

ABSTRACT

Reading the American Bible: Its Role in Liberal Morality, Criminal Justice Attitudes,
and Attitudes about Religion and Science

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The Bible has had a large impact on American culture, but thus far very little research has looked at the impact that reading the Bible may have. Research shows that religion has the tendency to have a conservative influence upon those who are more highly religious, but using the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey, this study finds three different areas where reading the Bible has a liberalizing effect on the reader. The three domains where reading has a liberalizing effect deals with liberal morality issues, various criminal justice attitudes, and attitudes about the interaction between science and religion. This liberalizing effect is in opposition to the effect of Biblical literalism. Three mechanisms are suggested for how reading the Bible has this effect on the reader.

Reading the American Bible: Its Role in Liberal Morality, Criminal Justice Attitudes, and
Attitudes about Religion and Science

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Bible is the most influential text in Western civilization. Its stories and messages are referenced in countless cultural mediums and its sacredness is used to legitimate countless forms of political authority. As such, it is surprising that little attention has been given to the significance of actually reading the Bible. Perhaps the Bible's ubiquity promotes the misperception that we all know what it says and, consequently, reading it is simply a habitual and ultimately meaningless activity.

Self-proclaimed Biblical literalists welcome the public designation as arbiters of Biblical accuracy. But Biblical literalists are far from the only Americans who read the Bible. In fact, of Americans who read the Bible about every week, 47.2% do not claim to be Biblical literalists (see Figure 1). What effect, if any, does this activity of routinely reading the Bible have on them? And, conversely, what is the effect of not reading the Bible on Biblical literalists?

Thus far, very little research focuses on the effect of reading the Bible. Most of the existing research on reading the Bible is either in the field of anthropology (Bielo, 2009; Malley, 2004), or tries to quantitatively apply various hermeneutical theories (Village, 2005, 2006). This paper uncovers how the effects of reading the Bible produce unexpected outcomes, at times opposite the effects of identification as a Biblical literalist. Specifically, Biblical literalism tends to predict conservative religious identities and political attitudes, while actually reading the Bible can conversely indicate more liberal political attitudes and religious identities. Ultimately,

these counter trends demonstrate the extent to which reading the Bible and thinking that the Bible is literal are distinct and often divergent religious indicators.

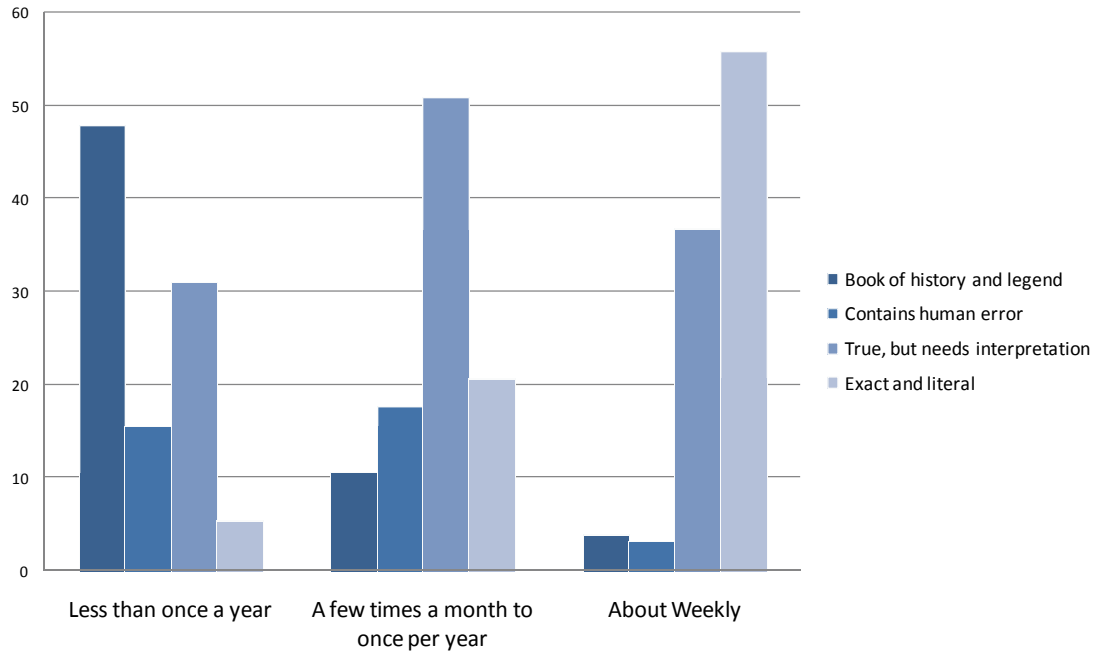


Figure 1. Bible Reading Frequency by Biblical Literalism. Source: BRS (2007).

N: Less than once a year: 539; A few times a month to once per year: 439; About weekly: 397.

Religion Attitudes

Religion influences people’s views and most frequently the relationship reflects a conservative influence. Sometimes the effect of Biblical literalist views and the effect of reading the Bible are similar and in the same direction¹. At other times, however, the effect of reading the Bible diverges. Additionally, as can be seen in Table 1, when comparing reading the Bible and Biblical literalism in a bivariate sense the two do not diverge in terms of their effects on the dependent variables used in this study and they

¹ Other regression models, not included here, show that both Biblical literalism and reading the Bible have a similar impact on issues such as views on abortion, helping people in need and the sick, that science helps reveal God’s glory, and doubting that science will eventually solve most of our problems.

are also positively related to one another. The only instance where reading the Bible diverges from Biblical literalism is in correlation with being actively engaged with social and economic justice and decreasing one's rate of consumption, which reading the Bible is not correlated with at a bivariate level. As will be shown later in the paper, this similarity between reading the Bible and Biblical literalism does not necessarily hold true once we move to multivariate comparisons and controls are introduced. I have loosely categorized three general domains that are the focus of this paper: liberal morality, attitudes about criminal justice, and attitudes about the relationship between religion and science.

While research shows that a higher level of religiosity is correlated with higher levels of moral and political conservatism (Woodberry & Smith, 1998; Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998), some also suggests liberal moral and political outcomes (Davis & Robinson, 1996b, 1996a). Davis and Robinson looked at 21 European countries and Israel (1999), and found that orthodox beliefs are correlated with an increased support for government help for those in need because their situation may be out of their control, but then other research argues that even orthodox believers see people's struggles as being the result of their own failings (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Brewer et. al. (2003) show that while political messages are relatively common in congregations, these almost exclusively take the form of social justice issues, but it may then be a question of whether or not congregants actually internalize and act on these messages as Curry et. al. (2004) show no relationship between religiosity and people's attitudes towards these issues of justice.

Table 1: Crosstab of Biblical Literalism, Reading the Bible, and Dependent Variables

	biblit	Read	Social and Economic Justice	Consume Less	Death Penalty	Terrorism	Harsh Punishments	Science and Religion in Competition
Read	0.585***							
Social and Economic Justice	-0.067*	0.037						
Consume Less	-0.091**	0.038	0.253***					
Death Penalty	0.172***	-0.026	-0.174***	-0.144***				
Terrorism	0.297***	0.172***	-0.1**	-0.095**	0.213***			
Harsh Punishments	0.232***	0.074**	-0.054*	-0.132***	0.296***	0.457***		
Science and Religion in Competition	-0.056*	-0.098**	-0.071**	0.042	-0.077**	0.031	0.028	
Scientists are Hostile	0.29***	0.257***	-0.066*	-0.034	0.07**	0.144***	0.067*	0.189***

Source: BRS (2007).

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

The sub-cultural identity theory of evangelicals (Smith, 1998) would predict that more religious and orthodox believers would be more conservative on both cultural and economic issues, while the moral cosmology approach of Starks and Robinson (Starks & Robinson, 2009) shows that orthodox believers are more conservative than modernists on moral and cultural issues but more liberal on economic issues than the modernists. While this is the case, there will be a tendency for the more conservative religious believers to be more conservative on both moral and economic issues due to a general reluctance to allow the government to shape the social order (Froese & Bader, 2008). It is unclear whether these same orthodox believers support actually engaging in social justice issues in their personal life, but the relation of cultural and economic issues to the government's involvement would suggest an overall reluctance to engage in social and economic justice.

One's religious tradition also has been shown to have some relation to one's consumption behaviors, with the Judeo-Christian traditions behaving differently from Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims (Bailey & Sood, 1993). Riesebrodt (2000) argues that many conservative Christians shun consumerism, chastising it as a piece of American culture to be rejected. But consumerism is also recognized as a cultural tool able to achieve certain goals, if the consumption does not exceed its bounds as merely a means to this end (Stevens, 2010). Others, however, propose arguments similar to Weber's (2001) claim that the ability to consume could be interpreted as a sign of God's blessing, and therefore welcomed as a comforting sign to the believer. Indeed, Cobb (2000) has argued that the Reformation's rejection of the monastic life opened the door to and was the beginning of an acceptance of consumption that may not have been

previously accepted by believers on a wide scale. Thus it is expected that the more conservative the believer the more likely they are to, on some level, embrace consumerism.

Conservative religious beliefs and Biblical literalism are also positively associated with favorable views of corporal punishment (Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, & Bursik, 1992; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Evans & Adams, 2003; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Owen & Wagner, 2006; Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009). There are, however, a few variations worth noting. Believers for whom religion is important in their daily life tend to think the death penalty should be reserved for older individuals (Evans & Adams, 2003), and those who believe in a punitive God are also more likely to support more harsh punishments (Evans & Adams, 2003; Bader, Desmond, Mencken, & Johnson, 2010). On the other hand, those who have images of God that are more loving tend to support less harsh forms of punishment (Unnever et al., 2005; Unnever et al., 2006), but Bader et. al. (2010) show that loving images of God are not consistent predictors once God's anger is controlled for. Finally, Unnever and Cullen (2006) show that fundamentalist beliefs can both increase and decrease different dimensions of one's views regarding the punishment of criminals.

Conservative and Biblical literalist views also impact how one thinks God views the United States, as well as how we ought to defend the country. Froese and Bader (2007) show that Biblical literalism is related to believing that God favors the United States in world affairs. Similarly, those with engaged and judgmental images of God also believe this. This relationship of Biblical literalism to the belief that God favors

the United States is influential for the support of various policy decisions, such as support for the PATRIOT Act. Results from the first wave of the Baylor Religion Survey showed that one of the strongest predictors of whether or not one would support the PATRIOT Act was whether or not those respondents thought God favored the United States in world affairs (Bader et al., 2006). Further, Froese and Mencken (2009) show that religious justifications most successfully garnered public support for policies such as the PATRIOT Act.

Religion and its relationship with science has also been a topic of research conversation, usually centered on some form of conflict between the two (Evans & Evans, 2008). Granger and Price (2007) argue it is possible that literal interpretations of the Bible lead to an attitude of anti-intellectualism, leaving believers weary of furthering education and the project of science in general. Similarly, fundamentalist beliefs and conservative Protestantism more generally has also been shown to have a negative influence on the believer's educational attainment (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997; Sherkat & Darnell, 1999), but Beyerlein (2004) further qualifies this finding, showing it is primarily fundamentalist and Pentecostal believers that tend to have lower levels of education while evangelicals tend to have higher levels of education. Gauchat (2008) discusses three different explanations of anti-science sentiments, one of which focuses on the social context of the individual. Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) find that one of the strongest predictors of a scientist's present religiosity is whether or not religion was an aspect of their home as a child, hinting at the possibility that religion may not inherently deter interest in science. However, Ecklund and Park (2009) show that religious upbringing is associated with scientists perceiving a conflict between religion and

science, but the conflict is greater for more liberal believers and not more conservative believers. Scientists are also less likely to see a conflict when they think their peers are less antagonistic towards religion (Ecklund & Park, 2009).

Both Biblical literalism and theological orthodoxy are associated with higher levels of morally based criticisms of science, and members of conservative protestant denominations are generally more skeptical of the value of science (Ellison & Musick, 1995). While there may be information available to the public that would help individuals see science in a positive light, religious beliefs have been shown to filter this information according to values already held as important (Nisbet & Goidel, 2007). Thus a believer may perceive a conflict between science and religion depending on whether or not information in support of science is in conflict with various ideological values already held as important.

It is clear that conservative religious beliefs and beliefs about the Bible specifically are strongly related to moral attitudes, criminal justice issues, and attitudes about the relationship between science and religion. It is not known, however, whether or not actually reading the Bible has the same effect or whether reading the Bible even matters. As it turns out, reading the Bible actually tends to make the reader more 'liberal' in all three of these dimensions in various ways.

CHAPTER TWO

Data and Methods

The data used in this study is from the second (2007) wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS). Using the General Social Survey (GSS) as a model, the BRS provides a periodic depiction of American attitudes and beliefs on a variety of topics containing both fixed content and rotating topic modules. Unlike the occasional models devoted to religion in the GSS, the BRS devotes the majority of its items to religion with the addition of various other more general questions. This range of topics was necessary so that this study could test when and how reading the Bible impacts the reader. Consisting of a random, national sample of 1,648 U.S. Citizens over 18 years old, Wave 2 of the BRS was administered and collected by the Gallup Organization. See Bader et al. (2007) for a detailed overview of the methodology behind the BRS.

Dependent Variables

Two different dependent variables were used to test the impact of reading the Bible under the general heading used here as ‘liberal morality.’ As discussed above, both social and economic justice issues as well as consumption are impacted by Biblical literalism, conservative beliefs, and religion more generally. One question for each of these two issues was used from the BRS to measure whether conservative beliefs as signified by Biblical literalism had a similar impact as did actually reading the Bible. Both of the questions had the prompt of, ‘How important is it to do the following if one wishes to be a good person?’ There were four possible responses ranging from ‘very

important' to 'not important.' The first variable was whether or not one must 'Actively seek social and economic justice' (N=1588), while the second was whether or not one must 'Consume fewer goods' (N=1606). Both were first recoded so that 'not important' had a lower value. Finally, both were collapsed into a dummy variable so that 'very important' and 'somewhat important' were combined (1), and 'not important' and 'not very important' were combined (0).

Fundamentalism, conservative beliefs, and Biblical literalism have all been shown to impact views of punishment (Unnever et al., 2005; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993) as well whether or not one is in support of expanding the government's authority to fight terrorism (Froese & Bader, 2008). Two questions pertaining to the punishment of criminals and one question pertaining to the expansion of the government's authority to fight terrorism were included as dependent variables. All three of these variables had the prompt question saying, "To what extent do you agree or disagree that the federal government should...." There were five possible responses, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' with the 'undecided' option recoded to fall in the middle. The variable measuring support for expanded authority to fight terrorism stated that the federal government should... 'expand its authority to fight terrorism?' (N= 1599). The first of the two variables measuring feelings about punishment stated that the federal government should... 'punish criminals more harshly?' (N= 1604) with the second stating 'abolish the death penalty?' (N= 1605). Finally, all three were transformed into dichotomous variables reflecting either agreement with the statement (1) or not (0).

Religion and science have long had a somewhat uncertain relationship and this is reflected both in academic research (Evans & Evans, 2008; Ecklund & Park, 2009) as well as more popular commentary (Bartlett, 2005; Scott, 2000; Couzin-Frankel, 2010). In order to test whether Biblical literalism has an effect that ought to be differentiated from that of reading the Bible, two key variables were used. Again, both of these had the same question prompt, stating, ‘Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about science.’ Five responses were possible, again ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree,’ with an ‘undecided’ option. As before, the undecided response was moved to the middle. The first variable asked whether the respondent agreed that ‘science and religion are incompatible’ (N= 1602), which was then transformed into a dummy variable reflecting either agreement (1) or disagreement (0). The second variable asked to what degree the respondent thinks that ‘most scientists are hostile to religion’ (N= 1603). This was also transformed to reflect either agreement (1) or disagreement (0).

Independent Variables

The independent variable of focus here is how often the respondent reads the Bible. The question on the BRS states, ‘Outside of attending religious services, about how often do you read the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book?’ All of the non-Christian and Jewish respondents were dropped since Biblical literalism and reading the Bible is the focus of this study. There were seven response categories ranging from ‘never’ to ‘several times a week or more often.’ In order to reflect a more normal distribution and for conceptual ease, these were re-coded so as to reflect the categories of

never, less than once a year, more than once per year but not more than once a month, about weekly, and several times a week or more. The other independent variable of interest, primarily for comparison purposes, is Biblical literalism. The BRS asks ‘which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about the Bible?’ Responses were coded so as to range from 0 to 3, with higher values being more literal interpretations. The most literal belief says that the Bible means exactly what it says and ought to be taken literally. The next highest level states that the Bible is true, but should not be taken literally and needs to be interpreted. The next view claims that there is some human error in the Bible, while the final view is that it is merely a book of history and legends or that the respondent did not have any particularly strong or clear beliefs about the Bible.

Control Variables

Other religious control variables included the respondent’s level of church attendance. In addition to attendance, the RELTRAD (Steensland et al., 2000) system of dummies was included, but altered in order to reflect the population of this study, which is concerned with the effect of reading the Bible when compared to being a Biblical literalist. Both the Jewish category and ‘other’ were not included in the analysis, leaving the categories of Evangelical, Black Protestant, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and none. Evangelicals are used for the comparison category.

Of the non-religious controls, one’s political ideology is likely the most important. As Biblical literalism may be also a measure of some ideological commitment that often seems to closely follow political values, it was important to include a measure of political ideology to ensure that the Biblical literalism measure was not merely a proxy

measure for such an ideological commitment. A dummy variable for region of the country was included for whether or not the respondent was from the south (1). Finally the socio-demographic measures of age, education, income, sex, race and marital status were also included.

Analytic Plan

Stepwise binary logistic regressions were used with models falling into the three general categories mentioned above – moral agendas, political policies, and attitudes about science. Each dependent was initially run with only the socio-demographic variables, followed by the addition of religious tradition and service attendance, finally Biblical literalism and reading the Bible were added. Various steps were taken to ensure that there were no problems with multicollinearity. While it is clear that there is a conceptual difference between holding a more literal view of the Bible and engaging in the activity of reading the Bible, the two are still positively correlated with one another. The correlation between them still falls below the generally accepted level of .6. While still in the range of acceptable correlation, I took further steps to ensure that there was not sign switching or statistically significant differences being concentrated only in certain response options for the dependent variables. In order to ensure there were no issues with sign switching, every regression was run with only Biblical literalism included, then only reading included, and finally the full model. In no case were there hints of sign changes or changes in significant to hint at problems. Further, multinomial regressions were run for every dependent variable, non-dichotomized, to ensure that statistically significant effects concentrated in a single response category were not falsely effecting the binary logistic regressions. Finally, because the dependent variables were a little skewed after

being collapsed, bias in the maximum likelihood estimates must be checked. In order to ensure this was not a problem, all models were also run with a Firth bias reduction command in SAS and no statistically significant changes were apparent (Firth, 1993). As such, the standard Fisher's scoring is reported here.

CHAPTER THREE

Results

Liberal Morality

In Model 1 of whether or not one must be engaged with social and economic justice in order to be a good person (Table 2), the odds of agreeing increases when the individual has a more liberal political ideology, when they increase in age, and when they have more education. When the religious traditions and rate of attendance are added into the model (Model 2), these demographic influences remain nearly identical. Attendance is statistically significant, but the effect is relatively small, with each increase in attendance rate only increasing the odds that one will agree with the statement by 12%. Catholics, Mainline Protestants and religious ‘nones’ all tend to retain more liberal positions in comparison to Evangelicals.

In Model 3, attendance is no longer significant with the addition of Biblical literalism and reading the Bible. Biblical literalism does not have a statistically significant influence, which is somewhat surprising. On the one hand, because the “Religious Right” is significantly less supportive of social and economic issues than that of the “Religious Left” as well as the fact that the “Religious Right” is generally more concentrated on the literalist end of the Biblical literalism spectrum (Hall, 1997), one would expect Biblical literalism to be negatively related to social and economic justice views. This, however, is not the case and since some religious conservatives and Evangelicals eschew government intrusion in some social issues (Emerson & Smith, 2000), the effect could have been washed out by political ideology.

Table 2: Logistic Regressions of Liberal Morality: Social and Economic Justice

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	0.96	-0.04	0.99	-0.01	1.01	0.01
politics	1.25	.23***	1.27	0.23***	1.30	0.26***
age	1.01	.01**	1.01	0.01*	1.01	0.005
educ	1.24	.21***	1.20	0.18**	1.15	0.14*
income	0.92	-0.09	0.90	-0.11	0.92	-0.08
Male	0.99	-0.01	1.04	0.04	1.15	0.14
white	0.95	-0.05	1.26	0.23	1.48	0.39
married	0.71	-0.35	0.74	-0.31	0.75	-0.29
RELTRAD ^a						
blackprot	-	-	1.93	0.66	3.17	1.15*
catholic	-	-	1.89	0.64**	2.37	0.86***
main	-	-	1.94	0.66**	2.21	0.79***
none	-	-	3.67	1.3***	2.99	1.1**
attend	-	-	1.12	0.12***	1.04	0.04
biblit	-	-	-	-	0.87	-0.14
read	-	-	-	-	1.39	0.33***
Intercept		-0.08		-0.97		-1.06
R ²	0.07		0.11		0.12	
N	1324		1307		1208	

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

More interesting than this, however, is the effect of reading the Bible. Reading the Bible actually tends to have a liberalizing effect on the reader. With each increased level of reading the Bible, the odds that the respondent agreed with the statement about engaging in social and economic justice in order to be a good person went up by about 39%. As expected, all of the religious traditions tend to be more liberal on this issue in comparison to Evangelicals, but this fact makes the impact of reading the Bible all the more interesting. Evangelicals are the most strongly correlated with reading the Bible (.39), with the next closest being the Black Church tradition (.14). Thus, while the traditions that we would expect to be more liberal are, the more conservative tradition,

Evangelicals, tend to read the most which will moderate their conservative position in regards to social and economic justice. The liberalizing trend of reading the Bible is even similar to the effect of political ideology. That is, the more liberal one considers themselves politically, the more he thinks one needs to actively engage in social and economic justice in order to be a good person.

On the topic of whether or not one needs to consume fewer goods in order to be a good person (Table 3), we can see that political ideology is again significant as well as age and education in Model 1. All three of these are positively associated with agreeing that a good person needs to decrease their consumption. Interestingly in this model, race is also significant, showing that whites have higher odds of agreeing with this statement about decreasing consumption. This effect of race drops out in Model 2 with the addition

Table 3: Logistic Regressions of Liberal Morality: Consuming Fewer Goods

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	1.09	0.08	1.12	0.11	0.97	-0.03
politics	1.19	0.17***	1.19	0.17***	1.19	.18***
age	1.01	0.01*	1.01	0.01*	1.01	0
educ	1.17	0.15***	1.15	0.14***	1.16	.15**
income	0.93	-0.07	0.92	-0.08	0.89	-.11*
Male	1.05	0.05	1.05	0.05	1.01	0.01
white	1.63	0.49**	1.04	0.04	1.09	0.09
married	0.85	-0.17	0.82	-0.2	0.87	-0.14
RELTRAD ^a						
blackprot	-	-	0.50	-0.7*	0.61	-0.49
catholic	-	-	0.95	-0.05	1.01	0.01
main	-	-	1.34	0.3	1.43	.35*
none	-	-	1.57	0.45*	1.54	0.43
attend	-	-	1.04	0.04	1	0.004
biblit	-	-	-	-	0.84	-.18*
read	-	-	-	-	1.27	.24***
Intercept		-1.61***		-1.31**		-1.12*
R ²	0.06		0.07		0.09	
N	1335		1318		1217	

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

of religious traditions and attendance rate. Only the religious nones are more ‘liberal’ in comparison to Evangelicals on the question of consumption, and Black Protestants are actually less liberal in comparison to Evangelicals. So, the odds of those in the Black Protestant tradition agreeing that one must decrease their rate of consumption in order to be a good person is actually less than that of Evangelicals.

In Model 3, Biblical literalism and reading the Bible have the opposite effect from one another. Being a Biblical literalist is negatively related to thinking one ought to consume fewer goods in order to be a good person while reading the Bible more will increase the odds that the respondent will agree with the sentiment. Similar to social and economic justice, the odds that the respondent thinks one ought to consume less in order to be a good person increases by 27% for each increased interval of reading. Again displaying the commonality of reading the Bible with traditions typically considered more liberal than conservative, the Mainline tradition is statistically more likely to agree with the statement than are those in the Evangelical tradition. This is a shift from Model 2 where Mainline Protestants were not significant and Black Protestants and religious nones were. The impact of income also enters in with Model 3, showing that with higher levels of income the odds of agreeing with decreased consumption decreases. Again we see that the liberalizing trend of reading the Bible is in line with the impact of political ideology. The more liberal the respondent’s political ideology, the more they think one ought to consume less.

Criminal Justice Attitudes

Reading the Bible also has a liberalizing effect on some of the policies that respondents think the federal government should act on. When respondents were asked whether or not the federal government should expand its authority to fight terrorism (Table 4), a reference to the PATRIOT Act, political ideology and education both are negatively associated with the sentiment that the federal government should expand its authority (Model 1, Table 4). That is, the more liberal one’s political ideology the higher the odds are that they will disagree with this statement. Also, the more education one has, the higher the odds that they will disagree. Conversely, the older the respondent is the higher the odds are that they will agree with this expansion of federal government power. The same trend is repeated in Model 2 with the addition of religious traditions

Table 4: Logistic Regression of Criminal Justice Attitudes: Authority to Fight Terror

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	1.20	0.18	1.20	0.19	1.37	0.3
politics	0.54	-0.62***	0.55	-0.61***	0.54	-0.6***
age	1.01	0.01***	1.01	0.01**	1.01	0.01*
educ	0.85	-0.16***	0.86	-0.15**	0.88	-0.13*
income	1.06	0.06	1.06	0.06	1.08	0.08
Male	0.86	-0.15	0.97	-0.03	1.01	0.01
white	0.56	-0.58	0.80	-0.23	0.83	-0.19
married	0.97	-0.03	0.90	-0.11	0.77	-0.26
RELTRAD ^a						
blackprot	-	-	1.98	0.68	1.67	0.51
catholic	-	-	1.13	0.12	1.06	0.06
main	-	-	1.04	0.03	1.06	0.06
none	-	-	0.22	-1.53***	0.25	-1.4***
attend	-	-	0.98	-0.03	0.98	-0.02
biblit	-	-	-	-	1.36	0.31***
read	-	-	-	-	0.81	-0.22**
Intercept		3.05***		2.92***		2.74***
R ²	0.29		0.34		0.36	
N	1230		1220		1130	

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

****p* <.001; ***p* <.01; **p* <.05.

and rate of attendance. We do see, however, that religious nones are less likely than Evangelicals to support this expansion of government power.

In Model 3, Biblical literalism and reading the Bible again have opposite effects. Biblical literalism tends to make people support this policy change while reading the Bible increases the odds that the respondent will think that the federal government should not take steps to expand its authority to fight terrorism. For each increased level of Bible reading frequency, the odds that one will agree with this expansion of power decreases by 19%. As with all of the prior models, reading the Bible more has an effect similar to that of increased liberal political ideology.

With the variable measuring the respondent's sentiments regarding harsher punishments for criminals (Table 5), we see effects nearly identical to that of expansion of the federal government's authority to fight terrorism. The only change in terms of significant effects is that in Model 1, race is also significant showing that the odds that non-white respondents agree with harsher punishments is less than that of white respondents. Model 3 shows that reading the Bible again has the opposite effect that would be expected of more conservative religious beliefs. As discussed above, one would expect that higher levels of religious conservatism would also be related to increased support for harsh punishment. It can be seen here that this is indeed true for Biblical literalism, but those who read the Bible more frequently are less likely to agree with the statement. For each increased level of reading frequency, the odds that the respondent will agree with harsher punishment of criminals decreases by 22%. This is an effect that is again in line with higher levels of liberal political ideology.

Table 5: Logistic Regression of Criminal Justice Attitudes: Punish Criminals Harshly

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	1.05	0.05	1.06	0.06	1.20	0.18
politics	0.61	-0.50***	0.63	-0.47***	0.62	-0.48***
age	1.01	0.01*	1.01	0.01*	1.01	0.01**
educ	0.79	-0.23***	0.80	-0.23***	0.78	-0.25***
income	1.08	0.07	1.07	0.07	1.09	0.09
Male	0.79	-0.23	0.83	-0.19	0.91	-0.1
white	0.39	-0.95*	0.61	-0.49	0.56	-0.58
married	1.00	0	0.99	-0.01	0.88	-0.12
RELTRAD ^a						
blackprot	-	-	2.53	0.93	1.96	0.67
catholic	-	-	1.25	0.22	1.14	0.13
main	-	-	0.94	-0.07	0.94	-0.06
none	-	-	0.60	-0.51*	0.54	-0.61*
attend	-	-	1.00	0	1.02	0.02
biblit	-	-	-	-	1.20	0.2*
read	-	-	-	-	0.78	-0.25**
Intercept		4.06***		3.53***		3.7***
R ²		0.22		0.23		0.27
N		1234		1222		1130

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Turning to the death penalty (Table 6), more of the demographic variables (Model 1) are significant than in the past two measures. Here the region of the country makes a difference, with respondents in the south having increased odds of supporting the retention of the death penalty. Political ideology again reflects a significant impact with a more liberal political ideology having increased odds of rejecting the death penalty, as does both higher levels of education and older respondents. White respondents have higher odds of supporting the death penalty than do non-whites. These same effects continue in Model 2 with the introduction of the religious traditions and attendance with only the effect of education level dropping out. Catholics, Mainline Protestants and religious nones all have increased odds of rejecting the death penalty when compared to

Evangelicals. Attendance also has an impact, although in an interesting direction. A higher level of attendance is related to increased odds that the respondent would oppose the death penalty.

Table 6: Logistic Regression of Criminal Justice Attitudes: Retain Death Penalty

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	1.48	0.39*	1.48	0.39*	1.51	0.41*
politics	0.63	-0.46***	0.63	-0.47***	0.60	-0.51***
age	0.99	-0.01**	0.99	-0.01*	0.99	-0.01
educ	0.89	-0.12*	0.92	-0.09	0.95	-0.05
income	0.99	-0.01	1.01	0.01	1.02	0.02
Male	0.97	-0.03	0.96	-0.04	0.96	-0.04
white	2.03	0.71***	2.08	0.73**	1.50	0.41
married	1.26	0.23	1.17	0.16	1.06	0.06
RELTRAD ^a						
blackprot	-	-	0.84	-0.17	0.48	-0.73
catholic	-	-	0.45	-0.79***	0.33	-1.12***
main	-	-	0.48	-0.73***	0.41	-0.88***
none	-	-	0.26	-1.37***	0.22	-1.53***
attend	-	-	0.90	-0.11***	0.98	-0.02
biblit	-	-	-	-	1.41	0.34***
read	-	-	-	-	0.58	-0.55***
Intercept		3.3***		3.96***		4.45***
R ²	0.18		0.22		0.27	
N	1341		1324		1221	

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

In Model 3 we see this theme of the liberalizing effect of reading the Bible continues. The expected and typical conservative impact on death penalty sentiments is present. First when looking at the religious traditions, Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and religious nones are all have higher odds of holding more liberal views in comparison with Evangelicals. Additionally, the odds that those in the south support the death penalty are higher than for those who do not reside in the south. Political ideology has a strong effect on support of abolishing the death penalty, with the odds of respondents supporting the death penalty decreasing by 40% for each increase in liberal political

ideology. Most interesting, however, is that the effect of attendance drops out with the introduction of Biblical literalism and frequency of reading the Bible. The odds that those with higher levels of Biblical literalism will support the death penalty increase by 19% per level of literalism while the odds of the respondent supporting the death penalty decrease by 42% per increase in Bible reading frequency.

Attitudes about Religion and Science

The story about science is an interesting one because in the third model (Table 7) looking at the incompatibility of science and religion, reading the Bible is statistically significant while Biblical literalism is not and then in the third model looking at whether scientists are hostile to religion, this trend is reversed so that Biblical literalism has a statistically significant impact while reading does not. In the first model of the regressions looking at whether or not science and religion are incompatible, both living in the south and being a male increase the odds that the respondent will see science and religion as being incompatible with one another. On the other hand, having higher levels of education and white respondents have decreased odds of making this same claim. There are few changes when looking at Model 2. The level of education is no longer significant, which is also the case with gender. Living in the south still has roughly the same impact in terms of how much the odds increase that someone in the south will agree that the two are incompatible. The same is roughly true for both level of income and the race of the individual. Both of these decrease the odds that the respondent will agree that the two are incompatible to almost the same degree that was seen in Model 1. One interesting change here is that rate of attendance is significant, with the odds of agreeing with the statement decreasing by 10% for each increased level of attendance.

In Model 3, Biblical literalism does not have a significant impact, but there is an impact of reading the Bible. In fact, besides reading the Bible, none of the religion variables in the model are significant. In this model again we see that the region of the country does matter in that the odds that a respondent from the south will see the two as being incompatible increases by 1.45 as compared to those not in the south. Additionally, those with higher levels of income are, like those who read the Bible more, less likely to see religion and science as at odds with one another. Beyond these socio-demographic influences, only reading the Bible matters. For each increase in how often the respondent read the Bible the odds that they saw religion and science as being incompatible decreased by 22%. It appears as though the effect of reading the Bible completely negates the effect of the respondent's attendance rate.

Turning our attention to whether or not scientists are seen as hostile to religion now, Model 1 shows that most of the socio-demographic measures are significant. Once again living in the south increases the odds that one will agree that scientists are hostile to religion. Having a more liberal political ideology, being older, having a higher income, and being white will all increase the odds that the respondent will not see scientists as being hostile to religion. Most of these effects remain significant when we look at Model 2. The only effect that drops out is that of living in the south. Both Catholics and Mainline Protestants have lower odds than do Evangelicals of agreeing that scientists are hostile to religion. Attendance, on the other hand, will actually increase the odds that the individual will see scientists as being hostile to religion.

Table 7: Logistic Regressions of Attitudes about Religion and Science

Variable	Science and Religion are Incompatible						Scientists are Hostile to Religion					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta	Odds Ratio	Beta
south	1.50	0.41**	1.51	0.41**	1.45	.37*	1.41	0.34*	1.19	0.17	1.13	0.13
politics	1.07	0.07	0.98	-0.02	0.95	-0.05	0.65	-0.43***	0.72	-0.33***	0.78	-.25***
age	1.00	0.00	1.00	0	1.00	0.00	0.99	-0.02***	0.99	-0.01**	0.99	-.01**
educ	0.88	-0.13*	0.90	-0.11	0.92	-0.09	0.98	-0.02	0.95	-0.05	0.93	-0.07
income	0.88	-0.13*	0.85	-0.18**	0.79	-.24***	0.81	-0.21***	0.84	-0.18***	0.87	-.14**
Male	1.38	0.32*	1.26	0.23	1.19	0.17	0.97	-0.03	1.17	0.16	1.26	0.23
white	0.53	-0.63**	0.52	-0.65*	0.38	-.96**	0.43	-0.86***	0.46	-0.77**	0.47	-.75**
married	0.98	-0.02	1.14	0.13	1.15	0.14	1.15	0.14	1.07	0.06	0.99	-0.01
RELTRAD ^a												
blackprot	-	-	1.29	0.25	0.86	-0.15	-	-	0.74	-0.3	0.59	-0.52
catholic	-	-	1.25	0.22	1.03	0.03	-	-	0.53	-0.64***	0.65	-.43*
main	-	-	0.82	-0.20	0.69	-0.37	-	-	0.53	-0.63**	0.63	-.46*
none	-	-	1.44	0.37	1.15	0.14	-	-	0.92	-0.08	1.28	0.24
attend	-	-	0.90	-0.11***	0.99	-0.02	-	-	1.13	0.12***	1.05	0.05
biblit	-	-	-	-	0.85	-0.16	-	-	-	-	1.28	.25**
read	-	-	-	-	0.78	-.25**	-	-	-	-	1.16	0.15
Intercept		-0.49		0.09		1.16		2.61***		1.92***		1.06
R ²	0.06		0.09		0.1		0.17		0.21		0.21	
N	1336		1319		1218		1336		1319		1218	

Source: BRS (2007).

^a= Evangelical is contrast category.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Model 3 shows that the effect of Biblical literalism is significant while reading the Bible is not; the opposite of the models depicting whether or not they are incompatible. Interestingly, of the effects that are significant in this model, Biblical literalism is the only effect that increases the odds that the respondent will agree that scientists are hostile to religion. It is possible that this effect is the result of prominent cultural issues, which will be discussed further below. We see that both Catholics and Mainline Protestants are less likely than Evangelicals to agree with this statement, showing that the odds are higher that theologically conservative believers see scientists as being hostile to religion than that of theologically more liberal believers. The more liberal the respondent's political ideology, the lower the odds are that they see scientists as being hostile to religion. Increased age, income, and individuals who are racially white are all also less likely to think that scientists are hostile to religion. Unlike all of these, Biblical literalism actually does increase the odds, by 1.28, that the respondent will see scientists as being antagonistic towards religion.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

While some argue that conservative believers could hold liberal views on economic policy while remaining conservative on moral issues (Starks and Robinson 2009), others argue that more ‘orthodox’ believers should be conservative in both areas (Smith, 1998). Still other research (Hall, 1997) focuses on the existence of both a “Religious Right” and a “Religious Left,” showing that religious conservatives are more conservative on all issues when compared to those of the ‘left.’ With this being the case, it is significant to note that the more an individual reads the Bible, the more their views reflect what are generally considered liberal positions.

Various conservative religious commentators have recently taken up the issue of social and economic justice being incorporated into Christian beliefs, making their opposition clear. They have urged fellow conservatives to take action, whether by leaving their church as Glenn Beck suggests (Grant, 2010), or by staunchly disallowing any political clout for social and economic justice supporters under the umbrella of ‘Christianity’ (Rush, 2010). But those who read the Bible, the ‘content’ of the faith, actually are frequently more insistent on the necessity to engage in social and economic justice in order to be a good person. This effect could be due to focusing on reading certain sections of the Bible more often than others, such as the Sermon on the Mount for example, but it is nearly impossible to know more about why we see this effect apart from more knowledge about the content that is read or how it is understood by the

reader. This is an observation that would apply to all of the models presented here.

Despite the fact that the content of the reading is unknown, it is striking that reading the Bible has a similar effect to that of having a more politically liberal ideology in all of the models besides those pertaining to science.

The models dealing with consumption are interesting. It seems possible that the effect of being more religiously conservative, here denoted by Biblical literalism, does tend to have the economic effect expected by Weber (2001), where beliefs drive economic activity. As such, believers could be following the advice of John Wesley to “gain all we can...” (Wesley, 1840, p. 442). But maybe reading the Bible, conversely, makes the reader more prone to reject the consumption that is so widespread in American culture.

It was mentioned above that the two models looking at science fit together, telling a more complete story than if they were looked at individually. Initially it is striking that Biblical literalism does not have an effect on whether or not an individual thinks science and religion are incompatible with one another, and political ideology is also insignificant so the effect of Biblical literalism is not washed out by the most likely culprit. It could be the case that those who read the Bible more see less and less reason to think there is a necessary compatibility issue between science and religion and any conflict that could be interpreted between the two is attributed to cultural sentiments and not the contents of the Bible or religion directly. The debate over Creationism is a fitting example. Creationists view their position as scientific and so naturally there would not be a conflict between religion and science. On the other hand, they are also engaged in a battle of sorts with the scientific community at large. To the degree that

this is true they will see scientists as being hostile to religion. There is reason to think these perceptions of others matter, as Ecklund and Park (2009) show that perceptions of other scientist's view of the science/religion conflict has a strong impact on the individual's own perception of conflict.

A second reason that Biblical literalism may see scientists as being hostile to religion could be due to questions of morality. Research shows (Ellison & Musick, 1995; Nisbet & Goidel, 2007) that questions of morality that Biblical literalists may think essential are, in their view, invisible to the project of science. Because science pursues goals with seemingly little to no notice of morality, a central concern of religion and religious communities, it would also naturally be hostile in a certain sense to religion. On the other hand, reading the Bible may not have this influence directly because there is no overt mention in the Bible of topics such as embryonic stem cell research or therapeutic cloning and other modern cultural issues.

Literalism and Reading: Why Does Reading Matter?

There are reasons for why we would expect a strong similarity between Biblical literalist views and the effect of reading the Bible. Biblical literalism may primarily be an ideological boundary marker and is often bundled with notions about fundamentalist discourse and related political stances (Malley, 2004). Claiming a literalist stance is primarily a claim to an identity or affiliation typified by certain ideological beliefs (Bielo, 2009), and leads the believer to use and apply language in a certain way (Bielo, 2009; Crapanzano, 2000; Keane, 2007; Coleman, 2006).

As an ideological form, literalism can also be seen as the 'context' in which one reads the Bible. Paul Ricoeur (1976) argues that texts are not static and do not have a

‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ reading per se, and readers invest meaning into what is read by using their own context to understand what is read. Specifically, because texts do not have an objective and recognizable inherent truth, when reading a text one must infer meaning to the text. As Ricoeur says, “there is no necessity, no evidence, concerning what is important and what is unimportant,” and as a result the judgment of importance falls subjectively on the reader (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 77). The believer learns what is important and when they read the Bible with the expectation for the belief to be verified, the expectation itself directs the interpretation of what is read (Malley, 2004). An interpretive pretext is carried with the reader when they actually do approach the Bible (Bielo, 2009). One learns in a communal setting what is important (Collins, 2010) and how to find that importance in the text of the Bible (Bielo, 2009; Malley, 2004), and these methods for understanding direct one’s personal of reading the Bible.

But we find that reading the Bible follows Biblical literalism less than would be expected. This likely happens primarily in two ways. The first is the result of surprises in the text and confrontation with unexpected discoveries. A text is never fully dependent on the reader, who is unable to have complete and accurate expectations of a text before reading it (Armstrong, 1990). They are bound to be confronted with something new or something that was in a sense ‘unexpected.’ Indeed, “surprise is important for the very reason that texts challenge our beliefs by frustrating the expectations they give rise to” (Armstrong, 1990, p. 27). As a result, Armstrong emphasizes that reading must be understood as a process that treats the text both as subjugated to the reader as well as a foreign imposition upon the reader where “we can

understand the unfamiliar only by grafting it onto the familiar,” and as a result “escape the prison of our own identity” (Armstrong, 1990, p. 29).

Another instance where surprise makes the act of reading significant for the reader is when one reads the Bible devotionally and creatively applies pieces of the text to specific situations in their own life, despite the possibility that these applications are taken ‘out of context’ (Malley, 2004). Here, as a result of seeing the Bible as inspired by God, the believer can see the text as speaking directly to them about their own life and apply what they read to some aspect of their life that was neither present nor implied within the text. In devotional reading, people will often read until they come across something in the text that unexpectedly sticks out or conveys some kind of meaning that makes them stop and reflect. This process as described by Malley is a positive form of Armstrong’s theory of frustrated expectations. Relevance is assumed, and this assumption may drive readers to read the Bible until struck by something that is relevant (Malley, 2004, p. 106). But because the relevance is mediated by whatever life experiences the reader is having at the time, a familiar text can still become new and surprise the reader as the application for what is read has changed.

The second way the effect of reading the Bible diverges from the effect of Biblical literalism is in how the reader deals with authorial intent. It is often believed that the Bible’s text was written by an author who had a specific context and intent for what they were writing (Malley, 2004, p. 111). Because of this context and intent, the meaning of the text is set and it is the reader’s job to get as close to that author’s intent as possible for understanding. In this case, the self is actively altered and changed to align with the text. It is something foreign and objective, and the goal is conformity; for

it to be known and embraced. In order to do this, the reader shifts their self to be in line with what they perceive as the content of the Bible.

Through these mechanisms, the action of reading can add to or change the identity of the individual reading the Bible. Bielo makes it clear that the text takes an active role in the life of the reader, as “the interaction that takes place between Bible study participants and their texts is productive, informing the worldview of these readers and their ways of being and acting in the world” (Bielo, 2009, pp. 158-159). Thus it is clear that actually engaging with the Bible by reading and studying it will be productive in a direction that would not be possible had the reading not taken place. As a result, we would expect to see that reading makes a distinct and additional difference in the life of a believer apart from merely being a Biblical literalist and staking that identity boundary claim.

Conclusion

Claiming to be a Biblical literalist as well as actively engaging in some religious practice such as reading the Bible is generally seen as a signal of a more religious individual, but literalism and reading the Bible can mean very different things. While there is indeed a correlation between Biblical literalism and reading the Bible, it would be a mistake to think they both solely measure religious conservatism. In many cases the effect of the two is similar, but it has been shown here that there are some distinct areas in which actively reading the Bible actually has a liberalizing effect on a believer. Instead of making the believer/reader more politically or socially conservative as the

assumption may be, in some ways they actually become more politically or socially liberal.

Individuals who read the Bible have higher odds of supporting social and economic justice, reducing consumption, disagreeing with the PATRIOT Act, disagreeing with harsher punishments for criminals, and disagreeing with the death penalty. They also have lower odds of seeing science and religion as being incompatible, and do not appear to retain the same cultural effects, such as the polarizing effect of Creationism in science and some more modern-specific morality issues, that may set apart the impact of being a Biblical literalist. Future research should look into why reading the Bible has a rather unexpected ‘liberalizing’ effect. While some anthropological works are a good start (Bielo, 2009; Malley, 2004; Crapanzano, 2000), it is clear that research on this topic is underdeveloped. Specifically, in order to know why reading the Bible has these effects it would be helpful to know if certain traditions tend to read certain portions of the Bible more frequently, or if there are understandings of sections common in some traditions that are different in others, or if there is some other reason that leads to somewhat counterintuitive results.

It has long been known that the actual practice of religious adherents is not always in line with the texts or teachings of the religion. This is why knowing what effect reading the Bible has on readers is interesting for research, especially when the impact is so different from what one may expect. Future research ought to take into account the fact that all religious practices do not tend to have similar effects. That is, increased levels of attendance, Bible views, as well as other occasionally used measures

such as prayer are frequently used with the expectation that the effects are similar. Here it was shown that in some cases this expectation of related effects from various practices is not true, as the opposite effect was actually found. It may be time for further theorizing and research to focus attention on what each of these different religious activities and dispositions are doing and what they mean to the believer and for their life and beliefs more generally.

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