details three ancient peoples and compares common aspects of their primitive religions to modern Western religion and notes three important points. First, the primitive religions had no priests or hierarchies. The community practiced the religion as a whole. Second, the primitive religions included rituals that often lasted many hours and evoked intense emotions that bound the group together. The ecstasy induced by these rituals was interpreted as an encounter with the supernatural. Third, the primitive religions were less concerned with theology, instead focusing on practical issues. These issues included hunting, healing, and efforts to influence the weather.

As society advanced, however, religion had to change. The hunter-gatherer societies were egalitarian. As economic development progressed, people began to gain wealth, and social hierarchies emerged. Religious leadership became the source of legitimacy for social leadership.

Wade (2009: 126) quotes the anthropologist Roy Rappaport:

> The virtue of regulation through religious ritual is that the activities of large numbers of people may be governed in accordance with sanctified conventions in the absence of powerful authorities.... As such it is plausible to argue that religious ritual played an important role in social and ecological regulation during a time in

human history when the arbitrariness of social conventions was increasing but it was not yet possible for authorities, if they existed at all, to enforce compliance.

A focus also switched from survival in the current world to salvation in the afterlife.

As the hierarchy of religion emerged, it sought to minimize the rituals of earlier groups so as to allow the priests to be those responsible for interpreting the supernatural. Religions had middlemen.

A key thesis of this work is that division based on religion is poorly justified, counterproductive, and consequently may lead to perverse outcomes. Wade (2009: 146) eloquently makes this point:

> There is, in a sense, only one religion. Or, to put it more exactly, all religions are related to one another because all belong to the same family. This is not a widely held perspective, because people are much attached to the particular features of their own faith and are more likely to dwell in its differences with other creeds than with its commonalities.

To elaborate on how a religion may evolve, we can visit standard church to sect to church literature in detail here. The basic idea is that we can extend Iannaccone's examination of a person's conduct interacting with social norms in such a way that a sect splits from the church with which its members had identified. Iannaccone (1988) derives a unique model to distinguish a church from a sect. In the past, researchers have used differences in size, exclusivity or inclusivity, how demanding expectations are, how much secular society is rejected, or income and religiosity of members to distinguish between a church and a sect. Iannaccone derives a model of church and sect that leads to comparative statics consistent with stylized facts that have already been cited that distinguish these two types of religious organizations, in particular that churches are more mainstream and sects are stricter, demanding codes of conduct significantly stricter than secular codes of conduct.

His model focuses on normative conduct that impacts our opportunities in either secular or religious consumption. Conduct is the key to the model. It affects a person's consumption of both secular and religious activities. A kind of conduct that increases religious consumption will reduce secular consumption and vice versa. A certain kind of conduct is accepted as a behavioral norm by a religion and maximizes religious consumption. Another kind will maximize secular consumption. Shifting norms are one of the key issues addressed in the paper. If the norms across secular and religious consumption diverge too much, the result will be the creation of extreme positions. This extremity also leads to reduced tolerance and extreme positions being preferred to moderate ones. We also see that those with greater orthodoxy become less responsive to social change.

The model leads to various implications for distinguishing between a church and a sect. Members of a church tend to adopt positions that are relatively close to societal norms, while members of a sect will demonstrate remarkable uniformity more distant from standard societal norms. And if the sect persists, it will be remarkably stable in the face of changing societal norms. The paper discusses that sects must offer substitutes for secular activities since they distance themselves from secular society. Sects will be more attractive to people with fewer secular alternatives.

As we saw previously with the Mormon Church, if a sect wants to grow into a church, it must relax some of these requirements related to strictness in order to attract additional adherents. Stark and Iannaccone (1997) study why the Jehovah's Witnesses grew rapidly. Their paper is a nice application of the strict church theory, as applied to Jehovah's Witnesses. For our purposes, the paper generalizes to offer some propositions for a successful New Religious Movement (NRM).

1. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they retain cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they seek converts.
2. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are non-empirical. In other words, if their teachings cannot be refuted by data, NRMs are less likely to lose credibility. This proposition relates to the challenge posed by failed prophecies in other NRMs.
3. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment—strict but not too strict.
4. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective. This effectiveness depends on two factors:
   - Adequate authority requires clear doctrinal justifications for an effective and legitimate leadership.
   - Authority is regarded as more legitimate and gains in effectiveness to the degree that members perceive themselves as participants in the system of authority.
5. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they can generate a highly motivated volunteer religious labor force, including many who want to proselytize.
6. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that fertility rates match or exceed mortality rates.
7. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they compete against weak local conventional religious organizations
8. NRMs are likely to succeed to the extent that they sustain strong internal attachments, while maintaining an open social network, able to maintain and form close ties to outsiders. Again, this proposition reflects Davis's (2007) work on both relational and categorical identities.
9. NRMs must socialize youth sufficiently well so as to minimize defections and the appeal to reduced strictness.

If we then return to Wade's (2009) text, we can see how the three monotheisms all borrowed from pagan rituals to offer something in common with what was already socially available, but in new ways so as to promote the new religions. Wade (2009: 189) states, "Looking back at the emergence of the three monotheisms, a striking process is evident: throughout history, religion has been reshaped to serve new needs as the nature of society has changed." Wade (2009: 190) notes,

> But human societies have changed vastly in the last 1,500 years. Because religion has not changed as fast, it has found itself in increasing conflict with modernity. Early peoples used religion as an explanatory framework for understanding physical and biological phenomena, like weather or disease, that are now better explained by science. Religions have not ceded this ground gracefully. New religions that might have been more compatible with the rise of scientific knowledge have not been allowed to emerge because established faiths have blocked the process of religious innovation in which they themselves were created.

People still have a demand for religion however. Perhaps the Pew survey results (2008, 2015) we discuss reflect the fact that organized religion has fallen behind and people themselves are taking the lead. Consider, for example, the Pew results on people personalizing religion to the point of spirituality and how our surveys are likely not asking the right questions to measure spiritual (rather than religious) behavior adequately. In other words, the language of our surveys caters to a past version of religious belief and thus is not capturing new, more personalized, approaches to spirituality which (for many) seem to be replacing a traditional notion of religion.

We may try to further strengthen our argument by considering the Pew results regarding salvation and religious identity. Likely the best example of this result is the earlier reported statistic that approximately 50 percent of Christians believe that non-Christian religions also lead to salvation.

We believe this modern outcome is strongly related to the evolution of our discussion throughout this paper. The evidence seems to illustrate clearly that we create a bottom-up approach to religious identity as opposed to a theological top-down approach. This conclusion is further supported by the Putnam and Campbell (2010) analysis of social capital and the Davis (2007) style analysis of identity (both personal-social analysis and the relational-categorical analysis). With these frameworks in mind, we may revisit the question of how different people will define religion differently and how they may re-rank social criteria in the face of conflict or cognitive dissonance. So, again, we state our main question, what do we truly know about a person's religious identity when all we know is their proclaimed religious affiliation? To continue our analysis, we next turn to some insights we can glean from cognitive theory.

COGNITIVE THEORY

In this section, we consider the work of Barrett (2011), drawing on cognitive science to understand better how science informs us about how we conceive of a god. This consideration will help us to understand better the previous section on the evolution of religion.

Cognitive science informs us that we have an illusion of a complete representation of the world. We non-consciously fill in gaps in the information. The limits of our mind have led us to create heuristics, or shortcuts, to make sense of our world (Barrett, 2011: 71). Even preschoolers are inclined to see the world as purposely designed and to look for a designer responsible for this structure. Barrett (2011: 34) notes, "I only need to communicate enough info to trigger the conceptual background for your mind to fill in the rest."

Barrett (2011: 40) defines belief as "…an instance of mentally representing something as being the case in the generation of further thought and action." His main question is to ask why people hold religious beliefs that motivate religious action and why they take the forms they do across time and space. He notes some biases we have may play a role in shaping religious beliefs. These biases include, first, a conformity bias: when in doubt, consensus opinion serves as a default. Second, the prestige bias: when consensus is lacking, use someone's prestige as a reference. Last, the similarity bias: trust people that are like us. Taken together, these biases could play a role in explaining the nature of religion discussed in the previous section, especially as they may relate to Christoforou and Davis's (2014) research on relational and categorical social identity.

Borrowing from Kahenman (2011), we have a two-system way of thinking given our bounded rationality. One system uses careful logic; the other uses rules of thumb. We rely on the rules of thumb frequently. This reliance then motivates another bias, that of accessibility/availability. This bias says that things that come to mind rapidly are more likely to be considered as correct. From Barrett (2011: 47): "Our percepts and memories automatically and immediately deliver beliefs without intervening reflection."

Barrett then distinguishes between two types of beliefs: reflective and non-reflective, as well as how they interact. Non-reflective beliefs serve as an anchor and inform reflective beliefs. Our intuition and emotions also significantly influence our beliefs. Plausibility increases with cumulative support (keep confirmation bias in mind) of non-reflective beliefs. This plausibility then impacts anchoring and informs explicit beliefs. Reflective beliefs become non-reflective through practice (habit) resulting in "practiced naturalness."

Humans are social creatures, so we turn to the impact of culture. Culture may transmit ideas that are not initially intuitive. Consider then, ideas that are to some

degree counterintuitive. Religions work to strike a balance between some ideas that are counterintuitive but not too counterintuitive.

We have considerable natural cognitive resources for conceptualizing other humans (folk anthropology) and forming thoughts about the mental states of others, including their expectations of your behavior. This process serves as a prerequisite for collective behavior and engaging in rational religious behavior.

From psychology, we tend to believe in an invariant person-essence. This belief gives us a stable identity across growth, aging, and death. It sets the stage for a soul. We then see a non-reflective belief regarding a non-physical thing in us that anchors and sustains our identity. Add to this idea that if a non-reflective belief resonates with an idea, the idea will more likely become a reflective belief. Barrett (2011: 97) offers a cognitive science of religion (CSR) definition of a god: it is counterintuitive. A group reflectively believes in its existence. People can detect its existence, and it will motivate some difference in human behavior. Given our desire to seek meaning and attribute it to person-based behavior, we have an intuitive desire to postulate a god. Our tendency to believe in a principle of reciprocity enhances this desire. We can note that there is evidence that a sense of fairness based on reciprocity is present even in young children.

Barrett (2011: 102) notes that when unlikely events occur, we are tempted to think a divine entity is responsible. Moral intuitions, or a form of just-world thinking, can support this supposition. Natural cognitive equipment shapes how we conceive of a god. Our need to see order around us, to see purpose, to understand bad fortune better, and to associate good or bad fortune with a reward or punishment leads us naturally to want to believe in God(s).

A successful God concept will be able to make meaning of life in intuitive ways. Intuitive religious ideas (bottom up logic) are more likely seen as justified belief than theological reflections (top-down logic).

Willard and Norenzayan (2013) apply cognitive theories to experiments employing two samples (*N1* = 492, *N2* = 920) including both genders from two ethnically distinct groups to test whether our cognitive biases can explain a belief in God. The data were consistent with a path model indicating that we first mentalize, which in turn leads to dualism and teleology, that then leads to religious, paranormal, and life's purpose beliefs. Barrett (2011: 115) makes the case that emotion and perception play important roles in how we process experiences because we depend on what we know to make sense of all experiences.

We see a two-way causality here (similar to Iannaccone's idea of religious capital and religious practice, each contributing to the other). How we think impacts religious practice, and religious practice impacts how we think. He notes a number of non-reflective beliefs that are included in natural religion. Among these are:

1. Elements of the world are purposeful and intentionally created by a god.

2. Things happen that unseen agents cause.
3. Humans have internal components (e.g., a spirit) that are distinct from their bodies.
4. Moral norms are unchangeable.
5. Immoral behavior leads to punishment; moral behavior leads to fortune.
6. Ritualized behaviors can prevent you from unseen harm.
7. Some component of a human (e.g., its spirit) continues to exist after the body dies.
8. Gods exist with wants and desires and are free to act.

Theology then amplifies these beliefs in cultural settings. As these theologies create a narrative, we see more reflective discussion and even disagreement between the theologies. For example, take example 7 that a spirit continues after the body dies. This belief can be contextualized in many ways. Barrett notes that the conversation could turn to ghosts, or reincarnation (as in Hinduism and Buddhism), or a resurrection (as in Christianity). Which one is correct?

Experimental results suggest that we may have two (or more) sets of ideas about a god. One is the theologically informed (academic) version of god. The other is the one to which we appeal in a more human form to which we relate. This distinction leads to Barrett's (2011: 140) discussion that religion is not theology:

> Theologians have spent and spend enormous amounts of attention and energy on trying to work out the reasonableness of different propositions regarding God (or gods) and related matters. They draw upon historical considerations (including archaeological findings), linguistics, philosophy, textual studies, and modern science to reach their conclusions. Most individual believers do not engage in such theological exercises but are content to live religiously. To be religious is not to be a theologian or vice versa.

We can now see how religion can be used as a shield or as a sword. It can be a personally comforting institution that engenders associations with like-minded people and friends. Or it can be used as a force of social power to impose desired outcomes and behaviors on others. We see the former in more socially liberal churches and the latter in churches that are much stricter in terms of the conduct they require. Is the church a place of comfort for anyone or a social structure that imposes morality?

Barrett then discusses moving away from natural religion as different religions create their own narratives, which can become more and more counterintuitive. They can use complex rituals (an example of cultural scaffolding) to make the religion more accessible.

We have seen in this section that we are wired to see a natural religion which can then be extended to a theology. As we saw in the survey data at the beginning, however, and we saw anecdotally with Aunt Sally and My Friend Al, these two ways of approaching a religious identity can create a cognitive dissonance that may

be difficult to reconcile logically. In fact, this dissonance extends beyond religion to any number of other deeply held beliefs. The following experiment illustrates the point in sharp relief.

The study by Kahan et al. (2013) employs an interesting approach. Over one thousand participants were asked about their political views and also asked a series of questions designed to assess their mathematical ability. They were then asked to solve a fairly difficult problem that involved interpreting the results of a hypothetical scientific study. But here was the trick: while the fake study data that they were supposed to assess remained the same, sometimes the study was innocuous, described as measuring the effectiveness of a "new cream for treating skin rashes." But in other cases the study was controversial, involving the effectiveness of "a law banning private citizens from carrying concealed handguns in public."

Survey respondents performed very differently on what was essentially the same basic problem, depending upon whether they had been told that it involved the innocuous topic or the more controversial topic. The facts indicated that the highly numerate liberals and conservatives were even more likely to let their political beliefs impact their reasoning than were those with less mathematical ability. This experiment serves to show how we tend to force ourselves to justify already established beliefs. If this bias works for politics, might it also work for religious beliefs?

TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM UP?

In the previous section, we learned that there is a strong case to be made for the notion that we cognitively create a vision of God on our own, though influenced by our environment. The next section will elaborate on that finding significantly. We consider a tension that we refer to as logic that is imposed in a "top-down" fashion versus a lived reality that is derived in a "bottom-up" fashion. This tension may be a key contributor to our environment, which at times sacrifices the best that religion can bring to society and fosters the worst it can impose on society.

In the field of economics, our general strategy in research is to create a theoretical model that calls for a testable hypothesis. We then gather data, unleash our sophisticated statistical tools on the data, and either reject or fail to reject our hypothesis. Our models employ assumptions, some of which may be good or not-so-good. Currently, the assumption of rationality is under considerable debate (and one that other books are dedicated to unpacking).

In the field of religious studies, how interreligious dialogue affects one's own religious identity and beliefs is an area of great research interest. It was previously thought that as a person with a given religious identity would engage in conversation with a person of a different identity, each would be subject to either

suspending or holding tentatively their own religious beliefs due to the encounter with the views of a different religion.

Theologian Mara Brecht (2014) studied a women's interreligious dialogue group and found that the reality of the outcome did not conform to epistemological theory. Rather, she found that a person's religious beliefs can be strengthened through interreligious dialogue. The idea is that the women of this interfaith religious discussion group find affirmation in their own faith traditions by sympathetically listening to other women's experiences. It seems that rather than getting bogged down in the specifics of the context of the doctrine or theology, they seek out the commonality of the message. This finding harkens back to Putnam's Aunt Sally or my friend Al in wanting to see the good rather than ceasing to find common ground after the label of a particular religious affiliation is articulated. This finding also speaks to Barrett's point about being religious versus being a theologian. Does it also reflect a version of confirmation bias when we focus on the commonality of a message or teaching instead of the potential division based on nominal church affiliation? It may also reference the intersection of confirmation bias and accessibility bias, depending on the image we associate with a person of a particular religious affiliation.

CONCLUSION

We began this paper examining data from a number of studies or surveys that seem to indicate that nominal religious affiliation may offer very little insight to what a person actually believes or acts upon. We began to delve into a better understanding of what we may or may not infer about someone and their religious identity by referring to significant economics and sociological research on the notion of identity.

This approach introduced recent insights from psychology and behavioral economics regarding how humans have created heuristics, or mental shortcuts, that we attribute to our system 1 and system 2 ways of intuiting or deliberately reasoning. This discussion in turn led us to consider what different types of identity (relational and categorical) may affect how we see or trust others. Taken together, we see that regardless of what a hierarchy may attempt to establish in terms of self or other identity, it is likely to be less effective than what most humans have evolved to do on their own in their own best interest.

Once the role of the individual was established, we turned to religions. As a religion, the church has some comment on the absolute. Yet confronted with social change, we see that organized religions also engage in change driven by societal changes. Negotiating these changes is clearly a challenge, as we saw with the research on the Mormon Church. Taking a step back, we borrowed from the work

of *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Wade to see that religion has clearly evolved over the course of mankind's development.

Finally, we consulted cognitive theory to understand better why we have evolved in this manner. A theme and language we repeatedly used was that of whether we abide by a top-down approach to religious identity and action (when we fully follow, for example, a religion's theology) or whether, on the other hand, we follow a bottom-up approach (in which case we practice a religion, but it becomes a highly personalized version of that religion). We are religious but not theological in our practice.

Through all these lenses, it seems clear that for most of the population, the latter is the approach employed. An exception may be, at least to some degree, members of more fundamentalist religions, though more research delving deeper may lead to additional insights in this regard.

Consequently, we believe that our traditional way of associating religious identity with religious affiliation affords us far less insight into a person's religious beliefs or religiously motivated actions than we have traditionally thought. We believe that in light of this analysis, rethinking how to gain insight to a person's religious identity is important and will involve factors well beyond nominal religious affiliation.

REFERENCES

Akerloff, George A., and Rachel E. Kranton. 2010. *Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages, and Well Being*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Barrett, Justin L. 2011. *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.

Brecht, Mara. 2014. *Virtue in Dialogue: Belief, Religious Diversity, and Women's Interreligious Encounter*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Christoforou, Asimina, and John B. Davis. 2014. "Social Capital: Social Values, Power, and Social Identity." In *Social Capital and Economics: Social Values, Power, and Social Identity*, edited by Asimina Christoforou and John B. Davis, 3–11. London: Routledge.

Daniels, Joseph P., and Marc von der Ruhr. 2010. "Trust in Others: Does Religion Matter?" *Review of Social Economy* 68(2): 163–86.

Davis, John B. 2007. "Akerlof and Kranton on Identity in Economics: Inverting the Analysis." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 31(3): 349–62.

Froese, Paul, and Christopher Bader. 2010. *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2006. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. New York: Basic Books.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2016. "Can a Divided America Heal?" TED Talk, November 2016. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-_Az5nZBBM.

Iannaccone, Larry. 1988. "A Formal Model of Church and Sect." *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S241–S268.

Iannaccone, Larry. 1994. "Why Strict Churches are Strong." *American Journal of Sociology* 5: 1180–211.

Iannaccone, Larry, and Michael Makowsky. 2007. "Accidental Atheists? Agent-Based Explanations for the Persistence of Religious Regionalism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(1): 1–16.

Iannaccone, Larry, and Carrie Miles. 1990. "Dealing with Social Change: The Mormon Church's Response to Change in Women's Roles." *Social Forces*, 68(4): 1231–50.

Kahan, Dan M., Ellen Peters, Erica Dawson, and Paul Slovic. 2013. "Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government." *Behavioural Public Policy* 1: 54–86.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Kosmin, Barry A., and Ariela Keysar. 2006. *Religion in a Free Market*. Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing.

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Pew Research Center. 2008. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. Available at http://www.pewforum.org/files/2008/06/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf.

Pew Research Center. 2015. *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. Available at http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf.

Smith, Mark A. 2015. *Secular Faith: How Culture Has Trumped Religion in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stark, Rodney, and Larry Iannaccone. 1997. "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow So Rapidly: A Theoretical Application." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12(2): 133–57.

Voas, David, and Abby Day. 2010. "Recognizing Secular Christians: Toward an Unexcluded Middle in the Study of Religion." ARDA Guiding Paper Series. State College, PA: The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University. Available at http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers/Voas.pdf.

Wade, Nicholas. 2009. *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Witham, Larry. 2010. Marketplace of the Gods: How Economics Explains Religion. New York: Oxford University Press.

Willard, Aiyana, and Ara Norenzayan. 2013. "Cognitive Biases Explain Religious Belief, Paranormal Belief, and Belief in Life's Purpose." *Cognition* 129: 379–91.