

## ABSTRACT

Individualism and Religion: The Impact of the Individualist Cultural Tradition on Religious Beliefs and Practices

Jenna Griebel, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson: Jerry Park, Ph.D.

Individualism and its effect on American society has received a great amount of scholarly research. Researchers have established that individualism plays a large role in all areas of society. Using the dual process model of culture developed by Stephen Vaisey (2009) and data from waves I and III of the National Survey of Youth and Religion, this study investigates the role that individualism plays on religion. In examining the effect that an individualist cultural tradition has on religious attitudes and behaviors this study reveals that the shift in authority that takes place within this cultural tradition has a large influence on the subsequent religious behaviors and attitudes of the person.

Individualism and Religion: the Impact of the Individualist Cultural Tradition on  
Religious Beliefs and Practices

by

Jenna Griebel, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Sociology

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Charles M. Tolbert III, Ph.D.

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Jerry Z. Park, Ph.D.

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Paul Froese, Ph.D.

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Thomas S. Kidd, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

What is the link between culture and religion? How does culture influence and shape religion? How do different cultural traditions affect the way that religion is shaped in the United States? The rise of modern individualism in the United States as a competing dominant ideology has led to many changes in all parts of American society (Bellah et al. 1985), including religion. The effect of individualism on religion has been explored by researchers in various qualitative studies (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Madsen 2009; Sikkink 1998). These researchers have found that the coupling of individualism and religion is leading to changes in the shape of religion in America, and influencing the attitudes and behaviors around religion.

This paper offers a quantitative empirical analysis of the effects of individualism on religious beliefs and behaviors as articulated by previous qualitative research. In order to test the effects that the competing ideology of individualism has on religion in America, this paper looks at emerging adults and their religiosity by using data from the National Survey of Youth and Religion. The paper finds that those of an individualist moral schema do in fact differ on their religious beliefs and behaviors. Within the individualist schema, there is a shift in authority from external sources (as in the biblical schema) to the individual. This shift leads to the individual evaluating beliefs based on their self-expressive potential, not on a moral framework given from an external authority. As the rightness or wrongness of beliefs is subject to the individual's authority, the beliefs among religious systems become interchangeable. The

interchangeability of religious beliefs, allows for the fragmentation of belief systems, which is then coupled with the interchangeability of religious practices. The shift in authority affects the role that the religious institution plays in controlling and shaping religion. The religious institution, for those who adhere to an individualist schema, holds no authority over religion, and therefore the individual does not need the religious institution in order to take part in religion.

### *Cultural Schemas*

Culture theorists have long argued over whether a person's actions are motivated by culture or justified by them. On the one side, some claim that cultural understandings are tools that people use, thus culture is used to make justifications, or make sense of the choices that individuals make in their lives (Swidler 2001; Boltanski and Thevenot 1999). The other side of the argument claims that cultural meanings and values play a role in shaping a person's behavior (Smith 2003; Lakoff 2002; Hitlin and Piliavin 2004; Smith and Denton 2005). Stephen Vaisey (2009) integrates both perspectives into what he describes as a dual process model of culture. Vaisey distinguishes the justificatory and motivational approaches as the 'discursive' and the 'practical' modes of culture, and thus shows how both are used in shaping a person's behavior. Drawing from insights from cognitive science, Vaisey argues that human cognition is based upon two processes, one which is conscious (discursive) and one which is unconscious (practical). Though the discursive consciousness can slowly shape the practical consciousness over time, it is usually the practical consciousness that is in charge, and is led by the simple mechanism of attraction and repulsion (2009).



Typologies of these practical dispositions, as Vaisey explained have been found cross-culturally. The cultural psychologist and anthropologist Richard Shweder (1992) outlines a typology of three major cultural ethics (dispositions) found cross culturally, these being autonomy, community and divinity. These closely resemble the typology of cultural traditions or dispositions found in America by cultural sociologist Robert Bellah et al. (1985), modern individualist, republican and biblical. Vaisey argues that these cultural ethics are moral schemas, “deep, largely unconscious networks of neural associations that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action” (2009:1686). In other words, practical dispositions, accounts for the future behaviors of individuals. Thus the dual action model of culture proposed by Vaisey (2009) shows that practical dispositions, or schemas, do shape or influence the future behavior of individuals.

Bellah et al. (1985) describe the biblical schema as best exemplified through John Winthrop and the American Puritan community. This group wanted to build the ‘city on a hill’, a society in which an ethical and spiritual life were fulfilled. Bellah et al. (1985) describe this group as searching for religious freedom, more specifically, the freedom to establish a new ‘biblical religion’. This biblical religion would be concerned with the whole of a person’s life, rather than one dimension or one particular facet. This biblical-religious society would have a tight link between religion and public life, and where authority is derived from biblical revelations. Thus in this society, religion was linked with each part of a person’s life, and deference and obedience over one’s life was given to the religious authority, which took the form of the religious institution.

The republican tradition, according to Bellah et al. (1985) was exemplified by Thomas Jefferson. This schema is similar to the biblical-religious schema in that all lives

are bound very tightly to one another. But differs in that the moral authority is derived from the common good and individual initiative should be used for the common good, and that the American character is shaped by inherited values. Thus Bellah et al. (1985) explain that in New England, the roles of citizen and Christian were very closely linked, for when the whole community is deferring to religion, being a good citizen also means being a good Christian. In the republican tradition the focus is on a person's role and obligation to society, or the community. Thus it is each citizen's responsibility to watch over the welfare of the whole group, the common good. The authority then for this tradition is relational, it rests within the group, adhering to its ideals, and following what is ultimately for the common good of the group (Bellah et al. 1985). The common good thus acts as the central moral authority in the republican tradition.

### *Individualism in America*

Individualism, as described by cultural sociologist Robert Wuthnow, is an ideology which places a strong emphasis on the individual which in turn leads to the decrease in group solidarity and the use of formalized doctrines and creeds. Individualism as an ideology also leads to "individual orientations being disaggregated at the individual level" (Wuthnow 1987:195). The most extreme form that this ideology can take is "the dual form of 'do your own thing' and 'anything goes'" (Wuthnow 1987:195); this extreme manifestation however rarely takes place. Wuthnow describes individualism as one of the key ideologies which operate in American society, an ideology which is reinforced by the social environment.

Individualism has two main forms in American society, the utilitarian form and the expressive form (Bellah et al. 1985). Based in a society where "the chance for an

individual to get ahead on his own initiative” (Bellah et al. 1985:33) is one of the founding ideals, individualism becomes about making one’s self better. Utilitarian individualism focuses on self improvement and pursuing one’s own interests, from which the social good will automatically emerge (Bellah et al. 1985). Expressive individualism leans towards a deeper “cultivation of the self (Bellah et al. 1985:33). Success within expressive individualism has little to do with the material gain, but rather “to cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identities” (Bellah et al. 1985:35). While utilitarian individualism generally functions at the public level, expressive individualism functions at the private level, allowing the two to work together to create a culture of individualism (Bellah et al. 1985). Bellah (1985), in his exploration of individualism in American society explains that the idea of individualism does not focus around traditional external moralities, whether biblical or republican, but instead focuses around the individual interests as the moral authority. The focus then becomes not to live by external standards, but to live the good life by increasing individual well being.

In looking at individualism it is important to note the many meanings that accompany this concept. Movements of individualism have been found in all of the different cultural traditions as they have changed over time and throughout history. These individualistic tendencies are not what is meant by ‘individualism’ in this paper, however. Individualism here refers to the source of moral authority for the person, where personal decisions are centered. In using this definition of individualism, we can use the individualistic schema (as described above) as one of the cultural dispositions found in

modern America by researchers (Bellah et al. 1985) and compare it to theistic and relational cultural dispositions.

In sum individualism is arguably a dominant schema in American society; however what we know of the effects of individualism thus far are based largely upon qualitative evidence, leaving a need to test these effects on the quantitative level. Through the dual process model of culture, as proposed by Vaisey, we can explore quantitatively the effects that cultural dispositions or schemas have on subsequent behaviors, and can thus estimate the prevalence and effect that individualism has on religious behaviors and attitudes. The different cultural dispositions of individual, biblical and republican have moral authority centered in different places for the individual. This difference in authority will thus have effects on the decisions that a person makes concerning religion, for it is this underlying disposition that drives or influences religious attitudes and behaviors.

### *Individualism and Religion in America*

If the ideology of individualism operates independently from religion, what relationship might it have with religious expression? Individualism is about the moral responsibility to the self, and a preoccupation with the self (Wuthnow 1987). The literature outlined below explains how individualism affects the practice of religion since the locus of authority is internal as opposed to the biblical-religious schema which is external.

Scholars have found that individualism has influenced religion in that people now have choice and individual autonomy within religion (McGuire 2008; Madsen 2009; Wuthnow 1987). Individualism has been built upon the idea of the individual as the “sole

decisions maker”, the authority, and the individual’s personal convictions then form around this unit (Wuthnow 1987). As the authority shifts to the individual, religious beliefs no longer exist in a worldview given to them from a religious source such as a religious community, but instead the individual is free to choose. In looking at the state of religion in America today, McGuire (2008) has found that within a disestablished and relatively open religious marketplace the individual can now “commit or refuse to commit to an entire, single package of beliefs and practices of an official religion” (McGuire 2008:11), and can instead choose to identify with certain parts, or remain autonomous.

This idea of choice and choosing what fulfills the self is demonstrated in Richard Madsen’s work, where he explains that Americans view religion as a consumer commodity which, like material goods, are obtained for personal satisfaction (2009:1278). By placing the focus on the self, religious beliefs and expression become about pleasing and satisfying the self. Looking at four different religious communities, Madsen (2009) identifies the common underpinnings of religious expression amongst the middle class in America and argues that American religion today is religious individualism. Madsen explains that when people talk about ‘choosing God’ they are talking about it in terms of the free choice of the consumer, rather than a divinely inspired call. Madsen finds that middle class Americans look at religion in terms of a consumer marketplace, from which they can choose, emphasizing again the individual as the exclusive or primary decision maker.

### *Individualism and Fragmenting Faith*

The practice of choosing religious beliefs via an individualist moral schema is highly evident among emerging adults according to sociologist Christian Smith. He finds that young adults believe that “absolute authority for every person’s personal beliefs or actions is his or her own personal self” (2009:49), thus trying to tell someone what one should or should not do is unacceptable for what a person thinks is up to “their own personal belief system” (2009:49), therefore external authority from this perspective is not recognized or goes unheeded. As a result, the evaluation of religious beliefs is subjective and relative. This idea is reflected in the finding that emerging adults believe that the core principles of religion are shared, thus they are all good (Smith 2009). Put together, the relative merit of core religious principles and the internal locus of moral authority create the conditions for a fragmentation and interchangeability of religious beliefs. When moral authority is individualized and autonomous, religion becomes subject to the same process of decision making as any other aspect of an individual’s personal experience.

Individualism’s focus on the self affects religious beliefs, with the individual or the ‘self’ as the focus, the individual as the decision maker, and the moral authority, religious beliefs are something for the individual to choose from based upon what fulfills them. The tenets of the individual’s belief system are only subject to the person’s needs and wants, not to an external authority. As the religious belief systems have no authority greater than the individual, they are subject to the individual’s preferences. This idea is then reflected in the first hypothesis:

*Those who have an individualist moral schema will be more likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented, taking some of the religious beliefs but*

*not the teachings of the religion as a whole, than those who are of different schemas.*

### *Individualism and Relative Religious Pluralization*

As individualism leads to religion being about satisfying the individual, the way that religion is practiced will also change. As individualism leads to the individual being the authority, and religious beliefs become fragmentable, the practices associated with the different religious belief systems will also become interchangeable. Thus religious beliefs and practices will be based upon individual wants and needs. The focus on the self is found in the National Survey of Youth and Religion, showing that the number of emerging adults who are incorporating spiritual practices from religions which are not their own to help 'find' themselves is high (2009).

The effects of individualism on religious expression can be seen in the general view of emerging adults that things are 'up to the individual' (Smith 2009) and that "religion exists to support individuals" (2009:157). That is people should take what is helpful to them, and what fits with their experience and leave the rest. The individual being able to choose what is best for them, for they are the authority, allows for a level of tolerance amongst religions and their practices. Smith finds that emerging adults generally believe that "anybody who follows a particular religion is ultimately just like any other religious person following any other religion" (2009:145). The view that all religions are equal and similar reconfigures the symbolic boundaries that set religious practices of different religions from one another. As Madsen finds, the element of choice in religion, "allows people to express many different religious preferences while remaining relatively tolerant of each other's choices" (Madsen 2009:1299).

The ideas of choice and autonomy have led to ‘privatizing religion’, as seen in David Sikkink’s (1998) study, which finds that the religious identities have become highly personalized. In this study, Sikkink explores the boundaries which seem to be the most salient for ordinary church attending Protestants. Sikkink explains that most people “situate themselves in religious social space” (1998:54), based upon a variety of different religious images and ideals, and not around a singular frame of reference. The identity formation found in his study focused around “self styled, personal religious worlds” (1998:55). Sikkink finds that the burden of identity again rests upon individual choice, and is expressed in terms of what is right for the person.

As individualism leads to individual autonomy within religions, and personalized religious identities, the way in which religion is practiced will change, leading to less exclusion and weaker boundaries between religions and the practicing of more than one religion. This then leads to the second hypothesis:

*Those of an individualist moral schema will be more open to a person of their faith practicing multiple religions than those of a different moral schema.*

#### *Individualism and Religious Practice*

Religious expression has changed greatly over the past few decades. Religion today has become more about self control than about deference (Bellah et al. 1985), as the emphasis switches from external authority to the individual. One of the results of individualism that Wuthnow concludes (1987) is that religion focuses on personal beliefs, not necessarily about teachings or symbols, thus religion becomes more associated with the individual and their personal preferences, not the institutional system. Due to the lack of institutional guidance and authority in this new form of religion, the religion and the



way it is practiced is being redefined in terms that have meaning to the individual (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008).

Scholars have focused on the trend of religion moving away from its institutional boundaries, and its appearance in new forms in the everyday lives of people (Ammerman 2007, Hall 1997, and McGuire 2008). These scholars have found that there is now an “elevation of individual autonomy over institutional authority” (Ammerman 2007:7). The boundaries that were once present due to these organized collective religious institutions are no longer as strong or distinct. Instead people today are beginning to make a “distinction between the ‘church’ and ‘religion’” (McGuire 2008:6). Religion no longer takes place exclusively within organizations that are under the control of religious authorities, but appears in a number of major non-religious institutions and controlled by individual followers and non-religious authorities. Despite the religious organizations’ attempts to “routinely try to shape such boundaries” (McGuire 2008:6) and thus “exert their authority” (McGuire 2008:6), religion exists beyond these boundaries, and thus under individual authority.

The effects of individualism can be seen as the religious institution (the church or place of worship) no longer remains the center of religion for these individuals. As people adhere to the ideology of modern individualism, the authority has shifted from the religious leaders to the individual, and thus religion has moved away from the religious institution and the religious leaders. Religion for the individualist is shaped by their sense of fulfillment, and what pleases their ‘self’, and is not confined to the rules and teachings of an institution. Thus Individualists do not need the religious institution to practice their religion. This leads to my third hypothesis:

*A person of an individualist moral schema will be less likely to attend religious services than someone who adheres to a different schema.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Data and Methods

The data for this analysis was taken from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), waves I and III. This is a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,290 adolescents. Wave I includes teenagers between the ages of 13-17 as well as their parents. The NSYR also includes an oversample of 80 Jewish families, bringing the total number of completed cases to 3,370. Questions from this survey focused on understanding the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American teenagers. Wave III of the NSYR was an attempt to re-interview all respondents of the wave I survey. The youth at the time of the third wave of the survey were between the ages of 18-24. Wave III along with replicating many of the questions on wave I also included questions to capture the changing nature of the participants' lives as they grew older. For further details on the methodology of this survey see Smith and Denton (2003).

To examine the impact that an individualist schema has on religious beliefs and attitudes, I limited my sample to those who are currently religious. To create this sub-sample I took the question asking "(if the respondent doesn't consider themselves any religion, or reports being non-religious), do you consider yourself to be an atheist, agnostic, just not religious, or something else?" I removed respondents who affirmed these latter categories from my sample.

I limited my analyses to include only followers of Christianity and Judaism as these two faith traditions are significantly represented in this dataset and both are well

associated with the biblical traditions mentioned earlier. This analysis examines the effects of the new coupling of religion and individualism on religious behavior, particularly how this is different from the traditional coupling of religion with the biblical tradition. Being that the biblical tradition was founded upon Christianity in America, and monotheism still remains the dominant religious type in America today, this study is not equipped to fully understand the impact that individualism may have on non-monotheistic religious traditions in America. Anyone who chose their religious tradition as 'non religious' or 'other religion' was also taken out of the sample. This ended with my final sample of emerging adults who were religious and of a monotheistic religious tradition (N=1,709).

### *Measuring Schemas*

In creating a variable to measure a person's moral schema, I took the question from wave I asking, "if you were unsure of what was right or wrong in a particular situation, how would you decide what to do?" The responses to this question then mirrored the four major types of moral logics that have been found in previous research (Bellah et al.1985), these being expressive individualist, utilitarian individualist, relational and theistic. Thus the responses of "do what would make you feel happy" (expressive), "Do what would help you to get ahead" (utilitarian), "follow the advice of a teacher or parent or other adult you respect" (relational) or "do what you think God or the scriptures tells you is right" (theistic), reflect the typology of moral schemas as outlined by Bellah et al. (1985). This method of measuring moral schemas has been employed by Vaisey (2009) in exploring the way which culture influences our actions, and was found to reflect the underlying schema of the person.

In using this question, I then recoded the responses into three categories for the purposes of this analysis. I collapsed the categories of expressive individualist and utilitarian individualist responses to create a measure of “American individualism”, which is described by Bellah et al. to take these two forms (1985). The distribution of the population then comes out to be 37% individualist moral schema, 42% relational moral schema, and 21% theistic moral schema.

### *Dependent Variables*

In creating the dependent variables for this analysis I used questions from the survey that reflected the hypotheses that I set forth earlier in this paper. To measure hypothesis one, which stated that “those of an individualist moral schema will be more likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented, taking some of the religious beliefs but not the teachings of the religion as a whole, than those who are of different schemas”, I used the question on the survey asking “some people think that it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole. Do you agree or disagree?” This question reflects the idea of allowing for religious faiths to be fragmented, and only certain parts followed, without keeping the faith as a whole. The responses for this question were “agree”, “disagree”, “don’t know” or “refused”. These were then recoded so that those who responded with don’t know or refused were placed as missing, leaving us with the two categories of agree or disagree. To test this first hypothesis, I use a binary logistic regression, looking at the effect that moral schemas have on the belief that religions can be fragmented.

For the second hypothesis, stating that “those of an individualist moral schema will be more open to a person of their faith practicing multiple religions than those of a

different moral schema”, I used the question on the survey asking “if consider self religious, is it okay for someone of your religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion?” This question reflects how bounded and exclusive the person sees their faith, and whether it permits other religions to be practiced by the person as well. The responses for this question were “okay to practice other religions”, “should only practice one religion”, “don’t know” or “refused”. Again the “don’t know” and “refused” responses were replaced as missing, leaving us with the two categories for our analysis of ‘okay to practice other religions’ and ‘should only practice one religion’. To test the second hypothesis, I use a binary logistic regression, looking at the effect that moral schemas have on the belief that a person can practice more than one religion.

For the third hypothesis, stating that “a person of an individualist moral schema will be less likely to attend religious services than someone of a different schema”, I took the variable “attends”, which asked how often the person attended religious services. This question had responses ranging on a seven point scale from “more than once a week” to “never”. To test this final hypothesis, I use an OLS regression, looking at the effect that moral schemas have on church attendance.

### *Control Variables*

In this analysis I include several standard demographic controls. Education was measured as the highest grade which the respondent completed. Response categories ranged from no high school diploma, high school graduate, one year higher education, two years of higher education, three years of higher education, four years of higher education, five years of higher education, or six years of higher education. Income was

measured using \$2,000 increments, ranging from 'no income' to 'more than \$50,000'.

The other demographic variables included gender (male=1), marital status (married=1), region (south=1) and race (white=1).

I also controlled for the religious tradition and denomination using the RELTRAD typology developed by Steensland et al. (2000). From this typology, I placed individuals into the categories of Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Religions and Nones based upon their stated denomination. Again, in this analysis, the 'Other Religion' and the 'Nones' were dropped from the sample. Church attendance was also used as a religious control in the first two models, and was measured the same way as described above.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Results

The first analysis is a binary logistic regression looking at hypothesis one, which states that those who have an individualist moral schema will be more likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented, taking some of the religious beliefs but not the teachings of the religion as a whole, than those who are of different schemas.

Table 1 shows the results of this model.

Table 1  
Logistic Regression of “Okay to Pick Parts of Religion”

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Gender (Male)	.075	1.08
Education	.048	1.05
Marital Status (Married)	.041	.1.04
Race (White)	.073	1.08
Income	.010	1.01
Region (South)	-.255*	.775
Church Attendance	-.173*	.841
Religious Tradition		
<i>Mainline Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	.552*	1.74
<i>Black Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	-.013	.987
<i>Catholic</i> <sup>a</sup>	.865*	2.37
<i>Jewish</i> <sup>a</sup>	.272	1.31
Moral Schemas		
<i>Individualistic</i> <sup>b</sup>	.410*	1.51
<i>Relational</i> <sup>b</sup>	.272	1.31

\*p<.05

<sup>a</sup> Reference group is Evangelical Protestant

<sup>b</sup> Reference group is Biblical Tradition



The results show that controlling for a variety of socio-demographic characteristics someone from a Catholic or Protestant Mainline religious tradition will be more likely to allow someone to choose parts of a faith than someone from the Evangelical tradition. Those who are from the south and those who attend church more are less likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented. In looking at our variable of interest, we see that a person who has an individualist schema will be more likely to allow the fragmentation of religion than a person of a biblical schema. The table shows that while there is no difference between a person with a relational schema and a biblical schema, those with an individualist moral schema will be 51% more likely to agree that a person can fragment religion than a person with a biblical schema.

Table 2  
Logistic Regression of “Okay to Practice Other Religions”

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Gender (Male)	.279*	1.32
Education	.051	1.05
Marital Status (Married)	.154	1.17
Race (White)	.164	1.18
Income	-.001	.991
Region (South)	-.323*	.724
Church Attendance	-.251*	.778
Religious Tradition		
<i>Mainline Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	.609*	1.84
<i>Black Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	.155	1.17
<i>Catholic</i> <sup>a</sup>	.643*	1.90
<i>Jewish</i> <sup>a</sup>	.601	1.83
Moral Schemas		
<i>Individualistic</i> <sup>b</sup>	.751*	2.12
<i>Relational</i> <sup>b</sup>	.629*	1.88

\*p<.05

<sup>a</sup> Reference group is Evangelical Protestant

<sup>b</sup> Reference group is Biblical Tradition

In looking at the second hypothesis, those of an individualist moral schema will be more open to a person of their faith practicing multiple religions than those of a different moral schema, we find the results listed in table 2.

From the results listed, we see that those who are of the Catholic and Mainline Protestant religious traditions are more likely to agree that a person of their faith can practice multiple religions than those of the Evangelical Protestant tradition. We also see that church attendance and being from the south have a negative effect on the belief that a person can practice multiple religions. Thus those who attend church more are 22% less likely to agree with the statement, and those who are from the south are 28% less likely to agree. We also find that women are 32% more likely to agree with this statement. Finally in looking at those of different schemas, we find that those of a republican schema are 88% more likely to agree that someone can practice multiple religions than someone of the biblical schema. We also see that someone of an individualist schema is 112% more likely to agree than those of the biblical schema.

In looking at the third hypothesis, a person of an individualist moral schema will be less likely to attend religious services than someone of a different schema, we find the results listed in table 3. We find that all of the religious traditions are significant in predicting church attendance. Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Black Protestants, and Jews are all less likely to attend church than those of the Evangelical Protestant traditions. The results also show that men and white respondents attend church less than women and non-whites. Income and age have a negative relationship with church attendance. Education however has a positive effect, for the more education a person has, the greater their level of church attendance. In looking at our variables of interest,

we find that those of a relational moral schema have a lower average level of church attendance than those of the biblical schema. We also see that those of an individualist moral schema have a much lower level of average church attendance (1.17 units) than those of the biblical schema.

Table 3  
OLS Regression of “Attends Religious Services”

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>
Gender (Male)	-.228*	.10
Education	.095*	.04
Marital Status (Married)	.428*	.21
Race (White)	-.234*	.12
Income	-.019*	.01
Region (South)	.123	.10
Religious Tradition		
<i>Mainline Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	-.711*	.15
<i>Black Protestant</i> <sup>a</sup>	-.454*	.19
<i>Catholic</i> <sup>a</sup>	-.694*	.13
<i>Jewish</i> <sup>a</sup>	-1.72*	.36
Moral Schemas		
<i>Individualistic</i> <sup>b</sup>	-1.17*	.13
<i>Relational</i> <sup>b</sup>	-.807*	.13

\*p<.05

<sup>a</sup> Reference group is Evangelical Protestant

<sup>b</sup> Reference group is Biblical Tradition

### *Discussion*

In this thesis I empirically test the relationship between contemporary individualism and religious belief and practice. Through using the dual process model of culture developed by Vaisey (2009), we are able to test whether an individualist disposition affects subsequent religious behaviors and attitudes. The above models demonstrate that those who adhere to an individualist moral schema, do in fact differ on

their religious attitudes and behaviors from those of other schemas. The effects of individualism on religion found in previous studies have far reaching consequences, particularly for the emerging generations of American citizens.

As the previous models demonstrate, individualism has a unique impact on the religious attitudes and behaviors surrounding religion. Why is someone who adheres to an individualist moral schema more likely to have different religious attitudes and behaviors than someone who is of a biblical schema? The key to this answer lies in the shift in moral authority that has taken place between the two schemas.

Within the biblical schema, authority is external to the person; they must defer to and obey this external authority. In this schema, the 'bible' or 'religion' is seen as the source of authority, and this is often carried out through the religious leaders (Bellah et al. 1985). Religious authority directs individual moral decisions, and moreover provides a worldview that pervades most of their daily lives. Since this religious authority exists outside the individual, there is no personal agency in determining the moral categories of right and wrong. This then contrasts with the individualist schema. Those who adhere to an individualist schema see authority as something which rests within the person (Wuthnow 1987; Bellah et al. 1985). With the authority resting with themselves moral categories and ultimate responsibility are subject to personal utilitarian and self-expressive ends.

This notion of authority resting in the self as opposed to external sources plays a particularly important role in the attitudes and practices around religion. As the absolute authority for each person's personal beliefs and attitudes are their own personal self, people come up with their own personal belief systems (Smith 2009). Being that there is

no outside moral authority, the tenets of any of these belief systems are only under the authority of the individual. The personal fulfillment for the individual determines the rightness and wrongness of beliefs and behaviors, and the tenets of an individual's belief system are then subject to the person's needs and want, since there is no external authority.

This idea is reflected in the first model of this paper, which looks at how those who adhere to an individualist schema are more likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented, taking some of the religious beliefs, but not the teachings of the religion as a whole. As the model shows, those who are of an individualistic schema are more likely to see religion as something which can be fragmented. This again, is due to the idea that the moral authority rests within the individual, thus religious beliefs become interchangeable, and based upon what fulfills the individual. The notion of interchangeability stands in contrast with the biblical schema, as their moral decisions are directed by the religious authority, and create an internally cohesive worldview.

Alongside this fragmentary view of religious beliefs is the dominance of comparative religiosity or pluralistic religiosity where religions are viewed as relatively comparable belief systems. Coupled together, competing belief systems that can all be disassembled allows for beliefs and practices to be interchangeable. This shift in authority then not only affects the beliefs around religion, but also the practices. Attitudes toward religious practice are egalitarian at the same time that beliefs are seen as relatively similar to one another in underlying principles. This forms a greater tolerance for individuals to practice multiple faith traditions. Given that religious practices serve self-expressive and utilitarian ends, the individual practices any and all forms of prayer,

worship, and discipline as fits their current preferences. This is exemplified in model two, which shows that those of an individualist moral schema will be more open to a person of their faith practicing multiple religions than those of a biblical schema. While we can explain the difference between those of an individualist schema and biblical schema, we find that there is also a difference between those of a republican schema and biblical schema. This could be an effect of the trend towards multiculturalism and general tolerance levels in the United States. As there is a push to be more accepting of other faiths and cultures in the United States, people may be more hesitant to say that other cultures or beliefs are wrong, particularly if one is concerned with community building. This effect however is not as strong as the effect that the individualist schema has.

The final model in this paper looks at the effects of individualism on the religious practice of church attendance. Again, we find that those of an individualist schema are less likely to attend church services than those of the biblical schema. This is not a reflection of the level of religiosity of the two groups, as the sample is only those who identify themselves as religious, but does reflect a difference in the way the two schemas view this fundamental practice and its role. The authority for the biblical schema is separate from the individual, and is drawn from the bible and carried out through religious leaders (Bellah et al. 1985), thus the church plays a vital role, for it is the source of authority for those who adhere to this schema. In the individualist schema, by contrast, the church does not hold authority over the person, for the authority rests in them. Thus religion has shifted for this group to become more about personal beliefs and preferences (Wuthnow 1987), and not about the teachings of the religious institution.

Those of an individual schema will be less likely to attend church because it is not the source of their religious beliefs, not the authority. As the model shows, those of the biblical schema attend services the most, which is explained by the fact that moral authority for them is centered there. We then see that those of the republican schema attend services less, though not as little as those of an individualist schema, for their authority is not based in the institution, and thus it is not necessary. Those who follow a republican schema may also see a civic value in church attendance as it can signify communal commitment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

What role does culture play in the actions and behaviors of a society? The model proposed by Vaisey (2009) demonstrates that a person's cultural disposition will in fact influence their subsequent behavior. What then does this mean for religion, for one of the strongest motivators of actions in our society? The above models demonstrate that the cultural disposition, or schema that a person has, does in fact influence the subsequent religious behaviors and attitudes. As individualism grows as a competing dominant schema in the United States, it plays a significant role in re-shaping religion. Thus we see that religion is no longer only paired with the 'biblical' schema (as it was traditionally), but instead is now coupled with the individualist schema as well. Therefore, while religious authority no longer holds exclusive dominance in moral decisions, religiosity nevertheless remains. The competing sources of moral authority found in these schemas can then transform the content and degree of religious faith and practices.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding from this study is the shift in moral authority for emerging adults. The individual becomes the one who determines what is moral, what beliefs to hold and how to practice them. This could have far reaching implications in terms of the underlying belief system in the United States which frames the values and morals and laws of our society. As the authority shifts to the individual, how will communal ethe and values be created? Will this disaggregate communities in the United Stated which are based upon shared values?



One of the limitations of this dataset is the limited number of both ethnic and religious minorities present in the sample. As both of these groups are expected to grow in the coming decades, they will have a large impact on religion in the United States. Due to their limited sample size in this dataset however, this study cannot adequately examine how the growth of individualism and its coupling with religion will impact these groups. Future research should thus consider the impact that individualism will have on different minority groups.

This study, while identifying the shifting authority among emerging adults, only looks at it in terms of religious beliefs and practices. In order to fully understand the implications of this, more studies need to be done in other areas, looking at other beliefs, morals and practices in the United States. Of particular interest are the issues which have traditionally been dominated by religious views, such as abortion or homosexuality. As the authority shifts to the individual, will external religious authorities still hold power in dictating the morality and ethics of these issues? Or will the effects of individualism on religious beliefs and practices of the morality resting with the individual appear. Thus the influence of individualism on religion examined in this paper not only holds implications for the way that religion is practiced, but for the wider range of beliefs and values in the United States which are based upon religious beliefs.

The implications for adhering to an individualist ethos are evident in this analysis. The shift in authority has led not only to the fragmentability and interchangeability of religious beliefs, but also to a change in practices. Understanding this is important to understand the role of religious institutions and religious tolerance in the United States today. As the individualist ideology grows in America, the way in which religion is

practiced will change from the traditional form. Thus measures of religiosity such as church attendance may not be adequate to capture the real vitality of religion in the United States.

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