



Education and religion: Individual, congregational, and cross-level interaction effects on biblical literalism ☆,☆☆

Samuel Stroope *

Department of Sociology, Baylor University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 December 2010

Revised 16 May 2011

Accepted 19 May 2011

Available online 26 May 2011

Keywords:

Stratification

Education

Organizations

Social networks

Culture

Religion

Beliefs

Congregations

ABSTRACT

Using ideas from cultural and organizational theory, I examine the interplay of individual and congregation-level educational attainment on biblical literalism. Data on 387 congregations and 100,009 worshippers (US Congregational Life Survey, 2001) are used to test hypotheses. Results indicate that the effects of congregational education and individual educational attainment are among the largest effects in models. This study is the first to show that regardless of an individual's own education, affirmations of biblical literalism are less likely when persons with higher education dominate a congregation. This finding brings into relief the important role of social context in persons' belief in biblical literalism. Additionally, congregational education amplifies the influence of individual education on biblical literalism such that the gap in belief between college/non-college education individuals widens in high education congregations. This finding suggests that high education persons more deeply absorb the influence of a more educated congregational context.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

A growing body of literature documents the importance of belief in the Bible for religious and nonreligious outcomes. Biblical literalism, the focal concern in this literature, represents not only a dividing line in religious communities but also remains important more broadly because of its association with various outcomes such as civil liberties attitudes (Froese et al., 2008). But there remain unanswered questions about what shapes literalist views of the Bible. Social class-based experiences often mold internal dispositions, including belief commitments, in enduring ways (Bourdieu, 1984); similarly, stratifying experiences, such as educational attainment, shape beliefs about the Bible. Educational attainment is particularly relevant to biblical literalism because Americans spend an increasing number of years enrolled in schools and colleges, and part of the expansion of formal education in the United States has meant that many more conservative Christians, including biblical literalists, are exposed to unprecedented levels of formal education. Biblical literalists' increased experience with educational institutions is partly due to the improved representation of women and ethnic and racial minorities in higher education, groups more likely to adhere to a literal view of the Bible. What consequences might the expansion of education and the dominance of congregations by college graduates have for biblical literalism?

Secularization proponents generally hold that the modernization of societies, including scientific and educational advancement, reduces religiosity. Past sociological literature sees higher education in particular as a secularizing force (Hunter, 1987; Wuthnow, 1988). Though this earlier work contends that diminished religiosity accompanies increased

☆ Thanks to Paul Froese, Joseph Baker, Troy Blanchard, Charles Tolbert, Jerry Park, Chris Bader, Phillip Connor, Brandon Vaidyanathan, the editor and anonymous *Social Science Research* reviewers for comments on this article. Thanks to Andrew Whitehead and Scott Draper for productive conversation.

☆☆ Winner, 2011 Robert J. McNamara Student Paper Award from the Association for the Sociology of Religion.

* Address: Department of Sociology, One Bear Place #97326, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76798-7326, United States.

E-mail address: sam_stroope@baylor.edu

education, recent research complicates this picture, showing that the college educated may be more religious than young adults who do not attend college (Uecker et al., 2007).¹ This education-religion puzzle directs our attention away from examining whether or not schooling uniformly secularizes, to consider how educational attainment may differentially affect *particular* religious practices or beliefs. Higher education is known to cultivate a range of beliefs in areas such as political tolerance, civil rights, and altruism (Hyman and Wright, 1979; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). But a recent review of the college-religion literature finds that “research has not provided a compelling answer to the question of how the college experience affects the content of [religious] beliefs” (Mayrl and Oeur, 2009, p. 264).

In this article, I argue that it is not enough to examine this question in view of individuals' own educational backgrounds; rather, the role of social context must be brought into relief. Specifically, I reason that the educational make-up of congregations is a key factor in understanding the influence of education on the maintenance of religious belief, and specifically beliefs about the Bible. This focus is in line with a long-standing sociological tradition maintaining that individuals' personal backgrounds as well as individuals' social context shape beliefs, including religious beliefs. Simmel (1898, p. 108) spoke explicitly to this notion: “the faith that has come to be regarded as the essence and substance of religion is first of all a relationship *between human beings*” (emphasis in original). Consistent with this tradition, scholars have distinguished between individuals' within-denominational social ties and within-congregation social ties, the latter highlighted as especially important for shaping religious behavior and belief (Cornwall, 1987, 1989). There are a variety of reasons why higher education should particularly affect beliefs about the Bible. Some of these reasons revolve around personal experiences in college, but others stem from being surrounded by fellow congregants who are college graduates. Such a high education social context may amplify the influence congregants' educational experiences have on each others' view of the Bible. It follows that the educational composition of these “interpretive communities” should have strong bearing on the maintenance of biblical literalism among members (Bartkowski, 1996, p. 269). The influence of congregants' higher education background on an individual congregant's biblical belief should be considered an important piece to the education-religion puzzle.

The present study contributes to the education-religion literature by tying together several lines of research and theory indicating that congregational and individual educational attainment should interact in a multilevel framework to diminish affirmations of biblical literalism. Following previous work and theory (Hoffmann and Bartkowski, 2008), I understand the literal view of the Bible as a cultural schema shaped by both individual and social structural resources. I build on previous work on the social sources of biblical literalism by examining the effects of educational attainment at both individual and group levels. Sociological theories of religion expect congregational contexts to condition individual-level effects, but until recently, data and methodological limitations have hindered researchers' opportunities to model hypothesized multilevel relationships. As a result, no scholarly work has examined how the educational composition of congregations shapes view of the Bible. Additionally, few studies of educational effects on religion compare college attendees with non-attendees. To fill these gaps and build on the education-religion research literature, the present study uses a recent national survey, analyzing 100,009 individuals nested in 387 congregations using multilevel modeling, to test hypotheses concerning educational effects at the congregation and individual level and their cross-level interaction. In interpreting results, I import the idea of “absorptive capacity” from organizational literature to help illuminate the tendency of more educated individuals to be more strongly swayed by more educated congregational environments.

2. Background

2.1. Biblical literalism

A central aspect of Christian groups' divisions and conflicts has centered on view of the Bible (Ammerman, 1987). Scholars of religious fundamentalism count belief in scriptural inerrancy and literalism as key identifiers of fundamentalism (Almond et al., 1995; Hood et al., 2005). Survey researchers frequently use literal interpretation of the Bible as a measure of Christian fundamentalist orientation (Jelen et al., 1990), with variation in biblical literalism found within both traditionally conservative and liberal denominations (Village, 2005; Woodberry and Smith, 1998). Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Hoffmann and Bartkowski, 2008), biblical literalism is understood in this study as taking everything in the Bible as the literal word of God (as opposed to non-literalists who do not take some biblical passages literally, word-for-word). Contemporary biblical literalism is largely the descendant of a theological orientation popularized during the early fundamentalist movement in the United States in the late nineteenth century (Marsden, 1980). Around this time, Evangelicals had become increasingly marginalized in America's cultural centers (e.g., the academy) and the promotion of a literalist hermeneutical orientation became one attempt to maintain religious fidelity in an intellectual climate skeptical of the Bible's authority and timeless validity (Marsden, 1994). Despite this relatively recent popularity of biblical literalism within the American context, an ongoing research literature has devoted considerable attention to biblical literalism with good reason. Studies repeatedly demonstrate that biblical literalism is related to a wide variety of religious and non-religious social outcomes and attitudes (Froese and Bader, 2010). Among these is biblical literalism's association with political intolerance (Froese et al., 2008), criminal punishment attitudes (Bader et al., 2010), reduced verbal ability (Sherkat, 2010), limited educational enrollment (Darnell and Sherkat, 1997), lower exposure to pornography (Sherkat and Ellison, 1997), lower marital infidelity

¹ Others have also found college to either have a positive effect (Dillon, 1996; Lee, 2002) or no effect (Arnett and Jensen, 2002) on religiosity.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/955811>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/955811>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)