

Abstract

Do you treat God as if he is your cosmic therapist and divine butler? Among Christian college alumni (2006, 2008, 2010) and undergraduates (freshmen, senior), surveyed by Dr. Cook and her research teams, we have been exploring religious denominational commitment and descriptions of God. We thought, after reading Arnett & Jenson (2002) and Smith (2005, 2009), that after graduation there would be a shift away from religious communities to which participants once belonged. We found however, that college graduates maintained their faith four years after graduation (97%), with 40% graduating in the same denomination and 44% in a similar one. We also focused a lot on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), Smith (2009) predicts that MTD is common; we found that expressions of trust in God and ownership of one's faith were more common.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or God as a Divine Butler

Smith (2005, p. 162), says a parasitic, watered-down faith has emerged which views God as "something like a Divine Butler and Cosmit Therapist: he's always on call, takes care of any problems, professionally helps people feel better about themselves, and does not become too involved in the process."

The three aspects of MTD can be described as:

- Moralistic (God as a source of moral rules): God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Good people go to heaven when they die.
- Therapeutic (God as a problem-solver): The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- Deist (God as distant): A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on Earth. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when needed to resolve a problem.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a unique stage of transition which takes place between the ages of 18 to 25 and allows individuals to "examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews" (Arnett, 2000). Religious beliefs held during childhood and adolescence are often put into question during this stage of life.

Do Christian College Undergraduates and Alumni Hold Onto Their Faith, or Do They View God as a Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist? Laurieann Smith, Lauren Stone, Matt Van Hamersveld

Hypotheses

- Alumni will leave church, or move into more liberal denominations in college (Arnett & Jensen, 2002).
- Undergraduates and alumni will move toward individualized religion and Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a move which will increase with time out of college (Smith, 2005, 2009).
- Men and Women will express different levels of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and spiritual commitment as well.

Participants

60 undergraduates from Gordon College were interviewed (30 males and females; 30 freshmen and 30 seniors; Mean age, 20.4 years; Range 18-23).

The majority of the sample were Caucasian (84%) and highly religious (72% declared religion was "very important" to them)

240 alumni from Gordon and Wheaton Colleges were interviewed (120 males and 120 females; 100 recent, 100 2-year, and 40 4-year alumni; Mean age, 26 years; Range 22-29).

Sample was largely Caucasian (94%) and even more highly religious (80%)

Differences Between Undergraduates and Alumni

Undergraduates were more likely than alumni to give classic descriptors of faith, and alumni made more comments about trusting God and owning their faith (x^2 (1) = 5.00, p < .001). Examples of classic descriptors of faith are comments that include concepts such as:

Honoring God in everyday life Comments about the Trinity Obeying the church or obeying God The grace of God

Procedure

An email containing a link to our survey on Survey Monkey™ was sent to Gordon freshmen and seniors and to 2006, 2008, and 2010 Gordon and Wheaton alumni.

One-on-one phone or face-to-face follow-up interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes, were then conducted. At the beginning of every interview, informed consent was

At the beginning of every interview, informed consent was obtained and no names were used during the interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

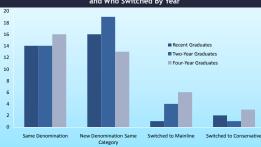
Responses to the following two questions were explored by open coding:

- (1)When you matriculated at college/currently, what denomination were/are you most connected to? (alumni only)
- (2)Since coming to college, how has your faith changed? Give three turning points/markers. (alumni and undergraduates)

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 that alumni will move away from faith was not supported. There was no significant difference in years since graduation (figure 1). 40% of participants stayed with their same denomination and 84% stayed within the same denominational category.

Figure 1: Number Who Stayed in Same Category and Same Denomination and Who Switched By Year



Conclusions

For the most part, participants (97%) stayed with their denominations. If they did change their denomination they stayed within the same category of conservative, not moving toward mainstream denominations, or out of the church.

We did not find a shift toward Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a parasitic and watered down form of religion, contrary to Smith (2005, 2009). Instead, participants were much more likely to describe faith in classic terms, and to describe their trust in God and ownership of their own faith.

Although MTD perceptions were not common, among the participants, a therapeutic perception was most common. Undergraduates expressed more classic statements about faith whereas alumni expressed more statements about ownership of faith and trust in God. There were no differences by gender.



Smith's Denominational Categories





Hypotheses 2 and 3

Again, our hypotheses that participants will move toward MTD and that there will be gender differences in these statements was not supported.

Undergraduates and alumni (Figure 2) did show some MTD but there were no significant differences in years since graduation or between men and women (Figure 3). Surprisingly, and positively, participants more often referred to ownership of their faith (a personal responsibility) and trust of God than MTD.

Figure 2: MTD Differences Between Undergraduates and Alumni

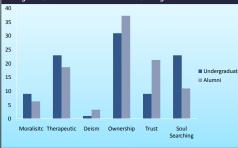
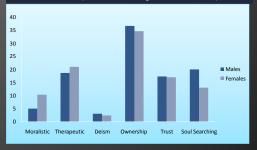


Figure 3: Gender Differences in MTD and Spiritual Statements (Alumni and Undergraduates Combined)



References available on handout