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The Relationship of Religious Belief and Student Attitudes Toward Civil Liberties

By John H. George
Central State University

A review of relevant literature reveals that there has been too little research regarding the effects of religious belief on political attitudes. The sociologist Gerhard Lenski demonstrated attitude differences among Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Detroit but said that his data showed little or no relationship between religious liberalism and political liberalism.¹ Conversely, California sociologists Charles Glock and Rodney Stark demonstrated that the less orthodox (or modernist) denominations such as the Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian were more predisposed in favor of civil liberties and against racism and anti-Semitism than were the fundamentalist religious organizations such as the Church of Christ, Nazarene, Southern Baptist, and Pentecostal groups.² Psychologist Milton Rokeach’s observations that the “religiously devout are on the average more bigoted, more authoritarian, more dogmatic, and more anti-humanitarian than the less devout” seemingly lend weight to Glock and Stark’s findings.³ Sociologist Jack Balswick’s findings were like those of Rokeach and Glock and Stark. His study of clergymen revealed a strong relationship between theological liberalism and political liberalism in two areas: civil rights and civil liberties, and a less strong but definite relationship in the areas of welfarism and internationalism⁴ Similar patterns are discernable in earlier studies by psychologist T. W. Adorno and sociologist Samuel Stouffer. Adorno and his associates found that those “who reject organized religion are less prejudiced on the average than those who, in one way or another accept it.”⁵ Stouffer, using a

national sample, reported that people who do not attend church are more tolerant of political nonconformists.¹

To further explore this area, which seems to have been neglected by political scientists, I surveyed 444 students in the fall of 1970 at three colleges located in central Oklahoma. The study categorized students as religious fundamentalists, modernists or unbelievers based on the manner in which they responded to statements and questions involving belief in God, the Devil, the divinity of Jesus, miracles as described in the Bible, hell as described in the Bible, and the necessity of being of a particular religious faith in order to attain salvation. At this point it should be stressed that most examinations of the relationship between religion and attitudes have used denominational or sect preferences as the basis for comparison of attitudinal differences. My study concentrates on actual beliefs, for the following reasons: Although the particular religious group in which one was raised or with which one identifies no doubt can have a significant effect on his overall attitudes, it seems that the religious beliefs of each person would be more important in shaping these attitudes. For example, two people who are Methodists may have diametrically opposed views on such issues as abortion, civil rights, the death penalty, foreign policy, etc. It is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that these same two Methodists will have divergent views regarding the divinity of Jesus, the inspiration of the Bible, belief in miracles, a literal hell, the necessity of being a Christian, etc. Thus it might be surmised that knowing whether or not a respondent is a religious fundamentalist would provide a better clue to his other beliefs than knowing what church he attends would provide. Our prime concern, then, is with the individual's system of belief rather than his denominational (or sect) preference.

Returning then to the categorization of respondents as fundamentalists, modernists or unbelievers, we note that such factors as belief in the Biblical Hell, the Devil, miracles, and the necessity of accepting the divinity of Jesus were considered as denoting a fundamentalist. The lack of such beliefs coupled with affirmation of a supreme being placed the respondent in the modernist category. To be categorized as an unbeliever, the respondent, in addition to rejecting orthodox beliefs, had to answer a question about God with "I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out."

Using these criteria, the sample turned out to be 82% fundamentalists, 8% modernists and 10% unbelievers. This is quite different from a national sample of college students taken by the Gallup organization in January.

of 1971. Thirty-nine percent of that sample responded that religion is old-fashioned and out of date. Among the reasons given for this belief the students mentioned that religion cannot provide answers to today’s problems; it is behind the times and too steeped in tradition to be effective; it has too many rules; it is used as a crutch to avoid facing reality; it places too much emphasis on money and is held back by its leaders. Another Gallup poll taken in late April and early May of 1970 found 58% of a national student sample answering “no” to the question “Is organized religion a relevant part of your life at the present time, or not?” This poll found that the higher a student’s parents’ income, the more likely he was to answer in the negative, with more than two-thirds of those whose family income was over $15,000 per year saying that organized religion was not relevant in their lives.

In the present study, thirty of the unbelievers answered a question regarding religious preference by selecting names of denominations rather than by marking “none” or “agnostic or atheist.” Many of these respondents no doubt chose the church in which they had been raised. Thirty percent of the unbelievers, however, were still attending church with at least moderate regularity, which lends support to the old adage that a lot of unbelievers go to church.

No doubt one-third (and probably more) of the people in this category are not unbelievers in the traditional sense of that term. Some are almost unquestionably mystics or doubters who want evidence before they will accept certain doctrines. Other include Unitarians, many of whom prefer not to be called unbelievers. Such persons generally adhere to the conviction that whether or not Jesus was divine, or whether or not a supreme being exists are not important (not even meaningful) questions. But, they affirm, the ethical teachings of religion (all religions) are important and should be stressed at the expense of (and without the hindrance of) dogmatic creeds. No doubt many persons with such beliefs consider themselves very religious. If they have a conception of a supreme being, it is a highly personal conception; they do not accept the idea that God looks like a male caucasian with a beard. Most modernists, of course, also reject such a notion and a number probably hold a quasi-deistic view. This involves the belief in a supreme being who created, but who does not interfere in the affairs of the world.

At any rate, respondents in the unbeliever category should not be thought of in terms of the doctrinaire village atheist, doing verbal battle with theologians and writing nasty letters to the local newspaper denouncing Jesus as a first century snake-oil salesman.

Although about two-thirds of the students reported that they attend church at least once a week, frequency of attendance differed with regard
to the religious belief category. Whereas 35% of the modernists and 30% of the unbelievers claimed to attend religious services at least two to three times per month, eighty-five percent of the fundamentalists asserted this frequency of attendance, with 76% saying that they attend at least once a week. Nearly one-third of the modernists and over half of the unbelievers stated that they had not attended church in the last year or that they attend "seldom." Only 5% of the fundamentalists gave comparable responses.

As previously stated, the findings of Balswick, Glock and Stark, Rokeach and Stark et al, strongly suggest that religious fundamentalists tend to have less favorable attitudes toward civil liberties than do non-fundamentalists. Balswick's study of political attitudes among the clergy showed a significant difference in dispositions toward civil liberties between theological liberals and fundamentalists, with 60% of the fundamentalists and none of the liberals believing that all Communists in America should be put in jail.

Glock and Stark found that 57% of the Southern Baptists and 54% of the sect members in their sample believed that an atheist should not be allowed to teach in a public high school, while only 33% of the Congregationalists and Methodists believed this. Further, they found that while fewer than one Congregationalist in five would prevent an atheist from teaching in a private university, almost half the sect members would deny the unbeliever this right.

Rokeach discussed findings which show the religiously devout to be "more bigoted, more authoritarian, more dogmatic and more anti-humanitarian than the less devout." Rokeach did not find himself in agreement with Allport and Ross that although churchgoers in general are more bigoted than nonchurchgoers, those who attend church occasionally are the most bigoted of all. In Rokeach's sample, frequency of church attendance made virtually no difference; regular churchgoers were just as intolerant as those whose attendance was irregular. Using his Value Survey, Rokeach also found that the unbelievers, Jews and Episcopalians in his sample had somewhat different values from the Baptists. This supports the theory that modernists and unbelievers have different attitudes from fundamentalists.

7 Balswick, op. cit.; Glock and Stark, op. cit.; Rokeach, op. cit.; Stark, et al, op. cit.
8 Glock and Stark, op. cit., Chapter 5. Included among their list of sects are: Assembly of God, Church of God, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Seventh Day Adventists, Four Square Gospel and an independent tabernacle. The authors applied the term sect to this group of religious bodies "in conformity with common sociological usage." (p. 5).
9 Rokeach, "Faith, Hope and Bigotry," op. cit.
Lenski indicated that he found no interrelation between religious liberalism and political liberalism except for a modest relationship between religious liberalism and support for freedom of speech.\textsuperscript{10} The findings of my study are that a highly significant relationship exists with regard to civil liberties in general. The fundamentalists were less favorable toward civil liberties than were the modernists and unbelievers.

The method for categorizing respondents as favorable, ambivalent or unfavorable toward civil liberties utilized nine statements involving such areas as freedom of speech and assembly, censorship of books and films, rights of the accused, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, private sex-related behavior, and women's rights in relation to abortion. Students were asked to respond to the statements with one of the following answers: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Not sure or neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. They were categorized by using the following range of means:

1.00-2.75, Favorable toward civil liberties  
2.76-3.25, Ambivalent toward civil liberties  
3.26-5.00, Unfavorable toward civil liberties

Sixty-two percent of the fundamentalists had favorable attitudes, but 97% of the modernists and 93% of the unbelievers were favorable. And although the fundamentalists were 26% ambivalent and 12% unfavorable, 3% of the modernists and 7% of the unbelievers, respectively, were ambivalent; none were among the unfavorable attitude group.

Also in the realm of civil liberties are attitudes toward protest demonstrations. Peaceful demonstrations are, of course, a medium of expression and thus protected by the First Amendment. Unfortunately, from the civil libertarian viewpoint, a majority of the American public disapproves of any sort of demonstrations, even peaceful ones. Social psychologist Phillip Converse and his associates found that in their 1968 national

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude Toward Civil Liberties</th>
<th>Fundamentalist</th>
<th>Modernist</th>
<th>Unbeliever</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(367)</td>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>(43)</td>
<td>(444)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p < .001

\textsuperscript{10} Lenski, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 211.
sample, only 20% approved of “taking part in protest meetings or marches that are permitted by the local authorities.” Further, this same study found that almost 40% of those who took a “dove” stand on the Vietnam war believed that the Chicago police had not used enough force in quelling the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic convention; better than two-thirds rejected the idea that too much force had been used.

The question relating to demonstrations was:
If a friend of yours informed you that he was going to take part in a non-violent demonstration to protest something he considered to be wrong, would you:
1. Strongly approve
2. Approve
3. Be unsure or neutral
4. Disapprove
5. Strongly disapprove

Fifty-four percent of the total sample approved of friends taking part in such demonstrations, 17% disapproved and 28% were unsure. Fundamentalists’ attitudes on this question differed noticeably from those of other students. No modernist or unbeliever disapproved of non-violent demonstrations, but one in five fundamentalists registered disapproval. And although nearly two-thirds of the modernists and 86% of the unbelievers gave approval to such demonstrations, only half the fundamentalists did so.

### Attitude Toward Non-violent Demonstrations and Religious Belief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude toward friend being involved in a non-violent demonstration</th>
<th>Religious Belief Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fundamentalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly approve</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approve</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapprove</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disapprove</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total *</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N) <em>(367)</em></td>
<td>(34)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p < .01
* Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

A question might be raised as to whether these findings are distorted by the factor of social class. It seems probable that they are not, since the results were quite similar when social class was held constant. In fact, there were no significant differences in the civil liberties attitudes of the three social classes among modernists and unbelievers. And while upper middle class fundamentalists tested more civil libertarian than the lower middle and working class fundamentalists, they were notably less so than even working class modernists and unbelievers.

It may be seen, then, that the findings of this study strongly support the idea that religious fundamentalists tend to be anti-civil-libertarian in comparison with modernists and unbelievers. Such findings conflict with Lenski’s view that there is little, if any, correlation between religious liberalism and political liberalism in this regard. Of course, Lenski’s findings applied to a Detroit cross-section in the late fifties, while the present findings apply to Oklahoma college students in the early seventies.

What explanation may be offered for fundamentalist views regarding civil liberties? A plausible interpretation is that persons who view religion in terms of right versus wrong with not much middle ground (or perhaps as Christ versus anti-Christ) are more likely to apply similar thought patterns to other realms, i.e., the political. Such people feel they know what is right and judge accordingly. There is not much sympathy for the rights of those who deviate. Thus, dissenters are evil and deserving of few, if any, rights. Women wanting abortions should not indulge in sexual relations in the first place. Or as one male fundamentalist put it, “If they don’t want to get pregnant, they shouldn’t be ———.” In short, fundamentalists seem far more likely to believe that if a person does not conform within certain narrow limits of tolerable behavior, he deserves any unpleasant consequences he may suffer. (If someone is indulging in “immoral” behavior such as showing a sex movie in his own home and his constitutional rights are violated, so what?) Rights, to an alarming percentage of fundamentalists, are for those who “do right.” As one female fundamentalist who strongly favored the death penalty put it: “Live right or don’t live at all.”

In summary, the civil liberties attitudes of Americans appear strongly related to their religious beliefs. This might be an area of great importance for further study, especially in light of recent heightened ethnic consciousness which is often closely related to religion. Further, it would

12 Social class determinations were made by using August B. Hollingshead’s *Two Factor Index of Social Position* (Privately mimeographed, 1957). Utilizing Joseph Kahl’s (*The American Class Structure*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1957) typology, the sample turned out to be 5% upper middle class, 38% lower middle class, and 57% working class.
seem advisable to concentrate on actual religious belief rather than on denomination or sect preferences.

**Abbreviated Questionnaire**

Please choose the answer that *comes nearest* to expressing your opinion about each statement. Place the number of your answer in the blank at the left of each statement.

1. SD  Strongly Disagree  
2. D  Disagree  
3. N  Not sure or neutral  
4. A  Agree  
5. SA  Strongly Agree

1. Constitutional guarantees of free speech and assembly should not apply to American communists.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

2. Our laws give too much protection to suspected criminals.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

3. If a man is showing a sex movie to friends in his own home, the police should stop it.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

4. Every city should ban objectionable books and movies.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

5. If police suspect that drugs or guns, or other criminal evidence is hidden in someone’s house, they should be allowed to enter the house without first obtaining a search warrant.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

6. The police should hunt down homosexuals and put them in jail.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

7. A book containing wrong political views should not be published, much less put in our libraries.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

8. No matter what a person’s political beliefs are, he is entitled to the same legal rights and protections as anyone else.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

9. It should be a woman’s right to decide whether or not she should have an abortion.  
   1. SD  
   2. D  
   3. N  
   4. A  
   5. SA

10. All the miracles described in the Bible really happened.  
    1. SD  
    2. D  
    3. N  
    4. A  
    5. SA

11. Hell, as described in the Bible, actually exists.  
    1. SD  
    2. D  
    3. N  
    4. A  
    5. SA
The following questions are multiple choice. Please pick the answer that most nearly expresses your opinion and place the number of that answer in the blank to the left of the question.

1. Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?
   5. I know God really exists and I haven’t any doubts about it.
   4. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
   3. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times.
   2. I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind.
   1. I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out.

2. The Devil actually exists.
   1. Definitely not true.
   2. Probably not true.
   3. Possible, but doubtful.
   4. Probably true
   5. Completely true.

3. Do you think belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour is . . .
   5. Absolutely necessary for salvation.
   4. Probably necessary for salvation.
   3. Would possibly help.
   2. Probably has little influence.
   1. Probably has no influence.

4. Do you think being a member of your particular religious faith is . . .
   5. Absolutely necessary for salvation.
   4. Probably necessary for salvation.
   3. Would probably help.
   2. May have some influence.
   1. Probably has no influence.