

# HOW RELIGIOUS ARE AMERICA'S COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS?

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A common account of the history of American higher education runs as follows. In their early years, America's colleges and universities served religious ends. Harvard, founded in 1636, had been started to train ministers, and although by the early nineteenth century some college and university professors could be found advancing the cause of science, their primary mandate remained that of instructing students in the classics and teaching them lessons in theology and moral philosophy that would prepare them for the business of citizenship and life. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, however, an "academic revolution" occurred.<sup>1</sup> Especially at elite institutions, professors began thinking of themselves as scientists and scholars whose major task was to seek out truth, not propagate religious dogma. Under pressure from industry and the state to produce scientific breakthroughs that would result in technological progress and social reform, professors reconfigured themselves as researchers who specialized in their subject areas, published their findings, trained graduate students, established their own criteria for evaluating academic work, and demanded the freedom to pursue truth whether or not it offended religious or political authorities. Academic freedom was institutionalized, many schools severed ties to religious denominations, and reforms started at the top soon trickled down. In the mid-twentieth century, additional changes took place as enrollments skyrocketed and students and faculty members from a variety of ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds entered the system. Seeking legitimacy, these new entrants to the academic arena shielded themselves from prejudice and attack by further embracing universalistic ideals of science and eschewing religious value commitments.<sup>2</sup> The secularization of American higher education, almost complete, had only to await the mass hiring into the ranks of the faculty of participants in the social movements of the 1960s – leftists who were deeply suspicious of religion in general and Christianity in particular. As a result of this process, or so the story goes, academe has now become, in the words of historian George Marsden, "a haven largely freed from religious

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, 1968. *The Academic Revolution*. Garden City: Doubleday.

<sup>2</sup> David Hollinger, 1996. *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

perspectives.”<sup>3</sup>

In broad brush stroke this story is not wrong, but, like most unilinear accounts of social change, it ignores many points of historical ambiguity, tension, and conflict, while encouraging us to substitute assumptions about social reality for systematic empirical investigation. At a moment when sociologists of religion are busy reassessing secularization theory in general – the thesis, subscribed to by all the founders of the discipline, that modernity inevitably brings with it a decline in the power of religion to shape people’s public and private lives – it is worth reconsidering as well the secularization of American higher education. This short essay takes a step in this direction by answering a straightforward question: How religious, if at all, are America’s college and university professors? To gain traction on the matter, we analyze data from a nationally-representative survey carried out earlier this year of professors in all fields and types of higher education institutions. Although the focus of the survey was professors’ political attitudes, we included a number of standard measures of religiosity as well. We find that, on the whole, professors are indeed less religious than other Americans. However, there is substantial variation in religiosity from discipline to discipline and across types of institutions, and it is hardly the case that the professorial landscape is characterized by an absence of religion. The essay begins with an overview of our methodology, moves on to summarize key findings, and concludes by considering implications for future research. In the short space we have here, we can offer only an exploratory analysis of our data, but we think that even the descriptive statistics are interesting.

### *Methodology*

Our survey of professors was designed in response to a number of recent studies, many with explicitly ideological aims, purporting to show that the contemporary American professoriate is not simply dominated by liberals, but a site of discrimination against conservative professors, students, and ideas. These studies, ranging from audits of voter registration records to surveys, suffer from a number of methodological problems. The most important, carried out by Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte in 1999, surveyed professors at 183 U.S. colleges and universities.<sup>4</sup> Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte, who neither publicly released the data from their survey nor made available the exact design of their sample, asked a variety of social and political attitudes questions, and reported a response rate of 72 percent, yielding a sample of 1643 cases. In a much publicized paper, they claimed, on the basis of an analysis of these data, that 72 percent of U.S. professors identify themselves as “left of center” politically. Beyond our concern about the nontransparency of their methodology, our view was that Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte had skewed their sample by failing to include any professors teaching in

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<sup>3</sup> George Marsden, 1994. *The Soul of the University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 430.

<sup>4</sup> The survey also included professors teaching in Canadian colleges and universities. See Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, Neil Nevitte, 2005. “Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty.” *The Forum*, Vol 3, No 2, Article 2.

community colleges, where 40.3 percent of American undergraduates at four year colleges or universities have at some point been enrolled.<sup>5</sup> More problematic, many of the questions they asked their respondents – including key measures of political attitudes – were, in our opinion, poorly phrased.

Our study sought to remedy these problems. We constructed a questionnaire with more than 100 items measuring professors' political and social attitudes, as well as a wide range of social background questions. The vast majority of our questions were taken verbatim from well-established surveys of the U.S. population such as the General Social Survey (GSS), the American National Election Studies (ANES), and the Pew Values Survey.

Our survey, called the "Politics of the American Professoriate" study, was administered by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University.<sup>6</sup> Precontact and invitation letters were sent to 2958 professors in the spring of 2006. Professors were selected for inclusion through a stratified random sampling procedure. The sample was split: two thirds of professors were drawn from the twenty largest disciplinary fields, measured by the number of bachelors degrees awarded in 2004 (the last year for which data were then available), and the remaining third were drawn from all fields in which bachelors degrees were awarded that year. To locate a professor, we first randomly sampled from the National Center for Education Statistics' dataset on degree completions, locating a college or university where either bachelors or associates degrees in the relevant field were awarded. We then obtained, through an examination of departmental websites, or phone calls if necessary, a list of full-time faculty teaching in that school and department, and randomly selected one faculty member to include in the study. We stratified our sample to ensure adequate representation of faculty members teaching at community colleges, four year colleges and universities, non-elite PhD granting institutions, and elite doctoral universities (defined as those in the top 50 in the latest US News and World Report ranking).

Professors completed the survey by logging into a special password protected website. The incentive offered was an early look at study results, and entry into a lottery to win one of twenty \$100 gift certificates. In 76 cases, invitation letters were sent to bad addresses, or to people who were not in fact on the faculty. The study closed eight weeks after the initial invitation letters were sent, and achieved a final response rate of 51 percent, with 1471 valid cases. In a regression model predicting response to the survey, neither type of institution – community college, BA granting, PhD granting, or elite doctoral – nor whether the school was public or private proved statistically significant, suggesting no response bias across these variables. To better assess response bias, we conducted short phone interviews with 100 nonresponders. The mean response to our key political attitudes question among nonresponders was about the same as the mean response among survey participants, suggesting no significant response bias along

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/tables\\_listings/show\\_nedrc.asp?rt=p&tableID=2988](http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/tables_listings/show_nedrc.asp?rt=p&tableID=2988)

<sup>6</sup> The study was funded by the Richard Lounsbery Foundation. The views expressed in this essay are the authors' own and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

political lines either (nonresponders were slightly more conservative than responders, but the differences were small). When asked, in an open-ended question format, why they did not respond, the majority of nonresponders – 54 percent – said they had not had time to do so, 7 percent stated that they objected to some feature of the questionnaire design, and 7 percent said they were uncomfortable answering political questions, with the rest citing a variety of other factors.

Once compiled, the data were weighted to even out the effects of oversampling certain fields and institutions. They also received a post-stratification weighting to correct for the effects of having slightly undersampled women and African-Americans. We believe our sample to be generalizable to the population of the more than 630,000 professors teaching full-time in U.S. colleges and universities, with the important caveat that professors were only eligible to be sampled if they taught in departments offering undergraduate degrees. Professors of law and medicine and those teaching in other professional fields were not purposively sampled (though professors of business were, as many business schools offer undergraduate instruction). As noted above, the questionnaire contained a number of items on religion, to which we turn now.

### *Are Most Professors Atheists?*

Previous research has examined the religious backgrounds of college and university professors,<sup>7</sup> and a much publicized study that came out earlier this year looked at professors' spiritual self-conceptions, finding that 81 percent of faculty consider themselves "spiritual beings."<sup>8</sup> By contrast, our survey examined professors' religious beliefs. A common perception of the college or university professor is that she or he is an atheist who rejects religion in favor of science or critical inquiry. Although when asked to specify their current religious preference 31.2 percent of the professors we surveyed said "none," responses to a question taken from the GSS suggest that more professors are believers than is usually recognized. Respondents were asked to select the statement that comes closest to expressing their views about God. Only 10.0 percent chose the statement, "I don't believe in God," while 13.4 percent chose the statement, "I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out." About 23.4 percent of respondents to our survey, in other words, are either atheists or agnostics. This figure is much higher than for the U.S. population as a whole. The same question was last asked on the GSS in 2000. At that time, only 2.8 percent of respondents said they didn't believe in God, while 4.1 percent said they didn't know if God existed and believed there was no way to find out. The figures for the college educated population – a more reasonable comparison group for professors – show greater religious skepticism, with about 11.2 percent of those with four years of college or more falling into the ranks of atheists and agnostics, but the differences with professors are still pronounced. Nevertheless, atheists and agnostics are in the minority among professors as a whole.

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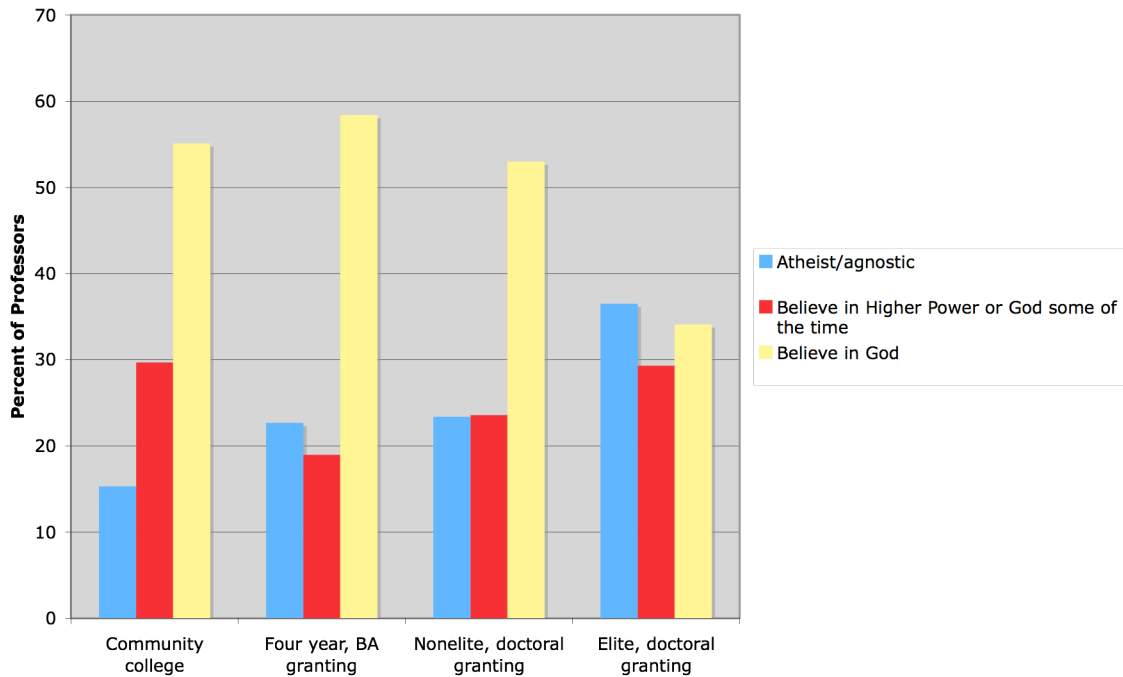
<sup>7</sup> See Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein, 2006. *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 460.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/results/spirit\\_professoriate.pdf](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/results/spirit_professoriate.pdf)

19.6 percent of respondents to our survey agree with the statement, “I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.” More surprising, while only 4.4 percent of respondents agree with the statement, “I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others,” 16.9 percent are of the view that “while I have my doubts, I feel that I do believe in God,” and 35.7 percent of respondents say, “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.”

These figures vary considerably across types of institutions and disciplinary fields. As concerns institutions, our first finding – an unsurprising one – is that professors teaching in religiously-affiliated colleges and universities are more likely to be believers. Whereas about 50 percent of professors in non-religiously affiliated schools say either that they believe in God despite their doubts or that they have no doubts about God’s existence, this is true of 68.9 percent of professors in religiously-affiliated schools, who comprise 13.9 percent of those in our sample. A second finding – one consistent with prior research – is that professors at elite doctoral universities are much less religious than professors teaching in other kinds of institutions. 36.6 percent of respondents with appointments in elite doctoral schools are either atheists or agnostics, as compared to 15.2 percent of respondents teaching in community colleges, 22.7 percent of those teaching at BA granting institutions, and 23.5 percent of those teaching in non-elite doctoral granting universities. And whereas about 40 percent of community college professors and professors at four year schools say they have no doubt God exists, this is true for only about 20.4 percent of professors at elite doctoral institutions. Contrary to popular opinion, atheists and agnostics do not comprise a majority of professors even at elite schools, but they are present in much larger numbers there than in other types of institutions.

**Belief in God by Type of Institution**



There is also significant variation on this question by disciplinary field. Looking at the top 20 BA granting fields, we find that atheists and agnostics are more common in some disciplines than others. Psychology and biology have the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics, at about 61 percent. Not far behind is mechanical engineering, 50 percent of whose professors are atheists or agnostics. Behind that is economics, political science, and computer science, with about 40 percent of professors falling into this category each. At the other end of the spectrum, 63 percent of accounting professors, 56.8 percent of elementary education professors, 48.6 percent of professors of finance, 46.5 percent of marketing professors, 46.2 percent of art professors and professors of criminal justice, and 44.4 percent of professors of nursing say they have no doubt that God exists. We caution, however, that some of these differences may be a function of the differential distribution of these fields across types of institutions.

Beyond institutional and disciplinary location, who are the professors confident in God's existence? The biggest group, comprising 27.3 percent of believers – those who say they believe in God despite occasional doubts or that they have no doubts – are Roman Catholics. 58.7 percent of believers are affiliated with a variety of other Christian denominations, with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus together composing less than 6 percent of believers. Overall, a surprisingly high 18.8 percent of respondents to our survey said the term “born-again Christian” describes them at least slightly well, and about a third of professors who believe in God are born-again Christians. Professors who are born-again are extremely rare at elite doctoral institutions, composing only about one percent of professors at such institutions, but they are not uncommon among community

college professors and professors teaching at four year schools. Nor are born-again Christians only to be found at religiously-affiliated institutions, though they are present there in greater numbers. 17 percent of professors at secular schools describe themselves as born-again Christians, as compared to 29.6 percent at religiously-affiliated schools.

### *What is Their Religious Orientation?*

If there is a single sociological lesson to be learned from American religious pluralism, it is that *how* one believes in God matters as much as *whether* one does. Beyond religious affiliation, we measure religious orientation with two questionnaire items: one on feelings toward the Bible, and another on approaches toward religious matters. Our general finding is that although many professors are religious, few are religious traditionalists.

Using another question from the GSS, we asked respondents which statement comes closest to describing their feelings about the Bible: “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word”; “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word”; or “The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.” When last asked on the 1998 version of the GSS, 30 percent of respondents (13 percent of the college educated) chose “actual word of God,” 49.2 percent (56.8 percent of the college educated) said “inspired word,” while 17.5 percent (25.9 percent of the college educated) said “ancient book of fables.” On this matter, divergences between professors and the general population are stark, as one might expect given that the culture of academe encourages professors to take a historical and critical view of texts. Only 6.1 percent of respondents to our survey said the Bible is the “actual word of God,” with 51.6 percent describing it as “an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts.” About 42 percent of respondents are of the view that the Bible is “the inspired word of God.” Here again differences are evident by type of institution, with community college professors three times as likely to subscribe to the “actual word of God” position, and 72.9 percent of professors at elite doctoral universities taking the “ancient book of fables” view.

Creating our own question, we also asked, “In religious matters, do you generally consider yourself: a progressive, a moderate, a traditionalist, or not religious?” Consistent with the finding above on atheists and agnostics, about a third of our respondents describe themselves as not religious. 28 percent say they consider themselves religious moderates, 25.5 percent progressives, and 12.6 traditionalists. The most interesting finding in this regard, looking at orientations across types of institutions, is that community college professors are more likely to be at the extremes of the distribution, with 40 percent describing themselves as religious progressives and 25.3 percent as traditionalists. At other types of institutions, religious moderates are more common, suggesting again that while believers can indeed be found in the upper echelons of academe, there is either less interest there or less space for more fervent forms of religiosity.

### *How Often Do They Attend Religious Services?*

One surprising finding to emerge from our study is that although professors, on the whole, are less religious than members of the general population, a high proportion report frequent attendance at religious services. Sociologists of religion have come to be somewhat suspicious of responses to questionnaire items on religious attendance, detecting a tendency toward overreporting, but the latest figures from the GSS suggest that about 48.6 of Americans attend religious services once a month or more. The comparable figure among respondents to our survey is 39.9 percent. It is professors at four year institutions who attend religious services most frequently, with 45.5 percent saying they do so once a month or more, as compared to 27 percent of professors at elite doctoral institutions. The least religious of the top 20 BA granting disciplines, as measured by attendance at religious services, are, in order, mechanical engineering (where 70.6 percent of professors report attending services once or twice a year or less), psychology (69.6 percent), communications (65.9 percent), marketing (65.1 percent), biology (64.7 percent), and sociology (63.2 percent), though we issue the same caution as above that some of these differences may reflect the differential institutional locations of various disciplinary fields.

### *Views of Religion, Politics, and Science*

In addition to measuring professors' religiosity, our survey included several items tapping professors' views of controversial issues around religion, politics, and science. Answers to these questions suggest that while many professors themselves are religious, most are secularists who believe in a separation of church and state, and who would resist efforts to blur the boundaries between religion and science.

One question we asked in this regard was an ANES item on prayer in the public schools. Overall, 75.1 percent of professors surveyed said that religion does not belong in public schools, and that public schools should not be allowed to start each day with a prayer. Here the difference between elite doctoral schools and community colleges was especially dramatic, with 92.1 percent of professors at the former taking the secular view, and only 45.2 percent of professors at the latter doing so. The only disciplines of the top 20 BA granting fields where a majority of professors support prayer in public schools are elementary education, nursing, accounting, and management information.

We also asked respondents to weigh in on the controversy over intelligent design. Our question asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "The theory of intelligent design IS a serious scientific alternative to the Darwinian theory of evolution." Overall, 84.1 percent of professors surveyed disagreed with the statement, with 75.3 percent registering strong disagreement. Agreement was strongest at community colleges, where 30.6 percent of professors see intelligent design as a serious scientific alternative, and weakest at elite doctoral universities, where just 5.6 percent of professors do.



This insistence on secularism, however, does not, in the eyes of most professors, mean that America's colleges and universities are hostile to religious believers. Last year we conducted a survey of Americans' attitudes toward professors and found that, among other things, 80.8 percent of the 1000 Americans we surveyed agreed with the statement, "American colleges and universities welcome students of faith." We included the same question on the Politics of the American Professoriate survey, and find that about the same percentage of professors agree with the statement, with disagreement highest at community colleges and lowest at elite doctoral universities.

Finally, we consider one aspect of the complex relationship between professorial religiosity and politics. We noted above that about twenty percent of the professors surveyed identify themselves as born-again Christians. Recent research on American evangelicals suggests they do not comprise as homogeneous a political bloc as is commonly assumed.<sup>9</sup> Where do born-again Christians in academe fall along the political spectrum? We will be releasing our overall findings on professorial politics in a later paper, but for now we attempt to answer this question by examining the relationship between being a born-again Christian professor and political party affiliation, which we measure by using a series of items from the ANES to construct a 7 point party affiliation scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Whereas 36.5 percent of professors who are not born-again Christians can be classified as strong Democrats, this is true of only 13.2 percent of born-again Christians. Likewise, whereas only 13.3 percent of non-born-again Christians in the professoriate are Republicans of any stripe, this is true of 57.6 percent of born-again Christians. While some liberal born-again Christians can be found in the professoriate, the vast majority appear to be conservatives, at least as measured by party affiliation. Looking at religious belief more generally, we find that 90.1 percent of Republican professors say they believe in God, as compared to 42.6 percent of non-Republicans. This suggests that what conservative political presence there is in academe is very often bound up with religion.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Although the findings presented above are exploratory, we believe they have three significant implications for the sociology of academic life.

First, the fact that a higher proportion of professors are religious than the usual story of academic secularization would have us believe suggests that we need more research on the causal impact of professors' religious value commitments on the formation of their ideas. There is much intellectual-historical evidence from eras past that religious or spiritual value commitments can channel a thinker's ideas in one direction rather than another. An example is the psychologist and philosopher William James, who underwent a spiritual crisis in his 20s and turned to the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce in part because he saw the perspective as providing a set of intellectual resources for pulling him

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Smith, 2002. *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

out of his spiritual malaise.<sup>10</sup> Under the influence of the story of academic secularization, however, intellectual historians and sociologists of knowledge writing about contemporary academicians have often failed to attend to the ways in which the intellectual choices of some of them – on everything from the kind of topics they study to epistemology – may be influenced by their religious commitments and orientations. This is a tendency that should be corrected.

Second, the findings above indicate that, when it comes to religion, professors at elite research universities and community colleges inhabit different cultural worlds. We need more research on what sociologist of science Karin Knorr Cetina calls the “epistemic cultures”<sup>11</sup> of these worlds, as concerns religion and other dimensions of life. For example, to what extent does personal talk about religion and spirituality count as a negatively valued form of cultural capital in the upper echelons of the academic universe,<sup>12</sup> and what strategies do professors who are religious employ to deal with the situation? On the other side, what assumptions are built into the culture of community college life about the proper role of religious values in the classroom? How, if at all, do these assumptions end up affecting students’ classroom experiences? Moving beyond cultural concerns, what social processes and mechanisms account for the differential distribution of belief in the different institutional locations?

Finally, although our research suggests that professorial religiosity has been previously underestimated, it is clear that on the whole, and measured various ways, professors are less religious than the general U.S. population. Insofar as this is so, and in the context of growing pressures on young people to go to college and the ongoing political mobilization of conservative Christians, we should expect continued conflict in the years to come between the forces of religious conservatism and the institution of the American university, with some such conflict taking place within the university itself as conservative professors, some emboldened by their religious views, mount a campaign for institutional change. 80 percent of Americans think colleges and universities welcome students of faith – but 20 percent do not, and there is evidence that this is a mobilized 20 percent. Theoretical frameworks must be developed to help us make sense of this situation, and to identify the steps that can be taken, if any, to keep the conflict from derailing the vital educational and research missions served by America’s colleges and universities.

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<sup>10</sup> George Cotkin, 1990. *William James, Public Philosopher*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Karin Knorr Cetina, 1999. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Our thinking here builds on Brad Verter’s efforts to harness the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to explain aspects of contemporary religious experience. See Bradford Verter, 2003. “Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu Against Bourdieu.” *Sociological Theory* 21:150-74.