

# **Is a *Christian* College Education ‘Worth It’? Worldview Development among Christian College Students as a Model for the Larger Academy**

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## Brief Abstract

In the context of recent discussions and concern about the value of a Christian education, the desires of college students for the freedom to ask bigger questions about values and mission and to explore deeper meanings in life often go unnoticed. Christian colleges are uniquely positioned to provide students an opportunity to explore these questions and to serve as models for contexts in which values and academic disciplines are taken seriously. The current study explores the religiosity, identity, attachment, and well-being of almost 1000 recent graduates from two Christian colleges. Two religiosity measures were of particular interest: 1) religious coherence measures the degree to which values affect one’s life and is a composite measure based on intrinsic religiosity, Christian Orthodoxy, religious identity, and religious coping, and 2) quest measures the degree of “readiness to face existential questions in all their complexity while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers” (Batson et al., 1993, p. 166). Committed questers—those high in both measures—show higher well-being and provide an opportunity to explore movement toward more complex faith and greater ownership of one’s faith and values. **Results show that a Christian college can create a place where values guide personal behavior and nurture human flourishing, and questing can be a positive if sometimes stressful path to spiritual growth.**

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## Research Project Summary

Currently, there is significant concern about whether the benefits of higher education are worth the cost. A recent study conducted by Country Financial and published in the Chronicle of Higher Education showed that one in four Americans believe a college education is a bad investment in an already bad economy. Others question whether a college degree is the surest ticket to success. But since young people attend college at a formative time for their development, that is, during emerging adulthood (ages 18-30), it is important that the experiences of college receive more attention from academics and parents alike.

College students crave the freedom to explore deeper meanings in life. A 2011 Pew Study (“Is College Worth It?”) concluded that “while Americans value college, they value character even

more.” In their recent (2010) book *Cultivating the Spirit: How colleges can enhance students’ inner lives*, the authors Astin, Astin, and Lindholm document, on the basis of nation-wide data that is not collected specifically from religious institutions, that today’s students are asking bigger questions about values and mission and frustrated by incoherent ways of thinking and living fostered by today’s agnostic, postmodern, piecemeal approach to education. As these students recognize, spiritual and intellectual growth go hand in hand.

Jeffrey Arnett, a leading scholar on emerging adults, believes that we best foster development by encouraging the formation of a solid worldview, ego identity, and attachments to others. As young people form a worldview, by which Arnett means “a coherent body of shared images, ideas, and ideals,” they are better prepared for the future. Yet, worldview is generally not measured in the literature.

The problem remains. If questions about spiritual values and morality are not addressed during the college experience, perhaps the investment does indeed come up short. The value of a college education, to all college students, not solely Christian ones, seems to have more to do with character than we expect and less to do with money. Many Christian colleges—including Gordon and Wheaton (colleges from whom the current participants were drawn)—are dedicated to worldview exploration and character development. Despite this, few studies have recognized the benefits of committed questing for identity development and fewer still have used religiosity as a measure of worldview.

### Research Methodology

The current study, carried out by Kaye Cook and Cynthia Kimball, along with three colleagues at other colleges and universities (Chris Boyatzis, Ph.D., Bucknell University; Kathleen Leonard, Ph. D., University of Massachusetts—Lowell; and Kelly Flanagan, Wheaton College), and 16 undergraduates, was inspired by concerns about alumni well-being as measured by stress, perceived stress, coping, and life satisfaction. All 2008 and 2010 recent and 2-year graduates from two Christian colleges were sent an email asking them to complete an extensive, online survey evaluating their religiosity, ego identity, interpersonal relationships, and well-being. The email contained a link to a unique survey, completed anonymously. To encourage completion of the survey, the names of alumni who completed the survey were entered into drawings for 16 Amazon.com gift cards. To protect anonymity, the names of alumni were kept separate from their surveys, and surveys were identified solely by number.

Of the graduates, 962 participated, for a response rate of 29%. The participants were in middle to late emerging adulthood (mean age, 24 years, range 20 – 34), and the sample was largely Caucasian (91%), female (69%, 392 males, 852 females), and Protestant (91%, predominantly self-identified as nondenominational, Anglican or Episcopal, and Baptist). Participants were recent graduates (N = 530), two-year graduates (N = 478), and four-year graduates (N = 238).

The survey consisted of demographic data and five religiosity measures: Intrinsic/Extrinsic-Revised, Quest, Christian Orthodoxy, Religious Coping, and Religious Identity. In addition, one identity measure assessed commitment and exploration (EIPQ); one attachment measure (IPPA) assessed mother, father, and peer attachments; and three surveys measured four indexes of well-

being (The Brief Stress and Coping Inventory, Perceived Stress Scale, and Life Satisfaction Scale). On average, the on-line surveys took an hour to complete.

A subsample of 159 participants, with a total of 79 males and 80 females, 79 recent and 80 two-year graduates, participated in a half-hour interview that more carefully explored participant changes in religiosity, ego identity, and attachments. Participants for this subsample were randomly selected from survey respondents and later found to be comparable to the larger sample in demographics, predictor scores, and outcome measures.

Questions were designed to assess:

- Current levels of Religiosity, Identity development, Attachment, and Well-Being
- Overall religiosity of the participants, measured by a composite score derived from the religiosity measures except Quest and called Religious Coherence
- Orthodoxy of faith (by scores on the Christian Orthodoxy scale and by comparison of the surveys and interviews of those high and low in religious coherence)
- Male and female differences, and differences by years since graduation, in religiosity, identity development, attachment, and well-being
- Factors (i.e., religiosity, ego identity, attachment) that predict well-being, with particular attention to the role of worldview (when measured by religiosity) in these predictions
- The role of Quest, or readiness to face complex existential questions, in well-being
- The well-being of Committed Questers (or participants high in both intrinsic religiosity and Quest), and the factors that predict their well-being

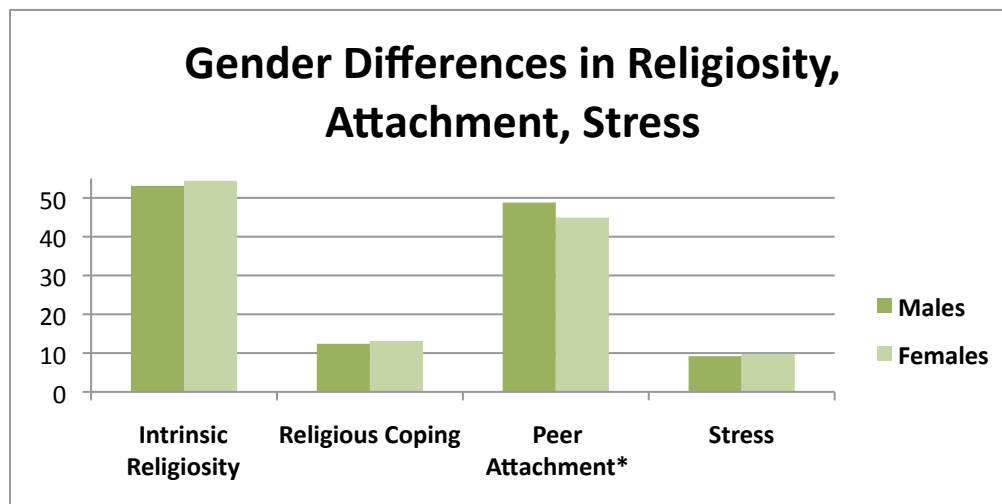
### Study Results

*This is a highly religious sample of participants, who were influenced by highly religious parents.* Religion was “very important” to 80% of participants and 97% reported that they were “moderately to extremely” interested in religion; 76% attend church at least once a week. Mean Christian Orthodoxy scores were 157.70 ( $SD = 20.95$ ) out of 168, with 36% giving the highest ranking possible to all beliefs (i.e., 168) and an additional 35% giving the highest possible ranking on two-thirds of the 24 items of the scale (i.e., for a total of 160 or higher). When their perceived similarity with parental religiosity was explored, on a scale of 1 to 7, participants reported a mean similarity with maternal religiosity of 5.26 ( $SD = 1.49$ ) and paternal religiosity of 4.72 ( $SD = 1.86$ ).

*Religious Coherence nurtures well-being.* Those high in religious coherence showed better coping and higher life satisfaction than those low in religious coherence ( $M = 10.50$ ,  $SD = .22$  vs.  $M = 7.98$ ,  $SD = .36$ ;  $M = 11.01$ ,  $SD = .17$  vs.  $M = 8.86$ ,  $SD = .27$ , respectively).

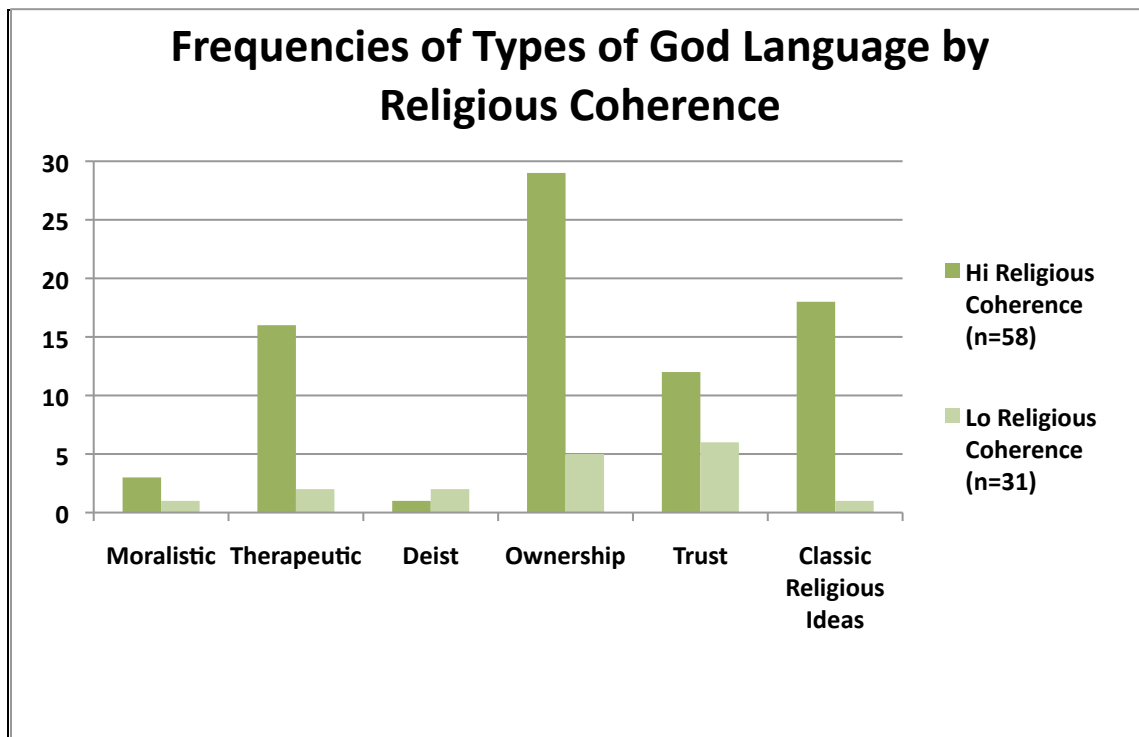
*Attachments are strong.* Not surprisingly, peer attachments are high (mean IPPA score = 46.14,  $SD = 12.57$ ). Peer attachments were predictive of well-being, and predicted lower stress, lower perceived stress, better coping and higher life-satisfaction. More surprisingly, father and particularly mother attachments are also high (mean father attachment = 55.84,  $SD = 20.46$ ; mean mother attachment = 49.16,  $SD = 18.16$ ; lower attachment scores mean higher attachment). Mother attachments also predicted all four measures of well-being. Father attachments predicted better coping.

Women were more religious, had stronger peer attachments, and had more stress than men. Thus, when asked about specific events in their lives, they reported more negative events than males but, when asked how “out of control”, for example, their lives felt, they did not perceive more stress. Women’s Religious Coherence Rankings ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .95$ ), a measure of overall religiosity, were higher than men’s ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = .92$ ); nevertheless, the religiosity of both genders was high. Women received a mean Intrinsic Religiosity score of 54.40 ( $SD = 6.86$ ,  $p < .002$ ), Christian Orthodoxy score of 158.99 ( $SD = 19.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Religious Coping score of 13.11 ( $SD = 2.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas men received a mean Intrinsic Religiosity score of 53.06 ( $SE = 7.46$ ), Christian Orthodoxy score of 154.87 ( $SD = 23.14$ ), and Religious Coping score of 12.43 ( $SD = 2.92$ ). Both men and women showed strong peer attachments, with lower scores meaning higher attachment (\*) and women’s peer attachments stronger than men’s (Women’s:  $M = 44.93$ ,  $SE = 12.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Men’s:  $M = 48.78$ ,  $SD = 12.87$ ). Despite these strengths, women reported higher stress than men (Women’s:  $M = 9.82$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Men’s:  $M = 9.16$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ).



Christian college alumni described their faith in orthodox terms—particularly by using historically central religious ideas, by mentioning their trust in God, and by expressing desires or making choices that showed ownership of their faith—more than in terms of God’s moralistic (M), therapeutic (T), and deistic nature (D), contrary to Smith’s predictions of high levels of MTD. Smith and Snell (2009, pp. 154-156) describe MTD as a parasitic form of religion that is “alive and well” among emerging adults. Sometimes described as a “watered-down” form of religion, MTD adherents picture God as the source of moral rules for good and bad behavior (moralistic), as problem-solver (therapeutic), and as distant (deistic). In the memorable words of Smith and Denton (2005, p. 162), they see God as “something like a Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist”. MTD was explored by comparing the interviews of those high in religious coherence ( $n = 58$ ) with those low in religious coherence ( $n = 31$ ). Both groups shared understandings of God and how to talk about God’s qualities and presence in their lives, having chosen to go to a Christian college and having graduated from one. Moralistic (M) and therapeutic (T) comments appeared in the high religious coherence protocols, as well as in the low religious coherence protocols, although deistic (or God as distant) comments did not. Differences between the two groups appeared when orthodox descriptions of God and total descriptions were coded. Among

members of the high religiosity groups, 29 mentioned ownership of their own faith, 12 trust in God, and 18 used a historically central religious idea (for example, “grace”) in contrast to five, six, and one, respectively, in the low group ( $\chi^2 = 10.01, p < .01$ ).



*Religiosity, ego identity, and attachment predicted well-being:* Stronger mother and peer attachments were associated with lower perceived stress, and Quest with higher perceived stress. Stronger religious coping, higher commitment scores, and stronger mother, father, and peer attachments predicted better coping. Intrinsic religiosity and peer attachments predicted higher life satisfaction whereas Christian Orthodoxy predicted lower life satisfaction. Religious coherence predicted better coping and higher life satisfaction.

*Questers had poorer well-being in general but, among Questers, Committed Questers did better.* Questers perceived higher levels of stress, participated in more stressful events, had poorer coping skills, and lower life satisfaction. However, Committed Questers were more religious (higher Christian Orthodoxy, higher religious identity, stronger religious coping) and their faith affected more of their lives (higher religious coherence scores). They had made more ego identity commitments, had stronger peer attachments, and showed better coping and higher life satisfaction.

## Conclusions

*Worldview predicts well-being:*

Worldview along with identity and interpersonal relationships strengthens well-being. A general pattern in our findings is that emerging adult well-being is optimal when the individual has high religiosity (as indexed by Christian orthodoxy, intrinsic religiosity, religious identity,

and religious coping) that is widespread and robust (as measured by religious coherence), more secure attachments to significant others, and an ability to make commitments in life and work. Benefits in adjustment seem to accrue from secure relations with peers and parents alike, sometimes mediated through community, particularly Christian community.

**It is particularly noteworthy that religious faith improves well-being.** Not surprisingly for people with faith but perhaps surprising for those who do not share their faith, religious faith has multiple positive effects on daily life, improving well-being by influencing one's personal characteristics (identity) and relationships (attachment), and the choices that one makes. The benefits of faith seem to function differently for men and women, with women apparently having more of the benefits (e.g., greater orthodoxy), but also greater stress. Nevertheless, both men and women appear to benefit from having a coherent worldview.

One's worldview, although it receives little attention in the literature, is conceptually intertwined with the other two measures of identity and attachment. K. D., a recent graduate who relocated across country after graduation, captured this complex relationship when asked how faith helps him cope: "well, in having a bit of a sense of direction" (i.e., feeling that God was calling him to teach music) and "praying for and with my friends...knowing that He will guide us...and has a plan for our lives...to reduce the stress, ya know?" We showed, in the narratives of our participants, that worldview differences are observable and, using regression analyses, increase our ability to predict well-being.

*The protocols of those high in Religious Coherence differ from those who are lower in Religious Coherence.* Participants high in religious coherence described God using more historically central religious concepts.

*Sample comments made by those high in religious coherence (initials are fictitious but are included to help personalize quotes):*

- God is so much bigger than the way we understand him to be
- God makes a difficult situation easier
- S. M. described God as sovereign, saying that he is continually "feeling close to God and feeling secure."
- L. G. experienced God as "good", saying that she "realized God's love for me and his value for my life"

*Sample comments made by those low in religious coherence*

- P. J., with low religiosity, talked about "feeling more distant from God" and about God as "the source of ethics"
- E. N. talked about no longer going to church because God is "hands-off"
- K. H. described God as "independent...doing his own thing."

*Making commitments in love and work, as opposed to continued exploration, were strikingly important for well-being.* Despite the assumption in the identity literature that some degree of exploration is positive, and despite the assumption in the emerging adulthood literature that explorations in relationships and identity are central to the experience of emerging adults, we found that commitments in love and work increased well-being, whereas exploration did not.

Perhaps one explanation for this finding is in the timing of the study. Our participants—graduates in 2006 and 2008—were interviewed in the winter of 2008-9, during the worldwide economic recession. Although any graduating class will likely experience its highest levels of stress immediately after graduation, it is no surprise that the 2006 and 2008 graduating classes experienced high levels of stress, particularly males who graduated in 2006. Commitments may be particularly valuable in challenging times. In other words, it is likely that someone who found a job early on or had more social support, for example, in marriage, was generally better able to weather greater stress and navigate unpredictable futures. As S. C. said, with feeling, “I have gotten and lost several jobs, and we are still ok. I do not know where I would be, and I mean emotionally and in every other way, without my wonderful wife.”

*Our strongest predictors of well-being were religious coherence and peer attachment.* These factors are probably related to one another, as the advantages of religious coherence (i.e., high religiosity) may be mediated in part by the benefits of having a social religious identity (Greenfield & Marks, 2007) and developing a strong religious community, sometimes shared with parents. As E. M. (a 23-year-old man about to be married) said, “Before I was at college, I would go to church on Sundays; now I am part of a faith community and still go to church with my parents, and that [belonging] makes all the difference.” With stronger support from others and their parents, and with the added benefits that community can provide (e.g., professional expertise, encouragement in times of job loss, advice about child rearing), stress can be reduced, coping more effective, and life satisfaction enhanced.

Religious coherence brings more than community; it is an aggregate index of one’s religiosity that measures how faith permeates one’s life across a spectrum of dimensions of religiosity. The wider and more pervasive one’s faith is—in other words, the more central faith is to one’s worldview—the stronger is one’s well-being. While the field increasingly recognizes the need for nuanced discussion of specific dimensions of religiosity (e.g., Pargament, 1997), this novel construct of religious coherence—the degree to which one’s faith affects all of life—suggests an additive effect among the various measures of religiosity and makes this aggregate measure one that has particular power in predicting emerging adult functioning.

*Among those high in Quest, Committed Questers have the highest well-being.* Committed questers, as measured by either intrinsic religiosity—the degree of ownership of one’s faith—or religious coherence—the degree to which faith influences one’s life broadly—experience greater life satisfaction and better coping. They truly experience the benefits that come to those who have freedom within a framework of faith.

Our study shows that a Christian college creates a place where values guide personal behavior, questing is a positive if sometimes stressful path to spiritual growth and human flourishing, and intellectual maturity can be nurtured in a Christian environment. One student we interviewed told us, “Having a well-founded faith is great when it comes to tricky decisions.” Another said, “I laughed to think that I might be accepted at a Ph.D. program at Harvard but Gordon prepared me well. I not only got in but I’ve loved it. My faith is often challenged but, even if they don’t know it, they operate from values too.”

So is a Christian college education worth it? It is certainly crucial for those going on to serve in religion-oriented vocations such as church work, missions, publishing, or education. But it also builds a readiness to face future challenges because it develops the values that make up a worldview. In fact, this intellectual and spiritual integration is most often successful in a religious setting that pays attention to and reinforces such values. Christian colleges, then, can serve as a model for a context in which values and academic disciplines are taken seriously, and within which one can be encouraged to develop coherent values and make commitments to core beliefs.

When we nurture student values, we develop within emerging adults the qualities they desire and that they'll need to succeed in the world beyond college. That's an investment whose return is immeasurable.