

RELIGIOUS REFERENCE GROUPS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF NORMATIVE BEHAVIOR: AN EMPIRICAL TEST

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Reference groups and significant others are vitally important in both the formation and the persistence or change of normative as well as deviant behavior patterns. Thus one's initial religious beliefs and behavior (or lack thereof) reflect the socializing influence of the family. However, the situation may change when young people leave home for education or work, as demonstrated by research that shows decreases in religious beliefs or church attendance when young people leave home to attend college. In contrast to the pattern whereby religiosity declines in a college or university environment, we maintain that students who develop close ties with others who are religious, especially in a highly religious community, will maintain the same patterns of high commitment developed in their families. Specifically, we hypothesize that religious beliefs and participation will be positively related to (1) parents' religious beliefs and practices and (2) current friends' religious beliefs and participation. These hypotheses were tested with a sample of college students living on campus (n = 339). The data support the argument that students' current religious beliefs and behavior are related to both their parents' religiosity and the reinforcing effects of the religiosity of their current friends.

What accounts for the development or persistence of individuals' religiosity? In contrast to the assumption that religiosity is primarily an individual pattern of beliefs and practices, Stark

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(1996) contended that religiosity should be seen largely as a characteristic of the social structure or a group property. That is, from a sociological standpoint, it reflects "the *proportion* of persons in a given ecological setting who are actively religious" (Stark, 1996:164). When applied to the experience of college students, this suggests that whether or not the transition to college leads to a decrease or increase in their religiosity depends on whether the college or university environment undermines or reinforces the socializing effects of their families and home communities. In other words, if the overall college or university environment is less religious than students' home environments, their religiosity will be expected to decline, but if the level of religious involvement is equal to or higher than students' families and home environments, their religiosity may be expected to remain relatively stable or even to increase.

Essentially we argue here that college students who grew up in highly religious families and who choose (or are sent to) a college or university environment that happens to have high overall levels of religiosity will continue the same patterns of religious commitment with which they grew up rather than abandon their faith and practice. Bengston (1975: 369) noted that: "The family serves as an important mediating link in selecting or orienting the child to the multiple reference groups to which he or she can turn for value development in a pluralistic society." Thus, the highly conservative religious environment within which the university in this study is situated may partially explain why students choose (or are sent) to study there. These expectations contrast with prevailing general assumptions about the liberalizing or secularizing effects of the university experience.

It seems intuitively obvious that transition periods such as moving away to college are often significant in altering religious (and other) behaviors. However, evidence for the erosion of individuals' religious beliefs and decline in religious participation among college and university students is actually rather sketchy. More than 30 years ago, Glock and Stark (1965) suggested that college has a secularizing effect. More recently, however, Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1993, 1995) found that the college experience is only weakly correlated with changes in religious beliefs and practice. Additional evidence suggests that religious beliefs and practices from early socialization persist while at college. Dillon (1996) reported that churchgoing undergraduate Catholics

tend to mirror the attitudes and behavior of the general Roman Catholic population with regard to selective acceptance of church doctrine and mores.

The importance of specific social bonds for explaining why individuals sustain or change their patterns of religious commitment is well documented and is consistent with the long-established perspective of reference group theory (Merton and Rossi, 1968), which has been used to explain numerous forms or patterns of behavior.

Stark and Bainbridge (1980) highlighted the importance of interpersonal networks which generate affiliation and strengthen personal attachment to sects and cults. This seems especially the case for recruitment to such groups, but they also note the importance of friendship ties when examining ideological concordance, especially among religious conservatives. They wrote (1980: 1391): "High concordances between friends were found on conventional religious beliefs and practices; they were especially high among evangelical Protestants. That is, "born again" students were very likely to have "born again" friends and both members of such pairs were likely to exhibit high levels of religiousness."

Based on these insights, we would expect not only that "born again" students attending a secular university would relate to other like-minded individuals when building a friendship network, but also that students who are only nominally religious, or even nonreligious students, may become more religious after encountering "born again" students when making friends on campus. The chances for students with nonreligious backgrounds to encounter highly religious students are greater if there is a high proportion of such students on campus.

Moreover, religious conservatives tend to be highly homogeneous and to share explicit norms regarding specific beliefs and behaviors that are expected in order to remain in good standing (Gay and Ellison, 1993). In more heterogeneous groups, in contrast, the variety of norms and roles means that the distinction between conformity or deviance is more difficult to establish. Consistent with literature on strict churches, we also know that conservative religious groups not only emphasize distinctive norms but also high levels of church attendance or other forms of group involvement. Group members are thus able to monitor one another's normative compliance. Moreover, as members actually comply with these explicit behavioral norms, this helps

strengthen their social ties with other members, which, in turn, reinforces their distinctive beliefs and subjective commitment (Tamney and Johnson, 1998; Iannacone, Olson, and Stark, 1995; Iannacone, 1994).

These theoretical considerations lead to the following hypotheses:

1. Overall, students will exhibit the same general level and type of religiosity as their parents. This relationship will be stronger for those whose parents socialized them in conservative religious groups and also followed such religious rituals in the family as saying grace before meals. Thus conservative Protestants and Catholic students are expected to exhibit the highest levels of religiosity, as well as students whose parents followed the pattern of saying grace before meals.
2. Levels of religiosity will be higher for students whose close friends share the same level of religiosity. This pattern will be most clear for those who identify with conservative religious groups and for those whose close friends actually participate with them in religious activities such as church attendance.

SETTING AND METHODS

Data were obtained from a sample of university students living in dormitories on campus. The university is a large, public, state-supported school with no religious or denominational ties. We limited our sample to dormitory residents in order to minimize variation in reference group formation due to living arrangements. Most of the students in our sample were living away from home for the first time.

The university is located in a staunchly conservative community of just under 200,000 with high levels of participation in conservative-type churches. The high levels of conservative forms of religiosity are well known and openly acknowledged throughout the community. For example, the community "yellow pages" list 78 Baptist congregations and 28 "Churches of Christ" (Campbellite tradition). This compares to 4 Lutheran (ELCA), 4 Presbyterian (PCUSA), 6 Roman Catholic, and 16 United Methodist congregations. (See Roof and McKinney, 1987, for a more in-depth description of the conservative, moderate, and liberal categories among American denominations.) The local newspaper publishes a daily "prayer" (actually, sometimes a Bible verse, sometimes a mini-homily) and employs a full-time

religion editor whose religious news stories and commentaries are regularly featured. Traffic on Sunday mornings is always fairly heavy, especially around noon, when church services are over, and visits to local restaurants early Sunday afternoon suggest that many people go out to eat after church, still dressed in their "Sunday church clothes."

Indicators of the strength of the religiously conservative "moral community" are in evidence at the university as well. Bulletin boards on campus buildings frequently have postings for religious activities sponsored by conservative groups and sometimes Bible verses as well. Publicity of and recruitment to activities of conservative religious groups frequently take place in the students' University Center, and occasionally students can be observed bowing their heads to offer prayer before eating their lunch there. As with many universities mainstream denominations have student-oriented religious activities near the campus, but some of the best-attended college and university student-oriented religious activities occur some distance away from campus at conservative churches in the community.

There were 1,109 students selected for inclusion in the study, and each was sent a questionnaire through campus mail. Two small pieces of candy were included in the envelope with the survey form as a token "incentive," and the cover letter promised that students who returned the completed survey form by a specific date would have their names entered in a drawing for a free meal for two. No cost was involved in returning the completed questionnaire through campus mail. After appropriate follow-up, 339 usable questionnaires were returned, making for a 31 percent response rate.¹

In keeping with the concept of individual religiosity as multidimensional, the survey instrument included measures of three different dimensions of religiosity as the primary dependent variables: (1) current church membership (yes or no), (2) subjective assessment of strength of religious faith (very strong, moderately

¹ We would obviously have preferred a much higher response rate, which would enable us to infer more definitively that our respondents represented the entire dormitory community. However, we were told by the dormitory Resident Assistants (who distributed the questionnaires) that dorm residents are routinely surveyed, often for marketing purposes. In their opinion, our 31 percent response rate was unusually high, especially in view of the length of the questionnaire. We have no reason to believe our results are unduly biased, but we recognize the limitations resulting from the self-selected nature of our sample. We thus urge caution in generalizing the results to other students living on campus.

strong, moderately weak, very weak, or nonexistent), and (3) beliefs about God, the hereafter, and salvation through Jesus Christ. Response options for beliefs about God were:

- a. I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it.
- b. While I have some doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
- c. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times.
- d. I don't believe in a personal God, but I believe in a higher power of some kind.
- e. I don't believe in God.

Not being a member of a church was coded 0 and being a member was coded 1. Very strong religious faith was coded 5 and nonexistent faith was coded 1. The mean of strength of religious faith was 4.077 (standard deviation = .929). Beliefs about God were coded 1 for "I don't believe in God" and 5 for "I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it." The item regarding the hereafter was: "After death, a person goes to either Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory." The item regarding salvation was: "It is possible to have a personal saving relationship with Jesus Christ."² The response options for these two items ranged from strongly agree (coded 5) to disagree strongly (code 1) on a 5-point scale. These three belief items (i.e., about God, the hereafter, and salvation through Jesus Christ) were combined into a Religious Beliefs scale with a range of 3 to 15, a mean of 13.154, and a standard deviation of 2.475. The religious belief scale had a reliability coefficient of .712.

Religious preference was a separate item; respondents were asked if they were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Agnostic, Atheist, Other, or None. The same categories were used to determine religious preferences of the respondents' parents (both fathers and mothers) as independent variables. Those indicating Protestant for themselves or their parents were asked about specific denomination, and their responses were subdivided into fundamentalist/conservative, moderate, and liberal, based on the same classification that Smith (1990) used in analyzing General Social Survey data. Moderate and liberal Protestants were combined into one category. There were only 12 religious

² Belief in God is, of course, quite general among all major religious groups. In contrast, the other two items reflect more specific conservative positions.

"Others" and they were dropped from the analysis. The Jewish category was also dropped from the analysis because there was only one Jew among the respondents. Religious self-identification is, of course, a less specific measure of organizational involvement than the question regarding current church membership described above.

In addition to the data on mothers' and fathers' religious identification, a more specific behavioral measure of religious socialization in the family as an independent variable was provided by responses to the following question regarding "saying grace" before meals: "When you were growing up, did anyone usually say grace or give thanks to God aloud before meals at home?" (Response options were yes or no.) Current social bonds with others in the same religious reference group (the primary independent variable on which we focused) was measured by responses to the following question: "Think for a moment of your five closest friends with whom you have social and recreational life. Do not include close relatives. How many of these people attend church events with you?" (Response option ranged from 0 to 5.)

With regard to basic demographic information our respondents can be described as follows: Age range was 18–37 (median = 19); 66% were female; 70% were first- or second-year students; 97% were from a town other than where the university is located, and 38% reported that their parents had college degrees.

Our analysis focused primarily on the effects of (1) socialization experiences in the family in respondents' growing up years (parents' religious identification and saying grace before meals) and (2) shared participation in church events with close friends. Each of these independent variables was related to respondents' own current religious identification and to the three dimensions of religiosity described above: current church membership, subjective importance of religious faith, and beliefs (regarding God, life after death, and salvation through Jesus Christ). These different dimensions were themselves highly correlated with one another and, as we shall see, their relationships to our independent variables were roughly parallel.

RESULTS

One of the most striking results revealed by our data is the

very high level of religiosity reported by our respondents. A definite religious preference was expressed by 69%, with 46% of those who expressed a preference identifying themselves as either Baptist or Church of Christ. In terms of current religious practice, 68% reported being members of a church currently, and 82% indicated that they attend Sunday morning worship services regularly. Moreover, 72% claimed they had read the Bible at home during the past year, and 50% reported praying daily or several times a day. (Less than 6% never prayed.) Theoretically, it is possible that respondents differ from non-respondents in terms of this high level of religiosity. Although we cannot generalize these results to the entire population of students at this university, even those living on campus, our main goal in this paper is to identify the family backgrounds and current social ties that are related to this pattern of high religiosity among our respondents.

According to our first hypothesis, this high level of current religiosity should be a reflection of similarly high levels of religious socialization during respondents' growing up years. Table 1 cross-classifies students' current religious identification with that of their fathers and mothers. The data show that students have an overwhelming preference for the same type of religious affiliation as their fathers and mothers, with percentages ranging from 82% to 89%. This pattern applies to all three affiliation categories: fundamentalist/conservative Protestant, moderate/liberal Protestant, and Catholic.

Of the respondents whose fathers and mothers had no religious identification, the percentages of their offspring who were unaffiliated ("none") were 32% (fathers) and 37% (mothers). It is interesting to note that the percentages of fathers and mothers in the "none" category (as reported by their offspring) had more offspring switch to the fundamentalist/conservative category than the percentages of fundamentalist/conservative parents whose offspring switched to the "none" category. Although the numbers in the cells are obviously too low to be reliable (due to the low numbers of parents in the "none" category), the pattern is opposite to what might be expected on the basis of the widespread notion that participation in higher education has a liberalizing and/or secularizing effect. Overall, the relations between both father's religious identification and mother's religious identification and their offspring's religious identification is statistically significant and strong (Cramer's $V = .677$ and $.710$ for fathers and mothers, respectively).³

TABLE 1 Effects of Parental Religious Affiliation Upon Respondents' Religious Affiliation.

Respondents' religion	Father's religion				Total
	Fund/cons Protestant	Mod/lib Protestant	Catholic	None	
Fund/cons Protestant	108 85.7%	6 6.7%	5 6.8%	5 20.0%	124
Mod/lib Protestant	12 9.5%	79 88.8%	5 6.8%	7 28.0%	103
Catholic	3 2.4%	1 1.1%	61 82.4%	5 20.0%	70
None	3 2.4%	3 3.4%	3 4.1%	8 32.0%	17
	126	89	74	25	314

Chi Square = 432.224, $p = .000$, Cramer's $V = .677$.

Respondents' religion	Mother's religion				Total
	Fund/cons Protestant	Mod/lib Protestant	Catholic	None	
Fund/cons Protestant	106 88.3%	7 6.7%	6 7.9%	5 31.3%	124
Mod/lib Protestant	9 7.5%	92 87.6%	2 2.6%	3 18.8%	106
Catholic	2 1.7%	0 0%	65 85.5%	2 12.5%	69
None	3 2.5%	6 5.7%	3 3.9%	6 37.5%	18
	120	105	76	16	317

Chi Square = 479.466, $p = .000$, Cramer's $V = .710$.

We look next at the relationships between "saying grace" before meals during respondents' growing up years and our indicators of current religiosity. Overall, the data show that students raised in families that practiced this ritual are significantly more

³ We compare affiliation rather than attendance since we don't have data on church attendance for parents.

likely to be current church members and to score high on our measure of religious beliefs (table not shown to conserve space). In addition, substantial numbers of students whose families did not "say grace" were also religious, although in lower proportions. Of the students whose families "said grace" before meals, 74% were current church members, but at the same time 57% of the students whose families did not practice this ritual during their growing up years were also church members (Chi-square = 9.829; $p = .002$; Phi = .170). On the Religious Beliefs Scale, the mean score was 13.63 (SD = 2.06; $n = 215$) for those whose families "said grace" and 12.211 (SD = 2.93; $n = 109$) for those whose families did not. The actual difference in these means was not large, but was nevertheless statistically significant in the expected direction (t -test = 4.53; $p < .001$). The same positive relationship exists for Strength of Religious Faith.

The data also showed that substantial majorities of those who identified with a particular denominational family were current church members. This was true for all denominational families, but was strongest for fundamentalist/conservative Protestants (82%), followed by moderate/liberal Protestants (70%), then Catholics (68%). Acceptance of traditional Christian beliefs (as measured by our Religious Beliefs Scale) was highest for Catholics (mean = 14.19; SD = 1.077; $n = 67$), followed closely by the fundamentalist/conservative Protestants (mean = 13.71; SD = 1.518; $n = 122$), then moderate/liberal Protestants (mean = 13.12; SD = 2.103, $n = 108$). In contrast, the "nones" were noticeably lower (mean = 7.2; SD = 3.509; $n = 15$) (table not shown to conserve space).

With regard to the relationship between friendship ties and one's own personal religiosity, the pattern is quite clear that students whose friends attend church with them are more likely to be church members and to accept traditional religious beliefs (table not shown to conserve space). The influence of friends is strongest if "all" friends attend church with the respondent. For those who reported that "all" of their friends attend with them, 92% are church members (compared to 76% if "some" friends attend and only 39% if "no" friends attend church with them; Chi-square = 57.61; $p < .001$; Cramer's $V = .415$). The same pattern is evident in terms of scores on the Religious Beliefs Scale ($F(2,316) = 35.953$; $p < .001$; $R^2 = .185$). Those with "no" friends who attend with them have a mean Religious Belief score of 11.449 (SD = 3.364; $n = 89$); if "some" friends attend with

them, the mean is 13.725 (SD = 1.703; $n = 178$); if “all” their friends attend with them the mean is 14.096 (SD = 1.287; $n = 52$). The same positive relationship exists for Strength of Religious Faith.

Table 2 portrays the relationships between the three independent variables—growing up in families in which the “saying grace” ritual was practiced, current religious identification, and

TABLE 2 Effects of Saying Grace Growing Up, Respondents’ Religion, and Friendship Reference Group Upon Strength of Religious Faith

Strength of religious faith	Grace growing up?		Total
	Yes	No	
Non-existent or very weak	5 2.2%	17 14.8%	22
Moderately weak	20 8.9%	21 18.3%	41
Moderately strong	109 48.7%	47 40.9%	156
Very strong	90 40.2%	30 26.1%	120
	224	115	339

Chi Square = 29.180, $p = .000$, Cramer’s $V = .293$.

Strength of religious faith	Respondents’ religion				Total
	Fund/cons Protestant	Mod/lib Protestant	Catholic	None	
Nonexistent or very weak	2 1.6%	4 3.7%	0 0%	12 57.1%	18
Moderately weak	7 5.6%	24 22.2%	7 9.7%	2 9.5%	40
Moderately strong	59 47.2%	54 50.0%	35 48.6%	3 14.3%	151
Very strong	57 45.6%	26 24.1%	30 41.7%	4 19.0%	117
	125	108	72	21	326

Chi Square = 138.099, $p = .000$; Cramer’s $V = .376$.

TABLE 2 *Continued*

Strength of religious faith	Friendship reference group			Total
	No friends attend church with me	Some friends attend church with me	All friends attend church with me	
Nonexistent or very weak	18 18.9%	4 2.2%	0 0%	22
Moderately weak	28 29.5%	11 5.9%	1 1.9%	40
Moderately strong	39 41.1%	99 53.2%	16 30.2%	154
Very strong	10 10.5%	72 38.7%	36 67.9%	118
	95	186	53	334

Chi Square = 104.149, $p = .000$, Somer's $d_{yx} = .481$.

friendship reference groups—and strength of respondents' religious faith as the dependent variable. If we look in the first panel at those whose religious faith was "very strong," the percentages of those from families where "grace" was said before meals is notably higher than those from the "no grace" families (40% versus 26%). If we combine the two "strong" categories, 89% of the students from families that practiced the "saying grace" ritual described their religious faith as important to them, compared to 67% of those whose families did not. But it is also worth noting that nearly 41% of the students whose families did not say grace considered their religious faith to be sufficiently important to be classified in the "moderately strong" category, and 26% were "very strong." Overall, the results of the "saying grace" variable are consistent with our hypothesis regarding the effects of family socialization experiences.

The middle panel of Table 2 portrays the relationships between respondents' religious identification and the strength of their religious faith. Large majorities in all denominational groups regard their religious faith as at least "moderately" important. Those with the highest percentage in the "very strong" category were those who self-identified as fundamentalist/conservative, followed by Catholics. Of the various denominational families, the moderate/liberal Protestants had the highest percentage in

the two "low strength" categories (approximately 26%). Of the "nones" 57% had scores putting them in the nonexistent or very weak category of religious faith.

The bottom panel of Table 2 shows the relationship between having friends who accompany respondents to church services and the strength of respondents' religious faith. If "all" friends attend, the percentage of respondents in the "very strong" category of religious faith is 68%; if "some" friends do so, 39% are in the "very strong" category; but only 10% are in this category if "no" friends attend with them. As with the previous dependent variables, the sharpest break is between having at least "some" friends attend church with the respondents versus having "no" friends attend.

Of course, with our cross-sectional data, it is not possible to claim a clear cause-and-effect relation between these variables. Moreover, the nature of the questionnaire is such that students with a strong religious background, who retain a strong religious orientation while in the college/university setting, and who have extensive social involvements with friends who accompanied them to church may have been the ones most likely to respond. But in spite of this possible selectivity and the resulting high level of homogeneity in our sample, the relationships discovered are clearly supportive of our hypotheses. We suspect the key relationships involve interdependence. That is, students who are from religious backgrounds get involved with religious friends, perhaps in the context of their initial participation in church activities, and the social ties with these friends reinforces their religious commitment and continued church attendance.

A more comprehensive and rigorous test of our hypotheses combines the various independent variables to show their effects upon respondents' own religiosity. For this part of the analysis, there were three dependent variables: church membership, religious belief, and strength of religious faith. The independent variables were religious preference, father's and mother's religious preference, whether or not respondents participated in the ritual of "saying grace" in their growing up years with their families, and whether their current reference group affiliations include friends who attend church with them.

A logistic regression of church membership as a dependent variable was regressed upon the independent variables. The only statistically significant relationship for the multivariate analysis is friendship reference group. Respondents who had some of their

friends attend church with them were significantly more likely to be church members than respondents who had no friends attend church with them. Respondents who had all of their friends attend church with them were the most likely to be church members (table not shown to conserve space).

Table 3 regresses the Religious Beliefs scale upon the independent variables. Religious preference has a highly significant relationship with religious beliefs. Catholics had the strongest religious beliefs both before and after statistical controls. Fundamentalist/conservative Protestants had the next strongest religious beliefs, and “nones” the weakest religious beliefs both before and after statistical controls. The effects of father’s and mother’s religious preferences are not statistically significant. Saying grace when growing up just missed achieving conventional levels of significance. Friendship Reference Group social ties are highly significantly related to the strength of the Religious Beliefs scale. Both before and after statistical controls, respondents who had all of their closest friends attend church with them had stronger religious beliefs than respondents who had only some of their friends attend church with them. The weakest Religious Beliefs score was for respondents who had no friends attend with them. As expected, the strongest partial Beta’s were the statistically significant associations—.568 for religious preference and .226 for Friendship Reference Group. The variables shown combined to explain 45.9 percent of the variation in Religious Beliefs scale.

A regression of strength of religious faith upon the independent variables revealed a similar pattern to religious beliefs (table not shown to conserve space). Religious preference has a highly significant relationship with the dependent variable. Fundamentalist/conservative Protestants and Catholics have the strongest religious faith and “nones” the weakest religious faith both before and after statistical controls. The effects of father’s religious preference is not statistically significant. Mother’s religious preference and saying grace growing up just miss conventional levels of significance. Friendship Reference Group social ties are highly significantly related to strength of religious faith. Both before and after statistical controls, respondents who had all of their closest friends attend church with them showed a stronger level of religious faith than those respondents who had only some friends who attend with them. The weakest religious faith was for respondents who had no friends attend church

TABLE 3 Effects of Religious Preference, Father’s Religious Preference, Mother’s Religious Preference, Saying Grace Growing Up, and Friendship Reference Group Upon Religious Belief Scale

Independent variable and category	N	Unadjusted mean ETA	Adjusted for other independents Partial Beta
Religious preference¹			
Fund/cons protestant	119	13.697	13.439
Mod/lib protestant	98	13.194	13.318
Catholic	62	14.274	14.443
None	11	6.727	7.469
		.626	.568
Father’s religious preference²			
Fund/cons protestant	119	13.655	13.697
Mod/lib protestant	85	12.988	13.180
Catholic	66	13.970	13.109
None	20	11.550	13.330
		.282	.120
Mother’s religious preference³			
Fund/cons protestant	114	13.491	13.207
Mod/lib protestant	96	12.865	13.440
Catholic	69	14.101	13.501
None	11	12.364	14.054
		.229	.083
Grace growing up?⁴			
Yes	199	13.744	13.520
No	91	12.604	13.093
		.240	.090
Friendship reference group⁵			
No friends attend church with me	75	12.000	12.559
Some friends attend church with me	166	13.801	13.615
All friends attend church with me	49	14.102	13.879
		.375	.226

$F^1(3,277) = 39.271, p = .000$ $F^4(1,277) = 3.642, p = .057$ Multiple R Squared = .459
 $F^2(3,277) = .661, p = .577$ $F^5(2,277) = 10.798, p = .000$
 $F^3(3,277) = .602, p = .614$

with them. The strongest partial Beta's were the statistically significant associations—.418 for religious preference and .389 for Friendship Reference Group. The independent variables combined to explain 43.1 percent of the variation in strength of religious faith.

CONCLUSIONS

Individuals' religiosity is affected not only by their socialization experiences in their growing up years with their families but also by the reinforcing influence of people in their current social environment. When a student is raised in a conservative religious family and moves to a setting that is conservatively religious, we should expect continuity of religious beliefs and practices. Our data support this argument. Those socialized in conservative Protestant and Catholic families who attended church as children and participated in familial religious rituals such as saying grace before meals persist with high levels of religiosity in college. In contrast, students from moderate/liberal Protestant families or whose parents were not religious had somewhat lower levels of religiosity in college. However, they too were affected by the staunchly religious ecological setting. Moreover, students who formed religious reference groups while at college are more religious than students with "secular" friends. This applied primarily to students from religious backgrounds, but we also noted that students from nonreligious or nonconservative backgrounds became more religious or more conservative in this religiously conservative setting.

Despite the limitations of our data due to the relatively low response rate and the inherent problems of selectivity that this involves, the findings reported herein are consistent with our theoretical arguments. This work highlights the importance of both family background and present social environment for explaining students' religiosity, even in the context of an officially secular state university. This remains the case even though the overwhelming majority of our respondents did not grow up in the community itself (98.2%); only 20% even consider themselves from the general region. This suggests that religious behavior persists even though students move away from the religious environment where they were raised. Finally, since all first year students are required to live on campus, we do not believe that our respondents' behavior is more traditional or

conservative than others in their academic cohort. And while students who move later to an off-campus apartment may eventually decrease their religious behavior, we believe this would be the case only if they abandoned their religiously oriented friendship network.

We would not expect, however, that results such as these would obtain in college/university or community environments that are less religious, or less conservatively religious. Nor can we claim that the patterns reported herein can be generalized beyond our sample to the larger student population. Even with these data limitations in mind, this study suggests a continuing research agenda which tests the effects of community context, reference groups, families, and generational cohorts on the persistence and change of religious behavior.

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