



# Religious Environment Shapes Epistemological Orientations in Emerging Adults

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## BACKGROUND

- In this project we explored the relationship between **personal religious narratives, epistemological orientations** and **religious and spiritual struggle** in emerging adulthood.
- Research has documented declines from adolescence to early adulthood in religious salience (Koenig, McGue & Iacono, 2008) and outward religious expression (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). This decline could reflect a change from a religiosity *assigned* by parents during childhood socialization to one *chosen* as an outcome of individuation and other identity processes (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). By asking participants for religious narratives regarding various **turning points**, we explored this question and the extent to which the experience of religious struggle has an epistemic source.
- Recently McGinnis has developed an assessment that measures dimensions of **personal epistemology** - absolutism, multiplism and evaluativism (2016). Absolutists tend to focus on one conclusion to a question and seek authority for that conclusion. Individuals with a high multiplist view believe that various opinions are equally correct. Finally, evaluativists believe that evidence must be examined, and the conclusion with the most evidence is the most likely.
- We anticipated that religious individuals would show the highest absolutism scores, and lowest evaluativist scores. We also anticipated differences between high religious and low religious individuals regarding their confidence in theology (as a discipline) and natural science.

## METHOD

**Participants:** Participants (N = 129) were undergraduate students at a private Midwestern university. The sample was 82% Catholic, 8.5% Protestant, 7% no religion, and 4% Buddhist or other. Approximately 63% were female, and the mean age of the sample was 18.8 years old.

**Procedures:** Participants filled out the survey online, and were given course credit for their participation.

### Quantitative Measures

- Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale (Exline et al, 2014)
- Justifying Conclusions Inventory (McGinnis, 2016)
- Personal Epistemology – Science and Theology (Hofer, 2000)
- National Survey of Youth and Religion (Smith & Denton, 2005)
- Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (Fetzer, 2003)

### Qualitative Measures (McLean & Pratt, 2006)

Q1. How have your religious/spiritual beliefs and practices changed over time? How have they remained stable?

Q2. Please write about an important transition or turning point with respect to your personal faith life.

## RESULTS

Qualitative answers were coded for whether they indicated that the participant was becoming more religious, less religious, showed no change, or had ambiguous change. Inter-rater reliability amongst three independent raters was achieved via group consensus whenever there was disagreement. Additionally, an iterative approach was used to categorize the participant's reason for religious change. These are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, below.

Figure 1: Reason for Religious Change Over Time (Question 1)

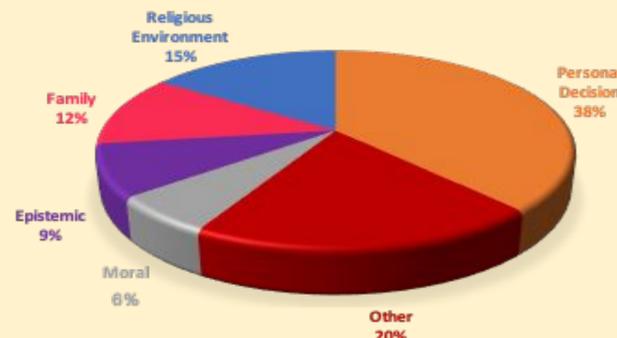
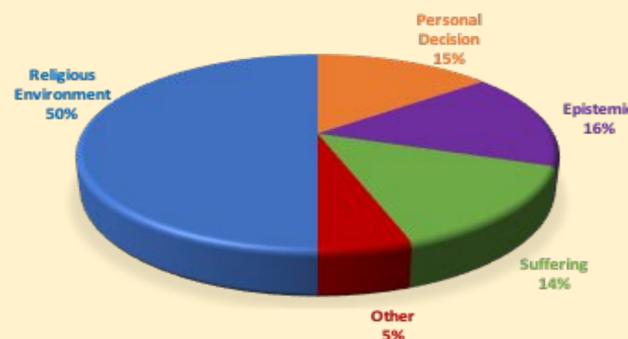


Figure 2: Reason for Religious Turning Point (Question 2)



Quantitative data was analyzed with two omnibus ANOVAs based on these coding groups. Results are summarized in Table 1, below.

Table 1 Significant ANOVA Results			
Question 1 Grouping	F (3, 125)	Question 2 Grouping	F (3, 125)
RSS - Doubt	6.64***	RSS - Doubt	3.36*
RSS - Ultimate Meaning	7.59***	RSS - Ultimate Meaning	3.10*
Religiosity	14.00***	RSS - Interpersonal	3.93*
Spirituality	15.67***	Religiosity	18.57***
No differences were found for JCI scores or Personal Epistemology - Science or Theology.		Spirituality	17.74***
		Personal Epistemology - Theology	3.84*
		JCI - Absolutist	3.06*

\* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

## RESULTS CONT.

**Post-hoc tests on Question 1** indicated that the “ambiguous” group differed significantly from the other groups on doubt and ultimate meaning, and all groups differed significantly from the “more religious” group on spirituality and religiosity. **Post-hoc tests on Question 2** indicated that the “more religious” group differed significantly from the “ambiguous” and “less religious” groups on measures of spirituality and religiosity. The “more religious” group differed significantly from the “ambiguous” group on measures of religious and spiritual struggle. The “more religious” group differed significantly from the “less religious” group on personal epistemology as it relates to theology. The “less religious” group differed significantly from the “ambiguous” group regarding epistemological orientation toward absolutism. [A Bonferroni correction was used to control for multiple tests.]

## DISCUSSION

- We anticipated that those becoming less religious over time would be more evaluativist**, perhaps because they are faced with scientific and theological claims and choose based on evidence. Instead, we found no difference between Question 1 groups on their epistemological orientation or their confidence in theology and the natural sciences. Qualitative answers confirmed this:
  - “I was reading...a Robert Frost poem...about how we as people try to make sense of the world around us. It discusses the dichotomy between faithful and scientific approaches of understanding, and this poem really struck a chord with me, because I am a religious person but I'm also very much into science.”
  - “I feel that I have changed greatly in my understanding of the Universe as science has gained more prevalence in my life. I have...always felt that there is some greater power controlling it all - e.g. a God.”
- Question 2 groupings were more specific, and here we found **those with a turning point away from religion were more absolutist, more distrusting of theology, and higher in conflict with other religious persons**. We saw this illustrated in participants' stories:
  - “I discovered fantastic writers...such as Christopher Hitchens....They verbalized my feelings and legitimized them, too.... When everybody in my school was going on a Jesuit retreat...I expressed to my teacher that I did not want to go. I made it abundantly clear that I was an atheist.... She put an awful amount of pressure on me to attend this retreat...I refused after much struggle and that was the start of when I became comfortable not being religious.”
- Relationships and religious environments mattered more than epistemic reasoning to our participants**. These particular emerging adults are studying at a religious institution. The constant religious exposure could be a source of struggle for those who turn away from religion and may be unique to a faith-centered environment. This could explain why “less religious” participants were more absolutist; they may find it necessary to have an unwavering mindset in contrast to their religious environment.
  - “I think [my religious beliefs] have been formed a lot due to such a religious atmosphere.... This is not to say I have come to see the Catholic point of view, but rather the overwhelming number of Catholics has made me really have to think critically about why I disagree with certain aspects, and which parts of my faith and spirituality I identify with.”
  - “Coming to college was a big turning point in my spiritual life. Because [my school] has an aura of spirituality surrounding it, faith became a larger part of my life.”
  - “Being in a community of peers...and being able to participate in prayer services and mass with them and [praying] with friends transformed my faith experience.”
- Future studies could examine these claims in a more neutral environment**, providing support for the claim that environment matters more than epistemology.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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